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CBF announces partnerships with Habitat, World Vision

By Bob Allen

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Seeking to maximize the impact of its 127 global missionaries, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has announced new strategic partnerships with World Vision and Habitat for Humanity International.

Gary Baldrige, co-coordinator for Global Missions at the Atlanta-based CBF -- joined by Habitat founder Millard Fuller and World Vision's Randy Strash -- announced the still-evolving arrangement at a press conference in late June.

World Vision and Habitat both bring vast resources to bolster the CBF's global-missions program, which concentrates on ministry to the world's least evangelized and most neglected peoples.

And while both organizations dwarf the 1,800-church Fellowship in size, Habitat and World Vision also believe that working with CBF personnel who are located in strategic areas can help the organizations accomplish things together that none could do alone, according to Strash and Fuller.

Baldrige said cooperation with para-church and other organizations is a key component of missions strategy for the Atlanta-based CBF, which formed in 1991.

"Our impact is far beyond our size and age because of how we work," Baldrige said. "I would guess that our field personnel around the world, at any given locale, are partnering with three dozen partners."

"We're people of possibilities," Baldrige said. "We're constantly saying, 'Let's see how we can work together ... for common good.'"

World Vision and Habitat for Humanity also value collaboration, Fuller and Strash said.

"A key word in the history of Habitat for Humanity, from the very beginning, has been partnership," Fuller said. "I am thrilled about the partnership between Habitat and CBF."

Like CBF, Strash said, World Vision has a mission statement that calls for developing strategic partnerships for strengthening churches.

"How can partnering with CBF help World Vision?" he asked. "What does World Vision need from an organization like CBF? I need to tell you we're not in it for the money. One of our mission statements is to develop strategic partnerships for growth of the church worldwide. That is in your mission statement as well."

One of 24 new missionaries appointed at the CBF's General Assembly in June, Stacey Schultz, will pioneer a Global Service Corps partnership with Habitat for Humanity.

Schultz, who is from Wisconsin, goes to Africa early next year as church-relations director for Habitat for Humanity in Kenya. She will work as liaison between local Habitat affiliates and churches in Kenya and other countries.

Fuller said he hopes the arrangement becomes a model for other places. "From the very inception of Habitat for Humanity we have seen this ministry as a new frontier in Christian missions," Fuller said, "a creative new way to share the gospel and the love of Jesus."

CBF missionary John Derrick will lead Habitat's first "Sing and Build" project next June in Australia. A choir of between 80 and 150 voices recruited from CBF churches will perform concerts to build enthusiasm for Habitat for Humanity at night and build houses by day.

Fuller said Habitat has for several years had a similar "Bike and Build" program, where bicyclists ride to Habitat construction sites to work.

"If all you do is sing, you won't build any houses," he said. "But if you put the songbooks down and build, then houses go up."

Strash said World Vision has already managed to place a CBF volunteer in its relief program in Afghanistan.

"That's sort of a foretaste of the future," Strash said. "We are also exploring other ways of collaborating. I think the sky is the limit as long as we are true to our own missions and it makes good sense in terms of stewardship."

Strash said partnering with CBF would benefit World Vision because CBF missionaries are located in key areas, speak native languages and share values of community development and justice.

Strash said he could envision possible partnerships in areas of emergency response through the creation of rapid-response teams for disaster relief. "CBF is in touch with very talented and experienced field hands who know what to do in case of a disaster," he said.

"There are some areas where you can really help us," Strash said.

Tommy Speed of Buckner Children and Family Services in Texas described how partnering with CBF solved a problem with the agency's Progresso Community Center in the Rio Grande Valley, one of the most destitute regions in the United States.

Few people used the center, which serves 22 colonias -- subdivisions of primitive houses often without water, streets or electricity -- until a CBF worker came as director, Speed said.

In the last three months, Speed said, the Progresso Center has served more than 5,000 people with health, food, clothing and other community programs.

"Our partnership with CBF is very significant in the lives that it touches on a month-to-month basis," he said.

Baldrige said such partnerships fit well with CBF's holistic missions philosophy, which includes not only church planting and evangelism but also meeting human needs.

"CBF seeks to address the needs of the whole person," Baldrige said. "Doing so, we partner with all groups out there that are doing effective ministry with the whole spectrum of human need."

"Church planting is indeed part of our strategy and it is one outcome that we look to," Baldrige said. "Often, we have to start with felt needs. Sometimes we have to meet needs whether it leads to a church or not, because God has told us to do that."

Baptist 'missionary kid' convicted of scam

By Joe Hewitt

DALLAS (ABP) -- A "missionary kid" convicted of using his Baptist connections to scam friends and businesses out of more than \$2 million awaits sentencing in August.

Steve Solesbee, son of veteran Southern Baptist missionaries, and president of Missionary Kids International Fellowship, was found guilty in United States District Court in February on 12 counts of bank fraud, wire fraud, and bankruptcy fraud. Sentencing was postponed until Aug. 9 to give his new attorney time to study the case.

A parade of 50 witnesses during eight days of trial portrayed Solesbee as a con artist who used friendship with Baptist missionaries and pastors to bilk people out of their life savings.

His once-opulent lifestyle indicated he had money to burn. He wore fancy clothes, drove expensive cars, and spent fortunes on interior decorators and furniture to give an impression of business success as he wooed prospective investors. In court, however, he was dressed in a wrinkled, gray T-shirt, blue jeans and deck shoes.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Linda Groves called Solesbee a "bust out" artist. She said he bought businesses with worthless promissory notes, looted the assets, stiffed creditors, paid the help with hot checks, and then took bankruptcy to prevent repossession.

Solesbee, 51, was born in the Philippines and grew up there while his parents served as Baptist missionaries. As president of MKIF, he promoted a 1996 gathering of MKs in Hawaii. He sold airline tickets and hotel accommodations through his Bonaventure Travel Agency in Dallas to hundreds of people, including the 90-member Ouachita Baptist University Band in Arkadelphia, Ark. Wire transfers of money from Ouachita became the basis for some of the wire fraud charges after Solesbee allegedly put the money in his pocket instead of paying the airlines.

Edie Strittmatter, of Richland Hills, Texas, auditor and investigator for Airline Reporting Corporation, testified that Solesbee's now defunct operation fit the pattern of travel-agency bust out. A non-accredited person takes over an accredited business, sells tickets, and then doesn't pay the airlines. "It happens quickly," she said. "They get in, get out; take the money, and run."

Barbara Petrella of Lake Dallas, Texas, an accountant for travel agencies, testified that Solesbee's travel agency sold tickets to a July 1996 missionary meeting in Hawaii and one week owed the airlines \$324,487.48. The next two weeks he owed \$114,627.44 and \$71,788.60. She said ARC drafted on his account, and the money wasn't there.

Groves said in her closing argument that Solesbee knew how to do a travel agency bust out, because he had done it before. He waited until two days before the flights to order the tickets, she said. Then the tickets would be used before the ARC drafted on his account and found the money to be gone.

Solesbee has taken bankruptcy nine times since 1982 and has operated businesses from Florida to Hawaii. Most went out of business leaving irate, unpaid creditors, frustrated employees holding hot checks, and investors wondering where their money went.

Sylvia Green, a pianist at Grand View Baptist Church in Dallas for most of the past 47 years, said Solesbee "gained my confidence and trust, and I told him about my dad, a poor Mississippi farmer who had sold his land and got a good sum of money for it. I was his old-maid daughter, missionary to Texas, and he left me that money."

She told Solesbee about having the money in certificates of deposit that were making less than 4 percent interest. He told her to invest with him and she could make 12 percent. He said he would personally

guarantee the safety of her investment, and she could get the money back any time she needed it. She lost \$79,000.

George Swan of Bedford, Texas, was a missionary in Mexico for 14 years. He now teaches third grade in Irving, Texas, and is pastor of a Spanish-language church in Hurst, Texas. He testified that he worked for Solesbee, managing a telephone-answering service in Conroe, Texas, in 1996. Swan said he sold a house and loaned Solesbee the \$37,000 he got for it. Swan said he never got his money back, nor was he paid for working.

FBI Special Agent Randy Horton testified that he had been investigating Solesbee since 1997, when an attorney for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court discovered Solesbee had taken bankruptcy without reporting his true financial condition. This led to charges of bankruptcy fraud, wire fraud and bank fraud.

Horton said he interviewed 225 people and had 10 file shelves of documents involving the Solesbee investigation. He showed bank statements indicating that Solesbee had spent lavishly on himself out of corporate funds, neglected creditors, and then taken bankruptcy again and again.

Robert Fordham, a financial planner and certified public accountant from Atlanta, said he met Solesbee in 1998 through his wife's parents, who were missionaries. Fordham loaned Solesbee \$3,500, which later witnesses said was repaid with money Solesbee had borrowed from other people with the understanding it was to be used to buy telephone-answering equipment.

Wade Sommer of Hudson, Wis., testified that he became involved with Solesbee in 1998 in Florida, assuming from Solesbee's trappings, furniture and location that he was a successful businessman. Sommer said he made Solesbee a loan because he had cash-flow problems. Later Sommer made many loans to Solesbee, some of which were to buy another answering service in Tallahassee, Fla., in which Sommer was to be a partner.

Continually Solesbee needed money to keep the business afloat, and Sommer gave it to him. "I was stupefied as to where this money was going," he said. "I had already given money to pay these things."

Sommer said he did an audit and found that the business in Tallahassee was not as Solesbee had represented it. Solesbee said the problem was that money was not coming in from the customers. Sommer found that the money was coming in and confronted Solesbee. "He refused to discuss it, ... changed the locks, and threatened to call the police if I came in," Sommer said.

Leeann Eck Lewis, whose late husband did a \$20,000 remodel of Solesbee's Fort Myers, Fla., offices, said she went to work for Solesbee because he offered medical insurance benefits. She worked in his office and cleaned his exquisitely decorated town house. The way his home and office were decorated gave the impression he had money to burn, she said.

Although customers were paying, and money was coming in, the office received many phone calls and visits from creditors who where not being paid, she said. "Things just weren't cool," she said. "People weren't being paid."

Then her husband died, and she learned that she had no insurance to pay his medical bills. She had received an insurance card, she said, but only the first month's premium had been paid.

Linda Jenkins of Atlanta said Solesbee purchased Cascade Communications answering service from her and her mother, Grace Clark, in 1997 for \$49,043, and the equipment for \$15,000, none of which was paid. Solesbee hired armed guards to keep her and her mother from entering the business to demand payment. Then, she said: "He ran out in the night and took everything with him. He even stole my personal computer."

Elias Kalantzis worked for Solesbee when he bought the Cascade Communications answering service in Atlanta. He said the business was pretty much a mess. People had not been paid, checks had been returned for insufficient funds, and Solesbee had been paying people in cash after an infusion from Sylvia Green. He paid the people who were essential to keep the operation going, but not people who had quit. He did buy tailored dress shirts for himself, however, Kalantzis said.

Kalantzis said Solesbee was constantly looking for investors. He testified that Solesbee told him to call the phone company to get service reinstated and tell the phone company that he was George Swan. Kalantzis refused, so Solesbee took the phone and represented himself as George Swan.

"I didn't know anybody could be such a liar and a crook," Kalantzis said.

Solesbee was convicted of fraud for supplying a false financial statement to qualify to buy luxurious residential property in Dallas in 1995, then declaring bankruptcy to prevent foreclosure, intentionally omitting five other debts from his bankruptcy filing, and lying about it under oath.

Another count was bank fraud for writing a no-account check for more than \$7,000 to the City of Dallas for property taxes while knowing the bank account had been closed.

Solesbee had answering services in Conroe, and Wichita Falls, Texas; Fort Myers, Tampa, and Port Charlotte, Fla.; Honolulu; and two in Atlanta. He operated under the names Answer USA, William S. Solesbee Special Trust, Galloway Special Trust, McKinney Communications, American Messaging Centers, Bonaventure Travel Agency, Stephens Communications, Inc., American Answering Service, Inc., Presidents Travel, Inc., Imperial Tours, VIP Answering Service, and Amalgamated America.

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-- Joe Hewitt is a free-lance writer in Rockwall, Texas.

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