

Associated Baptist Press

September 16, 2003 Volume: 03-86

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Truth-telling in reporting essential to overcome fear, interfaith leader says

By Ken Camp

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- Speaking on the anniversary of America's worst terrorist attack -- and just blocks from the site of another -- interfaith leader Welton Gaddy said journalism that tells the truth can help keep Americans from succumbing to their fear.

Americans live in the grip of fear, Gaddy said at a "Religious Freedom Celebration" Sept. 11 in downtown Oklahoma City, six blocks from the site of the 1995 Murrah Federal Building bombing. The interfaith gathering, sponsored by Associated Baptist Press, commemorated both terrorist events.

"Fear transforms people's lives to the point where they are willing to give up freedom for security and sacrifice fundamental rights for a promise of safety," Gaddy, president of the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance, told the 150 guests present.

And fear breeds intolerance, he added. "In an environment of fear, difference becomes a moral category. To be different is not to hold an alternative opinion or religion. To be different is to be wrong, to be considered a threat, even, some would say, the embodiment of evil."

"The pervasive presence of fear in this nation is nowhere more apparent than in the public's willingness to support a Department of Justice that is destroying primal judicial rights, running roughshod over issues of privacy, and even violating principles of religious liberty, all in the name of freedom," Gaddy said.

News organizations can help heal broken interfaith relations, discourage militancy and create respect for religious freedom simply by telling the truth about religion, Gaddy told the gathering, which was scheduled in conjunction with a meeting of ABP's board of directors.

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Religious bodies throughout the United States are divided by "hot button" issues such as homosexuality, the role of women and the institutional relationship between religion and government, Gaddy noted. When these issues are placed in the hands of "self-serving power grubbers," they become tools to create "separation, division and schism within one tradition or another," he said.

In this environment, Americans will have to work hard to maintain the degree of religious freedom they have enjoyed in the past and to secure it for the future, said Gaddy, who also serves as pastor for preaching and worship at Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La.

"At the intersection of religion and politics, a sizable shotgun wedding has taken place between religion and politics -- the politicization of religion and the religification of politics.... How that marriage fares will determine the shape of religious liberty in this nation in the future -- if, indeed, religious liberty exists in the future," he said.

Noting that "when religious freedom is in trouble, both religion and freedom are in trouble," Gaddy urged reporters of religion to tell the truth. Doing so is critical at a time when religion is at the heart of many top news stories, he added.

"From politicians' manipulation of religion to promote partisan causes, to religionists' efforts to manipulate politics for sectarian gains, to terrorists' claims to be servants of the Almighty, to governmental leaders' appeal to deity and morality to support their policies of war, religion is an unmistakable component of today's news," he said.

Gaddy urged reporters to pay close attention to the role of religion throughout the 2004 elections, giving it "the same kind of scrutiny that will be devoted to economic policies and foreign affairs."

Reporters also should report the comments of prominent Christians such as televangelist Jerry Falwell and former Southern Baptist Convention president Jerry Vines when they describe Islam as evil, but they should not allow those remarks to go unexamined, Gaddy asserted. "Condemnation of other religions should be set in a broader perspective," he said.

He also called on reporters to be sensitive to labels, particularly when it comes to attributing acts of terrorism to followers of a particular faith. "Characteristically, terrorist acts by Muslims are attributed to Islamic Fundamentalists, while similar acts by Christians are reported apart from any reference to religion," Gaddy observed.

"The atrocity perpetrated in this city was a terrorist act by a Christian fundamentalist that was anticipated and applauded by many in the Christian Identity movement.... Reporting on religion-based acts of terror should be consistent lest the reading, television-watching public concludes that terrorism is the exclusive domain of Muslim extremists, and prejudice against Muslims increases."

Gaddy also urged news organizations such as Associated Baptist Press to report on the positive and healing role of religion in public life.

Prior to Gaddy's address, the Associated Baptist Press board of directors presented its inaugural ABP Writer's Award to Mark Wingfield, managing editor of the Baptist Standard, the news journal of Texas Baptists.

Greg Warner, ABP executive editor, praised Wingfield's "skill, courage and tenacity" and noted Wingfield is the "most prolific writer" in the network of contributing reporters to the news service.

Warner said Wingfield was selected not for a single article, but rather for a body of work that exemplified outstanding reporting.

In accepting the award, Wingfield talked about the importance of telling the truth in a context where Baptist business -- in churches, institutions and agencies -- increasingly is being conducted behind closed doors. "That's not right. That's not the way Baptist business should be done," Wingfield said. "Truth matters. Freedom matters."

During their Sept. 11-13 meeting, ABP directors heard that the news service had a 20 percent increase in news stories published during the first six months of 2003, compared to the same period last year, and a 5 percent increase in usage by Baptist state papers. The organization, which suffered budget cuts last year, is operating within its budget this year, Warner told directors.

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Eritrean Christians seek relief, advocacy for persecuted believers

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A group of Eritrean Christians in the United States and Canada is soliciting money, public-policy advocacy and prayers for persecuted Christians in their East African homeland.

"The people there are very scared to talk," said one Eritrean Christian now living in Texas. "Even on the telephone, they are afraid. They have no freedom to talk. But they can send e-mail sometimes, and they tell us, 'We are afraid for our lives.'"

Eritrea, a small country of 4 million people bordered by Ethiopia and the Sudan, won its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. In May 2002, the Eritrean government ordered the closing of all Christian churches other than the officially recognized Coptic Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran parishes. According to an Amnesty International report, "This was done without any public announcement or legal basis."

About 20,000 evangelical Christians from non-recognized churches have been denied legal status since that time. More than 200 have been imprisoned, and many have been threatened with death. They include 79 soldiers who have been held in a military prison more than 17 months. In a sweeping government crackdown, about 170 Protestants were jailed and beaten in February and March of 2003.

More recently, Compass Direct news service reported that 62 teenagers were jailed Aug. 19-20 for possessing Bibles at a military training camp. After a week of imprisonment in metal shipping crates, five of the teens recanted their evangelical faith and expressed renewed allegiance to the Orthodox church. But 57 continue to be held.

Many who reportedly have been detained without trial for months at a time are the wage earners for their families. Eritrean Christians in North America are raising money in an effort to help them, as well as pastors who have lost their source of income in the last year and a half.

"There are practically no tithes or offerings for the pastors, since the churches cannot meet publicly,"

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said one Eritrean Christian, who declined to be identified for fear of reprisals. "But some of these same pastors have taken children into their homes -- children whose parents have been killed or put in prison. They say God will provide."

Although large shipments of supplies or wire transfers of money may be confiscated by government officials, Eritreans in the States say they are free to deliver monetary "gifts" personally to friends and relatives in their homeland.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas has established an "Eritrean Support Fund" to help Eritrean churches collect money for families in need. "We talk all the time about caring for Christians suffering around the world," said Patty Lane, director of the BGCT office of intercultural initiatives. "Here's a concrete way to help Christians who are suffering for their faith."

In addition to raising money for needy families, the Eritrean Christians in the United States also are seeking to raise the awareness level among Americans about persecution in Eritrea. "If American leaders would put pressure on the Eritrean government, that can help," said one Eritrean Christian in Texas. He encouraged Christians to contact elected officials in Congress, registering concern for the plight of persecuted Protestants.

Especially, the Eritrean Christians in North America are encouraging other believers to join them in prayer for the persecuted church. "God can do what seems impossible to us," said one Eritrean pastor who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Prayer changes things. We know God hears the prayers of his children."

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Conflict of interest charges 'baseless,' Baylor auditor says

By ABP Staff

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Charges that some members of the Baylor University board of regents have conflicts of interest are "completely baseless and unjustified," according to the university's internal auditor.

The assessment was delivered to Baylor regents during their Sept. 11-12 meeting, during which regents affirmed the leadership of President Robert Sloan. Prior to the meeting, some media outlets raised questions about the objectivity of the board because of potential conflicts of interest.

The Dallas Morning News first raised the issue in an article published Sunday, Sept. 7. The article cited four examples, including regent Duane Brooks, pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston, who is the brother of Baylor Chief Financial Officer David Brooks; regent Wes Bailey, who owns a Waco insurance company that underwrites Baylor insurance policies; regent Jim Turner, president of the Dr Pepper/Seven Up Bottling Co. in Dallas, which has an exclusive contract with the school; and regent Brian Harbour, pastor of First Baptist Church of Richardson, Texas, who teaches adjunctively in Baylor's Truett Seminary.

In a news release Sept. 12, Baylor declared there are no conflicts of interest on the board.

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"It is not a conflict of interest to care about Baylor, have children or friends at Baylor, make charitable donations or to be involved in community activities that touch the university," said Juan Alejandro, director of internal audit and management.

He cited several examples:

-- Regent Joe Coleman has two children who work for Baylor, and he may represent the university in a future lawsuit, Alejandro noted.

"We looked at the pay records, and Mr. Coleman's children are being paid wages comparable to others in their positions," he added. On the issue of representing Baylor in the lawsuit, Alejandro said, Coleman will not participate in regents' discussion of it, and he did not participate in the decision to hire the firm.

-- Regent Turner has an exclusive contract to distribute soft drinks on campus.

"That contract was awarded in August 1997 through a competitive bid process, three years before Mr. Turner came on the Baylor board," Alejandro said. "Their bid providing revenue to Baylor was several million dollars higher than the other bid. In late 2000, the athletic department recommended an extension of the exclusive vending-rights contract, which was executed in December of that year."

-- Regent Bailey is president of a family-run company that has the university's insurance contract. He also teaches adjunctively in the business school.

"Mr. Bailey's insurance agency has served as the university's broker since the late 1960s, well before he came on the board," Alejandro explained. "Furthermore, the university has historically employed an independent insurance consultant every three to four years to evaluate Baylor's total insurance program - both coverage and pricing -- and the work his firm performs on behalf of the university. Regarding the class being taught, he is being paid the same as other similar positions, and Mr. Bailey plans to donate his after-tax income to the endowment."

Bailey released his own one-page statement, asserting that he is "in compliance" with Baylor's conflict-of-interest policy. Bailey also noted that his father, who is chairman of the insurance company, served on the Baylor board for 18 years. During that time, he not only sold insurance coverage to Baylor, but he was appointed by then-President Herbert Reynolds as the university's adjunct risk manager.

-- Regent Harbour also teaches adjunctively at Baylor, within Truett Seminary. He has taught there since 1994, the year before he was elected to the board, the news release said. "His salary is consistent with other adjunct faculty at Truett, so there is no conflict of interest."

-- Regent Brooks, brother of the university's chief financial officer, presents "no violation of the university's conflict of interest policy," Alejandro reported. However, he added: "We understand that there may be an issue regarding compliance with the [Baptist General Convention of Texas]' own conflict of interest policy in this case, and the university will be working with the BGCT to resolve that matter."

Allegations of regents' conflicts of interest are among a variety of issues to be investigated by a newly appointed committee of the regents.

It will be chaired by Dale Jones, a retired director and vice president of Halliburton in Dallas. Other

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members are Bill Brian, an attorney from Amarillo; Bobby Dagnel, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lubbock and a doctor of ministry student in Baylor's Truett Seminary; Sue Getterman of Waco; David Sibley, a former Republican state senator from Waco; and Harold Cunningham, Baylor's retired chief financial officer, who lives in Crawford.

- Mark Wingfield contributed to this story.

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Couple turns broken marriage into ministry to help others

By Theresa Shadrix

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- He preaches with the fervor of a prophet. She sings like an angel. Together they are so dynamic it's difficult to believe they have each experienced a bitter divorce and custody battle -- with each other.

On the outside, the Forehand family once seemed perfect. Dale was a successful businessman, a deacon at First Baptist Church in Trussville, Ala., and a Sunday school teacher. Jena, an accomplished soloist, immersed herself in choir activities and raised their two children, Cole and Jorja. But on the inside, the Forehands marriage was dying.

Married couples, Dale said, "are looking to their spouses with unrealistic expectations, so they get very disappointed when these are not met." This disappointment often leads to a demand that needs be met by a spouse, he said, and when this doesn't happen, the spouses feel defeated and many quit.

Dale knows the defeat all too well, because in July 1996, Dale packed Jena's bags and told her to leave their suburban home in Birmingham. What ensued the following 15 months was a showdown in the courtroom for custody of Cole and Jorja, with each parent seeking full rights and each lawyer seeking victory.

Jena said she was not shocked Dale asked her to leave their home. "I can't say it was a major surprise, because our home had the arguments and the bickering and the anger had risen to a high point," she told the Alabama Baptist. "We had gotten so angry and tired."

While waiting for the court date, the Forehands lived in the same home, which became their prison. Dale lived in the master bedroom while Jena shared bunk beds with Cole.

The day finally arrived when they would bring their battle to the court. With loaded emotions, the Forehands listened to each ripping word, calculating the next move. In the end, they were given joint custody. Dale and Jena each left the room feeling destroyed.

Then the unbelievable happened. Four months after the courtroom battle, Jena called Dale and an argument started. Instead of fighting, Jena asked Dale to come get her so they could repair their relationship.

"I chose to reveal myself that day so that Dale could briefly peek into my heart," Jena explained. "I think

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it was the Holy Spirit speaking through me."

She said couples get to a point where they are stripped to their bare souls when experiencing struggles.

"We had such intense pain and hurt from each other, and the thought of continuing this relationship was devastating," Jena said. But she believes God allowed the experience to happen because it forced each person to look inward. "I had to look at what things in my life did not reflect Jesus."

In 1997, Dale and Jena were remarried. Symbolizing the beginning of a new marriage but a remembrance of the first, Dale and Jena took the original stone from her wedding ring and put it in a new setting.

That day, Cole told his parents he wanted to know Christ as Savior. The couple prayed together for the salvation of their son.

"We have learned and continue to learn to find our fulfillment, need and satisfaction in a deep relationship with Christ," Jena said. "It is out of this relationship we have something to give to our spouses."

Dale said a "stained-glass marriage" gave birth to Stained Glass Ministries, their joint ministry. The name is adapted from a song by Clay Crosse illustrating an old stained-glass window in the attic of a church that is brought out, cleaned up and placed back in the light.

"As I listened to this song, it was our story," Dale said. "Our first marriage had become dirty and dusty, full of pains and stains, but when the grace of God moved in our hearts and his light shone through, what a beautiful work of art we had just experienced."

It was Valentine's Day in 1998 when Dale and Jena first told the world of their experience. "As God burned that entire experience in our hearts, we knew then the Scripture that spoke of what man had intended for evil, God had turned for good," Dale said.

Today Dale and Jena lead marriage conferences and speak across the country. They also have written a book titled "Stained Glass Marriage" detailing their experience and offering insight into developing a quality marriage.

The Forehands feel it is important to share their story. Dale recently left his career of seven years in property management to devote his full time to the ministry. "Too many folks sitting in the pew are wearing masks, afraid to be real, share their struggles and ask for help," he said.

"We have bought into the lie that if you are a Christian, you are supposed to be perfect. If this were true we would not need Jesus," Dale said. The best advice Dale and Jena offer to couples is extensive premarital counseling. "Let [God's] character become yours, then flesh that out with the ones you love."

- Theresa Shadrix is a correspondent for the Alabama Baptist.

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From clubfeet to tennis shoes:

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Honduran boy gets free care

By Lauren Brooks

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- When Rony Javier Cruz-Oviedo arrived in America three years ago, the 10-year-old didn't know how to hold a pencil, was illiterate and could barely walk. Now the 13-year-old boy from Honduras is thriving. He recently completed fourth grade and, after four successful surgeries, is able to participate in sports.

In the summer of 2000, doctors at Birmingham's Medical Center East performed the first surgery to correct Rony's clubfeet. The operation was performed free of charge and his hospitalization was also free.

Since that time, Rony has been living with Efrain Horta and his family. Horta, former language-missions director for the Birmingham Baptist Association, met Rony on a medical missions trip to Honduras. Horta and his wife, Gisella, have become Rony's legal guardians.

"Physically, he is doing much better," Horta told the Alabama Baptist. "He still needs more surgery to correct his feet, and we're waiting because he needs to heal completely from the previous surgery and his bone must grow more."

Rony is from an isolated and poverty-stricken section of Honduras. Because of his physical disability, he was unable to attend school there or play with other children.

"School was too far away in Honduras," Rony said. "I got tired easily." Now Rony says he enjoys attending Roebuck Park Christian School and science is his favorite subject.

"He has progressed very well in school," Horta said.

John Morris, the surgeon who operated on Rony, asked the boy what one thing he would like to have the most, Horta said. The answer – a pair of tennis shoes. "He said he wanted them because he could use them," Horta said. "This is something he had never had before because of his feet."

These days, Rony spends a lot of time in tennis shoes, although he requires orthotics. "I can move fast and I'm good at basketball," he said. "I feel really good, but sometimes my feet hurt when it rains."

Horta first met Rony in 1998 at a medical missions clinic in Honduras. "I was an interpreter in a clinic and Rony came to see us," he said. "The doctor told him he needed surgery but it couldn't be done there."

Once Horta returned to the United States, he showed pictures of Rony's feet to some doctors. "Dr. Morris said he would do everything he could to help him if I could get the boy here," Horta said. "I contacted the pastor there, sent papers to his mother allowing him to come, and after a year-and-a-half process he came to the United States alone." Rony, who has not returned home since his arrival, said he enjoys living in America.

"I like basketball, cars and movies," he said. "I would like to stay here." Due to strict immigration laws, Horta said Rony might not be able to re-enter the United States if he were to return to Honduras. "He needs to stay until the doctor can do more surgery," Horta said.

- Lauren Brooks is a correspondent for the Alabama Baptist. A photo is available from Associated Baptist Press.

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