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Missions travel becoming increasingly a family affair

By Amanda Phifer

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- As the number of volunteers in missions explodes, not even the family vacation is sacred. A growing number of families are ditching Sea World for flights to South America and points beyond, laden with evangelistic tracts and crayons for street kids.

While most mission volunteers are still adults or youth groups, serving as families is becoming a trend, according to a story in FaithWorks magazine.

One reason is family togetherness.

"You're not leaving behind somebody that you're gonna worry about the whole time," says Betty Dennis, a single mom who has taken mission trips with her teenage daughter in West Virginia and Kenya. "You don't have to arrange child care. You spend your time ministering together instead of anxious about the family back home or the family members so far away."

Church-sponsored mission trips might take Christians across town or across an ocean. They last anywhere from three days to six weeks and are sponsored by individual congregations as well as national mission agencies, small and large. Increasingly, they are being viewed as a family affair.

"I wouldn't trade a thing for any of the trips we've been on as a family," says Mark Hathcox of Columbia, S.C. He and his wife, Lelanette, went on their first overseas trip without their children, who were young at the time. "It was tough leaving them," he recalls. "That can be traumatic."

"Going together eliminates that," says Hathcox, who later went to Kenya with Lelanette and their two daughters and son.

"We were worried about how they would handle the sleeping arrangements, and the food, and the culture shock. And our son, Jacob, actually did better than we did with the food in Kenya," says Hathcox, a pastor in Columbia.

A second advantage, family members say, is the ministry that occurs within families. Sharing in the struggles, culture shock, excitement and spiritual growth as a family means no one's left out. Mom doesn't return home with an excitement about the mission field that she just can't communicate to Dad and the children.

The challenges of traveling together strengthened their family, says Randy Higgins, who was accompanied by his wife and three children on treks to Bangalore, India, and Istanbul, Turkey. "It bonds the family, makes you feel like you can handle things together, builds a legacy between you."

His daughter Lauren, who was 5 years old when she traveled to India, agrees, speaking cheerfully of the geckos in their hotel shower: "I wanted to take them home as pets. They were cute!"

It's not just the resilience under tough conditions that bonds these families. As they gather at the close of each day and share stories of how God has used them and taught them, the bonding rises to a spiritual level.

"You get to see God working in your children's lives, and that's priceless," Higgins says. "To see that growth is just powerful."

Of course, it's not just the children who grow spiritually. The parents do, too, and sometimes the best teachers are their own children.

Hathcox tells the story of a night in a village in Kenya when, after a long day of working in medical clinics, the team held an evangelistic service. Though Hathcox was to deliver the sermon, their guide also asked him to have another team member share his or her testimony. Moments later, Hathcox listened as 11-year-old Jacob spoke to the congregation.

"To have my son be a part of that service, to have us minister together, it was quite a moment for me, both as a pastor and as a parent," he says.

"Our trip to Kenya and ministry there together -- that's something we'll always have in common, something we can always feel a oneness about," says Betty Dennis, who served two weeks last summer in the East African country with her daughter, Tara, 18. "It really brought us closer together spiritually."

Working on the same evangelism team in Ruiru, Kenya, Betty and Tara were able to witness each other sharing the gospel, an image Betty says was "a blessing for me to see."

The highlight for Betty came one evening after she and her interpreter had shared the gospel with a young man in a village. The man had listened but was unwilling to make a decision. Later that evening, Tara shared how she was able to witness to that same young man later in the day, and he had accepted Christ.

"It was so exciting for her, meant a lot to her, and it was really special to hear her tell about it," Betty recalls.

Lessons that all volunteers learn while on mission trips are only magnified when experienced as a family. For example, seeing the material and spiritual needs of other cultures, especially when compared with the United States, can be eye opening.

Says Mike Jorgensen, whose family went to Peru as part of a Global Missions Fellowship project, "I think our culture conditions us to yearn after things we don't have. These trips help our kids appreciate what they do have [and] . not become materialistic."

Seeing another culture firsthand can also profoundly affect how families, and particularly children, view the world.

"All of us made real friends in Turkey the summer of 1998," says Higgins. "And so the next summer, when the United States started bombing Iraq, Lauren, our youngest, was terribly upset, asking us 'Are they hurting our friends there?' Of course she was thinking from a child's geography, but just to know that she now empathizes with people on the other side of the planet, that she understands they are people too, it was proof to us that our children now know there's more than what they've seen here."

Going as a family sometimes is an advantage in itself. The example of a faithful family willing to sacrifice time and money and family vacations can speak louder than words to non-Christians in many cultures. And in countries where women or children are second-class citizens, or where men are poor family leaders, interaction with a Christ-centered family can teach without saying a word.

There are, of course, drawbacks to whole families going on mission trips together. Mom and Dad can spend so much time taking care of the family they miss ministry opportunities.

The expense, particularly for overseas trips, is prohibitive for many families. Yet many parents hardly think twice about spending money to send their children to baseball, cheerleader, basketball or 4-H camps, Higgins points out. "But the experience of missions is far more meaningful for the cost."

In some settings it may be difficult for missionary personnel either to use whole families for ministry or to care for them logistically.

"I think it's probably easier for families to do ministry in the States than overseas," says Debbie McDowell, director of missions mobilization for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, which has produced a children's video encouraging family missions. "It's one thing for a family to do a backyard Bible club together, and it's great. But it's harder to find things whole families can do together in an international setting."

Another disadvantage, at least from the viewpoint of some parents, is the mission-trip "virus."

"The challenge is, the minute you expose your family to this and they get a firsthand taste, they want to have more," says Hathcox. "And sometimes they'll go back whether you go with them or not. Of course, that's a good thing, but it can sure be hard as a parent to let your child go off to South America or Africa when you're not going with them!"

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-- Amanda Phifer is a free-lance writer and seminary student in Mill Valley, Calif.

Unorthodox campus minister shares faith in secular setting

By Marla Pierson Lester

NORMAN, Okla. (ABP) -- Nathan Brown moves even when he's sitting still. Teaching his freshman composition class at Oklahoma University, the 36-year-old graduate student and divorced father shifts constantly between desk and floor. Talking nonstop, his energy fills the room. He shows a "Saturday Night Live" clip to help students think in an unconventional way. He illustrates a point about cultural norms by describing a practice common in some cultures -- males gently squeezing each other's genitals as a greeting.

He segues the discussion toward faith -- a topic that comes up frequently in this secular university classroom. He reminds the students that he is a Christian and then launches into a diatribe about the millions of people killed in the name of Christianity. He says there's much about his religion he doesn't understand, yet he continues to believe. "I have a really hard time believing there's nothing driving this ship."

Welcome to college ministry, Nathan Brown style.

"He's cool. He's like the best English teacher I've ever had," says Rita Chandler, a 19-year-old freshman from Rush Springs, Okla. She also likes that Brown talks about his faith -- and the way he does it.

"Most Christians are conservative and very concerned with the image they present," Chandler says. "He just wants to be himself. He's very open with what he believes, and he wants us to be the same. The way he is makes me want to be a stronger Christian, to not be so afraid of what everybody else is thinking."

Brown sprinkles his conversation with Oklahoma sayings and inside jokes about Baptists, not to mention an occasional four-letter word.

In a conservative state, on a campus where some students have been warned to head straight for the safety of the Baptist Student Union, Brown argues that Jesus cussed. He's eager to face questions about the possibility of a sarcastic God and he loves talking about God's humor.

Not everyone appreciates his irreverent approach.

"I offend the Christian students, I really do," he tells the Christian lifestyle magazine FaithWorks. "But they don't need me. They've obviously got their mind made up. It's better to intrigue or tweak the interest of the non-Christian student than worry about offending the Christian student."

This is a luxury most student ministers don't enjoy. But most unorthodox ministers like Brown don't have the support system he enjoys either.

Brown's arrangement is unusual by student-ministry standards. He doesn't represent a campus-based organization but is paid by the Oklahoma chapter of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a national organization of progressive-thinking Baptists.

He works closely with Mike Bumgarner, student minister at First Baptist Church of Norman, a congregation next door to the OU campus and the church where Brown's father, now retired, served 29 years as pastor.

"He operates outside the boundaries. I operate inside the boundaries," Bumgarner says of his relationship to Brown. "Together our gifts and talents complement each other really well."

Or, as Brown says, "We're a little bit like a professional wrestling tag team."

Brown does what Bumgarner can't, and vice versa. Bumgarner nurtures, Brown provokes. Bumgarner is the one who teaches the younger college students. Brown seeks out students turned off by the Christianity they've known. Once Brown gets them to reconsider the faith, Bumgarner helps them find a place to fit in the church.

Bumgarner says he's more conservative than Brown but, he adds, Brown's theology is more conservative than most people think.

"He spends so much of his time playing the devil's advocate. And people who play the devil's advocate a lot play on edges that create an image or facade of being something they're not," Bumgarner says.

Brown himself tells students he loves for them to disagree with him. "I'm nothing if not opinionated," he says. But if he talks and the listener listens, nothing has happened. "However, if I p--- you off and sparks start flying, we may grow. We may get somewhere," Brown says.

It's hard to track how many layers of cynicism Brown is peeling away from these OU students. But the college program at First Baptist is growing, even though the church is considered "liberal" by many Baptist students and leaders. Six or seven years ago, the church had 15 to 20 students attending Sunday school. "We now waver between 50 and 125" at mid-semester, Brown says. A Wednesday-night meeting used to bring in a half dozen students. Now, on a good night, as many as 100 might be in and out of the three groups, he says.

Another successful venture is Praise Night, an occasional music-driven gathering led by students themselves. Between 300 and 600 students will show up for the mostly monthly meetings, which bring together Christians from various campus groups and faith traditions.

On this night in May, Brown is getting ready for his weekly Bible study with graduate students. He pulls on a worn white T-shirt. He cut the Old Navy logo off it to protest the conditions of the company's workers, he explains. This act, like so much else to Brown, is a teaching tool.

Since he's been leading the graduate group, it has multiplied -- all the way to eight on this night. That total is fine with Brown. "I feel like we're doing quality work," he says. Brown uses tidbits he gleaned from various afternoon conversations to spur the discussion during the Wednesday-night study.

He squeezes in research between everything else. Kind of like his ministry, this is not work taking place in a cubicle somewhere. In addition to reading the two magazines to which he subscribes -- Utne Reader and The Door -- he spends hours each week sifting through the publications at Borders bookstore.

"Input is at least as important as output," Brown says.

He does a lot of thinking on his bike or during a walk. He has multiple offices -- a cubbyhole he shares with other English graduate students and an office at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma, also in Norman. But don't expect to find him in either.

He confesses it's sometimes hard to figure out which hours to bill for the CBF job. Was that Baptist work or free time, ministry or messing around? When you're aiming to reach unchurched college students, it can look much the same from the outside.

Brown spent a year playing with the Ultimate Frisbee team before he started bringing leftover donuts from Sunday school to team practices. And it took awhile after that before anyone asked where the donuts came from. That was the first they knew that Brown was in ministry.

"Particularly with that crew, if I had done that at the beginning, they would have written me off," Brown says. The way it happened, he noted, sparked dialogue.

Ministering, to Brown, should take time. "I am personally sick to death of the 'get 'em, get 'em good, get 'em fast,'" Brown says.

"Jesus made a long-term commitment to a small group of people," Brown says. "The Son of God only worked with 12 people. So what the hell do you want from me?"

He points out that the Bible's accounts of Jesus' ministry leave a lot of time unaccounted for. "You think about three years there. Had to be a lot of down time. I'm really, really, really curious what went on around the campfire on the off nights. . I'd like to know what was said around the campfire, the off-color stories, the fishing jokes. I'd like to know what was going on around the campfire. I have an idea it wasn't quite as pious as we would like to think it was."

These are the kinds of ponderings that spark discussion among the graduate students on Wednesday night.

The group, ranging from regulars at First Baptist to Lutheran friends from the Frisbee field, meets alongside other college Bible studies at a large home on the outskirts of town.

It is not so much a teaching time as free-ranging discussion. They call themselves the Dead Heretics Society and ponder RPQs, random philosophical questions.

"It hits questions people are afraid to ask in church, and they would never be asked in church," says J. R. Grohs, an aerospace engineer at Tinker Air Force Base who drives in for the study. "Instead of presenting what you should know, it's asking questions, just trying to glean some more meaning."

Clearly animated by the study, Brown lingers over the table of chips, artichoke dip and other goodies, replaying with other students the discussions of the night. "This is what I live for," he says later. "Wouldn't it be cool if churches could pull this off somehow?"

"To me, large secular campuses are just as much of a mission field as any other part of the world because of how absolutely turned off to religion a lot of students are," he says. "They love to hate it actually."

Sometimes it seems Brown is right there with the skeptics. Perhaps it's because he has spent so much of his life in the buckle of the Bible Belt, surrounded by conservative Christians. He worries about the image Christianity has with the secular public.

"Why is it they're so jaded about Christianity? It's because we so consistently give them something to laugh about. 'Wives submit to your husbands.' What a joke! And students know it. They laugh at it."

But Brown does have limits.

"You will never hear me use the name of God lightly," he says.

But four-letter "words of emphasis," as Brown euphemistically calls them, are a different matter. "They all say it after they leave the BSU. It's a point of relevance. It bridges a gap with non-Christian students. It's intended to be something that whips their head around and at least makes them listen to the next two sentences I say."

"I am just trying to figure out some way to shake it up," Brown says. "The church has so much crust on it."

Volunteers provide inmates' children a 'day with mom'

By Ken Camp

BURNET, Texas (ABP) -- Ten mothers serving time at a Texas criminal facility got a welcome break in their routine Aug. 25 when Baptist volunteers sponsored a "day with mom" for children and the aunts and grandmothers who care for them.

While a "restorative justice" ministry sponsored by Texas Baptists has had similar events at male prisons, the six-hour party at the Ellen Halbert Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facility near Burnet, Texas, was the first at a women's unit.

"We're breaking some new ground here today," said volunteer leader Leland Maples.

The event is part of a larger ministry effort by Texas Baptists to promote programs that not only punish criminals but also seek ways to remedy and prevent crimes.

Statistically, children who grow up with a parent in prison are more likely than others to commit crimes themselves. Programs like a "day with mom" attempt to keep a relationship going with children otherwise separated by incarceration.

"When mom is gone, everything changes, and the kids are the ones who lose," said Jackie Thomison, chaplain at the Ellen Halbert Unit.

The offenders participating in the event had demonstrated an earnest desire to reconnect with their families and to put their lives back together once they complete the nine-month program at the Halbert Unit and one year at a halfway house.

"A program like this helps to build a bridge of relationship again between the mother and child who are separated by incarceration," Thomison said. "It helps the children understand that mother still loves them. Just because she's here instead of at home, it doesn't mean she has quit loving them. And it helps them understand why mom is here -- to get help."

Volunteers started the day with icebreaker games that prompted plenty of smiles and giggles, as well as sparking meaningful dialogue. Some of the younger children understood for the first time where their mothers were living and why they were there.

One offender said it was the first time in eight months that she had been able to touch her children.

In one team-building activity, mothers and children built towers out of drinking straws and masking tape, but every participant had to keep one hand behind her back. Once they completed the towers, volunteers asked the family teams to name their towers.

"We called ours the happy tower because I'm so happy to be here today," one child said.

"We called ours the hope tower because when there's hope, there's always a chance to make a difference," another responded.

Between games, volunteers asked questions and rewarded those who answered with beans. At an auction toward the end of the day, mothers traded those beans for school clothes, stuffed animals, toys and games that they were able to give to their children.

At lunchtime, instead of the usual prison cafeteria food, the mothers, children and caregivers enjoyed a pizza party.

On a couple of occasions during the day, volunteers divided participants into groups of boys, girls, mothers and caregivers. They asked members of each group to share feelings about how life was different because of incarceration, and they told how they coped with their feelings.

Little girls talked about crying themselves to sleep after going to bed without good night kisses. Little boys told about pounding pillows with their fists to work out anger. And inmates passed around tissue boxes and wiped away tears as they described their desire to set their lives back on course.

"I don't want my children to grow up in a world like this -- in a drug world," one offender said.

"There is no way, with God's help, that I will allow myself to get back in with the same people," another said.

When Margo McKinney, volunteer from Temple Baptist Church in Odessa, Texas, spent the day with the women at the Halbert Unit, she saw what she might have been had God not delivered her from alcohol abuse.

"I volunteer because my brother spends a lot of time in prison, and it's kind of a grace-of-God thing that I have not spent a lot of time in prison," she said.

Maples challenged the women to set clear goals, to find Christian friends who would support them in making right choices, and to stay away from negative influences.

"I know you've all got plans for getting out. I want you to make plans right now for staying out," he said.

"You should be able to tell me where you will be on the first Saturday night that you're out, and who you will be with. If you're with the same people and in the same places as you were before, the same thing will happen to you again."

He shared a presentation of the Christian gospel, encouraging the women to read the Bible and pray, asking God for direction and for a transformed will.

By the day's end, many of the offenders resolved that they would do whatever it took to be able to be with their children again and to care for them properly. And they agreed that the day they spent together was a good first step.

"I need to rebuild a relationship with my kids," one offender said. "We needed this."

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News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Religious leaders oppose missile-defense spending

WASHINGTON -- Representatives of three Baptist groups were among 22 religious leaders asking Congress to reduce funding for missile defense.

In a letter to members of key congressional committees, the clergy opposed President Bush's request of \$8.3 billion for missile defense in the 2002 fiscal year, a 57 percent increase over the current budget.

The letter says vast spending on national defense would take money away from programs that help the poor, argues that there is no credible threat to the United States from long-range missiles and says it would benefit only large defense contractors.

"For these reasons, we ask you to cut back on authorization for national missile defense and to redirect those resources to programs that meet important human and community needs.

Among signers, who include individuals speaking for themselves and not necessarily the organization they represent, were Curtis Ramsey-Lucas of National Ministries of American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.; Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America; and Lonnie Turner of the Washington office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. (ABP)

Two seeking presidency in North Carolina

BEAUFORT, N.C. -- Following a failed effort to promote shared leadership between theological factions, North Carolina Baptists will again have a choice when they elect a president this fall.

Raymond Earp, a layman at Calvary Baptist Church in Beaufort, N.C., said he is not a political person and does not belong to any political organization. He said he would appoint both moderates and conservatives to leadership posts and would seek to increase representation from lay persons and smaller churches.

Charles Page, a conservative pastor from Charlotte, announced earlier that he would be a candidate for president of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Last year a proposal to change the state convention's constitution to make it harder for any faction to gain control failed to receive a necessary two-thirds vote. (ABP)

Annuity Board launches AB Funds Trust

DALLAS -- The Southern Baptist Convention Annuity Board, an agency providing retirement, insurance and relief programs for church and denominational employees since 1918, is branching out into registered mutual funds.

Thanks to changes in the agency's mission statement approved in 2000, the Dallas-based Annuity Board is now set up to offer eligible investors a variety of new products and services, officials announced Aug. 27.

With the launch of AB Funds Trust, a no-load family of mutual funds sponsored by the Annuity Board, investors can now open Individual Retirement Accounts and Personal Investment Accounts by purchasing shares through a registered broker.

"This is a watershed event in the life of the Annuity Board and its participants," Roddy Cummins, vice president of AB Trust, told workers and guests at a kickoff ceremony. "Entering a registered environment is a tremendous achievement and one that enhances our products and goals for the benefit of all our participants in the years to come."

The new investment products are open to participants in Annuity Board plans, persons eligible to participate, annuitants and spouses. (ABP)

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