



Associated Baptist Press

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ABP bureau chief resigns to attend law school

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Kenny Byrd, the first chief of Associated Baptist Press' Washington bureau, has resigned to enter law school at Boston College.

"I may be making an unwise decision -- leaving the greatest job a free-thinking reporter could have for a new career in law," Byrd wrote in his resignation letter. "But for many reasons, it is the decision I need to make at this time."

Byrd, 28, accepted the newly created bureau position in May 2000. Before that, however, he covered Washington for ABP four years as lead writer for Baptist News Service, a division of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

"The decision to leave ABP and change careers has been a tough one because I have thoroughly enjoyed my job and time with ABP," Byrd said. He deferred his entry into law school two years, he said, in order to remain in the job.

During the last five years, Byrd has covered five State of the Union addresses, the impeachment hearings and trial of President Clinton, arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court in the 2000 presidential election dispute and both the 2000 Democratic and Republican conventions.

"I can never repay those who gave me this opportunity to report from up close on top lawmakers and politicians in the country," he said.

However, Byrd said he has also enjoyed covering "smaller voices" on issues such as hunger, world debt and sanctions against Cuba. "With ABP's help we have uncovered stories of interest to Baptists that the secular media ignores or is unaware of," Byrd said. For example, he reported action opening a two-year window for ministers who previously opted out of Social Security to re-enter the program.

Byrd is a native of Nashville, Tenn., and a graduate of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

He plans to leave Washington July 30 to prepare for an Aug. 4 marriage to Judith Saies. Following a honeymoon, he will be back in the office briefly in mid-August before leaving for Boston.

A search is underway for his successor, according to Philip Poole, executive director of ABP, an independent, national news service with headquarters in Jacksonville, Fla.

"We knew this day was coming, but that doesn't make it any easier," said Greg Warner, ABP's executive editor. "We are so grateful that Kenny postponed law school to help us get the Washington bureau

started and credentialed. It has made a huge difference. The Washington bureau was a crucial step in ABP's maturation and a key to our future. Although Kenny will be a hard act to follow, he has created a very desirable and credible role for the journalist who follows him."

Opened in 2000, the Washington bureau was the first regional news office opened by ABP. A second bureau in the Southwest United States has since been established in partnership with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Founded in 1990, ABP provides news to both religious and secular media. It also publishes FaithWorks, a Christian lifestyle magazine aimed at younger readers, established in 1998.

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-- By ABP staff

BP reporters denied credentials at CBF meeting

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship communications office denied press credentials to two Baptist Press reporters, saying the news service has become "the public-relations arm of the Southern Baptist Convention."

The move did not prohibit the BP reporters from covering the June 28-30 CBF General Assembly in Atlanta, but might have made it harder for them to gain access to events and conduct interviews.

The refusal follows a decision in November by CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal and Communications Coordinator David Wilkinson to no longer grant interviews to BP reporters.

Wilkinson advised Will Hall, the head of BP, of that decision in a memo dated Nov. 1.

"In countless instances, Baptist Press has made it clear that it has little interest in reporting accurately or fairly on the missions, ministries, and people of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," the memo said.

In a June 25 memo to BP editor Art Toalston, Wilkinson said that CBF did not plan on keeping BP reporters out of the General Assembly newsroom, an area used by journalists.

"We do not consider Baptist Press to be a news organization, but rather the public-relations arm of the Southern Baptist Convention," the memo said.

Some state Baptist paper editors have grown increasingly concerned about the objectivity of BP since conservatives gained control of the SBC.

Marv Knox, editor of the Baptist Standard in Texas, wrote an editorial for the June 4 issue regarding BP's articles about the Baptist General Convention of Texas. He told readers that Cooperative Program money is being used to fund the SBC attacks on the state convention.

Knox called BP the "public-relations arm of the SBC Executive Committee."

Will Hall, vice president for news services and executive editor of BP, said in an article released by his organization that calling BP the public-relations arm of the SBC is "nothing more than a ruse by the CBF, the BGCT and their supporters to draw attention away from factual news reported by Baptist Press about people and events that affect the life, work and ministry of Southern Baptists."

John Yeats, the editor of the Oklahoma Baptist Messenger, wrote a letter of protest to Wilkinson, urging him to grant press credentials to the BP reporters.

BP reported that the letter was signed by seven state Baptist paper editors. Most represented state conventions that are closely aligned with the SBC. Yeats also serves as the recording secretary of the SBC.

Tony Cartledge, editor of the North Carolina Baptist paper Biblical Recorder, didn't sign the letter but said he believed CBF should have issued credentials for the meeting.

"My personal feeling is that Baptist Press should be given credentials to come to CBF, just as other organizations are given credentials to cover the SBC," Cartledge said. "I just think it's fair."

Baptist Press issued 17 articles about the CBF meeting. Seven stories talked about CBF's debate over homosexuality. Two focused on statements opposing the SBC or its conservative stands. Two others focused on a Baptist Women in Ministry worship service where God was allegedly described as "Mother."

The BP articles called CBF a "liberal Baptist splinter group" and "a de-facto denomination."

CBF's Wilkinson wrote in an e-mail message that the articles written by BP at last year's and this year's assembly are clear evidence its writers had no intention of fair and accurate reporting.

"It seems to me the credentialing organization has to require some minimum standard of professionalism, otherwise the term 'credential' is meaningless," he said. "The performance of Baptist Press clearly does not measure up as a legitimate news organization with even a modicum of commitment to objectivity and impartiality."

Wilkinson said "any impartial observer" reviewing BP's coverage of CBF "would easily recognize an agenda that is unrelated to a fair and objective presentation of facts for the purpose of informing the Baptist public."

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-- By Biblical Recorder staff

Baptist-run center offers support to mental-health consumers

By Ken Camp

AMARILLO, Texas (ABP) -- Beth spends hours meticulously clipping pictures from magazines and gluing the bright images on pieces of paper.

It's been a big part of her life for six-and-a-half years. For six of those years, it was a solitary activity.

Those were the dark years when she didn't leave home much. When she wasn't cutting and pasting photos, she passed time watching TV or copying articles out of magazines. A boyfriend came to see her regularly for a while, but his visits stopped after he got a job.

The darkness lifted a few months ago when she started attending the Agape Center, a peer-support center sponsored by the Amarillo Mental Health Consumers Association and Buchanan Street Baptist Chapel in Amarillo, Texas.

Beth still clips magazine pictures and glues them onto poster board or wooden blocks. But now it's part of her volunteer job. She serves as a project director at the center three days a week, leading her peers in making collages, mosaics, decoupage and other crafts.

"This place just saved my life," she says.

The Agape Center is open each Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Thursday evenings for a couple of hours.

About a dozen or so people who struggle with mental-health problems gather on overstuffed sofas and in worn recliners for a Monday morning Bible study led by Buchanan Street Pastor Larry Mills.

Then they hang around to hear guest speakers on health-related topics, or to enjoy general times of peer counseling and recreation.

Some who frequent the Agape Center have become a part of the congregation of Buchanan Street Chapel, a mission of Amarillo's First Baptist Church.

One such member -- a man who was referred to the Agape Center by his mother because he never left home -- now attends worship every Sunday. His mental illness is regulated with medication, and he drives a van for the center.

"I'm learning more and more about mental-health problems," said Mills, who noted that one of four Americans either is mentally ill or has a family member with a mental illness.

Mike Halligan, executive director of Texas Mental Health Consumers in Austin, said the Agape Center is the only church-based ministry of its type that he knows about in the state.

He praised Mills and the Agape Center for its peer-oriented approach, which he said is "light years ahead" of the techniques normally used.

"I love the Amarillo program. Larry may not realize this, but he is doing more to help people with mental illness than the public mental-health system," Halligan said. "I wish we had a million more like him."

At the time Buchanan Street became involved in the ministry to mental-health consumers, Mills had no idea that several members of the sponsoring congregation had family members who would benefit from the Agape Center.

"One thing I've learned is that there was nobody here wanting to minister to this specific group of people," he said.

The church learned about the need for such a ministry through a newspaper-advertising salesperson from nearby Canyon.

Mary Kay Kuhrts initially came to Buchanan Street Chapel trying to sell the director of the Christian Women's Job Corps an advertisement in a regional Christian newspaper.

Christian Women's Job Corps, a program that teaches job skills and life skills to low-income women, is one of several community ministries sponsored by Buchanan Street Baptist Chapel.

As Kuhrts learned more about Buchanan Street's commitment to ministry among unreached segments of Amarillo's population, she went to talk with the pastor. She asked Mills if he knew of any organization that would be willing to provide a meeting place for mental-health consumers.

She explained that the Texas Panhandle Mental Health and Mental Retardation office had sponsored a mental-health consumers' "clubhouse." The group met at an outpatient facility for about eight years, but it was no longer available.

She explained the importance of a non-threatening place where mental-health consumers could be with their peers for support and counseling. And she spoke with the authority of firsthand experience.

Kuhrts first became acquainted with the Amarillo mental-health consumers association upon her release from a hospital in 1992, four years after being diagnosed as bipolar.

"I have a chemical imbalance," she says matter-of-factly. "I was luckier than most. I had a good support system in my family. A lot of people in that situation don't."

Mills told her that nearly 30 percent of the church facility -- primarily its basement -- was being unused except for storage. They walked downstairs, and Kuhrts saw the potential.

"We worked out an agreement with a 90-day renewal," Mills recalls. "At the time, nobody knew how well it would fit."

Quite well, according to those who use the center.

Tears welled in the eyes of one man who has become a regular at the Agape Center as he said, "If I didn't have this place, I'd either be in bed asleep or out on the streets being hassled."

Kuhrts, who now works part-time as a public-information specialist with Family Support Services in Amarillo, noted: "I'm not here all the time because I have a very busy lifestyle. But a lot of these people are

unable to work. They have no life outside of home, unless there is a place to come to be around their peers... This has given them a life."

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News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Children hurt in church-van accident

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. -- Seven children and one adult from First Baptist Church in Cullman, Ala., suffered minor injuries in a van crash while on a church outing.

The accident, caused by a blowout, occurred July 12 on Interstate 65 in Blount County. The group was returning from a field trip in Birmingham. (ABP)

Moderate Baptists produce history pamphlets

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. -- The Baptist History and Heritage Society and Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society have jointly produced a pamphlet series on "The Baptist Style for a New Century."

Writers are prominent educators from a moderate Baptist perspective. They include Walter Shurden, Glen Hinson, Charles Dewese, Carolyn Blevins and Bill Leonard. (ABP)

Church evacuates after bomb threat

GRAND PRAIRIE, Texas -- Worship services were cut short July 15 at Indian Hills Baptist Church in Grand Prairie, Texas, because of a bomb threat.

Pastor Doug Simon said a woman who lives near the church told a member that a neighbor had threatened to put a bomb in the church. Simon said there has been recent news about pipe bombings in area schools, but not churches. "There's no telling what people will do today," he said. "I felt I had to protect the people in my congregation."

The church is located in the Dallas-Forth Worth metroplex, not far from Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, where a gunman burst into a youth rally and shot 15 people in 1999. (ABP)

Views on genetic modification of food vary by faith

WASHINGTON -- Ethical and religious views affect how people feel about the genetic engineering of food and animals, according to a recent study.

While debate over the issue typically centers on relative benefits and risks, a Zogby International poll found that a majority of Christians said they oppose moving genes from one species or organism into another on moral grounds.

Overall, 57 percent of Protestants, and 62 percent of Evangelicals, opposed the technology while 37 percent approved. Among Catholics, 52 percent opposed the practice and 42 percent were in favor. A plurality of Muslims said they were against it. Among religious groups, Jews were most favorable of the technology, with 55 percent in favor and 35 percent opposed. (ABP)

College gives day off for flood relief

BLUEFIELD, Va. -- Employees of Baptist-affiliated Bluefield College took a day off work July 20 to assist flood victims in Bishop, Va.

Eight inches of rain July 8 caused local flooding in four counties in western Virginia. About 1,000 homes and businesses were destroyed and another 500 damaged.

As President Bush declared a disaster area, Bluefield College President Dan McMillan approved a day off for employees to pitch in with cleanup. The college also provided rooms and meals for other volunteers from out of the area. (ABP)

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