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Americans don't understand worship, Barna research says

By Greg Warner

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- The so-called "worship wars" are being fought on the wrong front, says researcher George Barna.

"We're only fighting about the style of music because our people don't know what worship is," Barna told a recent gathering of Christian musicians.

A new study from the Barna Research Group suggests American churches are less conflicted over worship music than many people think. But neither do church members understand the nature of worship, Barna said. "The real issue is not music but the state of the heart."

"Everything in Worshipland is not OK," Barna said in summarizing the study, commissioned for the first Hearn Symposium on Church Music at Baylor University.

While much has changed on the surface of worship in recent decades, worship remains "primarily something we do for ourselves," he said.

"Americans tend to see ourselves first of all as consumers," he said. As a result, Americans often view worship as a transaction for personal benefit.

Barna cited earlier research in which one third of regular worshippers said they have never experienced the presence of God in worship; two thirds were unable to describe worship in a meaningful way; fewer than half cited worship as a top priority in their lives; and only a fourth described worship as something done for God's benefit.

The latest study asked 727 adults -- all regular attenders of Protestant churches -- a number of questions about worship. Also included in the telephone survey were 601 Protestant pastors and 69 music ministers or worship leaders.

The new study showed that most congregants have no clear expectation about what happens in worship. Asked to identify the most important personal outcome of worship, the largest group of regular attenders said they don't know (21 percent). Nineteen percent said a connection with God is the most important, while 11 percent said experiencing peace. Among the 23 answers offered, smaller percentages cited expressing feelings to God (5 percent) experiencing God's presence (4 percent), and praising God (2 percent) -- all considered God-directed activities by Barna.

Grouping the 23 responses into two categories -- those that benefit God and those that benefit the worshipper -- Barna said only 8 percent of regular attenders cited outcomes directed to God as most important. Outcomes that benefit the worshipper were cited by 47 percent. Other outcomes were not directed either at God or the worshipper. Baby boomers were most likely to cite God-directed activities as most important (14 percent), compared to younger (6 percent) and older (4 percent) worshippers.

The outcomes cited by regular attenders differed significantly from those expressed by pastors and worship leaders, who were much more likely to cite God-directed activities. Pastors said a connection with God is most important (36 percent), while worship leaders said experiencing God's presence (38 percent). Overall, 23 percent of pastors and 26 percent of worship leaders said outcomes that benefit God are most important in worship.

Barna said the survey reveals some misperceptions about the "worship wars."

"The survey reveals that there is definitely such a battle waged within Protestant churches, although the magnitude of the battle depends upon who is analyzing the situation," the report states.

Almost two thirds (63 percent) of pastors surveyed said the tension over worship in their churches is "not too serious" or "not at all serious." About 29 percent said the tension is "somewhat serious" and 5 percent said it is severe.

Worship leaders, however, saw slightly more evidence of worship tension. While 60 percent said the tension is "not too" or "not at all serious," about 30 percent said it is "somewhat serious" and 11 percent said it is severe.

Congregants were not asked to evaluate tension over worship.

The style of music is the primary source of worship tension, cited by nine out of 10 pastors and worship leaders.

However, 72 percent of congregants said they are completely or mostly satisfied with the music in their worship. And 76 percent said they would not change churches if the style of music changed. "For all the complaining that is lodged against church music, people may be more accepting or flexible than they let on," the report noted.

That doesn't mean congregants don't care about music style, however. Thirty percent said music was the primary factor in choosing their current church, and another 26 percent said it was one of the top two or three factors. Only 17 percent said music style was little or no factor in their church decision.

Music style was most often cited as a primary factor by blacks (50 percent), people 56 or older (43 percent), women and people attending larger churches (both 37 percent).

Again confounding the image of churches disrupted over worship, the Barna study found regular attenders have mostly positive feelings about their worship experiences. Respondents said they usually leave worship feeling accepted by God (83 percent), inspired (69 percent), connected to God (62 percent), and challenged to change (50 percent). Ten percent said they feel guilty and 8 percent said they feel frustrated because their needs were not met.

Those feelings generally coincided with the responses pastors and worship leaders expected among worshippers.

Congregants and pastors largely agreed about what elements are essential to worship, although the emphasis often differed. Barna said the responses could be grouped into "must haves" elements, "helpful but not necessary," and "disposable elements."

Congregants said prayer, a sermon, communion and reflection are "must haves," cited by two thirds or more of respondents, Barna said. Pastors thought the sermon was more important (84 percent) and reflection less (32 percent).

Music, Scripture reading, offering, confession and greeting one another were "helpful but not necessary," each cited by slightly more than half of the congregants. Pastors thought music and Scripture were more important and confession less.

Reciting creeds and responsive readings were least essential, but surprisingly they were ranked as much more important by congregants (38 percent) than pastors (14 percent).

While styles of worship have multiplied in recent years, the most popular remains traditional worship - typically with hymns, choirs and organs -- which is offered in 46 percent of Protestant churches, according to the pastors surveyed.

Three fourths of churches offer two or more worship services during the week, but only 44 percent of those services are conducted in a different musical style. In churches with only one service, the most popular style is blended worship (42 percent). While overall the most popular style is traditional (35 percent of all services), blended music is featured in 30 percent. Rock and contemporary music account for 16 percent, followed by gospel (7 percent) and praise (6 percent).

Barna said much more needs to be done "to facilitate meaningful worship" in America's churches. He encouraged churches to help the "worship challenged." He mentioned four groups specifically:

-- Men. Because men tend to be self-reliant and emotionally closed, it is harder for them to experience biblical worship, Barna said.

-- Baby busters. They tend to be self-focused and are unskilled in worship.

-- Whites. They lag behind blacks and Hispanics in understanding worship. "We're too comfortable," said Barna, himself a white male. "Everybody came to church for two weeks after 9-11, then [attendance] went back to seasonal levels."

-- "Notional Christians." Half of all regular worship attenders call themselves Christians but show no evidence or understanding of a personal relationship with Christ. Revitalizing worship might begin by evangelizing those in the pews, he said.

While the "worship wars" may have been overblown, Barna said, church leaders should not get complacent. Satisfied worshippers aren't necessarily a sign of success.

"High satisfaction and low frustration does not mean everything is great in worship," he said, "because most of these people don't know what's going on in worship."

Barna presented his findings during the opening session of a three-day church music conference, sponsored by the Baylor University Center for Christian Music Studies. The conference brought together music ministers, academicians and leaders in the Christian music industry.

The research and conference were part of an endowed symposium on Christian music established by Christian music pioneer Billy Ray Hearn, founder of Myrrh Records and Sparrow Records.

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Missionary joins staff of medical-dental fellowship

By Marv Knox

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Veteran medical missionary Fred Loper has been named associate executive director of the Baptist Medical/Dental Fellowship.

"This is a fantastic step forward for the Baptist Medical/Dental Fellowship," said BMDF Executive Director Jim Williams. "He personally has been responsible for helping to start about 200 faith-based health clinics across the United States. ... It's a fabulous ministry, and he wants to continue with us."

Loper, a physician based in Oklahoma City, has for the past 16 years been a national medical missionary with the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board. He and his wife, Lavada, were the only medical missionaries appointed by the board.

The Baptist Medical/Dental Fellowship is an independent organization involving physicians, dentists and other health-care professionals in mission activity worldwide. Volunteers not only treat patients' physical needs but also tell them about Christ, Williams said.

Loper's addition to the staff is a "strategic move" for BMDF, Williams added. "It is a result of the implementation of a new vision. Over the last three years, we have been planning and implementing changes to become a much more diverse and comprehensive resource for Baptists interested in medical/dental ministries. ...

"Fred Loper is known throughout the Southern Baptist Convention. He is respected by fellow missionaries and association and state missions leaders. We want to provide a platform for him to have an enlarged and fruitful ministry with our Baptist family."

Loper expressed excitement about broadening the Baptist Medical/Dental Fellowship ministry -- both in scope of projects and personnel.

"What's exciting about this is it's a real expansion of the Baptist Medical/Dental Fellowship vision," he said from Oklahoma City, which will continue to be his base.

While affirming the 25-year history of the organization, Loper noted it has been "narrowly focused on international missions" and has not succeeded in involving ethnic health-care professionals, such as Chinese-, Filipino- and Hispanic-Americans.

"Many guys begin (their missions experience) with overseas trips" coordinated by the BMDF, he said. "After one or two or three trips, they come home and say, 'Gee, we could do that here.'"

A key component of his job will be helping them to do just that -- start medical/dental clinics in poor regions and inner-city neighborhoods where people don't have access to solid, affordable health care.

"Lots of physicians have an interest in doing this. It's a way to reach people," Loper said. For example, he recently visited with Baptist doctors in New Mexico, exploring their options for starting health clinics.

Loper's job will be "coordinating, collaborating, empowering" physicians, dentists and other healing professionals so they can minister to people in need, not only overseas but in their own states and communities.

Loper said he left the North American Mission Board for the Baptist Medical/Dental Fellowship for several reasons.

"The tip of the iceberg was the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message' statement," he said. "In good conscience, I didn't feel I could sign it the way they wanted me to."

The mission board recently required all its previously appointed national missionaries to affirm the confession of faith.

Some Baptists have rejected the statement, saying it functions like a creed, thus violating Baptist tradition, and distorts key doctrines.

But Loper said the "Baptist Faith and Message" played only a partial role in the couple's decision.

"We have felt a restlessness from God for a number of years," he said. "God has been preparing us to do something new. This is the time in Baptist life for organizations that have a particular calling to missions to be involved. We're doing missions in a new way. God is in the midst of it all."

The BMDF shares Loper's excitement about adding him as its first full-time physician staff member, said the organization's president, Victor Robards, a physician from Tulsa, Okla.

"He brings many years of experience in helping churches and other groups establish faith-based Christian medical and dental clinics," Robards said. "The resources and mentoring of BMDF will enhance this ministry."

Loper will continue to work "directly with Southern Baptist mission boards, state conventions, associations and churches," Williams said. "He will join with the BMDF staff and members in strengthening BMDF's role in helping build a strong global missions network."

Start-up funding for Loper's new position is provided by grants from the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Mainstream Baptists of Oklahoma, Williams said.

Some of the money comes from the BGCT's missionary-transition fund, to which Mainstream Baptists of Oklahoma contributes. The fund was established for SBC missionaries who could not in good conscience continue in their appointments because of the SBC mission boards' requirements that they affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Financial support also is provided by the two state organizations' partnership missions funds, Williams said.

Leaders of the groups expressed pleasure with Loper's appointment.

"The Baptist General Convention of Texas is happy to be a partner in this project," said Charles Wade, executive director of the BGCT. "Our churches are committed to ministry to hurting people as we share the good news of Jesus Christ."

Bruce Prescott, coordinator for Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists, said, "Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists are delighted to assist the Baptist Medical/Dental Fellowship in replacing the funding Dr. Loper needs to continue his vital and important ministry."

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Agency lawyers seek dismissal of court case

By Vicki Brown

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Attorneys for five embattled Missouri Baptist agencies will argue for dismissal of a lawsuit filed by the Missouri Baptist Convention in a hearing set for 9 a.m. Nov. 19 in Cole County Circuit Court.

Convention leaders filed a petition in August against The Baptist Home, Missouri Baptist Foundation, Missouri Baptist University, Windermere Baptist Conference Center and Word and Way. The MBC seeks to force the five agencies to rescind new charters that allow the institutions to elect their own trustees and to return to former charters that allowed the convention to elect board members.

On Oct. 21, Circuit Court Judge Thomas Brown denied a motion filed by convention attorneys to establish a schedule for the case because the motions for dismissal are pending. Lawyers for the five agencies filed those motions on Oct. 15.

Each motion includes points specific to each agency, but the convention's lack of standing is the common grounds for dismissal," said Kurt Odenwald of Guilfoil, Petzall and Shoemake, which represents Windermere, The Baptist Home and Word and Way. The filed motions say the MBC cannot legally challenge the institutions because the convention is not a member or director of those agencies under current Missouri law.

The judge is unlikely to rule on the motions to dismiss on Nov. 19 but probably will set a schedule for the remainder of the case at that time, according to Larry Tucker of the law firm Armstrong, Teasdale of Kansas City, the foundation's attorney.

The convention was represented on Oct. 21 by James Freeman of Moore, Hennessy and Freeman and Stanton Masters of Mitchell, Kristl and Leiber, both based in Kansas City.

Also on Oct. 21, attorney Bart Tichenor filed a motion to request the judge consider an "amicus curiae" or "friend of the court" brief to oppose the MBC's legal action. He has collected 2,485 names of individual Missouri Baptists, 35 churches and one not-for-profit organization.

Because the MBC is unincorporated, the convention must be represented by individual members. The six churches that represent the MBC in the convention lawsuit include First Baptist churches of Arnold, Bethany and Branson; Concord Baptist Church of Jefferson City; Oakwood Baptist Church of Kansas City; and Springhill Baptist Church of Springfield.

The convention's petition seeks declaratory judgment and alleges breach of contract by the five agencies.

Representatives of the five agencies have defended their actions, saying trustees want to shield their respective organizations, particularly for fiduciary and liability reasons.

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Washington news briefs

By Robert Marus

Prominent evangelicals join anti-war chorus

WASHINGTON -- American and British evangelical leaders have added their voices to the latest round of religious groups opposing "pre-emptive" war with Iraq. In Oct. 11 and 12 press conferences in Washington, heads of denominational and parachurch groups indicated support for documents opposing the governments of the U.S. and the United Kingdom launching an attack against Iraq without international support.

Linda Fuller, co-founder of the Georgia-based housing ministry Habitat for Humanity, appeared with a number of other anti-war leaders. Fuller said it is immoral to enter into a war that would ultimately create "more terrorists," endanger homeland security and devote billions of dollars to war efforts. The U.S. already has "too much support going to some countries, particularly Israel, and too little for other more needy countries, causing hate and resentment," she said.

Seventy church leaders from both sides of the Atlantic signed a document titled "Not a Just War: American and British Church Leaders Join to Oppose War in Iraq."

"An attack on Iraq could set a precedent for pre-emptive war, further destabilize the Middle East, and fuel more terrorism," according to the statement. It went on to say that the U.S. has not met the requirements for a "just war" in Iraq, and that the current plans for attacking Saddam Hussein "would be illegal, unwise, and immoral."

Signers included Fuller and her husband Millard; Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine; Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action; Tony Campolo, evangelical sociologist and popular speaker; Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists; Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, and the heads of the American Baptist Churches, the National Baptist Convention USA, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Evangelical Covenant Church and the Christian Reformed Church. (ABP)

Judge testifies in 10 Commandments trial

MONTGOMERY, Ala. -- Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore said he had a 5,300-pound granite Ten Commandments monument installed in the state judicial building during the middle of the night in order to "restore the moral foundation" of the state's laws.

Moore testified Oct. 17 in the third day of a trial in U.S. District Court in Montgomery. Two civil-rights groups sued Moore on behalf of three Montgomery lawyers, saying Moore's installation of the monument violated the First Amendment's ban on government establishment of religion. "The basic issue is whether we will be able to acknowledge God under the First Amendment, or whether we will not be able to acknowledge God," Moore said.

The monument contains the Protestant King James translation of the commandments as well as quotations from the Declaration of Independence and some of America's founders mentioning God as the source of moral law.

Moore acknowledged that he did not inform his fellow justices of his plans for the monument, but said that he did so in order to protect them from being named in the lawsuit he knew would result from its placement. He also did not alert the public, but gave exclusive rights to Coral Ridge Ministries -- the Florida-based organization run by Presbyterian minister D. James Kennedy -- to film the monument's construction and installation. Attorneys for the plaintiffs pointed out that Kennedy's group raised funds for Moore's legal defense and sold videotapes of the installation for \$19.95.

While Moore has received support from several churches, more than 40 Alabama clergy signed a friend-of-the-court brief prepared by the Baptist Joint Committee opposing Moore's actions and asserting that "governmental efforts to promote religion drain religious practices and beliefs of their spiritual significance, thereby depreciating, rather than revitalizing, religion." (ABP)

Sudan Peace Act signed into law

WASHINGTON -- President Bush has signed into law a bill designed to prevent further human-rights abuses resulting from Sudan's 20-year-old civil war. Bush gave final approval to the Sudan Peace Act Oct. 21, stating that "This act demonstrates the clear resolve of the United States to promote a lasting, just peace; human rights; and freedom from persecution for the people of Sudan."

In the war, the Muslim-controlled government of northern Sudan has been fighting rebels from the largely Christian and Animist southern part of the country. Nearly two million people have died in the conflict, many from malnutrition caused by the fighting and the northern government's refusal to share aid money and food with residents of the south.

The two factions signed a cease-fire agreement on Oct. 15. The bill provides several sanctions designed to ensure that the two groups cooperate in good faith. If not, it instructs the executive branch to take several diplomatic and economic-sanction measures against Khartoum. (ABP)

Commission urges appointment of religious-liberty envoy

WASHINGTON -- A federal panel is urging the Bush administration to appoint a high-level person designed to protect religious freedom and other human rights in Afghanistan. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom called for an envoy to be the watchdog for human rights protections as the war-decimated country struggles to create a constitutional democracy.

"Despite the huge amount of military and foreign-assistance resources the United States is devoting to Afghanistan, the U.S. government is not making a similar investment in diplomatic resources to promote human rights and related freedoms," the commission said in a statement.

"This is a serious omission in the administration's strategy for regime change and political reconstruction."

Earlier this summer, the commission urged Bush to appoint a special envoy for religious freedom in Afghanistan before Afghan leaders convened a tribal council to begin discussing the shape of the country's new government. (ABP)

Gay Christian group to step up Falwell protests

LYNCHBURG, Va. -- Soulforce, the religious gay-rights group led by former Jerry Falwell associate Mel White, planned protests outside Falwell's Lynchburg, Va., church Oct. 26 and 27. White said the group would protest Falwell's "anti-gay" and "anti-Muslim" rhetoric outside Thomas Road Baptist Church.

"The ultimate goal of Soulforce is not just to condemn Jerry Falwell but to help the fundamentalist leader understand the consequences of his untruths about Muslims and gays, to seek forgiveness, and together to build a community where we can live together in peace," said White, who was once a speechwriter for Falwell but changed his political and theological views after admitting he is a homosexual.

The protests are part of "Out and About" -- the first ever gay-pride event in the small Virginia city's history. Recently, White and his partner, Gary Nixon, moved to a rented house across the street from Falwell's church and began attending worship services there in an attempt to get Falwell's attention. However, the evangelist and former Moral Majority head has thus far declined to meet with them to discuss their concerns. (ABP)

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