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Agency formed to magnify women's role in missions

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- A new missions organization led by and focused on women has been launched, according to an announcement Dec. 13.

"One third of the world's people today are non-Christian women," said Suzanah Raffield of Birmingham, Ala., an incorporator of Global Women who will be the group's full-time coordinator.

Despite that statistic, planners of the organization said they could find no evangelical mission board in existence specializing in worldwide ministry and witness by women.

Incorporated Dec. 6, Global Women will attempt to "create and cultivate global friendships among women for shared learning and service for all humanity," according to legal documents.

"A dominant characteristic of most unevangelized peoples is repression and isolation of their women," said Raffield, an ordained minister. "Such women cannot usually receive the loving message of Jesus Christ, except through contact with a[nother] woman."

A purpose statement says the organization will "enable evangelical women to help women and their families to obtain a life of faith and benefit." Though started by Baptists, the organization is open to full participation from all "missions-minded evangelicals." It is also open to men.

Organizers include several former leaders of the Woman's Missionary Union, auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention. They also include younger women who believe a new kind of mission organization is needed to appeal to their generation.

Raffield said Global Women is unique among Baptists and other Protestant groups. She believes an informally defined constituency will be appealing for young women to enter and to lead.

"We hope to help meet the need for gathering and sharing expertise in global ministry among women," Raffield said. "Many women already in the field have requested a chance to network."

President of Global Women is Dorothy Sample of Flint, Mich., a former national president of WMU.

"Nurture of women toward global service will be a distinctive of Global Women," Sample said. "We want to help place women, and also men, where they can minister to the world through women."

The first year's work is projected to include international partnership projects, conferences for young women, building an infrastructure for appointing women as missionaries and working with others wishing to expand humanitarian aid and evangelism among women, according to Raffield.

The group says it wants to complement work of both WMU and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Atlanta-based CBF, said: "I am inspired by the founders of Global Women. Their vision for this new organization is born out of a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and a passionate desire to fulfill the Great Commission. The birth of Global Women is fresh evidence of the Spirit's continued empowering."

Gary Baldrige, co-coordinator of the CBF's global missions division, said he looks "forward to cooperating in every way possible" with the group.

Funding will be "by churches and individuals who have a global vision of ministry for and by women," said Catherine Allen of Birmingham, the group's treasurer. She said the organization might also develop publications and projects that are "more-or-less self-funding."

Allen, a former staff member of Woman's Missionary Union who has written several books on the history of women in missions, said several strong women's mission boards were active 100 years ago. Their work helped to plant lasting Christian communities in Burma, China, India, Brazil, Korea, Nigeria, and other nations."

But in recent years, Allen said, the percentages of women appointed as missionaries, especially for leadership development and human-needs ministry to women, have declined among Southern Baptists and some other denominations.

"We want to multiply women missionaries," Allen said. Global Women, she added, "will be an advocate and also an action agent for women in missions."

Vice-president of the organization is Carolyn Crumpler of Cincinnati, who was executive director of WMU, 1974-1989, and later moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

"Global Women will take up parts of the missions task among women that need a spotlight," Crumpler said. "Our women's mission heritage around the world gives excellent models of what can be done when women shape mission philosophy. We will build on those and be mutually supportive of all who are continuing to serve."

Secretary is LeAnn Gunter of Panama City, Fla., and assistant secretary will be Lori Crowe of Cornelia, Ga. Gunter and Crowe are students at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta with backgrounds in mission projects.

Other incorporators include Alma Hunt of Roanoke, Va., who was executive secretary of WMU, 1948-1974; and Dellanna O'Brien of Birmingham, WMU executive director, 1989-1999. After serving as an incorporator, O'Brien vacated her position on the founding board of directors.

Organizers said planning for a women's mission initiative began in March 2000, after research indicated declines in missions for and by women. Research also revealed that suffering of women is worsening globally.

Three informal think tanks have been held since June 2000, where women described shortcomings of existing missions-delivery systems, looked at the history and current demographics of women in missions and discussed factors that hinder women from following God's call.

As early as November 2000, a consensus developed that a freestanding organization was needed to meet growing needs and opportunities for women, Allen said.

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: Some of the Baptist women who have actively guided and endorsed the Global Women effort from its beginnings are the following:

Sheri Adams professor of church history and theology at Gardner-Webb University; Rosalie Beck, associate professor of religion at Baylor University; Carolyn Blevins, associate professor of religion at Carson-Newman College; Diana Garland, director of the Baylor Center for Family and Community Ministries; Kathryn Grant of West Palm Beach, Fla., co-founder of Christian Women United; Beverly Greer,

minister of education at Clearview Baptist Church in Anderson, S.C.; Carol Holcomb, assistant professor of religion at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor; Karen Massey, assistant professor of Christian education and faith development at McAfee School of Theology; Helen McNeely, international coordinator for volunteers of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; Anne Thomas Neil of Wake Forest, N.C., minister and founding chair of Baptist Women in Ministry; Carol Richardson, associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Memphis, Tenn.; Tamara Tillman, associate coordinator for missions education of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; Mari Wiles, minister of family life at Knightdale Baptist Church in Knightsville, N.C.; Winnie Williams of Seneca, S.C., retired associate professor at Southern Wesleyan University, Gaynor Yancey, baccalaureate program director at Baylor University's School of Social Work; and Lynn Yarbrough, an English teacher in Nanjing China, working under auspices of the Amity Foundation and former editorial director of WMU.

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Events of Sept. 11 renew debate about reality of evil

By Mark Wingfield

(ABP) -- Evil is making a comeback in an America jarred from complacency by Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Once considered passe by many mainstream Christians, fundamental questions of the nature of good and evil are now showing up not only in churches, but also in front pages and TV talk shows as well.

Recent events have renewed talk about cosmic evil, a problem that has confounded theologians for centuries but some say has become neglected in modern society's "I'm OK, you're OK" philosophy.

"I see this in one tragic way as the vindication of the Christian position on the nature of human beings," said Steven Davis, professor of philosophy at Claremont-McKenna College in California.

Events of Sept. 11 are "a real wakeup call for educated people around the world," said the Presbyterian professor. "A lot of educated and sophisticated people were very uncomfortable with accusing anybody of being evil or any act of being evil. They said others just had different sets of hopes and desires and that nothing really constitutes evil."

That argument "no longer carries the same weight as before," Davis asserted. "It is very difficult to hold that position in light of 9/11."

Evil is "an intrinsic part of the world system and is impossible to avoid," he added. "Apart from the mercy of God, there's no solution to it."

Jim Denison, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas and a former philosophy of religion professor, identified three categories of people whom history has judged as evil.

First, he said, are the ideologues. "These are people the rest of the world considers to be purely evil but in their own minds are doing what their ideology prescribes," Denison said. "The rest of the world disagrees with their ideology and therefore sees what they're doing as evil."

He placed Osama bin Laden, accused mastermind of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, in this category.

Second, Denison said, are the pathological. "These are people who are inherently damaged, who do things that are definitionally evil as an expression of their own personality dysfunction."

He cited as an example Adolf Hitler, whom he said was not driven so much by ideology as an irrational need to create the myth of a super race.

Third, he said, are those whose actions create a pattern the world perceives as evil even though the person's own character may not be evil. As examples, he cited Napoleon and Herod the Great.

Whatever their motives, Denison said, all can be classified as evil, because "any ideology that results in the death of innocent people is evil."

Any discussion of evil ultimately leads to the existence of a devil.

"I take Satan more seriously than most anybody I know of," said Walter Wink, professor of biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City. Unlike others, however, who view the devil as tempting individuals to sin, Wink views evil as primarily affecting institutions.

"Evil is a spiritual power, a reality," he said. "And it incarnates in institutions and systems and structures."

Wink said he dislikes it "when Satan and demons are treated as though they're somehow in the sky and come and jump down on people and possess them. I think they are incarnate in these institutions and systems and structures and people to varying degrees."

Bill Tillman, professor of Christian ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology, said the Bible teaches that Christians will be challenged by forces of evil.

Tillman said many Baptists have ignored that fact, believing that such issues belong to fringe groups like charismatics and Pentecostals.

Davis said both the Bible and events of the 20th century suggest the reality of Satan. "To say there's a demonic force out there but not a devil is like saying there's gravitational force but no gravity," he said.

The presence of evil in the world doesn't mean God is absent, however, Wink added. He said he has been asked often in recent weeks about where God was in the midst of the terrorist attacks. "My reaction was to say that just as the clouds of smoke caused by the falling debris of the towers eclipsed the sun, so God appears to be eclipsed by an action of such horrendous proportions," he said. "But just as the clouds of smoke cleared, God is in fact still there."

Yet many wonder why God, if all powerful, doesn't simply stop evil in its tracks.

Christians find different ways of answering this question, said Davis, who believes everything that occurs happens with God's permission.

"God created a system where human beings would have free choice that could go tragically wrong," he said.

Theologians warn that there is danger in the temptation to immediately label enemies as inherently evil.

While Americans may be justifiably outraged by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, they should not ignore their nation's own actions may have at least in part provoked such an attack, Wink said.

He cited ongoing United States intervention in Iraq as an example, claiming 500,000 Iraqi children have died as a result of U.S. policy.

"Who has the boasting rights for having suffered the worst?" he asked. "We cannot demonize these people. From the point of view they take, the actions they have taken are liberation."

Tillman quoted longtime Baptist ethicist Henlee Barnette as teaching him: "We always need to be sure we understand who we are and those things of which we are capable. The one who stands before you, in him beats the heart of a barbarian."

There is a personality of evil lurking in the world, "and each of us has the potential to side in with that," Tillman warned.

Still, is it possible for an individual person to embody evil? Tillman says yes.

"At some point, we probably have to say: 'I can't do anything else with this individual,'" he said. "They are so overcome with anti-good that nothing I do gets through."

Denison agreed. "If a person is going to adopt a theology and ideology that are evil, that makes the person evil," he said.

"Most of us do evil things, but that doesn't mean we are evil people, because not everything we do is evil," Denison said.

"We are sinners. It's not just that we commit sin. We are by nature sinners. But then there's a second step to take from being a person who is by nature a sinner to being a person who is by nature evil."

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