

Tornado levels Tennessee church, sends deacon on wild ride

By Lonnie Wilkey

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FAYETTEVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) – A historic church in southern Tennessee was leveled by a tornado May 5, but the survival of one of its deacons was hailed as "a miracle of God."

The original sanctuary of Oak Hill Baptist Church, built in 1883, was destroyed by the Monday tornado. The church, in the Belleville community of Lincoln County, hosted the first and 100th meetings of William Carey Baptist Association.

The tornado struck the church shortly before noon, flattening the 120-year-old sanctuary. Two later additions, one on each side, were left standing although they received extensive damage.

The church's parsonage also was severely damaged, forcing the pastor and his wife to seek lodging in a local hotel. The tornado caused extensive damage to 12 to 15 homes in Belleville, about 70 miles south of Nashville.

Kenneth Rozar, a deacon at Oak Hill, went to the church shortly before noon on May 5 when he learned a tornado was headed in that direction. When he arrived at the church, he heard what seemed like an explosion, he told the Baptist and Reflector newspaper.

He said the tornado picked up his truck, with him inside, and carried them over the church. He recalled seeing the pews still standing as he dove onto the floorboard of the truck. The tornado threw Rozar's truck into a telephone pole, cutting it in two. It came to rest about 150 feet from where it became airborne.

"It is an act of God he is here today," pastor Charles Brown said.

Rozar, who suffered a slight concussion and some broken ribs, was taken to a hospital Monday afternoon but was later released. "I'm alive by a miracle of God," said Rozar, who has been a member of the church since 1974.

The congregation is seeking a place to meet while deciding if rebuilding will be possible.

When church members last met Sunday night before the storm, Rozar recalled, their lesson focused on the church being the people and not the building. "That lesson didn't mean much Sunday night, but it means a lot more now," he said.

Surveying the damage the next day, longtime member Bobby Forrester voiced both sadness and hope. "Buildings can be replaced, but humans can't. The good Lord will see us through and if it's his will, we will build it back," Forrester said.

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House passes job-training bill allowing religious discrimination**By Robert Marus****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****May 8, 2003****Volume: 03-43-3579**

WASHINGTON (ABP) – The House of Representatives has passed a bill that allows religious organizations receiving federal dollars to discriminate in hiring.

The measure passed on a largely party-line vote, in spite of vocal opposition from congressional critics who say it both rolls back important civil-rights protections and violates the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom.

On May 8, the Republican-controlled House passed the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act (H.R. 1261) on a vote of 220-204. The bill, which reauthorizes funding for federal job-training programs, included a provision that repealed a civil-rights protection contained in the law's earlier versions.

That provision prevented organizations receiving direct government funding for such programs from denying a job to an applicant on the basis of his or her religious beliefs. Federal civil-rights laws from the 1960s prevent employers from discriminating on the basis of religion but contain special exemptions that allow churches and similar religious organizations to hire only adherents of their own faith.

However, several federal programs deny government contracts and funding to groups that practice job discrimination on any grounds, including religion.

The provision that the Workforce Reinvestment Act would remove from existing federal law has existed since 1982. Ironically, it was part of legislation sponsored by then-Sen. Dan Quayle (R-Ind.) and signed into law by Republican President Ronald Reagan.

But President Bush and most congressional Republicans have charged that religious organizations should be able to compete on the same basis as secular groups in providing social services with government funds. They contend that requiring religious organizations to adopt non-discriminatory hiring practices to receive federal funds would cause them to compromise their character. "Faith-based providers cannot be expected to sustain their religious mission without the ability to employ individuals who share the tenets and practices of their faith, because it is that faith that motivates them to serve their neighbors in trouble," said Reps. John Boehner (R-Ohio) and Buck McKeon (R-Calif.) in a letter to colleagues supporting the act.

But critics of the provision said that was not acceptable with federal dollars. "The idea of citizens having to pass someone else's religious test to qualify for a federally supported job was settled by our founding fathers," said Rep. Chet Edwards (D-Texas), a frequent congressional activist on religious-freedom issues.

House leaders passed the legislation without allowing debate or an up-or-down vote on an amendment that would have stricken the offending employment-discrimination language. Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and several colleagues offered the amendment. In March it was rejected, on a party-line vote, in the House committee dealing with the bill.

Van Hollen and his allies made another attempt May 7 to get the amendment included in the bill in the House Rules Committee, which determines how many amendments may be considered on each piece of legislation that comes to the House floor. The committee voted, again strictly along party lines, to reject bringing up the amendment for consideration. "This is a very fair rule," said Rules chairman David Dreier (R-Calif.), noting his committee had already allowed for floor consideration of five other amendments to the bill offered by Democrats and three offered by Republicans.

But Edwards, Van Hollen and other critics said Republicans were simply trying to avoid floor debate and an up-or-down vote on the issue because it would focus the public's attention on the fact that the bill's passage would mean the repeal of a federal civil-rights protection for the first time in modern history.

Dreier's press secretary, Jo Powers, said that isn't the case. "We felt it was more important to go with the amendments that dealt more explicitly with the main points of the bill," she told Associated Baptist Press. "We just felt like the aim of the bill was helping people get jobs and access to jobs and education, and we felt the debate was better kept to that."

But Van Hollen press secretary Afshin Mohamadi said the provision is central to the bill. "Just saying that this is just one minor provision [of the bill] is flat wrong," he told ABP. "The job training that this bill aims to fund should be given to all. If the religious discrimination that is allowed under this bill takes away that access to all, then the entire purpose of the bill is moot."

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CBF general assembly features Tony Campolo, Kate Campbell**By Lance Wallace****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****May 8, 2003****Volume: 03-43-3580**

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) – The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship expects more than 4,000 people for its annual general assembly June 26-28 in Charlotte, N.C.

Billed as the largest gathering of moderate Baptists in America, the general assembly will feature a message from preacher, educator and author Tony Campolo, music by Nashville recording artist Kate Campbell, and guided prayer time by Marjorie Thompson, an author on spiritual formation.

The assembly also includes the commissioning of CBF missionaries and more than 100 ministry workshops.

Campolo, a professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pa., is currently an associate pastor at Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. A popular speaker and activist, he has promoted various Christian social causes, including tutoring for urban children in North America and care of African children orphaned by AIDS.

Campbell, the daughter of Baptist pastor Jim Henry, made her recording debut in 1995 with "Songs from the Levee." Her "Moonpie Dreams" (1997) and "Visions of Plenty" (1998) each garnered Folk Album of the Year nominations from the Nashville Music Awards.

Thompson is director of the Pathways Center for Spiritual Leadership with Upper Room Ministries. An ordained Presbyterian minister, she is a retreat leader, teacher and speaker in the area of Christian spirituality. She served as the chief architect of the "Companions in Christ" spiritual formation resource now used by many CBF congregations.

Also during the general assembly, a business session will include adoption of CBF's 2003-04 budget. A resource fair with more than 90 exhibitors will offer a variety of resources and services. A children's assembly will provide learning experiences for preschoolers through 6th grade. Author Brian McLaren will lead a day-long leadership institute on June 26 prior to the general assembly.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Photos available from Associated Baptist Press.

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Texas Baptists plan ministry for crime victims, families**By John Hall****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****May 8, 2003****Volume: 03-43-3581**

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) – Texas Baptists hope to open the nation's first hospitality house for crime victims next year.

The new facility would offer a protected environment for victims who come to witness the executions of convicted attackers. The facility is planned for Huntsville, site of the Texas State Penitentiary, which executes more criminals than any other facility in the country.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas is planning the project in partnership with Texas Department of Criminal Justice Victim Services. The convention already operates a hospitality house in Huntsville for criminals' families.

Jim Young, director of the convention's Center for Community Ministries, said victims would be able to stay at the home free of charge and would be protected from the media. Trained counselors would be available to minister to the visitors. A memorial for victims also is planned, which perhaps would be a prayer garden.

Convention staff members, who are refining the details, are hoping to purchase and remodel a private home or build a new facility in Huntsville. The house could serve as a training center for counselors who minister to victims of violent crimes like assault and rape.

The house will be the only facility of its kind in the United States, according to Raven Kazen, the state's director of victim services. There are approximately 70,000 victims registered with the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse, she said, but perhaps four times that many are unregistered.

"We want to provide the best ministry possible to those who have been hurt by the actions of others," said Young, who announced the plan at the recent Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse conference in Austin. He said he hopes the project involves several denominations and spawns similar ministries elsewhere in the country. "We expect this will be a blessing to Texas, but I expect it to go beyond this," he said.

Kazen, who is herself a victim of assault and rape, called the hospitality house "an answer to a prayer." She recalled her own struggles with faith after the attack. She wondered why she was attacked and didn't find a satisfactory answer. Though she was a Christian, she became dissatisfied with her faith after the incident, she said. The emotional pain continued to build until she let Jesus work in her life, Kazen said.

Now satisfied with her faith, she believes the tribulation prepared her to help other victims in her job. She believes the proposed ministry will be a great help to the hurting. "There's only one cure for that kind of hurt and that's the healing presence of Jesus Christ," she said.

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Couple retires after 17 years of hospitality to inmate families

By Ken Camp

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HUNTSVILLE, Texas (ABP) --When Bob and Nelda Norris opened the Hospitality House for inmate families, hardly anybody wanted them in Huntsville -- not criminal-justice officials, the local community or even most local churches.

But the Norrises believed God called them to minister to prisoner families. Seventeen years and 87,000 people later, those whose lives were touched by the ministry agree.

"Our job description has been to love, listen, labor and not ask questions," Nelda Norris said.

The Norrises retire in mid-May from what they call "living in a fishbowl" -- living under the same roof with an always-changing household of inmate families. "It's bittersweet," Norris acknowledged. "For 17 years we've dealt with these people and touched these people. They've been our family."

The Hospitality House, a ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, was launched in 1986. At the time, it was the only faith-based facility offering temporary shelter to the visiting families of prisoners in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Today, there are 15 hospitality houses and visitors centers around the state.

Bob Norris came to the Hospitality House after a brief time in the pastorate and more than 15 years of secular employment. "We'd had a food brokerage business in El Paso and lost it. For two years, we literally were living day to day. That's when we learned faith living," he said.

A representative of Hospitality House discovered Norris' resume in an old file. Some time earlier, he had applied for a chaplain's post in the prison system, but at that time there were no positions open.

The Norrises moved to Huntsville and "we've been busy ever since," he added. They have hosted nearly 50,000 overnight guests and about 14,000 visitors. And they have touched more than 23,000 people through their extended ministry, including offering released offenders a place to shower and shave on the day they are reunited with family.

"Seeing families reunited has been one of the most satisfying parts of the ministry. If [the offender] doesn't have somebody to come home to, he's not going to stay out of prison," Nelda Norris said. "It's good to know that they have a second chance. And we serve a God of second chances."

The ministry has yielded 662 known professions of faith. The Norrises conducted about 15,000 counseling sessions, wrote nearly 19,000 letters and provided 5,700 toys for inmates' children at Christmas.

They have also provided a safe haven away from the media spotlight for more than 200 families of death row inmates in the hours immediately before and after an execution.

"I've never witnessed an execution. I've never wanted to. But I've heard the stories so many times, I could tell you every detail of the process," Bob Norris said. "One thing never changes. It's the mother who hurts the most."

"We've learned that crime is no respecter of persons," Nelda Norris added. "We've seen people pull up out front in Lincoln Town Cars and in cars barely held together with baling wire."

"Our heart of compassion is always with the family," Bob Norris said. "They are the other victims. They pay the price and they didn't do the crime."

Corrections
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Please make the following corrections in the May 6 release:

1. In the story "White house supports 'Under God' in pledge," add the following to the end of the story: In a rare move, Olson asked the justices to discard the 9th Circuit's ruling in the case without even listening to arguments. He said previous Supreme Court decisions are so clearly opposed to the lower court's ruling as to render further arguments unnecessary.

2. In the "Cotton Patch Gospel" story, in the 7th paragraph, it notes Tom Key was "raised at Dawson Memorial Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala.." Dawson Memorial is in Birmingham.

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