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First woman pastor installed in Mississippi Baptist church

By Jim Newton

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- Rivercrest Fellowship in Jackson, Miss., has become the first church ever affiliated with the Mississippi Baptist Convention to be led by a woman pastor.

The congregation geared toward young adults commonly referred to as "Generation X" installed Carla Street as pastor Jan. 20. She had been co-pastor since starting the church in 1993 with her husband, Steve Street. He recently resigned to become coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Mississippi.

In October, the small church voted unanimously to call her as pastor. "It was one of the best days of my life because it was so affirming," she said. "That tells me it was an act of God."

Since she was on medical leave at the time, however, the church actually functioned without pastoral leadership until January.

"We are not your typical Southern Baptist congregation," said Phyllis Ragland, a member of Rivercrest's advisory council and a legal assistant for an insurance company. "However, we didn't want her to become our pastor by default."

Tom Hughes, chairman of the church's advisory council and customer-service representative for the local daily newspaper, said Rivercrest did not use a traditional "pastor search committee" to recommend Street as pastor. Instead, the three-member advisory council considered two other candidates, both men, before deciding to involve all church members in a business meeting called a "bodybuilder" session to "build the church as the Body of Christ."

Support was unanimous among the members for calling Carla as pastor. No other candidate was seriously considered. Hughes and Ragland said there was never any question about her being pastor, as one church member after another stood and affirmed her as the person God was leading the church to call.

During the installation service, a former drug dealer and member of Hells Angels, said he started coming to Rivercrest because it was the one church he could attend dressed in shorts and a tee-shirt and where people "accept me, listen to me, and help me." Greg McAlister, now a chef at a Jackson restaurant and a Rivercrest member, said, "Carla and this church changed my life."

"I know for a fact that the Spirit speaks through Carla Street," added Ragland. "Not any politics or any preconceived notions can convince me otherwise."

While the Southern Baptist Convention officially discourages women from serving as senior pastors, local churches are allowed to choose their own leaders. Those choices can affect relationships with other churches, however. In other states where churches have called female pastors, local associations have sometimes reacted by attempting to withdraw fellowship for what opponents view as violating the Bible's teaching.

The "Baptist Faith and Message," as amended by the SBC in 2000, says, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

William Perkins, editor of the Baptist Record, told the Jackson Clarion-Ledger he did not expect the first woman pastor in a Mississippi Baptist Convention church "to throw us into an uproar." Perkins said Mississippi Baptists support the autonomy of the local church and that the issue of women serving as pastors had never come up at the state convention.

During the 2000 session of the Mississippi Baptist Convention, messengers adopted a resolution stating that Mississippi Baptists had never officially endorsed any of the previous versions of the "Baptist Faith and Message," because such statements are not binding on autonomous churches and state conventions. The resolution acknowledged that historically, Baptists are not a creedal people, and that the Mississippi Baptist Convention affirms the Bible as the final authority in faith and practice.

Bill Merrell, vice president of convention relations for the SBC Executive Committee, however, said that 99 percent of Southern Baptists do not believe that females should be pastors of churches.

About 35 churches among the SBC's 42,000 affiliated congregations have women pastors.

Two years before amending the "Baptist Faith and Message" to declare that women should not be pastors, the SBC adopted a statement that a wife should submit herself "to the servant leadership of her husband."

In the Street's household, Carla is now her husband's pastor. "Steve has been so supportive," she said. "Steve has been a blessing and is proud to have me as his pastor," she said.

Carla said she has received no complaints from either the Mississippi Baptist Convention or Metro Baptist Association, and that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, of which the church is also a member, is celebrating the decision.

"Actually, you can't equate all Baptists to the Southern Baptist Convention," she said.

Steve said that affirmation of women in ministry is one of the principles that make the CBF different from the SBC. He said the Atlanta-based CBF also strongly affirms principles of the "priesthood" of all believers to interpret Scripture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and the autonomy of the local church to call anyone, male or female, as pastor.

While Steve and Carla have from the beginning functioned as co-pastors of Rivercrest Fellowship, before now she has been listed in the Mississippi Baptist Convention annual as associate pastor. Steve compared the convention's failure to acknowledge her role to "a form of religious shunning."

"They don't openly express disfavor, but they pretend she isn't there," he said.

Both Steve and Carla said they have received only positive reactions to front-page coverage in the Clarion-Ledger and lead stories on local television news programs.

"We don't have a feminist agenda here," Carla said. "I'm just doing what God has called me to do. My purpose is to reach people and help them connect with God, and that's what I'm going to focus on."

At the close of the installation service, Steve said he longs for the day when it isn't front-page news for a woman to be called as pastor of a Baptist church.

New Mexico legislature considering moment of silence

By John Loudat

SANTA FE, N.M. (ABP) -- A bill has been introduced in New Mexico's House of Representatives that, if passed, would restore a moment of daily silence in the state's classrooms.

Rep. Gloria Vaughn of Alamogordo introduced HB 138 Jan. 22. She said the bill would "restore the rights of every student to the free exercise of religion to be guaranteed within the public schools."

The bill would allow students to meditate, pray or engage in any silent activity that does not distract other students in their individual choice.

The proposed legislation would require that individual students be subjected to the "least possible pressure" to either engage in or refrain from religious observation.

New Mexico's lieutenant governor, Walter Bradley, issued a statement Jan. 22 in support of the legislation. "The attack on Sept. 11 strongly reminded me of the importance of maintaining my own personal belief," he said. "This bill affords students with that opportunity on a daily basis, and I support it."

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-- John Loudat is editor of the Baptist New Mexican.

Conference helps teens, parents see 'Eye 2 Eye'

By Rachel LeMay

HOT SPRINGS, Ark. (ABP) -- Teenagers and their parents sometimes don't see eye to eye. That's why Arkansas Baptists brought middle- and high-school students and their parents together for a conference about the importance of families.

"We're hitting it hard about making things right at home," said Randy Brantley, member of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention's evangelism and church growth team and coordinator of the Eye 2 Eye conference held in December in Hot Springs.

The weekend conference, attended by more than 1,500 teens and adults, sought to reinforce for young people that respecting authority at home is the starting point for respecting authority from God, he said.

"We're really focusing on making peace with dad, making peace with mom," said Brantley. "We want the students to come to God to ask for his peace at home to give them power."

The conference provided times both for adults and students to worship and study together and in separate groups.

The program featured praise and worship times led by Billy Foote and Band, concerts from Christian artist Geoff Moore and The Distance and a new group of three sisters, Aurora.

A husband and wife dramatist duo of Jim and Carol Shores performed, and several speakers addressed both the students and adults.

The theme was "Set an Example . Raising a Generation to Live Radically for Jesus Christ."

Jacob Aranza was the first speaker to address the full crowd on Friday night. He gave his testimony of growing up in an impoverished family in Houston.

He said he was kicked out of his home at 16 for his faith in Jesus, and through moving around and transferring high schools, was able to be a part of two campus revivals at high schools he attended. His challenge to the students was simple: "Turn your campus right side up," for Christ.

"If your youth pastor asked for as much from you as your football coach, you would think you were in a cult," he said.

Aranza also reminded students of the importance of family. His own son, Jake, traveled with him to the conference and performed two songs that he had written himself.

"You are no more right with God than you are with your mom and dad," Aranza told the crowd.

Masses of students and parents responded when he gave an altar call. Some came forward to commit their lives to Jesus for the first time and others to renew that commitment.

Tears flowed freely as rows of teens moved to the front of the auditorium. This first service set the mood for a conference centered on renewing the commitments to God first and family next.

For adults, Brantley said, the focus was on helping parents with their teens. "What I'm hoping is that God will begin to turn the hearts of moms and dads back to their youth," he said.

Shane Baker, youth minister at Trinity Baptist Church of Searcy, was among those bringing a group to the conference.

He said he wanted to bring his group to Eye 2 Eye specifically because it was a conference that challenged adults as well as students.

"I like the idea of bringing the parents and youth here together," said Baker. "We had a lot of parents come. Some of them have seen their children's relationship with God and wonder about spiritual things."

Brantley said he wanted to see families leave the conference a little closer.

"I hope that families see that it's okay for Christians to have a fun time, and that this fun time recharges your batteries to go into a world that is hostile," said Brantley. "This is a time when we can draw strength from one another to reach out to a world that desperately needs to hear the gospel."

Josh Richardson, a member of Denmark Baptist Church, located outside of Bald Knob, said that this was his first year to attend the Eye 2 Eye Conference. He explained that besides being rejuvenated as a Christian, he just hoped that "a bunch of people got saved."

His prayer was answered. During the weekend, 10 parents and teens accepted Christ and more than 100 recommitted their lives. Many others answered a call to ministry.

Even more just spent a weekend with mom and dad, something they had not done or enjoyed in a while.

The bottom line, said Brantley, is that he hoped teens and parents left the conference and were able to say, "Jesus showed up."

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Rachel LeMay wrote this story for the Arkansas Baptist News.

Cowboy turned preacher counting his blessings

By Jennifer Bryant

CLINTON, Ark. (ABP) -- Arkansas Baptist pastor Brad Curtis has had 10 broken arms, four knee surgeries, a broken leg, lost three teeth and had plastic surgery on his forehead.

No, we're not talking about rough deacons' meetings. The pastor of Lexington Baptist Church in Clinton, Ark., is a retired rodeo cowboy who spent 13 years as a bareback rider.

Curtis, who grew up in a non-Christian home in Harrison and didn't attend church as a child, joined the rodeo circuit as a teenager in an attempt to fit in.

"Rodeoing was the only thing I could do where I wasn't compared to my brother," recalled Curtis, who struggled in school with learning disorders, including dyslexia, and had turned to alcohol and drugs by the time he was 15.

During his senior year of high school, Curtis met his future wife, Janet. They fell in love, and he tried for a time to straighten out his life.

After graduation, he felt he could do nothing except rodeo, even though Janet didn't like the idea. College was not an option, and he only had a third or fourth grade reading level. "Rodeoing was the only thing I could do," he said.

Curtis won his first state championship in 1984. Eventually, he started traveling on the professional rodeo circuit. By the age of 22 he had been in 36 states and part of Canada.

Curtis had set a goal to become one of the top 10 bareback riders in the world. He attained that goal in 1985, along with being named rookie of the year.

Despite his success, he wasn't happy. His drinking increased and his attitude and outlook on life deteriorated.

One night at a rodeo in Lebanon, Tenn., Curtis thought he had performed very well. Unfortunately, the judges disagreed. Curtis drowned his sorrows in alcohol. When he woke up the next morning, he was in North Carolina in a strange van with guys he didn't even know.

Curtis recognized one person, David Gaither, from the rodeo circuit. "I didn't really know him because he was a Christian, but he was a familiar face," Curtis said. Gaither climbed into the van beside Curtis and began telling stories about Jesus and the prodigal son. Finally, Curtis told him four hours of non-stop Jesus was enough.

But God wasn't finished working in Curtis' life. He continued talking with Gaither about getting his life straightened out, and every conversation turned to Jesus. He was a guest in Gaither's home in Virginia for a week. "It was nothing like I had ever been around," he said. "They prayed before meals and seemed to be happy."

Right before a rodeo on a hot summer night, July 3, 1986, Curtis climbed into his own van and asked Jesus into his heart. "I felt like Superman coming out of the phone booth when I came out of the van," Curtis recalled.

The next night at another rodeo in Edmond, Okla., Curtis broke his leg. Friends packed him up and sent him home to heal, but before he left, one friend he had mentioned accepting Christ to gave him a copy of the New Testament. "It was the first book I ever read," said Curtis, who at the time was 23 years old.

Still, his troubles weren't over. After his leg healed, Curtis decided to rodeo again. He tried to win his rodeo friends to the Lord, but instead, they pulled him down. He drank again and started snorting crystal methamphetamine, a very dangerous illegal drug.

In late 1987, Curtis began attending Second Baptist Church of Conway's "Cowboy Church." It offered worship services for cowboys and provided them a place to study the Bible and feel perfectly at ease no matter what they were wearing. Curtis was drinking on Saturday nights and then attending church on Sunday nights.

"By the end of the year, I was running from the Lord," Curtis said. "I was miserable and thought about taking my own life. I had to do something."

In March 1988, Curtis and a friend took a trip to get away. During the trip, he said, "God opened my eyes."

He determined to return home, see if Janet would take him back, get involved in Bible study and get a job. Finding work posed the biggest challenge, because he didn't feel qualified for anything but rodeo. He did find a job, however, in Conway.

He married Janet in 1989 and then won another state championship. He decided to give up rodeo when their daughter was born. Quitting rodeo was harder for him than it was to quit drinking or drugs, he said, because it had defined him for so long.

He soon felt God was calling him into the ministry, but thought that was impossible since he despised being in front of people. Eventually, however, he surrendered to preach. He gave his first sermon the next week and has preached somewhere nearly every week since.

A friend encouraged him to seek more education, so he began attending what is now known as the Arkansas Baptist School of Biblical Studies in Little Rock. For the first time, he began to realize he could learn.

He attended school every weekend for over four years and continues to take correspondence courses. He has now spoken in 53 churches and been involved in prison ministry.

About six months ago, after filling in at Lexington Baptist Church, they asked him to become their pastor. It was the first time in his life he ever knew exactly what he was to do.

Curtis also works at Aermotor Pumps in Conway as a machinist. He works four 10-hour days and is off on Fridays to prepare for his church. Curtis and his wife have two children, Lindsey, 10, and Fletcher, 6.

He drives 75 miles one way to the small church. When people ask him how he can drive that far each Sunday, he just says, when you drive from Conway to San Diego for a rodeo, 75 miles doesn't seem like a lot.

"They (his church) are the right group of people. It is a place I don't have to act or be anything I'm not," Curtis stated.

He tried to wear a suit coat, but it wasn't him. When he started wearing a jacket, tie and starched wranglers, he felt like his church was blessed immensely because he was more comfortable.

Curtis said he owes a lot of people for where he is today. "I owe the Conway church a lot because they were doing something that most churches thought was stupid," he said. "But there was no way I would go into the church because of the stares and laughter I could hear in the parking lot when someone saw how I was dressed."

He tries not to let his past bother him. He just tries to learn from it and go on. "I will always remember where I came from, so that I can continue to grow."

"The past is the past," Curtis said. "I'm looking to the future, and I am amazed at what God has done so far and looking forward to what he's going to do." Curtis said he is still alert to dangers from his old lifestyle that might pull him down, however. "You can never get overconfident," he said.

His church membership has almost doubled in the last three months, and he has several goals in mind for the church. He wants his congregation to see and feel Jesus during worship, and he especially wants his people to realize the need to go out and do the Lord's business.

"I lived across the street from the associate pastor of one of the largest churches in town when I was young," stated Curtis. "I wondered why I didn't hear about Jesus until the age of 22."

About his past sins, he said: "I wish I hadn't done it, but now I use it to glorify God."

"I tell my church members to get me the names of their neighbors, friends, coworkers," he said. "I don't want other church members. I want the ones nobody else wants."

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-- Jennifer Bryant is assistant editor of the Arkansas Baptist News.

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