



Nashville, Tennessee
Associated
Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

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

May 6, 2002

(02-38)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- New Mexico forest fires damage Baptist camp**
- National Day of Prayer brings petitions, division**
- Former BFA board chairman denies trustees knew of fraud**
- Pastor views laughter a tool for preaching**

**New Mexico forest fires
damage Baptist camp**

By John Loudat

CLOUDCROFT, N.M. (ABP) -- As firefighters worked over the weekend to try to gain an advantage over a 15,000-acre forest fire before winds picked up on Monday, a New Mexico Baptist encampment in the area continued to escape major damage.

The Silvels Baptist Retreat and Conference Center had lost two bathhouses and eight cabins by Friday night when the Penasco Fire exploded out of control. Also gone were a well house and materials on site for a planned new cabin to be built by a team of church volunteers.

All the camp's major buildings had survived, however, though it appeared earlier the whole camp would be lost as fire raced through the Sacramento Mountains in south central New Mexico near the small town of Mayhill.

"God is so merciful," said Paul Klopfer, who manages the camp owned by the Baptist Convention of New Mexico. He said he believed most of 128 beds destroyed in the blaze would be replaced before the heavy camping season arrives in summer.

The cabins, which had been constructed by volunteers through the years, were rough wood shelters that were about half wood and half tent.

Klopfer and his wife, Sally, said it was a miracle that major buildings, including a dining hall, chapel, staff lodgings and a recently renovated family retreat center, were spared.

"I know that [prayer's] helping," said Sally Klopfer, asking for continued prayers for the safety of the camp's major structures as fire surrounded the camp on all sides.

Earlier, when the outlook was more bleak, Paul Klopfer had commented, "It will take a miracle to save the camp, but I believe [God] will."

Baptists across the state watched television interviews with Klopfer, along with images of flames jumping from tree to tree over camp structures, shooting as high as 100 feet in the air.

The fire began on Tuesday, April 30. The next morning firefighters moved into the camp and made it their staging area for fighting the blaze.

News reports said that approximately 1,000 firefighters were dispatched to the fire, which, investigators believed, was caused by accident. A suspect, 47-year-old William Myers Jr. of Wills Canyon,

confessed to accidentally setting the fire, before taking his own life Wednesday night, apparently distraught over the fire.

At one point, the fire got close to the camp but turned away.

That changed quickly around Tuesday afternoon, when the camp was hastily evacuated as winds picked up the flames, causing them to jump fire lines.

The Klopfers had time to only get a few valuables out of their home before fleeing.

Moments later a television reporter said that Klopfer had told him that the camp manager thought nothing would be left standing at the camp. Shortly after that, television news stations erroneously reported the camp had been lost.

Acreage involved in the blaze spread to 15,400 by Sunday, when it was described as 60-percent under control, and about 20 structures had been destroyed.

Klopfer wrote pastors and other New Mexico Baptists e-mails, asking them to pray for the safety of the camp and the nearby community of Mayhill, with about 240 residents and 180 homes and businesses very much in danger.

Sivells Camp was founded in 1963 when the Baptist state convention purchased 168 acres of land in southern New Mexico because the convention's only camp at the time, Inlow Youth Camp near Albuquerque, was not big enough to accommodate all the camping needs of both the Woman's Missionary Union and the Brotherhood.

The new camp was constructed by hundreds of volunteers on weekends under the direction of H.C. Sivells, who served as director of men's ministries in the state from 1954 to 1971.

-30-

National Day of Prayer brings petitions, division

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Speakers at National Day of Prayer ceremonies around the country hailed America's newfound post-Sept. 11 unity, but some controversy greeted the 50-year-old tradition.

The event began in 1952 after President Harry Truman signed a congressional resolution asking citizens to set aside a day to join in prayer for the nation and its leaders. The event became more widely observed after President Ronald Reagan signed legislation in 1988 designating the first Thursday in May as the prayer day.

Historically an ecumenical event, today many conservative Christian groups take the lead in organizing local and national observations of the event. That was evident in events planned by the largest group coordinating the day's activities, the National Day of Prayer Task Force.

The group, led by Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus on the Family head James Dobson, sponsored large prayer events May 2 in a House of Representatives office building and in the White House.

Featured speakers at the events included Dobson, traditionalist Catholic and former U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett, evangelical apologist Ravi Zacharias and Senate Chaplain Lloyd John Ogilvie, who composed a special prayer for the day.

Ogilvie's prayer noted the tragedies of Sept. 11, and then said, "We rededicate ourselves to be one nation under You."

Dobson lauded Bush in her remarks. "We are grateful to have a president who honors God and recognizes the need for prayer," she said.

Several leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention were invited to the White House ceremony and likewise commended Bush. Baptist Press quoted Dallas pastor Jack Graham as saying the ceremony proved that the U.S. now has "a president and first lady who understand the necessity of prayer, who desire, above all else, to honor God with their lives and to include people of faith in the influence of government."

In a proclamation for the day, Bush also referred to terrorist attacks in New York and at the Pentagon. "Especially since Sept. 11, millions of Americans have been led to prayer," he said. "We have all seen God's great faithfulness to our country."

Not all participants in ceremonies around the country reported such unity. Suburban Los Angeles saw competing events in observation of the day.

Complaining that right-wing Christian groups had dominated "official" National Day of Prayer celebrations at the county's government center in recent years, a group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim clerics from the Ventura Interfaith Ministerial Association held their own service across the street from the government center.

"This is a statement that Ventura County celebrates diversity and that no one religion has the right to dominate the American cultural scene," said Rabbi John Sherwood, one of the event's organizers, according to the Los Angeles Times. "The founders of this nation pictured a nation of diversity."

Another ecumenical National Day of Prayer group met for the second year at Valley Beth Shalom Temple in Encino. The head of the interfaith group that organized that meeting told the newspaper that it began last year after the evangelical leaders of the other local National Day of Prayer event refused to share the stage.

-30-

Former BFA board chairman denies trustees knew of fraud

PHOENIX (ABP) -- A pastor who chaired the Baptist Foundation of Arizona's board of trustees denied allegations that he and other trustees knew about alleged fraud three years before the Foundation's 1999 collapse.

Berry Norwood, pastor of First Baptist Church in Scottsdale, Ariz., called the charge "absolutely untrue," according to daily reports in the Arizona Republic about testimony during the first week of a \$150 million lawsuit against the Foundation's auditor, Arthur Andersen.

Norwood told an Arizona court the board of trustees found out about problems through a state investigation a year before the Foundation went bankrupt in November 1999. The collapse cost investors about \$570 million.

Investors allege a cover-up of losses and an illegal Ponzi scheme, in which funds were solicited from new investors to pay off old ones. Five former Foundation executives face criminal charges.

In a civil trial underway alleging that Andersen aided and abetted fraud by ignoring red flags and continuing to issue clean audits, a national accountant said Andersen failed to investigate signs the Foundation was in trouble between 1997 and 1998.

Dan Guy, a director of the American Society of Certified Accountants, accused Andersen of an "unpardonable" breach of accounting standards. A 1997 audit report of Foundation accounts "falls below the minimum accounting standards" and "should never have been released," he testified.

Guy, who studied Andersen case files in the audit, said an auditing team failed to investigate charges of financial misconduct, issuing a clean bill of health. At the least, he said, auditors should have tested the Foundation's ability to operate as a going concern, which likely would have disclosed its shaky finances.

He said Andersen missed red flags, including warnings by one of its own accountants, an anonymous call to its Chicago office and a series of investigative newspaper articles quoting former BFA employees.

About 40 spectators, mostly BFA investors, were turned away from the small courtroom April 30, the first full day of proceedings after jury selection, because there was no room to sit. Court officials set up a waiting area on Wednesday to admit spectators on a first-come basis.

Media covering the trial, which has drawn increased interest in light of similarities with allegations being made against Andersen in the Enron collapse, included the New York Times, Washington Post, Dow Jones and Bloomberg.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Pastor views laughter a tool for preaching

By Lacy Thompson

KENNER, La. (ABP) -- Joe McKeever sometimes leads audiences he is speaking to in a simple exercise -- he asks them to laugh for two minutes.

"It's a world changer," says McKeever, pastor at First Baptist Church of Kenner, La.

McKeever knows of what he speaks. Best for his cartoons, which for years have appeared in Southern Baptist magazines and newspapers, he also is recognized for his often-humorous storytelling.

For McKeever, laughter is healthy and helpful -- and the right of every Christian.

"Laughter is a vote of confidence in the Lord," he explains. "It's a way of saying we know he's in charge. ... Really, Christians are the only ones who have the right to laugh. They are the ones who have settled the major questions of their lives."

As illustration, McKeever cites a practice in overseas churches. On the day after Easter, people go to church to tell jokes -- "because the joke's on the devil," he says.

Of course, there always are a few people who object to mixing humor with church or religion.

"But you can't let that stop you, ..." McKeever says. "You know, people sometimes ask me if I think Jesus laughed or not, since it doesn't say he did in the Bible. My response is, 'I don't know if Jesus laughed or not, but he sure fixed me up so I could.'"

McKeever likes to point to the Bible story of Sarah, who named the child born to her late in life Isaac, which can be translated to mean "laughing boy." He says it was Sarah's way of saying God had made laughter for her.

God also made laughter for the good of people, the Louisiana Baptist pastor believes.

Research indicates more and more that laughter is good for individuals, providing them with a natural high and a measure of healing. It provides relief from the stress of situations.

Of course, there are lines to draw, he says. They must be drawn the same way lines are drawn in any relationship -- through a sensitivity to the situation and an openness to direction from the Holy Spirit.

McKeever says he considers some areas -- like sexual, scatological and sacrilegious humor -- off limits.

He also advises against the use of partisan political humor in the church, saying it could turn into an obstacle to bringing someone to Christ.

McKeever also stresses a cardinal rule -- no humor at someone else's expense.

He recalls his discomfort at listening to old comedy tapes, which include personal humor that would be unacceptable today.

"Thankfully, some people have raised our consciousness in ways that it needs raising at that point," he says.

The New Orleans-area pastor also cautions about mixing humor and God.

"The more sense you have of the reality of God, the more you want to honor him - you know, 'hallowed be thy name,'" McKeever says. "So, it's always a danger to think God is just like us. We always need to draw a line and be careful lest we dishonor him in some way."

McKeever says persons sometimes ask where he finds his stories and where they can find some as well.

His response is simple.

"You start by paying attention, because the truth is these things happen to you all the time, ..." he says. "The really funny stories are ones that really happened, and you're able to reflect on them in a funny way. They may not even have been funny at the time, but later you can look back and see the humor."

As if on cue, McKeever launches into a humor-laced account of a longtime Christmas program at his home church.

At one point, a dispute broke out about whether the use of a Christmas tree and Santa in the annual program was proper. Some said yes, and some said it was sinful.

Finally, a business meeting was called to discuss the matter. It was during the meeting that one woman stood and pronounced her support of the tree and Santa.

"Well, if it's sinning, we've been sinning all these years, and I don't see any reason to stop now," she said.

"That really happened -- and I just tell it with some humor and can use it to make several different points," McKeever notes.

For McKeever, making people laugh is a worthy endeavor.

"I know if you stood up and said you thought your goal in life was to make people laugh, some would say, 'What a little goal,'" he concludes. "But if you elevate laughter to the level of being on top of life, of acknowledging that God is the victor and that Christ has conquered death, that puts a whole other perspective on it."

-30-

END
