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Baptist churches plan trips to Afghanistan

By George Henson

KELLER, Texas (ABP) -- The U.S. State Department advises against travel to Afghanistan, but that isn't stopping one Baptist minister.

Bob Roberts, pastor of the 2,200-member NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas, takes seriously the gospel command to "go" into even dangerous parts of the world. He is looking for seven other churches to join him and members of his congregation in traveling to southern Afghanistan to build schools and share Christ's love.

Roberts already has made one trip to the war-torn region, working with the organization CURE International to start construction of a hospital. In December, his church plans to begin sending teams to work at the hospital and train the Afghan doctors there.

More than 40 members of NorthWood have signed up for the teams, and other Texas Baptists are being invited to participate as well.

Roberts acknowledged that isn't a decision to be made lightly. Travel in all areas of Afghanistan is considered unsafe due to military operations, land mines, bandits, armed rivalry among political and tribal groups and the possibility of terrorist attacks.

"It's not safe, but why is that an option for us?" Roberts asked. "The church should be actively making peace, not just being peaceful or peaceable."

Roberts said he believes "the church should be on the front lines" when a crisis occurs. Is he afraid? "Yes, I'm afraid," he said. "I had long talks with my wife and children before I left. But we really don't have a choice -- not if what we believe is real."

Roberts said frankly that "some things are worth dying for . and the gospel is one of those things."

Roberts wants to provide much-needed aid and education in southern Afghanistan, a region he said has gone neglected in other relief work.

"Most of the aid goes to northern Afghanistan, to Kabul," he explained. "For comparison, if Kabul is Boston, then Kandahar is Dodge City. It's still wild and wooly in southern Afghanistan, and the people there are not getting a lot of help."

For \$15,000, he said, a church could fund the construction of a school and pay teacher salaries for one year. But he sees this type of investment paying even greater dividends.

"My vision is to take those imams, take those young pastors, live out Christianity in front of them, for them to see so much Jesus inside of us that it is appealing to them and that they would want to become Christians."

NorthWood Church has purchased a \$200,000 mobile medical unit that will enable dental, eye and general health treatment to travel to the villages outside Kandahar.

The highly publicized plight of Christian aid workers Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry, imprisoned last year by Afghanistan's then-ruling Taliban, illustrated the peril faced by Christians ministering in areas dominated by Islamic fundamentalists.

But Roberts said he makes no bones with government authorities about the faith of the volunteers coming to help.

"I told them that we are Christians," he said. "We won't preach or pass out tracts about Christianity, but we do want to be able to talk one-on-one to people about our faith, and to not do so would be to deny our faith."

Roberts has told his congregation he believes God is opening doors for Christian ministry in Afghanistan.

In the days he spent there after the July 25 hospital groundbreaking, Roberts had an unexpected encounter that opened his eyes.

He was invited to the home of a stranger he had seen hanging around at events related to the groundbreaking. The only thing Roberts knew about the man was that he was a car dealer. He later learned the man was the son of a regional warlord.

Roberts at first balked at the invitation, but a friend told him it "probably would be all right." From that point on, Roberts saw it as a divine appointment.

To get to the house, Roberts traveled in an SUV with rocket launchers mounted on the roof and men wielding machine guns stationed at the windows.

During the five-hour drive across a hot, barren desert, Roberts learned his host's father is the leading warlord in southern Afghanistan and aspires to become the nation's president.

Before arriving at the home, they drove to a nearby village where the man told Roberts the children needed a school.

They later had dinner at the home, surrounded by rocket launchers and machine guns. After dinner, the man decided it would be safer to spend the night elsewhere, so he and Roberts drove farther into the desert, where they slept on cots in a building with walls but no roof. Roberts heard gunfire and rockets exploding in the distance during the night.

The next day, Roberts said, he was taken to meet eight mullahs, lower-level Islamic clergy. His host introduced him as "my Christian American mullah." After an uncomfortable silence, questions followed, such as "Why do you believe Jesus is God?"

At the end of the meeting, Roberts wanted to give his Bible to one of the mullahs, but his escort stopped him, saying: "He can't read English. I can; give it to me."

Roberts and the man discussed the Bible from cover to cover, paying particular attention to things that are also mentioned in the Koran, such as the three wise men and Jesus.

The man knew about Jesus but not the resurrection, and he was fascinated by the idea, Roberts said. While he didn't convert to Christianity, the man is planning to visit Texas, where Roberts plans to continue the dialogue.

Roberts said those kinds of relationships will be more important than the money raised to build a school. "Money is not going to change the issue or cause them to evaluate our concept of God," he said. "But if we get to know them and live out Christ in front of them, then we have an opportunity to make a difference."

Texas DOM recycles abandoned churches

By George Henson

ROCKDALE, Texas (ABP) -- Many people recycle newspapers, cans and glass. One Texas Baptist minister recycles churches.

As director of missions for four associations covering six counties in central Texas, Harold Cook noticed several churches that had been abandoned after members died or moved away. Wondering if there might be any value in the old buildings, he hit on a unique idea -- giving new life to dead churches.

When he finds a ramshackle church building surrounded by weeds, Cook goes to the county courthouse to obtain a legal description of the property. If it is a Baptist church, he tracks down at least two former members or their descendants. They hold a business meeting, vote to disband and appoint themselves as trustees. As trustees, they vote to distribute the property and any church assets to the association. The deed is signed and notarized and filed at the courthouse.

The total cost: \$12.

That can be a bargain in more ways than one.

Liberty Baptist Church near Rockdale, for example, had disbanded, and the building was beginning to deteriorate in the midst of four acres of untended land. After completing the acquisition process, Cook had the church building moved down the road to Blackjack Baptist Church -- a one-time mission of Liberty -- where it was renovated and now is used for education space.

"In a sense, the mother church went home to live with the child," Cook said.

In addition, the four acres of land were sold for \$4,000, which was used by the association to buy a building for a Hispanic mission church.

A similar scenario resulted from the acquisition of Satin Baptist Church. The church building itself was still in good enough shape to be used by another congregation in the community. The pews went to another mission church in the association.

A woman who happened to be driving by when the pews were being moved stopped to ask if they were for sale. She had been married in the church, and other family members also had other strong memories of the place.

"I told her that they weren't mine to sell, but if she wanted to make a donation to the mission fund, maybe we could work something out," Cook said. "She did to the tune of \$650 for four pews."

The defunct church also had a bank account with \$2,000 still in it. That also went into the mission fund.

In addition to pews, a baby grand piano was reclaimed from one abandoned church and given to a mission church.

That's pretty close to an organ transplant.

Cross Trails Church rounding up the lost

By Ken Camp

FAIRLIE, Texas (ABP) -- Talk about "cultural relevance" in church circles, and most people probably think of "seeker-sensitive" services geared toward baby boomers or non-traditional congregations aimed at reaching Generation X.

But in Fairlie, Texas, worshippers sit shoulder-to-shoulder -- with children on their parents' laps -- just to fit inside the Cross Trails Cowboy Church.

Shannon Moreland was working on the 1,200-acre Horn family ranch near the east-Texas town when he and Greg Horn started talking about prospects for a "cowboy church" in the area.

Moreland and Horn wanted to offer a "come as you are" kind of church where anyone would feel welcome. "If the best thing they've got to wear is a pair of dirty blue jeans, then praise God, we just want them to come on to church in what they have," Moreland said.

Today, an average of 100 worshippers gather each Sunday in a church building designed for 85.

"Cross Trails -- from its beginning -- dealt with removing the barriers to getting the gospel a hearing," said Ron Nolen, regional consultant with the Baptist General Convention of Texas Church Starting Center. "It is culturally relevant to the unchurched."

Chad George is one of 15 persons to become Christians in the church's first few months. About a half-dozen more have publicly rededicated their lives to Christ.

"It's more down to earth, kind of laid back, and I like that," George said. "There's lots of people who aren't comfortable in a big church, who don't like to put a tie and a suit on. This is kind of a different crowd here -- more down to earth people.

"There's a lot of good country boys around here who just need to have the light shown to them so they can walk with the Lord."

George says he is "into team roping," but he is the exception at Cross Trails Church. While the church definitely has a "western flair," only a handful of the members are active in ranching or rodeos.

The average worshipper probably spends more time on a John Deere tractor than a horse, and baseball-style caps outnumber Stetsons at church picnics.

Nolen, who modeled the "cowboy church" for Texas Baptists by launching a congregation in Ellis Baptist Association, maintains the cowboy culture is largely a state of mind.

"Most of the people at Cross Trails may not be 'cowboyed up,' but the key is that they have an appreciation for western heritage and the values shared by country people," he said. "It's a target group that I suspect is just beneath the radar of many existing churches."

Nolen estimates that roughly 1 million Texans fit into the cowboy culture. "If we reached 125,000 of them over the next 10 to 15 years, we would need 400 cowboy churches in Texas to disciple them," he said.

Cross Trails started as a Bible study meeting at the community center in Fairlie, a rural community west of Commerce. Moreland and Horn advertised in hometown newspapers across northeast Texas, and they posted fliers in area hardware and feed stores. "But honestly, it was mostly word of mouth," Moreland said.

Sixty people came for the first Bible study. The group continued to meet at the community center every Wednesday for about two months.

Recognizing the potential for growth, they decided to constitute as a mission congregation of First Baptist Church in Commerce, where both Moreland and Horn are members. At that point, they moved into the old Durham Baptist Church facility, which had been made available to Hunt Baptist Association when the congregation disbanded.

About 1,300 families live around Fairlie, but Cross Trails is drawing from a much wider area. Average driving distance to the church is about 12 miles, but some drive up to 30 miles, just to worship at a church where they feel comfortable.

"Our goal is reaching people who are part of the rural, agrarian culture," Moreland said. About half of the members at Cross Trails had little, if any, church background. Of the remaining 50 percent, about half of those had dropped out of church because they didn't feel comfortable in a large, formal congregation.

Moreland and Horn have baptized nine people so far in an inflatable pool in the church yard.

"They have found a real spiritual hunger out there," said Johnny Henderson, pastor at First Baptist Church in Commerce. "God is doing a great work through them because Shannon and Greg know the culture and know the language of the people they are trying to reach."

Soon, members of Cross Trails Church hope to buy acreage closer to the highway and build a larger facility. "We'd like to have an arena where the kids can ride their horses and a ball field where they can play," Moreland said.

Moreland believes part of Cross Trails' appeal is a nostalgic yearning for something that has largely disappeared.

"Looking at this church is sort of like looking at baseball and apple pie," he said. "It's the kind of country-church fellowship that a lot of people grew up hearing about but never knew themselves."

Unlike some cowboy churches, where preachers and worshippers all wear their hats during worship, most of the people at Cross Trails sit bareheaded through the service.

"People tend to take their cue from what others are doing. And I grew up being taught that you take your hat off when you're inside, so I've never been comfortable wearing a hat in church," Moreland said. "Of course, we'd never call anybody down for not doing it, but most everybody follows my lead."

"The key is acceptance of people just as they are. We don't put a lot of rules and regulations on them. We just welcome them with open arms."

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