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Unfavorable image of evangelicals shows power of labels, Barna says

By Mark Wingfield

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- Non-Christians in the United States view evangelical Christians somewhat more kindly than prostitutes but with less affection than lesbians and lawyers.

That's according to new data released by the Barna Research Group, which recently conducted a national telephone poll of adults who do not consider themselves Christians. The poll asked respondents to record their impressions of 11 categories of people -- military officers, ministers, evangelicals, born-again Christians, Democrats, Republicans, real-estate agents, movie and TV performers, lawyers, lesbians, and prostitutes.

Evangelicals ranked 10th out of the 11 categories. They received favorable marks from only 22 percent of the non-Christians interviewed, higher than the 5 percent approval rating given prostitutes but lower than the 23 percent rating given lesbians and Republicans.

On the other hand, ministers as a group came in second, with a 44 percent favorable rating, behind military officers, who scored 56 percent favorable.

Born-again Christians also fared better as a group than evangelicals, drawing a 32 percent favorable rating, the third highest of all categories. But pollster George Barna said most respondents don't know the difference between the two terms.

"Our studies show that many of the people who have negative impressions of evangelicals do not know what or who an evangelical is," he said in a statement.

For example, he pointed to the fact that "born-again" Christians drew a more favorable rating than evangelical Christians, "although few adults are able to identify any substantive differences between those two groups."

"This is most likely a result of the thrashing evangelicals receive in the media," he said. "It seems that millions of non-Christians have negative impressions of evangelicals, even though they cannot define what an

evangelical is, accurately identify the perspectives of the group or identify even a handful of people they know personally who are evangelicals."

Barna said the survey is evidence of the power of labeling in American society. He urged Christians to draw a lesson from this study as they are tempted to judge other people by stereotypes.

"We may also consider people groups about whom we have developed a negative or unflattering impression and examine the basis of those attitudes," he said. "We find that when people examine the foundation of their impressions and then talk to a few people from the groups of which they have a low opinion, they discover those people are not so bad after all."

The findings of this survey are based on a national telephone poll of 1,002 adults conducted in May. Among that sample were 270 adults who described themselves as non-Christians. The findings reported for opinions of non-Christians carry a margin of error of plus or minus 6.2 percentage points.

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Worsening famine elicits call for assistance from Africa

By ABP staff (compiled)

ATLANTA (ABP) -- An increasingly severe famine in Ethiopia and southern Africa has prompted an urgent call for help from relief organizations.

Recent reports from the United Nations World Food Program indicate there are food shortages in Ethiopia and six countries in southern Africa -- Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Complicating the food crisis are the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic and a recent outbreak of cholera. In the south of Zimbabwe, 10 people died of cholera and 350 have been infected since August.

The Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which has a relief partnership with World Vision, is calling on individuals and churches to respond with money and volunteer assistance.

David Harding, CBF international coordinator for emergency response, said the organization is looking for professionals with previous Third World experience to serve in partnership with World Vision. Expertise is needed in communications, statistical analysis, information technology, finance management, nursing and nutrition, logistics, irrigation engineering and agronomy, he said.

With a serious drought worsening in many regions of Ethiopia, the number of people needing food aid is expected to rise sharply from 6 million to 10-to-14 million people in 2003. The U.N.'s World Food Program alone needs \$80 million worth of food for the first quarter of 2003.

"Donor contributions have covered the most acute needs over recent months, but by early next year the number of drought-affected Ethiopians will rise dramatically -- the food aid pledges received so far are nowhere near enough," said Georgia Shaver, World Food Program representative in Ethiopia. "In the worst-case scenario, up to 14 million people will require around 2 million tons of food aid, costing \$700 million. If donors respond quickly, we can still help avoid immense human suffering in Ethiopia."

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Isolation leaves clergy vulnerable to sexual misconduct, counselors say

By John Hall

DALLAS (ABP) -- Isolation and lack of support are among the key factors that make ministers susceptible to sexual temptation, says psychologist Dan McGee.

Sexual boundaries are crossed for a variety of reasons, however, and it is nearly impossible to know who will cross these limits, said McGee, director of the Counseling and Psychological Services Center for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The center counsels ministers and their families.

"We wish it was as simple as saying that this group of people with this background will be sexual predators," McGee said. "It just isn't that easy." Religious groups across the country are struggling to know how to deal with clergy sexual misconduct in the long shadow of child-abuse scandals that have rocked the Roman Catholic priesthood.

"In dealing with sexual misconduct we're usually dealing with people who don't know themselves very well," he said. "There are needs that drive them, not necessarily sexual, that they have not dealt with."

"The way it gets sexual is someone offers that kind of support and the person is so starved for support, the barriers come crashing down."

Ministers are largely dealing with temptation alone, added Jan Daehnert, director of minister/church relations for the Texas convention. While Daehnert said this is due to several reasons, he points to a flawed theological education that does not discuss sexuality.

More fundamentally, Daehnert believes certain theological systems make it difficult for a minister to open up to friends and confidants, and the local church may not know how to help families further. "Early on, I do not think our theology allows us to be sexual men and women," he said.

"We don't know how to talk about it, don't know how to vocalize this gift. Our independent theology prevents us from being vulnerable. ... Ministers can't express temptation."

Many ministers feel their congregation has put them on a pedestal and they would let down their flock by admitting temptation, Daehnert said. This notion dangerously isolates ministers, he said.

This isolation, when added to unresolved issues, may lead a minister to become depressed and look for support wherever he can find it, McGee said. In some cases, people will take advantage of a vulnerable minister, he said.

Ministers must be careful, however, with whom they discuss temptation, Daehnert added. They should share with close friends and spouses only. Sharing with public groups and the opposite sex outside marriage may lead to rumors and inappropriate relations, he said.

"I think it is dangerous between men and women outside the marriage," Daehnert said. "It moves it from a time of healing to a time of damage."

Despite the lack of options for ministers, the overwhelming majority of them remain faithful to God in sexual matters. Less than six percent of church firings in the United States are the result of moral failure, according to Focus on the Family statistics. A small percentage of that amount is due to sexual misconduct, including extramarital affairs, sexual abuse and pornography addiction.

Daehnert envisions a time when ministers can share with each other honestly and support one another through trials, because few understand what it is like as a staff member.

"I pray for support groups around Texas among ministers," he said. "They can share with each other their struggles and temptations. Hopefully, they can trust each other to maintain confidences."

Being 'called' means being willing, says CBF missionary

By Lisa Jones

ATLANTA (ABP) – When Karen Morrow thinks of her missions calling, two words come to mind -- willingness and obedience.

Karen and her husband, Frank, work as missionaries for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, serving among an unevangelized people group in Germany. A native of Houston, Karen became a Christian at a young age and felt God calling her to missions when she was 12.

At age 15, she was an exchange student in Brazil. "I fell in love with the people and saw for the first time" their need for a relationship with Christ, said Karen, a former youth minister of Friendship Baptist Church in Weatherford, Texas. "I felt God once again affirm his call on my life."

While completing her college degree in business, Karen served as a semester missionary in Guatemala. While there, the country experienced a military coup. Karen recalls feeling God's presence, protection and peace. "Amidst the anxious moments and pleas from friends and family to come home, I felt God's presence and protection. I also felt the peace that one can only experience when one is exactly where God wants one to be."

"I realized at that point that God wanted to further prepare me for missionary service, and I enrolled in seminary the next semester."

At Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Karen met Frank on a mission trip to Austria. After seminary, Frank became pastor of First Baptist Church of Covington, Texas. The couple's desire to serve in missions still remained. But as their children came along, and as the missions landscape in the Southern Baptist Convention changed, Karen said, "It appeared the doors were closing for us to do missions as we had planned."

Then the opportunity to serve with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship opened. "It was a major step of faith for us to leave with four small children and only our suitcases to live in a foreign land, and trust that God would provide our every need," Karen said.

But the Morrows' obedience has been rewarded, she said. "It's been a joy to see friends from our [unevangelized people group] recently come to know Christ and see them begin to grow," she said.

Unevangelized people groups refer to ethnic groups that share a common language but have had no significant exposure to the gospel. Such groups are the focus of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's global missions efforts.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has more than 127 field personnel -- or missionaries -- working with 25 people groups around the world. The CBF currently is trying to raise more than \$6 million to support that work. "Living the Call: Doing Missions in a World Without Borders" is the theme for the 2002-03 Offering for Global Missions.

"With a goal of \$6.1 million, each dollar given to the Offering for Global Missions will go toward helping someone hear the gospel who's never heard it before or meeting human need that's being overlooked by others," said Gary Baldrige, CBF global missions co-coordinator.

Many 'sandwiched' adults finding surprising joy, spiritual strength

By Rebecca Vorwerk

CHICAGO (ABP) -- An estimated 9 million Americans are members of the Sandwich Generation -- wedged between the demands of caring for aging parents and helping their own children grow up. But while you might expect sandwiched adults to sound bitter or burdened, many say their new responsibilities are rewarding.

JoAnn Simich of Chicago says bringing her mother into her home has not only been a surprising source of joy but has made the three-generation family closer. "Our home has become a nexus for all the members of the family," she says. "The Lord is drawing us into a household again."

The term Sandwich Generation has been bandied about in the social sciences and the media for more than a decade. According to one study from the National Alliance for Caregiving, most of the estimated 9 million Americans in the Sandwich Generation are baby boomers, but they can range in age from the 30s to the 60s.

Although caring simultaneously for children and parents is not unique to this generation, it is more common for two reasons: Couples are waiting longer to have children and senior adults are living longer.

Whereas in the past children typically went through puberty when their parents were in their late 30s or early 40s, now parents are much more likely to be in their late 40s or early 50s when their kids are teenagers. Consequently kids experience changes and need extra support at the same time their parents are experiencing the changes and losses of midlife. Meanwhile the parents' parents, who typically are living longer than previous generations, are more likely to require involved and prolonged care from their grown children.

These factors combine to create the first generation of Americans who could face life's most difficult stages all at the same time. Place them in an individualistic society that worships youth and devalues caregiving, and it can be a lonely experience.

A 2001 study by the American Association of Retired Persons found out several things about adults age 45 to 55:

- 44 percent have living parents and at least one child under 21,
- 28 percent suffered a death in the family in the last year,
- 24 suffered a major illness in the family in the last year,
- 16 percent endured a major illness themselves, and
- 24 percent had a child leave home.

The result, says author Kathleen Fischer in *Autumn Gospel*, can be overwhelming. "Often when we feel we cannot bear another ending, it is pressed upon our lives anyway: a parent's sickness, the death of a friend, a diagnosis of illness. We may be dealing not simply with one major transition, but with many small or larger ones."

Nationwide only 18 percent of 45-to-55-year-olds in the AARP study said they feel stressed because they are "sandwiched between the needs of my immediate family and older relatives." While sandwiched adults endure demands on time and emotions, they have much to teach us about the joys of self-sacrifice.

Debbie Friel, 47, is married and works as a head nurse in Raleigh, N.C. She has two daughters living at home, one starting high school and the other starting community college this fall. Her 88-year-old mother recently moved from Ohio to live near her in an assisted-living facility.

"This spring my oldest child left high school and I was transitioning with mother. And I struggled with sadness," she says. "The younger part of my life is closing down. It's a transition from being young and youthful to becoming the older generation in my family."

For Friel, the biggest challenges come in finding enough time and energy “to give enough of myself to the needs of my children, my mother, my husband and myself -- keep myself in balance -- and, of course, attend to my job.”

Don Karrer, 62, of Grosse Pointe, Mich., knows what Friel is going through. He spent many years caring for two sets of elderly parents, as well as for his wife and teenage daughter. “If you’re the sole person responsible for two sides of the family, plus children, you can find yourself going in so many different directions, you can’t hardly stop to take a breath,” he says.

According to the AARP study, 84 percent of sandwiched adults call and visit their elders. About 45 percent do housework, maintenance or shopping errands for their parents. Other common tasks include handling paperwork or bills, dealing with legal issues, contributing financially or making financial decisions, arranging for aides and nurses, and helping with personal care like dressing, bathing and eating.

Typically, even if there are multiple siblings, the primary responsibility for providing for the physical and social needs of parents falls on the shoulders of one child, who is usually female.

“Most care-giving duties fall to the daughters in the family,” writes Jean Chatzky in Money Magazine. “According to the National Alliance of Caregiving, 73 percent of family care-givers are women. And not because they have more time. Three in five female caretakers from 35 to 49 hold down full-time or part-time jobs, and about half have to change their work schedules.”

The strain of juggling jobs and caring for kids and parents can cause marriage rifts and health problems if care-givers don’t have enough support and help from others. “I know I have to give some time to myself because I won’t survive if I don’t,” says Debbie Friel, “and I have to find time to give to my marriage because it won’t survive either if I don’t.”

When asked how this level of care-giving has affected their own lives, respondents in the AARP study said caring for older relatives has affected their own plans for vacation (29 percent), retirement savings (26 percent), education (12 percent) and career (8 percent).

Don Karrer says he and his wife have had to sacrifice on many levels to care for their parents, including vacation plans, educational goals and personal finances.

For Debbie Friel, care-giving has certainly been a lifestyle change. “We can’t be as spontaneous with friends as we used to be. I gave up going to a weekly ladies group in order to find time to spend with Mom. Amanda [14] is at the age that she needs her mother, so I try to make time for her. I’m so dead tired from taking mother to doctors and lawyers and other errands that we don’t have the time or energy to socialize.”

In perhaps the most surprising aspect of the AARP study, respondents said that in spite of -- or perhaps as a byproduct of -- these losses and sacrifices, they still felt very satisfied with their lives and their relationships with their families. The findings suggest that, although loss is a dominant theme of midlife, many people find it a time of renewal for themselves and their relationships with family.

“Many people at midlife experience a new sense of the balance of opposites in their lives,” says Lynne Baab in *A Renewed Spirituality: Finding Fresh Paths at Midlife*. “Work and rest, time alone and time with people, a growing sense of freedom coupled with a greater sense of discipline ... Just when we feel the most settled and even a little bored in our family life, a totally new path of service lights up our lives.”

JoAnn Simich, 53, the Chicago wife and mother who recently brought her own mother into her home, says her new role is a privilege. “The world would tell me that having my mother living with me should be a pressure because I’m giving up my freedom, but what’s happened is something very joyous. Because she always provided for me, it’s my joy now to be able to do that for her,” she says.

Simich and her husband have two children in their 20s who live in the area but are on their own. Since her mother has come to live with them, the family has grown much closer, Simich says. “Our life has been enriched.”

“Whether or not one must care for an older parent seems unrelated to probability of family life enjoyment,” concludes the AARP report. Only 4 percent of the study's 45-to-55-year-olds said that they consider their family a burden. And 93 percent said they feel “my family gives me strength.”

An overwhelming 88 percent of the age group say they are satisfied with the way their lives are going. And they feel optimistic about the future; 78 percent look ahead with confidence to better times personally and for their families, the study said.

How do people cope so positively with the challenges of caring for family members? And what can we learn about caring for others from their experience?

“During the midlife years, we not only have to learn to face losses, we also get to experience the surprise of finding new pleasures, new joys and new ways of connecting with God,” suggests Lynne Baab. As people face the challenges of this stage of life they also discover new coping strategies and sources of support they may not have needed to access earlier in life.

Many, according to the AARP study, rely on the community of friends and other family members, as well as social and government agencies and medical professionals. But the greatest support, say respondents, comes from spiritual sources.

“Among older boomers, faith and prayer are by far the most commonly cited sources of support for care-giving efforts,” the AARP says. “Fully 62 percent draw on spiritual aid. In addition, 42 percent say their church, synagogue, temple or other religious organization has been helpful to them.”

Many Christians also rely on care-giving organizations like Stephen Ministries or other care ministries at their local churches. But many churches have gone a step further by providing programs and classes specifically designed to meet the needs of this growing population.

Simich has found her greatest support from “relying on the Lord,” she says. “Religion doesn’t do the trick -- expectations, people telling me what the Bible says, etc. It has everything to do with talking with Jesus.”

“There’s literally joy in having a servant’s heart,” offers Simich. “It’s the simple joy of seeing another person’s need met and knowing that that’s God’s heart for them. It’s the Lord God living his life out through me.”

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- Rebecca Vorwerk is a creative-services specialist and free-lance writer in Downers Grove, Ill.

News Briefs from Associated Baptist Press

By ABP Staff

Chicago-area Muslim sues Christian hospital

DOWNERS GROVE, Ill. -- A Muslim-American civil-rights group has filed an employment-discrimination lawsuit against a Chicago-area hospital for firing a Muslim man shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The Council on Islamic-American Relations has filed a federal lawsuit against Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove. The hospital is affiliated with both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Church of Christ. The group alleges that the man was fired because he is a Muslim.

The plaintiff, a custodian at the hospital and a legal immigrant of Iraqi origin, said he was called into a meeting on Sept. 16, 2001, in which hospital administrators questioned him about his ethnic background, religious beliefs and opinions on the terrorist attacks. He said he was informed that hospital staffers were “nervous” and “did not feel safe with him around.”

The employee complained to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in March, and was recently informed that he had a right to file suit. (ABP)

Conservative ex-Congressman joins forces with ACLU

WASHINGTON -- In what many Washington insiders are calling a pairing of strange bedfellows, one of the most conservative members of Congress is joining forces with a civil-liberties group often decried as “liberal.” Outgoing Rep. Bob Barr (R-Ga.) recently announced he is signing on as a consultant with the American Civil Liberties Union.

It’s not the first time Barr -- a prominent advocate of individual privacy rights -- has joined forces with the ACLU. He and a few other prominent conservative Republicans in Congress have opposed many of the post-Sept. 11 expansions in government surveillance of individuals and groups. Barr is leaving Congress at the end of this year after being defeated for re-election in his party’s primary.

In recent years, many conservatives -- especially Religious Right supporters -- have derided the ACLU for its stands in support of gay rights and in opposition to government support for religious practices and displays.

Laura Murphy, director of the ACLU’s Washington office, said though Barr has had many ideological differences with the group in the past, “We have no doubt that a strange-bedfellows collaboration between us will yield great things,” according to the Washington Post. The paper also reported that retiring House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas) is also considering signing on with the ACLU as a consultant. (ABP)

Mormons will appeal case to Supreme Court

SALT LAKE CITY -- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints will appeal to the Supreme Court in a case that pits religious land-use rights against free-speech concerns.

The group has announced its decision to appeal a ruling by the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that it could not restrict allegedly “anti-Mormon” speech from taking place on a piece of property it owns at its headquarters building in downtown Salt Lake City. The property -- now a pedestrian plaza filled with Mormon iconography -- used to be a city street, but was sold to the church with the city retaining an easement that maintained the public’s right to have access to the plaza. However, the city reached an agreement with the church that allowed the church to regulate speech on the plaza.

Church authorities have arrested a handful of people -- including a Southern Baptist evangelist -- for activities on the plaza that it deemed unacceptable. The plaintiffs, including a Utah Unitarian church and several Utah taxpayers, said that’s an unconstitutional government entanglement with a religious group.

The church has argued that its rights to use the land as it sees fit include preventing “anti-Mormon” activities and “disruptive” protests on the plaza. (ABP)

Uzbekistan court convicts Jehovah’s Witness

WASHINGTON -- In what many human-rights observers fear is a new crackdown on a tiny religious minority, a court in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan has convicted a Jehovah’s Witness under a law that bans “inciting religious hatred.”

Marat Mudarisov was convicted in a ruling that his Canadian lawyer said also “classified all the Jehovah’s Witness literature in Uzbekistan as illegal,” according to Religion News Service.

As in many former Soviet republics, leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church have put pressure on the Uzbek government to crack down on religious minorities, according to observers. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and other watchdog groups have labeled the Uzbek government one of the world’s worst violators of religious freedom. However, most of the Uzbek oppression of religion has been of unauthorized or unregistered Muslim groups in the country. Although Uzbekistan has a Muslim majority, its government has tightly regulated the religion, to the point of even censoring the sermons of Islamic clerics.

However, the crackdown on Jehovah’s Witnesses began in early 2002. There are only about 7,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses in the country. (ABP)

Religious freedom commission names new director

WASHINGTON -- A governmental agency charged with monitoring religious-freedom conditions around the world has named a new head. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has named Joseph Crapa as executive director, replacing Steven McFarland, who left the group in April amid controversy.

Robert Seiple, the former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, recently lambasted the commission for what he said was its ineffectiveness and counterproductivity in encouraging religious freedom around the world. However, the commission’s current chair, Felice Gaer, said Seiple’s concerns were unfounded and pointed to several international improvements in religious freedom conditions and awareness.

Crapa was most recently chief of staff for U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), and previously served as an assistant administrator at the U.S. Agency for International Aid, appointed by former President Bill Clinton. (ABP)

Baptist Peace Fellowship names interim director

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- Jim Lowder has been named interim executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America effective Feb. 1, 2003. He replaces Ken Sehested, who resigned earlier this year.

Lowder currently is executive director for Habitat for Humanity in San Francisco. Previously, he was executive director of Dolores Street Community Services and pastor of Dolores Street Baptist Church, both in San Francisco. He is a long-time member of the BPFNA and has served on the BPFNA board for several years.

Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America links Baptists in Canada, the United States, Mexico and Puerto Rico, providing resources and training focusing on world peace and justice. (ABP)

Baptist history group hires associate director

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. -- The Baptist History and Heritage Society will employ Pamela Durso as associate director in June 2003.

Durso is assistant professor of church history and Baptist heritage at the Campbell University Divinity School, Buies Creek, N.C. She has a doctor of philosophy degree in church history from Baylor.

A member of Baptist Women in Ministry since 1999, she has served as guest preacher in churches throughout North Carolina.

Durso writes regularly for the e-magazine, The Baptist Studies Bulletin of Mercer University's Center for Baptist Studies. Mercer University Press will publish her forthcoming book, The Power of Woman: The Life and Writings of Sarah Moore Grimke. (ABP)

Longtime children's educator receives award

WACO, Texas -- Veteran educator Hazel Morris has received the 2002 Smyth & Helwys Award for Excellence in Christian Education.

Morris recently retired after 30 years as associate professor of childhood education at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. She continues to serve as minister of childhood education at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth and is a member of the advisory board for Smyth & Helwys' line of children's materials. (ABP)

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