Associated Baptist Press

Editor: **Bob Allen**
Executive editor: **Greg Warner**

Phone: **800.340.6626**
Fax: **904.262.7745**
E-mail: **bob@abpnews.com**

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Andersen was duped, jurors told in Foundation trial

By Craig Harris

PHOENIX (ABP) -- After agreeing -- and then reneging -- on a $217 million settlement for its role in the Baptist Foundation of Arizona scandal, accounting giant Arthur Andersen went on trial April 29 telling jurors that it, too, was duped, preventing it from uncovering the scam.

But an attorney for investors, who lost $570 million in the failed foundation, said the firm's Phoenix office perpetuated the fraud by issuing clean audits for 14 years while ignoring its own red flags and a handful of whistleblowers.

A pool of more than 40 jurors heard brief opening statements before Judge Edward Burke. By the end of the day, seven women and five men, including two postal workers and a Maricopa County sheriff's sergeant, were selected for a trial that could last into mid-July.

Andersen backed out of the settlement March 29, when its Bermuda-based insurance carrier, Professional Services Insurance Co., said it wouldn't pay.

Richard Himelrick, an attorney for investors, said the foundation crumbled in 1999 after it overpriced and overvalued assets by at least $300 million. He said Andersen knew about the problems but "chose to stay silent."

Investors' attorneys have said the pattern was similar to another Andersen client, Houston-based energy trader Enron, which hid losses with off-the-book transactions. Andersen, whose employees shredded Enron documents, is facing a federal criminal charge for its role auditing that company.

Don Martin, an attorney for Andersen, told the jury pool the wrong defendant was on trial.

"Why didn't they go after the people who committed the fraud?" he said. "Arthur Andersen was not committing the fraud."

The state is pursuing criminal charges against five former Baptist foundation executives, including William Pierre Crotts, former chief executive officer. Crotts is among the 80 or so witnesses expected to testify in the civil trial. Others expected to be called include Jay Ozer, a former Andersen partner who was in charge of the foundation audits and is the target of a criminal probe.

In addition to overstating land values, which were used as collateral for the high-yield investments, the foundation has been accused of running a Ponzi scheme, in which new money was used to pay off old investments.

About 11,000 investors, many elderly, lost $570 million, when the foundation filed for bankruptcy protection in November 1999.

Betty Seymour of Sun City West said she and her husband, Jim, who were at the trial Monday, invested more than $250,000. She said the loss "cuts out all your luxuries and travel and the things you thought you would do when you retire."

"We were told it was a good thing that had never lost money in 50 years," she added. "We believed in its good reputation."

Martin said the fraud began in the 1980s, and state officials were tipped off about the problems but ignored complaints. He also said the foundation's board of directors was aware of the fraud in 1986 but did nothing.

"As Paul Harvey likes to say, 'There is the rest of the story,'" he said. "In the remaining weeks of the trial, we will let you know the rest of the story."

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Southern Baptist defends notion of interfaith worship

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Several Southern Baptist leaders have been critical of interfaith worship services that became popular after Sept. 11, saying they have an obligation to witness to non-Christians rather than affirm them.

But one graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary thinks it's a good idea for evangelicals to worship with Muslims, Buddhists and followers of other faiths.

Roy Fuller, a member of a Southern Baptist church, directs an interfaith community group in Louisville, Ky. He's responsible for organizing dialogues, panel discussions and worship services for members of various faiths.

Recently the group held a prayer service involving Christians and members of five other religions, including Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Baha'is.

Fuller recognizes he is probably among the minority in his denomination. Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have generally avoided conversations aimed at finding common ground among various faiths. They say such efforts, by their nature, involve watering down beliefs like Christ is the only way to salvation.

But Fuller said that misses the point of interfaith dialogue.

"The point is never syncretism, which is mixing these all together," Fuller said of a frequent criticism of such efforts. "I don't want to create a syncretistic religion; I don't know anybody who does. I proclaim myself a Christian, but I think my faith can be broadened by exposure to other religions."

"I think part of [Baptists'] reluctance to be involved in interfaith services is the impact they think it will have on evangelism," he added. "They say, 'If we recognize other religions and worship with them and that means we can't evangelize them, then we don't want anything to do with it.'"

In Southern Baptist circles, past participation in a citywide interfaith group is among the sources of contention threatening North American Mission Board funding of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.

Although the DC convention has curtailed budgetary contributions for a multi-faith, pre-Thanksgiving sacred song service, director Jeffrey Haggray makes no apology for supporting the concept.

Haggray said such events can help people relate to each other as neighbors and create a more civil society.

"I value the interfaith effort," he said. "In addition to Christians, we are Americans. Respecting the freedom of religion is an American value. I don't think we can have a double standard, of upholding freedom of religion and not having it when it comes to other views."

"I don't agree with their views," he said of other faiths. "But I uphold their right to worship without being attacked and denigrated. One thing Sept. 11 showed is the failure to understand those differences can lead to all kinds of violence."

Likewise, a Muslim in Louisville believes forming a broader network of relationships is a key to avoiding the distrust and suspicion that followed last year's terrorist attacks.

"Sept. 11 was a terrible surprise for many Muslims," said G.A. Shareef, a member of the board of directors at Faisal Mosque. "We had no idea what was going on . behind the scenes in the Middle East."

In the mid-1990s the Louisville mosque helped organize an annual Thanksgiving service that included Jewish and Presbyterian congregations. In recent months it has hosted visitors from Boy Scout troops and two Southern Baptist churches.

Despite his advocacy of interfaith work, Shareef recognizes that some Muslims oppose the idea, but he thinks the vast majority are in the middle -- too busy making a living to care. Still, he believes such efforts are valuable.

"We as human beings need to learn mutual respect," he said. "If we don't, we'll become oppressors. For years, human beings have oppressed, exploited and killed their fellow human beings. We can't eradicate this but we should minimize it."

However, some Christians who believe in reaching out to other religions draw the line at participation in worship services.

Bob Reccord, the president of the North American Mission Board, said the problem with modern multi-culturalism is its promotion of the idea that all faith traditions and beliefs are equal.

This is contrary to scripture, which proclaims there is absolute truth and that the only way to God is through belief in Jesus Christ, he said.

Reccord said such services automatically promote confusion. If Christians come together with Muslims, Hindus and Mormons, it appears they are endorsing each other's doctrinal positions and beliefs, he said.

Although he saw value in multi-religion gatherings after Sept. 11, the NAMB leader draws a distinction between the reaction to a national tragedy and ongoing services.

"The [latter] are just efforts to support multi-culturalism," Reccord said. "That's not anything I could support."

Two Southern Baptist missionaries also express doubts about the value of interfaith services.

Jim Brooks, who recently returned to Okinawa after a stateside assignment, works in an internationally diverse church, with many members from the military. He has found that prayer breakfasts and other services sponsored by military chaplains cater to "political correctness."

"They have all left me feeling rather empty and almost violated," Brooks said. "There are usually representatives from several non-Christian faiths there, as well as Protestant and Catholic chaplains.

"Almost invariably the Christian chaplains are instructed not to pray in Jesus' name, while the others do whatever they please. It seems like the restrictions are rather one-sided."

Currently on assignment at Louisville's Boyce Bible College, Texas native Chip Collins never participated in an interfaith service during 10 years in the country of Suriname, located in northern South America. Nor does he think they can complement his evangelistic efforts.

However, he supports forming personal relationships with non-Christians, including such overtures as visiting a Buddhist temple if trying to befriend a member of that faith.

"I would go to their temple and hope they visit my church," Collins said. "If I were the pastor of a church, I don't think I would take the whole church there. But I wouldn't discourage it one-on-one."

Reccord also supports forging personal relationships, pointing to the Christmas party his wife hosted for women in their suburban Atlanta neighborhood. The guests included various nationalities and such faiths as Buddists, Hindus and Catholics. Among the gifts Mrs. Reccord presented her guests was a copy of the "Jesus" video in the recipient's native language.

"That has been received incredibly well," he said. "It has opened up all kinds of doors to share."

Still, in an increasingly pluralistic society, Fuller thinks Christians need to take practical steps to reduce barriers between groups.

"People who are evangelistic will build relationships as part of that witness," he said. "We live in a religiously diverse society, and we have to acknowledge that reality. I sense that Baptists don't want to acknowledge this diversity exists."

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Sudan's Lost Boys find a new home

By Craig Bird

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- Peter Pan's Lost Boys vowed never to grow up. The Lost Boys of Sudan were forced to grow up overnight, their childhoods amputated by a brutal civil war.

When Sudan's Muslim government launched attacks in 1987 against Dinka villages in southern Sudan, almost 40,000 young children -- mostly boys -- became instant orphans.

They grew up as they staggered through miles of desert, chased by the pop-pop-pop of small arms fire. They survived years of hunger, thirst and deadly wilderness, listening to the cackle of the hyenas that dragged away the bodies of their less fortunate "comrades."

Hunger, thirst, exposure and malaria claimed many. Others drowned trying to cross fast-running rivers. Crocodiles and lions feasted on stragglers. Rebel armies "drafted" those big enough to shoulder assault rifles. More than a few, drained of the will to live, collapsed and simply chose not to get up. The fraction that lived endured nine years in a desolate Kenyan refugee camp.

Now, 15 years and a million nightmares later, the surviving remnant -- about 4,000 young men -- have come to America.

As the Lost Boys marvel at elevators and wonder why a box of Bisquick contains only flour and not the strawberry shortcake pictured on the label, the Americans who have taken them in marvel that these young men with so few possessions are so willing to share whatever they have. And they wonder how they are so free from rage at God and mankind for the way they were abused.

"These are not angry young men, and that just blows me away," says Maggie Bond, who has helped her church establish a ministry to the 37 Lost Boys who were relocated to Charlotte, N.C. "I would overflow with rage if I had been treated the way they have. I would be the angriest person on the face of the earth. But they don't. And aren't."

One Friday afternoon last fall in Charlotte, Martha Kearse noticed six young men "wandering around" a grocery store with only chicken and rice in their cart. Kearse had seen news reports about the Lost Boys of Sudan. "They clearly were African and not African-American. All tall; they looked bewildered and lost."

She introduced herself and gave them her phone number, as well as the number of her church, St.

John's Baptist, less than a mile from the store. "Call if we can help you," she said. They called -- and came to church the next Sunday.

Since then the church has taken in those six and others, mentored them in the ways of America, trained them to handle everyday tasks, and shared in worship with them.

The Lost Boys take the worship of God very seriously. "We started out teaching life skills -- like keeping a checkbook or using a can opener -- in Sunday school," Bond says. "But they let us know, gently and politely of course, that you come to church on Sunday morning to worship and nothing else."

The boys exhibit a trust in God that belies their tortured past.

In late 1987, some of them were herding the family cows or goats when Sudanese government troops stormed their villages. Most were sleeping outside with fathers or older brothers when gunshots shattered the darkness -- and their world.

John Mayen, now 22, was 7 years old. "Those Arabs destroyed our houses and burned the church of Christ and our crops," he says. "They castrated the men like bulls before they killed them and cut off the breasts of women and left them to bleed to death. Some people they put in sacks and threw into the river."

Older boys also were slaughtered. Girls were kidnapped to be sold as slaves in northern Sudan. But the young boys were mostly ignored if they stayed out of sight.

Abraham Maker, then 9, protested when his father shook him awake. "Why get up? It's dark. There is no work to do." But as his father went into the hut to wake up his wife and daughter, gunfire erupted. Abraham ran. He never saw his parents again.

For two days he wandered in the bush before meeting his older brother and other boys who had fled the villages. After four days without food, the group, which had grown to 300, stumbled onto Dinka troops fighting the government. "They gave us five bulls to eat and told us to head for Ethiopia where there were some camps," says Maker, now 24.

"Go to Ethiopia" became the mantra for hundreds and then thousands of orphaned boys. They mostly walked at night, following rivers when they could, then going deep into the bush to hide during the day, never staying longer than three days at any one place. They were ambushed by government troops and chased by non-Dinka villagers for stealing food.

"We buried each other," Gabriel Tit, 20, adds. "But sometimes it was too rocky and the next day the body would rise up out of the ground. Then others got sick from the dead bodies."

Many of the Lost Boys made it to the relative safety of the Ethiopian refugee camps. After the relief agencies arrived, life in the camps was tolerable. Food was plentiful and even rudimentary education was provided.

But in 1991 a new government took over in Ethiopia and forced the Sudanese youth out of the country. Uncounted thousands died from gunshot wounds, drownings, crocodile attacks or various injuries. During the chaos, Abraham Maker became separated from his older brother. He never saw him again.

Unrelenting anguish marked the next eight months, as the boys roamed Sudan, fleeing the attacks of the Muslim government. "Once we went three months without food, except the fruit of the tree," Tit says as others nod. "There were 1,000 in my group and we had one pot to cook with." A United Nations airdrop provided corn meal for two months, until yet another government attack.

"They came at 3 a.m. and fired in the air at first. That made all of us jump up from our sleep. Then they shot into the group."

Driven from the Sudanese camp, the boys fled toward Kenya. It took two months to make the trek, often walking day and night. Along the way, the United Nations set up camps three-days'-walk apart, so any boy that made it that far could eat and rest. But the respite was brief -- stay more than one night and the Sudanese troops would attack again.

When they arrived in Kenya, the boys and thousands of other refugees from Ethiopia, Rwanda and Somalia were herded into Kakuma Refugee Camp.

Kakuma would be home for the Lost Boys for nine years, but their number continued to dwindle. Some starved during frequent food shortages. When there was food, some were shot resisting the armed gangs that entered the camp to steal the food. Others died of malaria or typhoid, while some slipped back into Sudan to join the Dinka rebels or look for family members long lost.

Excitement surged through the Kakuma Refugee Camp in 1999 when the U.S. State Department, somewhat shamed by the boys' plight, announced the unprecedented action of allowing all 4,000 surviving Lost Boys to immigrate to the United States and become American citizens.

The application process was tedious and the flow to America only a trickle. The first groups landed in New York in early 2001. The contingent bound for Charlotte was stranded in Europe by the 9/11 attacks. "Is war following us to America?" some feared. Finally the boys arrived in Charlotte last fall.

Martha Kearse, their supermarket Samaritan, was haunted by the obvious signs of malnourishment and sickness she saw in the boys. "They're starving," she confided to friend Maggie Bond. "I can do something about that," Bond replied. She went to every adult Sunday school class at St. John's Church with an envelope that "needed to be filled with cash."

That initial offering of $600 proved only the beginning. The young men were assigned mentors from the church to guide them through American cultural pitfalls and simply to be a friend. A large storage room was quickly filled with clothes, small appliances and other items they might need to set up house. The NBA's Charlotte Hornets even donated a supply of very large shoes.

More recently, as the men become adjusted to American life, long-term needs are being addressed. Church members teach classes on filing income tax forms and using a computer. Others ride buses with the men to show them how to get to work or school. To combat the expense of bus fare, all of the men are given bicycles. Even cooking lessons are a necessity for men who have never seen a refrigerator.

"Everyone who meets them wants to help them," Blythe Taylor, associate pastor of St. John's Church, points out. Why?

"We were inspired by their courage and their good spirits in spite of the unbelievable hardships they suffered," says Carl Phillips. "Once we met them we were drawn to them by their warmth. They are teaching us much more important things than we can ever teach them."

In January they taught the St. John's congregation how to worship Dinka style.

James Chol walked to the front of the sanctuary, where he addressed the altar in three different directions. Then he began to sing "in the most beautiful voice I have heard in any church," St. John's member Caroletta Partain recounts. "The other guys answered him in song, all in Dinka. Then the rest got up from their seats and walked with grace to join James."

"They continued singing, James leading with solo phrases and the boys answering in unison. All the while, they all were moving fluidly to mesmerizing drumbeats provided by two of the guys. The congregation was spellbound, silently listening to and watching what, to us, was a totally new way to worship. All of a sudden we 'heard' it. The words were Dinka but the melody was 'I have decided to follow Jesus.' I can't tell you how moving it was."

The Lost Boys of Sudan, who grew up much too fast, have finally found something they lost so long ago. Home.

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