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Prevost to assume leadership of CBF rural-poverty initiative

By Lance Wallace

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ATLANTA (ABP) – Tom Prevost will become national coordinator of Partners in Hope, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's rural poverty initiative, in July.

Prevost, CBF's associate coordinator for covenants and career selection, will assume leadership July 1 for CBF's effort among 20 of the poorest U.S. counties. These are spread across Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta and Cotton Belt, the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and Native American reservations in South Dakota.

Partners in Hope had been led by Tom Ogburn, CBF's associate coordinator for partnership missions, who will renew a focus on unevangelized people groups, according to CBF missions co-coordinator Gary Baldrige.

Prevost will continue to lead career missionary selection from his office in Richmond, Va., while giving the rural poverty initiative increasing attention. His responsibilities related to the Baptist World Alliance, theological education and other areas will be reassigned. His wife, Carol, will serve as a key volunteer leader for literacy/reading ministries, which are essential in addressing key poverty issues.

"Tom Prevost was once a home missionary and is very at ease with coalitions and partnerships," said Baldrige. "He will bring to the initiative what is needed at this time in its development."

Prevost has spent 20 years in missions administration with the Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board. He helped to develop the volunteer International Service Corps for the SBC Foreign Mission Board. He also has been a pastor of Baptist churches in West Virginia and California, and earned degrees from Mississippi College in Clinton and Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Mill Valley, Calif.

"I hope to make a difference," Prevost said. "The key people in this initiative are the people in the local communities. There are a number of meaningful efforts underway. Many of those efforts have served long in hard places already. The Lord is there, working in these communities. Seeds have been planted. I hope to be able to nurture those seeds."

The third and final stage of development for the Rural Poverty Initiative is expected to last more than a decade and calls for a full-time director by 2006. The objectives of the initiative are to work with local citizens in a grass roots effort of participatory, sustainable, assets-based and transformational community development.

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European, American Christians take peace message to Capitol Hill

By Robert Marus

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WASHINGTON (ABP) – Christian leaders from Europe and America have brought a musical message to the halls of Congress that they haven't been allowed to sing yet at the White House: "Dona nobis pacem" – "Give us peace."

A chorus of that ancient Latin hymn opened a Feb. 26 press briefing in a Senate hearing room. Speakers at the briefing included American clergy from several denominations and their European counterparts from countries that are members of the United Nations Security Council.

The leaders are opposed to a pre-emptive American war against Iraq at the present time. "I want to show you what we're talking about here," said National Council of Churches head Bob Edgar, as he held up a poster-board-sized photograph of a young Presbyterian Iraqi girl he said he met on a recent trip to Baghdad. "Most Americans don't even know that there are Presbyterians in Baghdad."

Although the leaders and the churches with which they are associated have had or have scheduled meetings with world leaders such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, so far the White House has not responded to their Jan. 30 request to meet with President Bush.

"The only government that refuses to speak with its church leaders is our own," said Jim Winkler, head of the United Methodist Church's social-concerns agency in Washington. Winkler noted that both Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney are members of his denomination.

A White House official has said that Bush would be happy to meet with religious leaders, according to the Washington Times. In recent months, groups of Christian leaders have met with both Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to discuss the war.

While polls have shown Americans to be generally supportive of a pre-emptive war to disarm Iraq of chemical and biological weapons, the leaders of most major Christian denominations in the United States have publicly opposed Bush's announced intent to go to war even without U.N. backing. And international opinion has run largely against Bush's position, even in countries where elected leaders are publicly supportive of Bush.

"I have to tell you that, although our prime minister stands shoulder to shoulder with your president, the churches in Great Britain have taken a clear stand [in opposition to Bush's plans for war]," said Alan McDonald, a Presbyterian pastor and convener of the Church of Scotland's social-concerns committee. "We're here not as politicians. We're here because we're part of the Body of Christ and worship the Prince of Peace."

However, also on Feb. 26, the British House of Commons voted 393-199 to back Blair in his support for Bush's war plans. Bush himself made a further case for the justness of pre-emptive war in Iraq later that evening. In a speech at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington think tank, Bush said America must attack Iraq before the nation poses an imminent threat because of the lessons learned in the Sept. 11 attacks.

"In Iraq, a dictator is building and hiding weapons that could enable him to dominate the Middle East and intimidate the civilized world – and we will not allow it," Bush said. "This same tyrant has close ties to terrorist organizations and could supply them with the terrible means to strike this country – and America will not permit it. The danger posed by Saddam Hussein and his weapons cannot be ignored or wished away."

But the religious leaders warned of several moral and ethical problems that they perceive in Bush's plan for war. Saying that a pre-emptive attack on Iraq without United Nations backing would undermine the international organization as well as Christian "just war" principles, the speakers also warned of creating something akin to a "holy war" between the Islamic-Arab Middle East and the Judeo-Christian West.

"A war in Iraq would be a catastrophe for the moderate Arabic and Muslim world," said Jean Arnold de Clermont, president of the French Protestant Federation. Repeating many terrorism experts' predictions that anti-American sentiment created by a war in Iraq could contribute to increased recruitment for Islamic extremist groups, he added, "We desperately hope that President Bush would not be successful where al-Qaida has failed."

The leaders also repeatedly cited United Nations figures that severe food shortages in the immediate aftermath of a war could threaten the lives of more than a million children in Iraq – and that a new American-controlled regime could do little to ameliorate the famine crisis in the short term. "We are intending to unleash hell on Iraq and all of its people, not just [Iraqi dictator] Saddam Hussein," said Winkler. "I have worshiped with Iraqi Christians and walked the streets of Baghdad. The people of Iraq are not our enemies."

Although the elected and appointed leaders of many of America's major denominations publicly oppose the war, their rank-and-file clergy members have expressed more mixed feelings. A few evangelical leaders – including some of the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative leaders and University of Chicago ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain – have expressed support for Bush's case for war.

In addition, Bush recently got the endorsement of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations – America's largest Orthodox Jewish group.

But none of that swayed Winkler. "My opposition to war is deeply rooted in my faith," he said at the congressional briefing. "I cannot profess Christ as my savior and simultaneously support pre-emptive war."



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IMB relies on reserve funds to keep flow of missionaries up**By Mark Wingfield****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****February 27, 2003****Volume: 03-21-3474**

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) – The number of people willing to serve in international missions continues to outpace the support offered by traditional giving sources, trustees of the International Mission Board were told in a year-end summary.

Trustees of the Southern Baptist Convention agency responded in late January by approving the expenditure of \$4.2 million in unbudgeted funds to cover expenses for 2002.

Increased expenses and decreased returns on investments have caused the IMB to pull \$50 million from operating reserves over the past two years, David Steverson, vice president for finance, told trustees.

IMB administrators reported record numbers of appointments to missionary service and huge increases in measurable results on mission fields worldwide.

The total number of missionaries under appointment by the IMB was reported as 5,441. That includes 3,359 career missionaries, 428 associate missionaries and 107 apprentice missionaries, all of whom are classified as long-term workers by the IMB. The total number of long-term workers is 3,894.

Associate missionaries are adults age 30 or older who qualify for a specific assignment but may not meet requirements for career service because of age, education, divorce or other disqualifying factors. They serve four-year terms. Apprentice missionaries generally are younger adults who need additional experience before appointment to career service. They are appointed to three-year terms with a mentor.

The IMB's missionary count also includes 1,524 short-term workers. Among these are 517 Journeymen, a two-year program for single college graduates under age 30; 629 International Service Corps workers, a two-year program for adults of any age; and 378 Master's workers, a two- to three-year commitment for those older than 50.

Much of the IMB's rapid increase in missionary appointments over the last decade has come through adding short-term workers.

The total missionary count in 1992 was 3,893, compared to 5,441 at the end of 2002. More than 80 percent of that net gain of 1,548 workers can be accounted for in short-term missionaries.

The 3,359 career missionaries serving at the end of 2002 compares to 3,356 career missionaries serving at the end of 1992, according to the SBC Annual. While the career missionary count has not grown, many career missionaries have retired and been replaced during this decade.

The 428 associate missionaries serving at the end of 2002 compares to 133 serving at the end of 1992, a 221 percent increase for the decade.

Greater growth, however, has occurred in the short-term categories of Journeymen, International Service Corps and Master's workers.

Even in 1992, the number of ISC personnel being appointed outpaced the number of career missionaries appointed for the year.

Direct comparisons in short-term workers cannot be made for the decade due to changes in categories. However, in 1992 the mission board reported 109 Journeymen, compared to 517 serving at the end of 2002. And in 1992, the board reported 295 "special project" workers – meaning everyone who was not a career, associate or Journeyman missionary – compared to 1,137 workers today who do not fit one of those three categories.

Growth in the number of missionaries serving shorter terms creates a double burden on the appointment process. More missionaries are being appointed, and the cycle in which they are replaced or reappointed occurs more frequently.

If a person serves as a Journeyman and then moves into another IMB assignment two years later, for example, that counts for two appointments and requires two distinct preparation processes.

That raises the count for annual appointment statistics, but it also creates more demand on the financial resources needed to train and send out workers.

IMB President Jerry Rankin predicted last November that the board might have to restrict the flow of new missionaries to the field because income is not keeping pace with the number of workers being processed for appointment.

Gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for international missions would have to increase nearly 19 percent to meet the demand, he said.

Southern Baptists have given record amounts to the IMB through the Lottie Moon Offering and the Cooperative Program unified budget, but that has not kept pace with IMB budgets. For example, the \$113.7 million given to Lottie Moon in 2001 was an all-time high but fell short of the IMB's \$120 million goal.

The board's 2003 budget provides funds for appointment of 150 new missionaries of all types, but IMB leaders predict the actual number will be 400 or more.

These field missionaries, whether long-term or short-term, work with a growing number of volunteers who travel to mission fields for anywhere from a week to a month. Volunteers have tripled over the last decade, from 11,197 in 1992 to 33,963 in 2002.

Some advocates of a strategy based on career missionaries have criticized the IMB for relying so heavily on short-term and volunteer workers, fearing this will reduce effectiveness on the field.

The IMB responds that, at least from a numerical perspective of effectiveness, mission work worldwide is posting gains as well.

IMB officials reported 8,369 churches were organized in 2002, an increase of 42.5 percent over the previous year. By comparison, 1,605 church starts were reported in 1992.

A "church" is defined as "a group of baptized believers covenanted together into community by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of worship, fellowship, witness, nurture and ministry." The count includes churches begun directly by IMB workers and those begun by "overseas Baptist partners," including other mission groups.

IMB missionaries reported 421,436 baptisms worldwide in 2002, an increase of 8.7 percent. By comparison, 251,700 baptisms were reported by missionaries in 1992. As with churches, the count includes baptisms reported by "overseas Baptist partners."

Officials also reported that IMB personnel "engaged" 183 new people groups in 2002. Of those, 138 were considered "unreached," according to Scott Holste, director of the IMB's global research department.

"These numbers represent groups newly engaged by IMB missionaries and/or our overseas Baptist partners," Holste explained. "The vast majority, however, represent direct engagement by IMB missionaries."

"Engagement," he added, "means that we have IMB missionaries appointed to work directly with the group. For most, it means we have IMB missionaries assigned to the group and that they are actively implementing church-planting strategies among that group."

The one caution expressed by IMB leaders is a recent downturn in high-school-age volunteers for short-term

assignments. The 50 percent drop in this category for 2002 probably is tied to fears from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, officials suggest.

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