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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Churches minister to families of mine explosion victims
- America still a 'Christian nation,' Catholic author Neuhaus says
- Graham California 'outreach' yields thousands of decisions
- Baptist home house parent charged with sexual battery

Churches minister to families of mine explosion victims

By Linda Holloway

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. (ABP) -- Alabama Baptists and other church groups responded immediately following the Sept. 23 mine explosion near Tuscaloosa.

Jim Walter Resources Blue Creek Mine No. 5 in Brookwood is the deepest mine in North America. The blast, believed to be the deadliest U.S. mining disaster since 1984, killed 13 and injured three.

"The families and workers could not have made it without the prayers and help of the area churches," said mine president Gary Tramell.

For five days following the accident, families, workers and friends gathered at the United Mine Workers Association building to hear rescue updates. Gathered with them were members of area churches.

Cathy Quinn, a member of Big Hurricane Baptist Church in Brookwood, noted how area Christians came together during the tragedy. "Churches from our area and neighboring counties continually brought food and donations for the families," she said.

"It was not a denominational effort, but a Christian effort to offer prayer, food and support," said Rick Davis, pastor of Fleetwood Baptist Church in Peterson.

Along with food and prayer support, a counseling team was established.

Ron Howard, a member of Woodland Forrest Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa and associate director of pastoral care at Druid City Hospital, led the team.

"It was incredible how the Christian community rallied around the families and employees," Howard said.

Welcoming the counseling team and other ministers, mine spokesman Dennis Hall said, "I was impressed at the comfort that the religious community gave to the families and employees."

While many came to the UMWA building to help, others prayed at the neighboring West Brookwood Church. Next door to the mine, the church is the only structure left of the original Brookwood coal town of the late 1800s.

Victor Hutchins, pastor of West Brookwood, said, "My brother, Marshall, is a mine rescuer, and he was leading the singing when he got the page about the accident."

"We immediately started praying," Hutchins said. "The church was open during the day for the next week for family and visitors to come and pray. Some travelers had heard on the radio that the church was open, and they drove from the interstate to pray. This is one way that we tried to meet the needs of the community."

Other displays of support included a memorial and candlelight service, a benefit for the families and a \$1,000 donation for the victims' families by Pleasant Grove Baptist Association.

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-- Linda Holloway is a correspondent for The Alabama Baptist

America still a 'Christian nation,' Catholic author Neuhaus says

By Jennifer Davis Rash

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- America is still a Christian nation, according to one of the foremost authorities on the role of religion in the contemporary world, Richard John Neuhaus. But "Christian America" is defined socially, not theologically, he noted.

"More than 90 percent of Americans claim they are Christians," he said. "We may find them to be a very imperfect Christian, a very muddled Christian, a very confused Christian, an inwardly contradictory Christian, but if in their minds they think they are Christians and if that is true of the overwhelming majority, ... America is still a Christian nation."

Neuhaus compared a Christian nation to an English-speaking nation. "We may not speak English well, but we are still an English-speaking nation," he said. "We may practice Christianity poorly, but we still practice Christianity (thus we are a Christian nation)," he said.

Christian America also is depicted in its tolerance, Neuhaus said. "We are tolerant because we are Christian, not despite being Christian."

Neuhaus explained that tolerance is grounded in biblical faith, Judeo-Christian morality and Christian theology, not in secularism. Christian traditions lead Americans to respect other faiths and not to offend.

Still, some claim America is a post-Christian, or non-Christian, society, Neuhaus added.

"Maybe some say it is a post-Christian world because they don't want to take responsibility for what an overwhelmingly Christian society would look like -- a lot like this one, filled with sinners," Neuhaus said. "We ought not have any problem as Christians in understanding that we are all forgiven sinners and only by the grace of God on our way to what we are to be in its wholeness."

Neuhaus, editor-in-chief of *First Things: A Monthly Journal on Religion and Public Life* and president of New York City's Institute on Religion and Public Life, was part of a recent two-day conference at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School. The conference, "Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail: Evangelical Conversations," brought together scholars and church leaders to examine historical differences, recent discussions and new initiatives among evangelicals, fundamentalists, Pentecostals, mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Neuhaus, a Catholic priest, discussed "The Meanings of Christian America" during an Oct. 2 luncheon.

Victor Hanson III, publisher of *The Birmingham News* and co-sponsor of the luncheon, along with Beeson Dean Timothy George, described Neuhaus' journal as one "seeking to address timeless truths rather than mere values."

"Father Neuhaus is one of the best defenders of the orthodox tradition that we have today," Hanson said, noting he was named one of the 32 most influential intellectuals in America by U.S. News and World Report.

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-- Jennifer Davis Rash is news editor for The Alabama Baptist

Graham California 'outreach' yields thousands of decisions

By Mark Wyatt

FRESNO, Calif. (ABP) -- California's agricultural heartland yielded a harvest of souls Oct. 11-14 as evangelist Billy Graham preached on God's love and Christ's Second Coming during a record-setting "outreach" in Fresno.

Undeterred by a broken foot and unprecedented security precautions, Graham launched the four-day event at Fresno's Bulldog Stadium exactly one month after terrorist attacks struck New York and Washington. The preacher known as "America's pastor" referred to the tragic events each time he spoke.

"Something about what happened on Sept. 11 caused people to think about spiritual things for maybe the first time in years," Graham said. "We are living in a different world, which will be felt in every area of our society for years to come.

"We are in troubled times. We're going to have to rethink our lives," Graham continued. "But in the midst of all that, there is one hope, that Jesus Christ said he is coming again. Without hope our nation will not go on."

Graham, 82, broke his foot in three places while in his Fresno hotel room two days before the campaign began. He arrived on the platform each night in a wheelchair, accompanied by his son Franklin Graham, CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. When it came time to preach, the senior Graham walked slowly to the pulpit aided by his son or another associate and wearing a brace on his injured foot.

Graham seemed to grow stronger each night of the campaign.

"The Bible teaches that we need to have faith and believe things we don't understand," the evangelist declared. "I don't understand why those hijackers hit those two great buildings in New York, or hit the Pentagon. I don't understand that, but I accept by faith that there is a sovereign God."

"Maybe God is speaking to us," Graham continued. "Maybe God is saying, 'It's time for you to repent and get right with God and change your way of living and change this state and this country.'"

Thousands responded to Graham's nightly call to repentance. They streamed down from the bleachers and gathered in front of the high-tech stage erected for the mission to pray to receive Christ. Immediately, trained counselors recorded each decision and distributed Christian literature to the new believers.

"I just joined the group!" an excited convert told the California Southern Baptist after he prayed with nearly 3,000 others crowding the stadium floor.

Campaign organizers reported 14,731 spiritual decisions registered during four evening services and a Saturday morning children's program. Nearly all were reported to be first-time professions of faith in Jesus Christ.

A Graham spokesman said attendance totaled 201,000 in five sessions, including a stadium-record 62,000 on hand for a Saturday night "Concert for the Next Generation." An overflow crowd numbering 15,000 packed a neighboring baseball complex equipped with a giant video screen while 47,000 people

jammed the Fresno State University stadium. The stadium crowd alone eclipsed an attendance record set during a game featuring the nationally ranked Fresno State Bulldogs just weeks earlier.

The youth-oriented concert featuring Kirk Franklin, dc Talk and Gamaliel Ruiz also drew the one-millionth young person to attend one of the Graham campaign events.

Stepped-up security procedures combined with capacity crowds delayed entrance to the stadium by as much as 90 minutes for some attending the event. Police used mirrors to examine the underside of every vehicle entering stadium parking lots while security officers searched handbags and used metal-detecting wands to scan every visitor.

More than 500 churches from 54 denominations and some 20,000 volunteers helped stage the four-day campaign in the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley. The event, more than a year in the planning, originally was called the Central Valley Billy Graham Crusade, using the term made familiar during Graham's evangelistic meetings spanning 52 years.

Citing sensitivity to other religions, however, organizers decided to abandon the term "crusade" in favor of "outreach," "mission" and "campaign." Most speakers complied with the change, but even Graham sometimes reverted to the more familiar term.

Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, shared the platform with Graham on the final night of the California gathering. Colson said he became a Christian 28 years ago when a friend spoke to him about Jesus. That friend, Colson noted, had been saved during a Billy Graham outreach.

"I surrendered my life to Christ and nothing has been the same since; nothing can ever be the same again," Colson declared.

Colson said churches around the world are "packed full of people asking questions" and dealing with uncertainty and fear following the events of Sept. 11.

"Sometimes fear leads to despair," Colson noted. "It's easy to succumb to despair. But Christians must never, ever succumb to despair; it is contrary to everything that the gospel teaches us."

In his closing sermon, Graham noted the Second Coming of Christ is mentioned in the New Testament more than 300 times. Still, he said, many do not believe Jesus will return.

"Some don't want to believe it because Christ hasn't come so far," Graham said. "A lot of people don't want Jesus to come because they're too comfortable living the way they are now. Materialism in a way has become our religion. We want to eat, drink and be merry without interference in our selfish way of life.

"Now we're faced with a new kind of war and we don't know what the end will be. The intensification of war in my opinion is one of the signs that the end of time is near," Graham said.

Commenting on the cultural diversity of the region, Graham said he was trying to confirm that decisions were recorded among more than 100 language groups during the Central California outreach. And he expressed hope that his visit would improve relations in the region's diverse population.

"One thing I'd like to see out of this crusade is a new love between the ethnic groups in this area," Graham said on the final night of the mission. He noted that pastors and other leaders of many ethnic communities had "worked together during these many weeks of preparation.

"We ought to be together at the workplace, wherever you work, at home, in meetings like this, in church. We ought to be prepared for the coming of Christ."

The Central California campaign was Graham's final mass rally this year. His next scheduled outreach is the Greater Cincinnati Northern Kentucky Billy Graham Mission, to be held June 27-30, 2002, at Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati. And while in Fresno, Graham received an invitation to hold another mission next October at Texas Stadium in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Baptist home house parent charged with sexual battery

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A house parent at Baptist Home for Children in Jacksonville, Fla., was jailed Oct. 12 on felony charges of sexual battery.

Scott Timothy Laschkewitsch, 36, of Jacksonville, was charged with improperly touching a 5-year-old girl who is a foster child at the facility.

A spokesman for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office said Oct. 16 that additional charges had been filed involving a second child.

Randy Harrison, administrator of the Baptist Home in Jacksonville, said Laschkewitsch had been employed a little over a year. He said the agency does extensive background checks through the FBI before hiring workers.

Harrison had no comment on the charges. When a child makes an allegation, the home reports it to an abuse registry. "The investigation goes into their hands at that point," he said.

According to a police report, a 5-year-old girl told her therapist Oct. 5 that Laschkewitsch fondled her. After child protective services interviewed the girl, a warrant was issued for his arrest. He was arrested Oct. 12 and held without bail.

Police also interviewed two other girls, ages 5 and 10, as possible victims. Lt. Paul Woolard of the sheriff's office's sex-crimes unit said two charges had been filed so far and that an investigation was continuing.

Laschkewitsch is scheduled to appear in court Nov. 5.

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