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Baptist layman wins Nobel Peace Prize

By John Pierce

PLAINS, Ga. (ABP) -- Former president Jimmy Carter is winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize. Carter, 78, has been called the greatest ex-president in American history. But for many, he's the world's best-known Sunday school teacher.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee selected the 39th president of the United States for his "vital contribution" to the historic Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt and his continuing efforts to resolve conflicts around the world and promote human rights.

Upon learning of the high recognition Oct. 11, Carter told reporters he hoped the visibility from the Nobel Prize would enhance efforts in seeking peaceful solutions to international conflicts. Carter added that he will donate the \$1 million prize to the Carter Center, the 20-year-old think tank and policy center that he and his wife, Rosalynn, started in 1982.

"This honor serves as an inspiration not only to us, but also to suffering people around the world, and I accept it on their behalf," Carter said in a statement.

Carter has said he considers establishing and working through the Atlanta-based Carter Center as his most gratifying and significant achievement. He is often described as a model ex-president for the work he has done with the center as well as Habitat for Humanity International and other service organizations.

Thousands of guests -- including many international visitors -- attend Sunday school classes at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., where Carter teaches most Sundays.

"It's about time!" Dan Arial, pastor at Maranatha, told Baptists Today hours after the announcement. "He's been nominated seven times and passed over six."

But Arial said Carter has also been gracious to state how previous winners were more deserving of the honor. "There is no end to my admiration for that guy," he added.

Carter is a lifelong Baptist layman who was actively involved in Southern Baptist Brotherhood work as a young man. However, Carter has been openly critical of the "fundamentalist takeover" of the Southern Baptist Convention over the past two decades.

The Carters have aligned themselves with the 11-year-old Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Carter addressed the 2001 CBF general assembly in Atlanta that drew a record crowd.

A reporter at a press conference asked Carter if the honor would change him -- if he would continue his practices of riding his bike through Plains and teaching Sunday school. "It didn't change my life when I became a state senator, or governor, or president or a defeated candidate for re-election, and I don't think this will change my life either," he said. "My roots are too deep here, and I'm too old."

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Fear hinders ministry to 'special friends'

By John Hall

MIDLAND, Texas (ABP) -- Fear hinders many churches from reaching out to people with disabilities, a Baptist pastor said at a retreat for "special friends."

James Aldridge, pastor of Northwestern Baptist Church in Midland, Texas, said many church members are afraid of what they don't know about people with disabilities. They are particularly reluctant to approach people with mental disabilities, because they don't know how to act around them.

Aldridge, the father of two mentally challenged children, said those attitudes often cause churches to alienate both disabled persons and the parents who care for them.

"Non-mentally challenged people need to realize mentally challenged people are more like them than they are different," Aldridge said. "The differences just stand out more."

People with disabilities ranging from blindness to varying degrees of mental impairment came together for Bible study and fellowship at an Oct. 4-5 Special Friends Retreat funded partially by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Diane Lane, a preschool consultant for the BGCT, said churches that don't reach out to the disabled ignore Christ's command to take the gospel to all people.

The mentally challenged "may not have a full understanding of Christianity," she said, "but they have a right to know God."

According to the U.S. census, more than 52.6 million Americans live with some disability. Thirty-three million are severely disabled.

Despite the vast numbers of people with disabilities, many churches are not reaching out to that segment of the population.

Aldridge said ministry to "special friends" brings unique challenges to a church. His congregation includes them in their own age group until they can no longer function there. They then move on to a special-needs class where they can discuss the Bible and connect with other church members with disabilities.

Aldridge said disabled members sit in the audience at his church without disturbing the worship services.

He has experienced some behavior problems, but has found that explaining to the individual that the action is inappropriate usually resolves the situation. In cases where behavior problems persist, the person is paired with a "partner" who helps him or her behave properly in Bible study and worship.

In extreme cases, Aldridge said, an individual might be banned from attending for a couple of Sundays.

Lane said parents who care for children with special needs face constant stress throughout the week. She suggested that churches offer those parents an occasional break.

She said churches not only have a duty to reach out to disabled people, but can learn from them as well. In some ways, she said, they are more Christ-like than many adults.

"They have no pretense," Lane said. "They don't have that façade to keep up. Because they're innocent and have a childlike faith, they believe in God as we teach them."

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information about ministering to people with disabilities, contact Diane Lane at (214) 828-5287 or James Aldridge at (915) 689-0612.

First Amendment wouldn't pass if voted on today, BJC head says

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Language in the Constitution protecting religious liberty probably wouldn't pass if Congress were voting on it today, says Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director Brent Walker.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," are the first 16 words of the First Amendment, which also protects the freedoms of speech, the press, peaceful assembly and redress of grievances against the government.

Citing a recent survey reporting that four in 10 Americans think the amendment goes "too far" in protecting certain freedoms, Walker asked BJC directors to ponder: "You think that such a bill would have much chance of passing? To tell you the truth, I'm pretty sure it would not."

In a report to BJC directors attending their annual meeting Oct. 7-8, Walker said it has been a tough year for groups, like the BJC, that advocate the separation of church and state. The U.S. Supreme Court allowed the use of tax-funded vouchers for religious schools in Cleveland. The House of Representatives expanded federal funding of faith-based social services. Two prominent books attacked modern interpretations of church-state separation.

"It feels, for all the world, like we are paddling upstream against a raging torrent from all sides," Walker said.

Despite that, Walker also reported successes, including the defeat of a law that would have allowed churches and other houses of worship to engage in partisan political activity while enjoying privileges of being tax-exempt.

Board member David Massengill, a New York City lawyer who lives a few blocks from the site where the World Trade Center once stood, found an analogy for church-state separation in the destruction of Sept. 11, 2001. All of the buildings on the World Trade Center complex eventually fell, because they shared a foundation with the twin towers, he said. But St. Paul's Chapel, an Episcopal church just a block away, survived because it had a separate foundation.

"If our churches become dependent on the government -- if they move into nice government-built buildings with government-built foundations -- then when the storms rise and the governments fall, our churches will fall with them," Massengill said. "That's why the Baptist Joint Committee's work is so important."

The BJC staff and directors also held a non-binding brainstorming session about future policy on school vouchers. The BJC has opposed them in the past, saying they are unconstitutional and warning that accepting public funding would likely result in increased regulation for churches.

Now that the Supreme Court has said vouchers are constitutional, the BJC must decide whether to continue its historic position against the regulation of churches or simply say to those accepting taxpayer funds "we told you so?"

"It could be uncomfortable with encouraging policies that are regulating churches when we've always been for not regulating churches," said Holly Hollman, the BJC's general counsel.

Board member Timothy Brendle of Virginia said he thought BJC should continue to fight against government regulation of religious institutions -- even for schools that accept government funding. "Our role is to be a watchdog against the regulation of religion," he said.

But Cynthia Holmes, a St. Louis attorney and moderator-elect of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said churches ought to follow the same rules as everyone else competing for public funds. "I would say, if you're willing to take voucher money, you have to follow the Golden Rule, which is to do what everyone else has to do," Holmes said. "I think if your guide is, 'What would Jesus do?' then that's what you would have to say."

Hollman responded it might hurt the "greater witness" when churches accept government dollars but argue for special treatment when it comes to government regulation. "That creates a lot of political resentment against churches," she said.

In other business, BJC directors closed a recent chapter of the organization's history on a positive note.

A "memorandum of understanding" reported reconciliation in a dispute between the organization and one of the denominations that funds it.

The North American Baptist Conference general council had earlier voted to withdraw funding for BJC because it sometimes works in coalitions on religious-liberty issues with organizations that are pro-choice or support gay rights.

But the BJC also works with groups that oppose abortion and gay rights. Leaders from the BJC met with the NABC general council to clarify the nature of the organization's work.

The memorandum, from the denomination's executive, Phil Yntema, states that while "legitimate differences" exist among Baptists on matters of public policy and there are "different opinions" about the BJC's work, the NABC "reaffirms its commitment" to the religious-liberty watchdog group.

BJC board members re-elected all of their current officers. Reginald McDonough of Virginia will continue as president, Ed Massey of Kentucky as first vice president, Margaret Ann Cowden of Pennsylvania as second vice president, and Richard Bloom of Illinois as secretary.

The board also approved a \$1.07 million budget for next year, an increase of 4 percent from 2002.

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