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Religious press must be free, veteran journalists tell group

By John Pierce

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- "Religion journalists must be fair, accurate and dogged in our search for truth," said James Wall, who served 26 years as editor of The Christian Century.

Wall, along with veteran Baptist editor Walker Knight, tackled the question "Baptists: Advocates of a Free Press?" during the 10th anniversary meeting of the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society June 27 prior to the opening session of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly.

Wall, a United Methodist, called on fellow religion editors to "employ a kind of precognition" and "point to the signs of the times" that impact church and society. He said five "signs" deserve attention in the press today.

First, Wall said: "Hate is a heat-seeking missile. They shoot off and look for something warm and hit it."

Wall cited former Southern Baptist Convention president Jerry Vines' recent description of Mohammed as a "demon-possessed pedophile" as an example. He said Vines' comments were "patently false and inappropriately made."

Wall said hate -- like the missile -- needs a target and "after 9-11, they (Vines and his defenders) had a target."

The second sign, said Wall, is self-preservation of the church. This problem, he said, explains "priests being protected rather than children."

Other signs needing attention of the press, Wall said, are capital punishment, campaign finance and last year's terrorist attacks.

"We must not let the horror of that day (Sept. 11) impact the way we face the future," said Wall.

Whitsitt Society president Walter Shurden presented the group's annual courage award to longtime Baptist journalist Walker Knight. Shurden called Knight "the epitome of a half century of courageous journalism."

Knight is the former associate editor of the Baptist Standard newspaper in Texas and director of editorial services for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board where he became well known as editor of Home Missions magazine.

In 1983 Knight left denominational employment to follow a "dream of establishing an autonomous, national news journal for Baptists." Originally called SBC Today, the publication now known as Baptists Today has honored Knight as its publisher emeritus.

"A free press occurs when an editor has sole responsibility to control the news and editorial content," said Knight. He said the same standards should apply "whether with a secular newspaper or a Baptist journal."

"If an editor doesn't have that freedom," Knight said, "he or she should have another title."

Knight said editors often face a three-fold "struggle" with themselves, their institutions and their audiences. The first struggle, he said, has to do with personal integrity and a willingness to take risks.

"By reading Baptist publications, readers would not have known there was a civil-rights movement or a Vietnam War," Knight said. He added that editors often avoid such controversial issues because of pressure from denominational leaders.

Denominational executives "are not risk takers," Knight said. Likewise, he observed that, "Most pastors don't want to give editors the same freedom they demand for their own pulpits."

Knight recalled heat he received when addressing issues -- such as civil rights, war and sexuality -- that formed the social climate in which missions took place during his stint with the former SBC Home Mission Board. He thanked those who supported his freedom to address potentially divisive topics.

The role of the editor is "to discover and report the truth" and to give readers a context in which news is occurring, Knight said. He also urged readers to write letters to the editor and engage in discussion of important issues.

"Communication -- by definition -- is a two-way street," said Knight, a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., for 43 years. "Communication is not completed by the accurate writing," he explained, "there must be feedback."

For both secular and religious publications, said Knight, the quality of journalism is primarily determined by the standards and policies that are tolerated. "We have the type of press [that] we will accept," he said.

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Thanks to cremation, church burial once again becoming a hot topic

By Lacy Elwood

TOWSON, Md. (ABP) -- The church cemetery is making a comeback, of sorts, with a growing number of congregations including a columbarium on their church grounds.

Time was when the church graveyard was the final resting-place of choice for most Americans. With the rise of urban and suburban congregations, however, the cost and availability of property made church burials less practical.

As a result, most Christians today are buried in sprawling, public cemeteries among rows of monuments that memorialize people they never knew.

With the increasing popularity of cremation, however, a number of churches are recapturing the concept of Christian burial by installing vaults or church walls with niches designed for the interment of cremated ashes.

The term columbarium comes from "columba," the Latin word for dove, the Christian symbol for peace. It also denotes the resemblance of the compartments that hold burial urns to a dovecote, a raised box or house with niches for domestic pigeons.

While a common feature in Episcopal churches, the idea is catching on more slowly among Baptists, because a lot of them have a problem with cremation, said Jack Springer, executive director of the Cremation Association of North America. But a handful of Baptist congregations are joining the trend.

Woodbrook Baptist Church in Towson, Md., included a columbarium in a new sanctuary dedicated in 1997.

John Roberts, now pastor emeritus of the church in suburban Baltimore, said the practice of burying congregation members within or near the church goes way back in the Christian tradition.

"Christian burial at one time was within the church building," Roberts said. "When interior space became limited, burial took place outside in the churchyard cemetery. As fewer churches had space for such burial on their grounds, interment took place in secular cemeteries. In our time, as more and more churches have a columbarium as an alternative to in-ground burial, it is possible to return to the church for the final resting place."

River Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., also has a columbarium. Church administrator George Davis said it allows church members to continue to be a part of the congregation even after their death.

"For a lot of people, the major focus of friends and acquaintances is through church," Springer said. "Especially as people get older and their friends have died or moved away, the church becomes a surrogate family."

It also gives survivors a way to provide a permanent memorial to a loved one who passes away, Springer said. He said he's seen some individuals scatter a portion of the cremains and lay the remainder to rest.

"With a columbarium, you have a permanent place to go back to and remember the individual," Springer said. "If you scatter the remains, the individual is essentially gone. Scattering is done for the deceased, but memorialization is done for the living."

And with people struggling to pay for the high costs of most traditional burials, both Davis and Roberts say the cremation-and-columbarium route is a much more affordable way to go.

"They don't have to buy a headstone, or a monument, or a plot," Roberts said. "They purchase a niche for \$1,000, with room for two urns, and pay a fee of \$300 to open the columbarium to place the urn and to have the plate engraved with the name and years of birth and death of the deceased."

At River Road, church members and their families can choose between two sizes of niches. A two-urn niche costs \$1,000, while the larger, four-urn version runs \$2,000. An interment fee of \$400 is charged each time the niche is opened, Davis said. River Road also allows church members' ashes to be buried in the church's common ground for no up-front charge.

Another Virginia Baptist Church charges members and their families a little more. Peakland Baptist Church in Lynchburg includes columbarium regulations on its Web site. A single niche costs \$1,200. A couple wanting to reserve a double niche puts up \$1,500. Memorial plaques cost another \$300.

Springer says the charge for niches usually varies along with the cost of a community's real estate. He said he's found niches costing up to \$35,000 in San Francisco. A lower-cost option popular in England, he said, is rental or leasing of columbarium niches. After seven years, if the family declines to renew the lease, the remains are removed and scattered, and the niche is rented out to someone else.

The obvious advantages aside, how do church members feel about having their fellow parishioners interred on church grounds?

"They were enthusiastic," Roberts said of his Baltimore congregation. "Several of our neighboring churches have them, so we were well aware of columbaria. There was no opposition to it, but definitely some questions about it."

Response came slower when River Road opened its columbarium in 1997, Davis said.

"The sale of niches wasn't as good as we hoped. I think initially it was thought that people would acquire a niche early on," Davis said. "More and more people are deciding to use it now."

Davis said some church members who have already purchased burial plots in cemeteries are reconsidering and opting to use the church columbarium instead. They like the peaceful and unique setting the columbarium provides. It often is incorporated into part of a church garden. Woodbrook's columbarium is

sheltered by a stone wall just outside the sanctuary. "It is attractively landscaped, surrounded by benches, trees, a small fountain and a terrace," Roberts said. "It provides a quiet, restful place for families and individuals to gather."

Many more such families may be paying their respects in churchyards in the future. The cremation association predicts the number of cremations will grow three-fold by the year 2025, Springer said.

According to statistics on the CANA Web site, www.cremationassociation.org, a total of 604,828 Americans were cremated in 2000, about one fourth of all deaths. That's up nearly 25 percent from five years earlier. By 2025, the association predicts, nearly half of bodies in the U.S. will be cremated rather than buried.

Springer attributes the rising popularity of cremation to longer lives and relocation to retirement hotspots. Certain areas in Arizona and Florida report high percentages of cremations, because of their popularity among the elderly and retired.

Cremation is definitely gaining popularity in the South, Springer said. That might help explain the sudden interest in church columbaria in the Bible Belt. An Internet search located just five such Baptist churches, and all were in Southern states. Along with the Maryland church and the two in Virginia, Greenwood Forest Baptist Church in Cary, N.C., and Mountain Brook Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., also boast a columbarium.

While some people view cremation as an alternative to having a funeral, Springer said many people do both. The funeral service "has nothing to do with burial or cremation," Springer said. "The funeral is simply the memorial service before the disposition of the body."

In Japan, for example, 98 percent of the population is cremated, he said, "and everybody has a very elaborate funeral."

"There are just more memorial services held following cremations than funerals before the body is cremated," he said.

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DC executive predicts new SBC witness in Washington

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The District of Columbia Baptist Convention's top official says he anticipates formation of a new convention loyal to the Southern Baptist Convention in the nation's capital.

Jeffrey Haggray, executive director of the triply aligned D.C. convention, made the prediction after receiving official word that the SBC North American Mission Board is cutting off about \$500,000 a year in funding, a third of the DCBC annual budget, starting in 2003.

In a June 26 letter explaining the defunding, NAMB President Robert Reccord said the D.C. convention had "grown increasingly distant from the Southern Baptist Convention, its positions and priorities."

NAMB earlier proposed a list of six conditions for continued support of the Washington convention, including employment of a NAMB administrator to directly supervise all staff paid in whole or part with Southern Baptist funds.

DCBC leaders rejected the proposal, saying it would violate the convention's autonomy. Since most D.C. convention workers are jointly funded with NAMB, it would have essentially removed Haggray from leadership, they said.

Haggray said he doesn't expect hard feelings to end when a cooperative agreement between the two

conventions runs out next year. He predicted SBC leaders would try to persuade autonomous Southern Baptist churches to pull out of the DCBC as well, either to join SBC-friendly conventions in neighboring states or start a new one of their own.

"NAMB's strategy at this point is to sow seeds of discord in DCBC and start a uniquely SBC convention in Washington," Haggray told Associated Baptist Press. "It's not enough to [NAMB] that they're ending the agreement. They want to take DCBC churches with them - and that is reproachful."

NAMB spokesman Marty King said the SBC agency, based in Alpharetta, Ga., wouldn't be opposed to working with a new convention started by area churches, but he speculated that any churches leaving the DCBC over the dispute might instead migrate to the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware or a new conservative Southern Baptist convention in Virginia.

Doyle Chauncey, executive director of the 3-year-old Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, said no DCBC churches have contacted him about joining since announcement of the SBC defunding, but he has heard rumors that some might be leaning that way. He also said no one from NAMB had spoken to him about helping to form an SBC-only convention in Washington.

The SBC recognizes two separate conventions both in Virginia and Texas. Conservatives in those states split from historic state organizations that they considered too liberal. When moderates in Missouri took a similar step last year, however, SBC leaders said they wouldn't accept money from the new convention, because doing so would weaken the Missouri Baptist Convention, which strongly supports the SBC's conservative direction.

King said NAMB employees have contacted SBC-aligned churches in the DCBC, but those calls were merely "to explain our position" and not to propose any specific plan.

Spokespersons at two Washington churches that have at times criticized the DCBC both said their congregations have ceased funding the D.C. convention but don't yet know if they will formally disassociate and join another body.

"Our elders will have to think about that, but not right now," said Greg Gilbert, pastoral assistant at the city's Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

Jim Burcham, pastor of First Baptist Church of Upper Marlboro, Md., said his suburban church was taking a wait-and-see approach. Money budgeted for the DCBC "will stay in escrow until such time as we see some kind of Southern Baptist mission effort beginning in the District," Burcham said.

Describing Southern Baptists' rationale for pulling out of the D.C. convention, Reccord cited "irresolvable differences" between the two bodies.

But Haggray said he doesn't believe such differences exist. "We are by nature not a 'protest' convention," he said. He said the real problem is that NAMB is unwilling to cooperate with any convention that it can't control.

Established in 1877, the DCBC traditionally related jointly to Southern and Northern Baptists to symbolize the fact that the nation's capital belongs to all Americans and not any region. That symbolism took on an added dimension in 1998, when the DCBC added a third national sponsor, the predominantly African-American Progressive National Baptist Convention.

As the SBC grew more conservative than in the past, however, NAMB leaders became increasingly uncomfortable with stated positions of the D.C. convention's other two national sponsors, as well as with a perceived hostility toward the SBC among DCBC leaders.

A listing last fall of NAMB concerns - described by NAMB as "proposals" but viewed by Haggray as an "ultimatum" - called for the DC convention to disassociate from "cultural festivals" that include non-Christian religions, to cease publishing negative articles about the SBC in the Capital Baptist newspaper and to use only speakers that agree theologically with Southern Baptists at DCBC events.

D.C. leaders say most of those are non-issues. They claim their convention has never taken part in "cultural festivals" as described by NAMB or denigrated the SBC in public settings. They also say examples

of where the SBC differs with American Baptists stem from misunderstanding of official statements of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., which actually aren't that different from official SBC proclamations.

Asked to comment on some of those issues, a NAMB spokesman said he didn't have specific information available. Referring to an instance of a DCBC speaker denigrating Southern Baptists, however, Marty King, NAMB's director of convention relations, described the final address of Haggray's predecessor, Jere Allen, which he described as "pretty anti-SBC."

Allen provided an ABP reporter with a copy of the manuscript for his 2000 sermon. The only comments in the written text relevant to the dispute criticized the SBC for being "embroiled in controversy over inerrancy" to the detriment of missions and evangelism. The same speech also chastised American Baptists for their own infighting over homosexuality, which caused a major fund-raising effort to be sidetracked.

"I don't think that's derogatory," Allen said. He also said he had never heard any criticism of the remarks from NAMB before now.

But King said such details aren't the main issue. "This relationship was not working," he said. "And we put forth a proposal to make it work, and they said, 'No.'"

Meanwhile, Haggray and his supporters claimed disrespectful treatment of the D.C. executive in discussions with NAMB, prompting some to suggest a racial motive. Haggray is the DCBC's first African-American executive director.

Haggray, former pastor of Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, was elected unanimously of the D.C. convention last June. He said DCBC leaders weren't made aware of problems with NAMB until Reccord pulled him aside at a national meeting to question him about his convention's positions on political and theological issues.

Haggray said he eventually "invited" himself to a meeting at NAMB offices last September to further discuss the matter.

"For Jeff Haggray to have to invite himself to a meeting at NAMB just does not sound like the level of respect that he deserves," said Jim Somerville, pastor of First Baptist Church in Washington.

Somerville, who is white, wondered if another person might have been treated differently. "It may not have to do with race," he said. "But what it feels like to Jeff, who's been subjected to racism before, is that it is racism."

Haggray said he believes race "played a role" in his problems with relating to Southern Baptist leaders. "[NAMB leadership's] sheer refusal to even attempt to build a professional relationship with me prior to presenting me with demands is a way that I've experienced racism in American life," he said.

Despite its small size, the D.C. convention has in the last decade taken a lead in Southern Baptist life in improving race relations. A highly publicized SBC resolution in 1995 apologizing for Southern Baptists' historic support of slavery, segregation and other incidents of past racism followed a similar proclamation by the D.C. convention by six months.

Allen, a driving force behind the historic resolution, said he doesn't believe racism is a factor in the current dispute. "I do not believe in any way that Robert Reccord is a racist," said Allen, who currently serves as interim pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington. "But it is true that Jeff was not treated in the way that other executive directors have been treated through the years. Nobody's ever been treated the way he was treated."

Allen, a longtime Southern Baptist minister who once worked at the SBC Home Mission Board, said that one frequently critical D.C. pastor, Mark Dever of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, voiced concerns similar to those raised more recently by NAMB six years ago.

"The point is, Mark and Robert Reccord didn't come after me," Allen said. "They went after Jeff when he was just coming up from being a pastor of a church. He did not know the system of Southern Baptists. And

all of a sudden Robert Reccord brings all these accusations about us up in August. If they had brought this up earlier, I would have been better prepared to respond to this than he was at the beginning of his tenure."

But Burcham, a conservative who has also criticized the D.C. convention's positions on various issues, said the timing had nothing to do with Haggray. "This doesn't have anything to do with the present leadership," the Maryland pastor said. "It has nothing to do with Jeff Haggray. Nothing. He's a fine man."

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