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'Faith-based' program wins court battle

By Robert Marus

MADISON, Wis. (ABP) -- Relying on a recent Supreme Court ruling that state-funded scholarships to religious schools don't necessarily violate the Constitution, a federal judge in Wisconsin has ruled that a faith-based drug-treatment program can continue to receive tax dollars in the form of "vouchers" to prisoners.

U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb had earlier ruled that direct funding by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections of a faith-based treatment program called Faith Works violated the First Amendment's ban on establishment of religion. Crabb left open in her January ruling, however, a second question of whether indirect funding -- in the form of vouchers to inmates who in turn choose between religious and non-religious programs -- also violates the Constitution.

Since then, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a landmark ruling upholding an Ohio program providing government-funded scholarships that parents may use to send their children private -- including parochial -- schools.

The June decision said such voucher programs are allowed by the Constitution, as long as parents have a genuine choice between religious and secular schools in deciding where to cash in the scholarships.

In a second ruling on the Wisconsin case July 29, Crabb said state funding of the Faith Works program operates on a similar principle, because it is tied to individual inmates who choose between the faith-based and secular programs.

In her opinion, Crabb said the Establishment Clause is designed in part to "prevent the government from placing its imprimatur on religion." Recent court rulings, however, have recognized that individuals can "nullify any appearance of government endorsement" in benefiting from programs that allow "genuine and independent choices."

Plaintiffs challenging the Wisconsin program had argued that the prisoners did not have a true private choice among programs. Lawyers said Faith Works operated the only long-term residential drug program available to prisoners, and that prisoners would feel compelled to choose a treatment program recommended by prison officials.

In her ruling, however, Crabb said the Department of Corrections issued regulations to prison staff requiring that they inform prisoners that they were not required to use the Faith Works program and that they could choose a secular alternative.

Crabb's ruling fulfills a prediction by many legal observers following the school-voucher ruling that federal courts would eventually apply the same legal reasoning to religious social-service programs.

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Theologians debate teachings behind 'Left Behind' novels

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The "Left Behind" novel series has given Christian fiction new respectability. Last year's installment, "Desecration," dethroned John Grisham from a seven-year reign at the top of bestseller lists.

The 10th and newest volume, "The Remnant," logged 2.4 million orders in the two months prior to its July 2 release.

But the novels have also renewed discussion of end-times theology. Theologians have a special discipline for interpreting what the Bible forecasts about the end of the world. It's called "eschatology" -- from a Greek word for "last" -- literally the "study of last things."

As readers of the "Left Behind" novels know, lead author Tim LaHaye believes Christians will be taken from the earth in a "Rapture" that precedes a seven years of suffering, known as the "Great Tribulation," for those who are left behind.

Based on their reading of Bible prophecy -- particularly the New Testament book of Revelation -- LaHaye and co-author Jerry Jenkins predict that this period will include the rise of an anti-Christ who will demand loyalty from all humans, including acceptance of an identifying "mark of the beast" on their hand or forehead. A series of plagues and suffering will ensue until Jesus comes back to establish a 1,000-year reign on earth.

The "Left Behind" phenomenon has catapulted such discussion not only out of seminaries and into churches, but also into society at large. Only half of those reading the books are evangelicals, meaning a whole new audience is now grappling with similar questions.

Uncertainty since last Sept. 11 has only heightened doomsday fears. A recent Times/CNN poll found that 59 percent of Americans believe that prophesies in Revelation will come true. Nearly a fourth think the Bible predicted the terrorist attacks, specifically.

Concerned about influence of the "Left Behind" series, Roman Catholic leaders recently endorsed a book aimed at clearing up "confusion" over teaching about the Rapture.

Even some Southern Baptist professors who share many of LaHaye's views say his imaginative fiction is no substitute for exacting scholarship when it comes to formulating an end-times view.

"It's dangerous to take any of your theology out of a novel," said Danny Akin, dean of the school of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. "The ultimate authority is the Bible, but I don't dissuade people from reading the books."

Akin said he particularly encourages his students who hold a different end-times view to read the books. "A well-informed minister should be reading the 'Left Behind' series, because his people are," Akin said.

Akin said he subscribes to the books' general theological viewpoint, but he quibbles with points at which he says the authors take liberties with the biblical text.

In earlier novels, believers are portrayed as receiving a cross on their heads that only Christians can see. That "fanciful" picture goes beyond what the Bible says, Akin said.

The series also portrays locusts as stinging humans, which Akin considers a confused reading of Scripture. While these locusts do appear in the ninth chapter of Revelation, he said, a careful reading shows that the creatures spoken of are in fact demons released from the abyss.

"But let's be fair," Akin said. "The books are novels. These aren't biblical, theological works."

Fellow Southern Seminary professor Russell Moore agrees. Although he has read only excerpts, he said the novels shouldn't be viewed as authoritative in the way they interpret Scripture.

The anti-Christ plays a prominent role in the novels' story line, but the Bible doesn't give many specifics about the character other than to predict his existence, said Moore, a theology professor who recently moderated a seminary forum on Israel and the end times.

"There are some issues of the end times that we don't know," said Moore. "To be fair, with a novel you have to do some speculating. But readers should have a discerning eye."

If people aren't careful, they can get caught up in the kind of speculation Moore encountered as a teenager in his native Biloxi, Miss. A revival evangelist warned his congregation to avoid supermarkets that used price scanners, saying they could be linked to Revelation's "mark of the beast."

"We know there will be a mark of the beast," Moore said. "But we can't have a mark when the beast hasn't been revealed yet."

The problem with jumping on the bandwagon of any particular interpretation is that it undermines serious discussion of end-times issues, said Craig Blaising, executive vice president and provost at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"There's a serious impoverishment of Christian life when that happens," Blaising said. "Sometimes these things are made into a major matter of division and they shouldn't be."

The Southern Baptist Convention's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement doesn't promote a particular end-times view, he noted, but it does affirm belief in Christ's return and a bodily resurrection.

Blaising said preoccupation with the Rapture often leads to faulty speculation on the date of Christ's return -- a practice Paul Boyer chronicled in his 1994 book, "When Time Shall Be No More."

Blaising also said the novels' major premise, that people without Christ are "left behind," picks up on a trend since the 1970s to view the Rapture as a "judgment" doctrine.

People's greatest fear shouldn't be missing the Rapture, Blaising said, but spending eternity apart from God. "The real message of the Bible is you better come to faith or you could die in sin," he said. "But our culture is disinclined to believe in hell and inclined to believe in earthly trouble."

A Samford University research professor said he believes the earthly travails outlined in "Left Behind" aren't going to happen at all. Professor Bill Hull said LaHaye's interpretation is a minority view among theologians and that it developed relatively recently.

English evangelist John Nelson Darby, who led a series of campaigns in the United States beginning in the 1860s, is credited with formulating the theological system called "dispensationalism." It gained popularity with the publication of the influential Scofield Reference Bible in 1909, with its extensive footnotes outlining Darby's scheme, and again in the 1970s with Hal Lindsey's popular book, "The Late Great Planet Earth."

Hull, one-time dean of Southern Seminary's theology school, said he views the theology underpinning the "Left Behind" series as "a massive misunderstanding" of Scripture.

"I think (LaHaye) has misinterpreted the whole Bible," he said. "It's not what Jesus, Peter, Paul or John preached."

Hull discounts LaHaye's account of "a secret Rapture where unbelievers don't know why people have disappeared." Revelation 1:7 says that when Christ returns, "Every eye shall see him."

"I've not found any of 10 Bible commentaries that interpret that verse the way LaHaye does," Hull said.

Hull hasn't read the "Left Behind" series, but he is familiar with LaHaye's theology as outlined in non-fiction books, including "Revelation Unveiled."

Hull said LaHaye forms his theology by tying together unrelated passages and taking certain passages literally that could be intended as symbolism.

Other Bible passages seem to indicate that God will never neglect or abandon his children on earth, he said.

"I would say the Bible doesn't have enough verses to dominate any particular view," he said. "I believe the end times will be characterized by the triumph of Christ, that it is God's purpose to redeem the world through Christ, and history will come to that conclusion."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story

Series co-author shares letters describing spiritual impact

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- By some accounts, the "Left Behind" series, published by Tyndale House, has brought co-authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins something in the neighborhood of $50 million apiece.

But at a recent book signing in Louisville, Ky., Jenkins talked about another kind of reward -- thousands of letters from people who cite the series as influencing them to accept Christ.

One 80-year-old man who received a copy of "Left Behind" from his children had to read the book with a magnifying glass because his eyes were so bad. After praying to receive Christ, the man wrote LaHaye and Jenkins to say that it wasn't what he read through the glass that made the difference but what he saw through his heart.

"That was a particularly moving one," said Jenkins, the writing half of the best-selling duo. "We've heard from between 2,500 and 3,000 people who tell us they've received Christ reading it."

The series has sparked so many letters that veteran Christian author Norm Rohrer is interviewing some correspondents to write "These Will Not Be Left Behind." The book is to be released next year.

Another tribute came from a couple in Minnesota whose teenage son had been running with the wrong crowd. They left a copy of the flagship title in the house, hoping he would pick it up.

After reading it, the youth told his parents not to worry about him any more. He said he was going to buy a box of the books and give them to his friends. Tragically, he died in a car crash before following through on the promise.

Instead, his parents distributed copies at his funeral. Several friends became Christians after reading them, Jenkins said.

Among those who have been touched by the series is Jeremy Sanderson, a freshman at Western Kentucky University.

Raised a Catholic, he strayed from his faith as a young teenager, but thought of returning after his grandmother's death. Reading "Left Behind" made him think even more, he wrote, adding that he felt God inspired the authors to write the novels.

Sanderson first heard about the books as a high-school freshman through a student's book report. He started reading the series at the recommendation of his stepmother, who claims no religious affiliation.

"I have not chosen a specific denomination," he said of his resurgent interest in faith, "but I know I am a Christian and believe with all my heart that Jesus is my Lord and Savior."

While the series has sparked controversy among those who question its theological underpinnings, Jenkins isn't bothered by criticism. After several years of best sellers and thousands of pages to argue their case, he said it's time for the other side to be heard as well.

However, two claims trouble Jenkins -- that the co-authors are only writing the series for the money, or that they are deliberately leading people astray.

"That makes no sense," Jenkins said. "Both of us have spent our whole lives in evangelism and Bible teaching. We never said this was inerrant or inspired the way Scripture was, and we know there are other interpretations."

"Because Dr. LaHaye's been studying this as long as I've been alive, he's got some pretty good arguments," Jenkins added. "If people disagree, they have the right to publish their own books."

One Southern Baptist critic of the series said he's glad that some readers are coming to Christ as a result of reading the books, although he doesn't think it's the best evangelistic approach.

"I think the central message is to accept Christ out of love rather than fear," said Bill Hull of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. "I'm not on LaHaye's case or saying he's harmful, but I don't think (these books) are a trustworthy guide to Scripture."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

Singer-songwriter urges churches to 'pass the baton' of church music

By David Winfrey

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Christian singer-songwriter Michael W. Smith says churches must be willing to "pass the baton" of worship music to younger generations or risk dying.

Smith, in Louisville, Ky., July 18-19 to record "Worship Again," a follow-up to his wildly successful "Worship" CD, took time out of his schedule to talk about worship, the impact of his recording and the state of contemporary Christian music.

Many churches have embraced contemporary worship songs, but many others haven't. Smith said some of those churches fear change.

"It's old wineskins," he said. "I think a lot of people who are not embracing some of the songs that are being sung are just afraid of change, and I think it's unhealthy."

Smith said many of the churches that resist new ways and ideas "are probably dying."

"They're stagnate, stale," he said. "I've seen them. I've walked into them."

Smith said churches can't afford to ignore younger people when it comes to worship music. "I think you have got to pass the baton, and we've got to have a heart for kids and this next generation."

But he said such changes can't be forced from the outside.

"You can beat somebody over the head for days; it doesn't do any good," he said. "Hopefully, you ultimately have a group of people within that church that absolutely are on their faces every day praying for God to break down the wall, and that change will happen."

Smith said the expanding popularity of contemporary Christian worship songs is one example of God's work among younger Christians.

"There's a real move of the Spirit of God sweeping across America, especially among young people," he said. "You're seeing people really falling in love with God, and so they're dying to find something that they can sing, something that will express what they want to say."

In spite of that, Smith said he never expected his "Worship" CD to be so successful. In fact, he says, he never wanted to do the project in the first place. "I grew up on Elton John and the Beatles and Billy Joel and I just wanted to do pop music and share my faith through that."

Released last Sept. 11, "Worship" became Smith's fastest-selling recording, reaching gold-record status (500,000 sales) in just 14 weeks. "Who would have known?" he marveled.

Even with that response, Smith said he initially didn't plan to do a second worship album. "I said I never would do a follow-up to it because I didn't want to manufacture something," he said, "but I continue to find great, great, great, great worship songs."

A lot of worship songs are being written, but not that many are good, Smith said. "You get about 5 percent that will really stand the test of time."

He said he looks for worship songs that will help listeners develop a deeper intimacy with God. "I think it's just trying to find something that we've said for 2,000 years and to say it in a fresh way," he said.

"Like a rose trampled on the ground, you took the fall and thought of me above all," he said, quoting a line from "Above All," a song on "Worship."

"I mean, that's never been said." he said. "How do you say that again, articulately? And how do you find that wonderful poet who can express something in a way and you go, 'Oh, man you took my breath away?'

"I want to sing something that will, for the lack of a better word, kind of slay somebody . and ultimately make people realize, 'Oh my gosh, the love of God, there are no words.'"

As the popularity of worship music expands, Smith said he has some concerns about contemporary Christian artists.

"I think the biggest need that we have for our artists in our industry is accountability," Smith said. Now that he's in his early 40s, he said he finds himself becoming a father figure and mentor to younger contemporary Christian performers.

"We get a lot of these artists, who are gone every weekend. They're not plugged into a church, and they're falling off the cliff," he said.

"The intent of their heart is fine," he continued, but many don't have the proper support or guidelines to guard against temptations.

Fans of Smith can look forward to two new recordings coming out soon. A DVD of music from the "Worship" recording is set for release Aug. 20. "Worship Again" comes out in October.

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Volunteer missionary dances as a way to share her faith

By Lacy Elwood

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Clair's love of dance began at age 8, when she was offered a free ballet lesson.

Now a college student, she views it not just as an art form, but also as a way to share her Christian faith.

Clair is one of a growing number of Christians combining their love of the arts with missions. She recently signed on for two years of mission work in Asia through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Global Service Corps. Since she will be working in an area considered sensitive for Christians, she asked that her last name not be used in this story.

Clair uses liturgical dance in her ministry. While growing in popularity in churches in the United States, using dance in mission work is still unusual. Clair already has used dance steps successfully, however, while working with American inner-city youth.

As girl's youth minister of Street Reach in Nashville, Tenn., Clair found the teens were "already moving in their community." She took their love of "stepping," a dance that incorporates the use of stomps and rhythms, and added contemporary Christian rap music.

At first, she said, the girls were apprehensive of the idea.

"They were really just self-conscious. Soon people started accepting it and they realized they wouldn't get made fun of," Clair said. "It gave them a purpose and allowed them to share within their communities. Dancing provided them a way to use their gifts to deepen their relationship with Christ, and it also taught them how to worship the Lord."

While in college, Clair has been on many mission trips and worked as a summer missionary. Much of her work so far has focused on teaching her passion to others, like inner-city students, so they too can share their faith.

"In Mexico we danced with children to 'Jesus Loves Me' in Spanish. In Portland and Atlanta we performed dances on the streets and taught children Christian dances to share in the community," Clair said. "I have also taught interpretive movement classes for dramatic arts festivals to equip ministries to use the arts in their church and community."

In Asia, Clair traveled to villages, orphanages, and schools to teach ballet. "In teaching these classes, our prayer was that they would be exposed to ... and start being able to accept different ideas and concepts, so one day they would be open to the truth," she said.

Soon after, Clair found herself working on the "Daniel Dance," a dance she choreographed to tell the biblical story of Daniel.

"I picked out the story because at the first Southeast Asian church I went to the pastor talked about how their people were like David. The natives have to stand up to what they believe in and they also have to endure persecution," Clair said. "I felt like Daniel was another character that the native Christians could identify with."

Hoping to connect her Western culture with their Asian one, Clair created a dance that embodied a mixture of both modern Western dance and native movement. She also chose to wear a costume of Asian origin.

Clair had a local Hindu maskmaker create her a mask to look like a "young, handsome man that has a good, wise character." The maskmaker asked the team to tell him the story of the character she was playing, in order to portray Daniel more accurately.

Clair and the team of missionaries with whom she worked also approached members of a local village to help create a piece of music to which the Asian people could relate.

The combination of dance and missions comes naturally to Clair. Her parents have dedicated their lives to missions, she said, and her years of training prove her love of dance.

"Once I was introduced to dance and the more I danced the more I loved it. I started performing and soon I was dancing so much I was unable to do anything else," Clair said. "I really started combining my love for dance and missions when I was 13. In high school, I knew that I was not supposed to be a professional dancer, but I also knew that I was supposed to keep dancing, because God was going to use this gift to glorify him in my future."

Now, Clair says, she is "most comfortable and content when I am dancing for the Lord."

Clair isn't alone, as more and more Christians are taking up dance as a way to share the gospel, according to Christian dance instructor Valerie Henry.

"There's been more understanding in the use of dance in faith," Henry said, adding that she's taught at and heard of Christian dance workshops across the world.

It might seem an especially odd mix for Baptists, who historically opposed dancing, along with other "worldly" behavior such as smoking, drinking and going to movies.

John Lithgow's character in the 1984 movie "Footloose" reportedly was based on an actual Baptist minister in Purdy, Mo., where dancing is still against the law.

Baylor University in Waco, Texas, made national headlines in 1996 when President Robert Sloan dropped the Baptist-affiliated school's unofficial ban on university-sponsored dances.

"Why are Baptists opposed to premarital sex?" asks an old riddle. "Because it might lead to dancing."

While attitudes on the subject have relaxed somewhat over the years, some Baptists still hold strongly to the old views. The Missouri Baptist newspaper Word and Way received several critical letters after running a story in February 2001 on a local church's sponsorship of a father-daughter dance as part of a sexual-abstinence program.

Dance found an unexpected ally, however, when former SBC president Adrian Rogers wrote a Jan. 13 column for the Memphis Commercial Appeal saying he believes dancing "for the glory of God," is appropriate, as long as it is an expression of art.

"If we forbid art, we may eliminate one of the best tools to reach a lost world for Christ's sake," wrote Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn. "If we do, we have surrendered art, one of God's greatest gifts, to the enemy. Art is at its finest when it brings glory to God."

Henry, the Christian dance instructor, acknowledged that there would always be some people who question whether dance is appropriate in church, citing the often-promiscuous style of hip-hop and modern dance. She remembers occasions where people have walked out in the middle of a performance, or simply covered their eyes.

"I have actually endured great rejection," Henry said in an e-mail interview. "Some churches have not let me in their door and still do not -- as well as Christian schools -- mainly because they believe that dance can only be a dirty word that means erotic, sexually tempting dance. They are ignorant in part because they have never seen anything else, and in part because they do not understand dance."

Clair said that after her own experiences with churches that didn't accept her dancing, she now considers how open a church is to the arts before deciding to attend. Still, she said she respects a church's decision not to have dancing.

"There have been two churches that our family has personally gone to that I didn't dance at because it would cause an uproar," she said. "I respect that, but I don't think people can tell me I can't dance. If it's going to make them uncomfortable, then I don't feel the need to dance for them," Clair said. "Artists can use their art in a positive way in churches. I think it hinders their walk with God if the churches say this is a part of you, but you can't use it."

Clair said she has found the arts useful in mission work, because they connect people from different cultures.

"Art breaks down the barriers. People are much more open to accepting art than words," Clair said. "Art can also introduce different issues and views that have never been thought of before to help people start to change their beliefs."

Ruth Ann Mayer, a dancer and instructor from Austin, Texas, said dance can be taught to people of all ages, making it a useful ministry tool.

Mayer said many cultures are traditionally steeped in art, and people in them relate easily to dance.

"Dance can be a universal language that speaks to everyone," Mayer said. "Regardless of language, we all understand when music sounds sad or happy, so it is with movement. Gestures, facial expressions, natural and classically trained movements can effectively communicate sorrow, joy, love or fear."

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