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**NC layoffs not political,  
convention exec says**

By Tony Cartledge

CARY, N.C. (ABP) — The head of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina is denying accusations that recent staff layoffs were politically motivated.

Instead, the downsizing -- which cut 20 percent of the convention's budgeted positions -- was a financial necessity, guided by a desire to preserve the most "mission-critical" services to churches, said Jim Royston, executive director-treasurer.

Many observers have noted that most of the 15 employees that lost jobs were considered theological moderates. "This thing is not just money," R.G. Puckett, former editor of the Baptist state newspaper, told the Winston-Salem Journal. "... I think some of the [moderate] people targeted were ones people wanted to remove anyway."

In the same article, longtime conservative leader Mark Corts said he believed the cuts were not a "moderate purge" but a "financial purge." But, he said, "If 70 percent of your staff are moderates and you have to let 15 percent go, guess who's going to feel it the most?"

Corts called Royston "a good, balanced conservative" and said that the cutbacks portend change. "They'll have to have new leadership, and they'll change," he said.

Corts also suggested that some of those released may not have been cooperating with the administration. "And a lot of them didn't agree with him (Royston) and they didn't agree with the movement the convention was taking, a slightly more conservative movement."

Royston declined to respond to the allegations but said in a statement, "The secular media is reporting this was a political decision. Nothing can be further from the truth. Finances, rather than any political considerations, drove us to the point of having to reduce our staff by 20 percent." Jobs were eliminated "on principle, and not on persons," Royston said.

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### **Moderate candidate in NC calls for end of political groups, less money for SBC**

By Steve DeVane

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- The moderate candidate for president of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina has released a campaign platform that calls for dismantling political groups and decreasing the amount of money the state group sends to the Southern Baptist Convention.

David Hughes, pastor of First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, released the information in a four-part statement called "A new vision for a new day."

Hughes said Beaufort layman Raymond Earp, who is running for first vice president, and Greensboro pastor Ken Massey, who is seeking the second vice presidency, agree with the statement.

All three have been endorsed by Mainstream Baptists of North Carolina, the state's moderate group. In November, they will face candidates endorsed by Conservative Carolina Baptists -- Greensboro pastor David Horton, who is running for president; Phyllis Foy, a laywoman from Mooresville, who is running for first vice president, the office currently held by her husband; and East Flat Rock pastor Brian Davis, who is running for second vice president.

Hughes calls for groups like Mainstream Baptists and Conservative Carolina Baptists to be dismantled. "I will ask for balance in appointments, working to assure that both 'moderates' and 'conservatives' have a meaningful place in the N.C. Baptist family," he added in the statement.

In an interview, Hughes acknowledged he helped form the Mainstream group, "but I'm now saying that the best thing that can happen is for all groups to shut down."

Hughes said in his written statement that the convention needs to regain financial stability. "Plainly stated, our current budget formula and our multiple giving plans have contributed to the current budget crisis," he said.

Hughes said he would work toward changing Plan A, one of the convention's giving options, to increase the amount allocated to the state convention from 68 percent to 70 percent and decrease the amount given to the SBC from 32 percent to 30 percent. The plan would provide an extra \$500,000 for use in the state, he said.

Conservatives will likely react negatively to Hughes' plan to cut funds to the conservative-controlled SBC, but he added, "We need to do something and do something quickly." Hughes

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said he realizes some moderates will be "surprised and confused" by his stance on the giving plans.

"While we had the best of intentions in creating the giving plans, and I myself have defended the giving plans in the past, it now seems clear that the state convention has suffered from them," he said.

The BSC staff must "reinvent" itself to "meet the unique needs of an increasingly diverse array of churches," Hughes said. A "growing number of North Carolina Baptists feel they no longer have a meaningful place in the BSCNC, and are wondering aloud about their future relationship to the convention."

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### **President of New Orleans Seminary balks at SBC 'control' strategy**

By Mark Wingfield

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Trustees of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary will decide this fall whether to continue as the lone holdout among Southern Baptist Convention entities by refusing to make the SBC Executive Committee the "sole member" of their corporation.

The Executive Committee asked all the SBC's schools and mission boards to make the legal change to prevent its trustee boards from exercising the kind of break several colleges have made with state Baptist conventions.

For example, trustees of Baylor, Samford, Wake Forest and Furman universities have amended the schools' charters to elect most or all of their own board members. Similar action by five agencies of the Missouri Baptist Convention is being challenged in court.

New Orleans Seminary President Chuck Kelley says he opposes naming the Executive Committee as the seminary's "sole member" out of principle. He conceives no situation under which the seminary would or could depart from the SBC.

The legal change requested by the Executive Committee would not alter the way seminary trustees are elected, nor would it change the current governance of the seminary. However, it would give the Executive Committee legal authority to overrule or remove the elected trustees if those trustees acted against the wishes of the convention.

Kelley opened the academic year at New Orleans Sept. 4 with a convocation address explaining the situation to faculty, staff and students. His topic was the autonomous organizational structure of Baptists.

To accede to the Executive Committee's request "could start a fundamental change in historic Baptist polity and compromise our practice of organizational autonomy," he declared. It also would introduce a form of connectionalism into Baptist life, he said, and start "a movement away from the decisive influence of the SBC and toward a direct control by the SBC."

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As evidence of where this connectionalism could lead, Kelley pointed to recent debates over the future of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. In a recent address to members of the Missouri Baptist Convention's Executive Board, Missouri pastor David Tolliver reported that an SBC Funding Study Committee was considering closing or changing the focus of Midwestern Seminary.

When Tolliver, who was in a small-group meeting with the study committee, asked what would happen if Midwestern's trustees didn't go along with the proposed change, he said he heard SBC officials intimate they would ask the convention to remove the seminary's entire trustee board.

In an attempt to quell the concern Tolliver generated among Missouri Baptists with that report, the president of the SBC Executive Committee released a letter to state Baptist newspaper editors Sept. 18. In the letter, Morris Chapman says no such threat was made.

Chapman concurs that the question was asked about what would happen if Midwestern's trustees did not consent to a change in status proposed by the SBC. But he recalls a different nuance to the answer: "I answered the question by saying: 'The SBC has left itself no recourse to overturn governing actions of an entity's trustees. The only course of action available to the SBC is the possibility of removing the trustees by vote of the convention in session.'"

Chapman added in his letter that such a step never has been taken and he can't imagine it happening.

Nevertheless, Kelley saw danger in the mere suggestion.

"To my knowledge, this stunning suggestion is unprecedented in Southern Baptist history," he said. "Knowing that Midwestern Seminary had already made the SBC the sole member of its corporation, these members of the SBC Executive Committee were assuming the power of sole membership made it possible to change an entire board of trustees at one convention. Whether they were right or wrong in their interpretation, such a suggestion would not have been made prior to the sole membership strategy."

Kelley warned the New Orleans family: "The change to sole membership suggests a new power would be in play at the denominational level. ... I believe it is impossible to say sole membership would never be used for anything but its original stated purpose."

Kelley lamented that SBC conservatives, after gaining control of all SBC boards through presidential appointments in the 1980s and '90s, would resort to such tactics to ensure they wouldn't have to call on God for a miracle again.

"It saddens me that the biblical conservatives would be the group of record taking the first step toward connectionalism at the national level of SBC life," he said.

The risks of allowing SBC entities to remain fully autonomous are more palatable than the risks of connectionalism, Kelley declared.

He posed several other alternatives as possible ways to accomplish the Executive Committee's desire:

-- Asking each person elected as a trustee of an SBC entity to "sign a covenant with the SBC to uphold all SBC guidelines for the entity he or she will serve."

-- Amend the charters of SBC entities to require financial penalties for unauthorized charter changes.

Trustees of New Orleans Seminary are scheduled to take up the matter when they meet Oct. 6-8.

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### **With churches, one size doesn't fit all, Barna says**

By Mark Wingfield

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- Small churches are small, and big churches are big, for a reason, according to pollster George Barna.

There's more at work than location and population growth, two factors often cited as reasons for church growth. Certain types of people prefer small churches or large churches, Barna said, and churches of all sizes play a role in doing God's work.

On average, churches in the United States attract fewer than 90 adults on a typical weekend, he reported. Sixty percent of Protestant churches average 100 or fewer adults in attendance. Large churches, those that draw more than 1,000 adults on a typical weekend, account for only 2 percent of all churches.

From another vantage point, 41 percent of church-going adults attend churches with 100 or fewer adults present, and 12 percent of church-going adults attend churches with more than 1,000 adults present.

Based on a study of the church-going habits of 4,501 adults randomly sampled from the U.S. population, Barna discovered that small churches are more likely than either mid-sized (301-999) or large churches to draw people who are not college graduates and are more likely to appeal to people with lower household incomes.

However, an exception exists for adults under 35 years of age, who are more likely than older adults to attend small churches.

Barna cited two possible explanations for this pattern. First, younger adults tend not to have children. Families with children often gravitate to larger churches that offer more programs and opportunities for children.

Second, Barna said, the baby bust generation shows disinterest in baby boomer-led organizations and in large-scale enterprises. "Busters are more interested in being personally known and connected, which many believe is more difficult to accomplish in larger churches," he explained.

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At the same time, mid-sized and large churches tend to attract a higher proportion of "upscale" adults -- those whose education and income levels enable the church to take more risks, be more aggressive in marketing and draw resources from deeper pockets and broader backgrounds.

Upscale individuals more often are comfortable with leadership requirements and decision-making and tend to be more excited about organizational growth, Barna said. He pointed out that large churches appeal particularly to baby boomers -- one-fourth of church-going boomers attend churches of 500 or more adults, compared to one-sixth of church-going baby busters.

Adults attending mid-sized and large churches tend to be more conservative in their theology as well as their social and political views, Barna added.

The data should not be construed to discount the value of small churches, Barna said. "These insights simply identify some of the critical challenges that the average small church has to address.

"Small churches play an important and valuable role in the religious landscape of America. They reach millions of young adults who have no interest in a larger church setting. They have tremendous potential for building strong community, as well as spiritual foundations. And small churches often grow into larger churches once they develop significant internal leadership and creatively overcome their resource limitations."

And growth should not be the only objective of the church, he added. "Jesus did not die on the cross to fill up church auditoriums. He died so that people might know God personally and be transformed in all dimensions of their life through their ongoing relationship with him. Such a personal reformation can happen in a church of any size."

Despite the media attention given to megachurches, small churches will continue to be the norm, Barna said. "We anticipate mid-sized churches becoming a more significant force in the future, with many of those churches spawning new congregations rather than expanding to become megachurches. However, large congregations are here to stay and meet the needs of a specific segment of the population."

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### **Bush expands 'faith-based initiative' again through regulatory changes**

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Continuing a trend of piecemeal implementation of his plan to provide government money to religious social-service organizations, President Bush expanded his "faith-based initiative" through regulatory changes Sept. 22.

Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, informed reporters that Bush had finalized regulatory changes in two cabinet agencies -- and announced new regulatory changes in four other departments -- that expand the government's

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ability to fund social services through religious groups, including churches.

The regulatory expansion follows similar announcements since last December, as well as several recent efforts by Bush's Republican allies in Congress to attach provisions to routine spending bills that expand faith-based-organization funding in the federal programs they govern.

The initiative has been the centerpiece of Bush's domestic social agenda. Supporters argue that faith-based groups are often more effective at providing social services than governmental or secular providers, and should be funded by government.

"Today, the real winners are addicts that are trying to access and have choice to a range of programs, and the homeless that can now enter a HUD program that can receive funds," Towey said to reporters. "And the real winners are ultimately taxpayers that can see their money spent in a good program."

But critics have said that providing direct government funding to religious groups violates the Constitution's prohibition on government establishment of religion. Some also contend that government encroachment on the freedom of religious groups will follow on the heels of government funding -- and that debates over whether a particular group, such as a Muslim group, receives funding will create religious strife in the civic sphere.

Although Bush tried to get Congress to implement the faith-based initiative shortly after he took office in 2001, opposition based on such concerns killed the legislation in the Senate.

The first wave of regulatory changes came in a December 2002 announcement. The most recent action essentially achieves the same goals that Bush's original faith-based legislation would have -- but bypasses Congress.

The process has "been done piecemeal, but these are the last pieces," according to Chris Anders, the American Civil Liberties Union's head lobbyist on the faith-based issue. "They're just basically putting the faith-based initiative in place through executive order rather than through the legislative process."

Anders' organization is a leading opponent of government funding for religious groups.

Among the most controversial aspects of the regulatory changes are provisions that explicitly allow religious organizations receiving government funding to discriminate on the basis of religion in their hiring practices. Asked if Bush was doing an end-run around Congress, Towey said the provisions simply affirm the long-standing exemption to hiring-discrimination laws under Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act that churches and other pervasively religious groups enjoy. "It preserves a civil right that has existed for three decades," he said.

Towey noted that secular non-profit groups that contract with the government -- such as Planned Parenthood -- can discriminate in hiring on the basis of ideology. "In any employment decision, there's discrimination," he said. "The World Wildlife Fund will make discrimination based on people they hire who share their tenets and beliefs. Universities hire smart people."

However, the Supreme Court has not issued a definitive ruling on whether religious groups receiving federal funding can discriminate in hiring for positions that are either partially or

wholly funded by federal dollars.

Towey also said that "Congress settled this in 1996" -- referring to the welfare-reform legislation that included a forerunner of the faith-based initiative, often known as "charitable choice." However, that legislation applied only to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program administered by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Congress passed that legislation and then-President Bill Clinton signed it into law. In his signing documents, Clinton included a proviso that such funds shouldn't be used for pervasively religious organizations.

The ACLU's Anders also noted that the 1996 law only addressed one cabinet-level department, while Bush's regulatory changes since December have expanded the faith-based initiative to the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Education, Veterans' Affairs and Justice.

In the Sept. 22 finalization of the HUD regulations, Bush attempted to clarify an issue that stirred significant controversy when it was announced in February. Then HUD proposed regulatory changes that would provide building-construction grants to religious groups operating housing ministries -- even if the new buildings contained spaces that were used primarily for religious activities.

Opponents claimed such a change was clearly contrary to the Supreme Court's 1971 *Tilton vs. Richardson* ruling.

The regulatory change as finalized, according to a White House "fact sheet" on the changes, "clarify that HUD funds may not be used for the acquisition, construction or rehabilitation of a sanctuary, chapel or other room that a religious organization uses as its principal place of worship."

But Anders said that is still problematic. "What's left open is that a church can use funds to build a social hall, a Bible study classroom -- anything but the church [sanctuary] itself," he said. "And that's something that the Supreme Court has said for more than 30 years now -- that you cannot subsidize in any way the 'bricks and mortar' of a church."

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### **EEOC files formal complaint against Missouri convention**

By Vicki Brown

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) – Officials of the Missouri Baptist Convention say they have received a formal complaint from the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on behalf of a former employee.

Former controller Carol Kaylor notified the EEOC of her intent to file a complaint after the convention's executive director, David Clippard, fired her in April. An EEOC representative

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conducted a telephone interview with Kaylor on June 10.

Michael Berry, Kaylor's attorney, said in June the complaint likely would charge the convention with demeaning Kaylor on the job. "Our basic contention is that she was forced out of her position because she opposed practices that were demeaning to her and to other employees of the Missouri Baptist Convention," he explained at that time.

Clippard claims Kaylor was terminated with just cause.

Neither Kaylor nor her attorney will reveal the specific charges outlined in the formal complaint, which is directed against the convention as Kaylor's employer rather than against an individual. The EEOC handles a wide range of employment issues.

Clippard said the complaint has been turned over to the convention's attorneys. According to Kaylor, the EEOC's next step will be to seek information from the convention.

In June, Berry explained that the federal commission usually tries to mediate disagreements and proceeds with a limited investigation while trying to get the parties to negotiate a settlement. Kaylor said the EEOC has not yet contacted her about that possibility.

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### **Terror of Somalia firefight clarifies soldier's faith**

By Norman Jameson

FORT BRAGG, N.C. (ABP) -- In the midst of the most terrifying 18 hours of his life, Army Ranger Jeff Struecker's future suddenly crystallized.

Compelled to return to the exploding center of Mogadishu, Somalia, to rescue survivors of a downed American helicopter, Struecker was petrified. On his first trip to retrieve an injured soldier, his Humvee careened through a constant hail of gunfire and rockets. A soldier beside him was shot and killed.

Now he was ordered to re-enter that hellish chaos. He felt certain he would die that day in 1993 in a war-torn and terrifying city.

"I thought I was going to die, and every single soldier that I worked with was going to die, if we had to drive back into that city and fight through the same thing that we had just come through," Struecker said.

It was at that moment that Struecker's life became clear, he said, because he realized that his life was in God's hands and only one of two things could happen -- he would live or he would die.

"Either I would drive back into that city and I would survive and go home to be with my family, or I would drive back into that city and I would die and go home to be with my savior in

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heaven," he said.

"From that moment on, when that finally hit me, I had no more fear about what was going to happen to me. The only fear I experienced that night and the rest of the time I was in Somalia was the fear of losing another one of my soldiers."

You may know Jeff Struecker because his heroic role as a squad leader rescuing stranded soldiers was portrayed in the movie "Blackhawk Down." Today Struecker is still an Army Ranger. But instead of leading a squadron in firefights, he wages war on a spiritual front as battalion chaplain.

Like so many young men and women, Struecker was enormously affected by the fear and fire of that horrible night in Mogadishu when 19 American soldiers and dozens of Somalis died. What affected Struecker most, however, was not the gunfire and terror but the hollow, bewildered expressions on the faces of his fellow soldiers who had no "faith foundation" from which to sort events.

"What really impacted me were those young Rangers who were absolutely devastated about what they had just seen and what they had been through," Struecker said. "A lot of those young Rangers were asking me questions. A lot of veteran Rangers who had been to war a number of times were asking me questions because they knew I was a Christian. And they were saying, 'Jeff, what just happened? How could God let something like that happen? What happened to my friend who just lost his life? What's going to happen to me if I get back on a helicopter or if I get back on a Humvee and I drive back into that city and I lose my life?'"

"At that moment, grown men who never wanted to hear about Jesus Christ before that moment, began to sit down and listen as I told them about Jesus Christ and how he could give them the assurance of knowing they'd spend an eternity in heaven."

Struecker went to seminary after that hitch in Somalia. But he later returned to the Army because of his concern that those soldiers have the opportunity to know God.

He considers his congregation to be his battalion's 750 soldiers and their families. He estimates 80 percent "don't know Jesus." "It's my responsibility to introduce those men and women to Jesus Christ every opportunity I get."

Struecker encourages Christians to remember soldiers and their families at every opportunity. "I hope every time you see someone in uniform you think about a mother or father, you think about a wife or a husband, you think about a baby girl or a young toddler who is just learning to walk," he said. "As that Marine or soldier, or sailor gets on a ship or into an airplane to go do his or her job, they're leaving a family behind."

"When my battalion loads aircraft and we fly somewhere, when we're jumping out of airplanes to go do our job late at night, I never forget there are women back home who are absolutely petrified at the thought of losing their husband. There are mothers not having any idea where their son is tonight and what they're doing."

Struecker knows people care about those in the military, but he urges those who care to let the soldiers know.

"Let them know you love them," he said. "Write them a note. Send them an e-mail. Just shake their hand when you see them walk down the street or when you see them at a restaurant."

And pray their lives will become crystal clear, without having to undergo the hell of another Mogadishu.

- Photo available from Associated Baptist Press.

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### **Isabel leaves death, destruction as Baptists respond with help**

By Robert Marus

NORFOLK, Va. (ABP) -- Even as Hurricane Isabel was damaging Baptist churches and leaving many church members homeless along the East Coast, Baptists from other churches and regions were responding to the call for help.

Isabel pounded North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and the District of Columbia Sept. 18-19 with high winds, heavy rains, storm surges and tornadoes. Although the storm was not as destructive as some had feared -- it had weakened considerably from the Category 5 rating it held only a few days before landfall -- Isabel nonetheless caused significant damage.

As of Sept. 22, the storm's death toll had risen to 28. At its peak, it left at least 4.5 million people in the Mid-Atlantic without power -- and many also without water or phone service. Over a million people remained without power Sept. 22, more than 72 hours after the storm passed.

Preliminary damage estimates reach into the billions of dollars for the many homes, businesses and churches that fell victim to the storm's double punch of wind and water.

Disaster-relief units from at least eight Baptist state or regional conventions were deployed to North Carolina, Virginia and Maryland as of Sept. 22.

A feeding unit from the South Carolina Baptist Convention was one of the first to respond. It was based at a Salvation Army installation in Norfolk, representing one of the first collaborations between the Salvation Army and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief Services that was borne out of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack at the Pentagon.

"I think it's great that we can work with Baptists," said Maj. Gene Hogg, Tidewater Area commander for the Salvation Army. "We know anybody can serve food, anybody can hand out water -- but it's the people of God who make a great impact."

Terry Raines, missions mobilizer for the Baptist General Association of Virginia's Global Missions Team, said the feeding unit and several like it would serve meals to all comers -- emergency workers, police officers and local residents who were without food due to the power outage.

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David Phelps, director of missions for Atlantic Baptist Association in one of the hardest-hit regions of North Carolina, said it was remarkable that many of the Baptists in his association have been working to help neighbors and churches clean up even though their own homes were damaged. "It's just God's people doing God's work," he said.

Kim Jessie, church and community missionary for the Norfolk Baptist Association, said she appreciated the local church members who volunteered to find housing for members of a Virginia Beach church who lost their homes. Most of the volunteers are themselves dealing with a lack of electricity and tree damage at their own homes.

Nonetheless, more help is needed, Jessie said. "It's real difficult when you're the victim area to find local volunteers."

In Virginia, there are seven sites where Baptist disaster-relief teams are serving meals. In North Carolina, there were at least three sites as of Sept. 22.

In addition, groups of tree-cutting volunteers from Baptist disaster-relief groups were setting up camp at First Baptist Church of Richmond to assist overwhelmed municipalities in removing trees from streets and yards.

Isabel caused damage to churches across the region. In Phelps' North Carolina association, churches at Marshallberg, Davis and Sea Level sustained flooding damage.

In North Carolina's nine-county Chowan Baptist Association -- which suffered the brunt of the storm -- director of missions Jim Pollard told ABP that a lack of phone service and accessibility made it difficult to assess damage. "We have one church that no one has been able to get to," he said, referring to Baptist Church at Cape Hatteras. "We're just assuming that there is extensive damage there."

In addition, Pollard said, churches in the historic city of Edenton may have suffered extensive damage, but the area has been inaccessible since the storm.

He also noted that churches in Englehard and Rose Bay received flood damage and churches at Hertford and Rocky Hawk lost their roofs.

In Virginia, Jessie said East Ocean View Baptist Church on Norfolk's Chesapeake Bay waterfront received extensive flooding damage.

In some cases, churches suffered damage that wasn't structurally significant, but emotionally so. Pastor Todd Combee of New Bethesda Baptist Church in Mechanicsville, Va., said the congregation "lost a grand old oak tree in the front of our church. It probably has stood on the property for well over 100 years."

But, he added, even that loss left a hopeful sign. "As it fell, it's huge limbs dropped on either side of our church sign and one limb came to rest right on top of the sign. The sign, however, is still standing and proudly displays the name of our church through the branches and leaves."

- Michael Clingenpeel, Robert Dilday and Steve DeVane provided additional reporting for this story. Photos available from ABP.

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## **'Luther' film paints heroic picture of German church reformer**

By Ted Parks

LOS ANGELES (ABP) -- It starts with a young German law student belly-down on the ground begging God to save him from a lightning storm. It ends with the spiritual, cultural and political transformation of Europe.

In between comes the tumultuous life of religious reformer Martin Luther, whose story is the focus of a new movie starring Joseph Fiennes and veteran actor Peter Ustinov.

Partially funded by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, a large Lutheran financial management and support organization, the bio-pic "Luther" tells about the religious leader's role as catalyst for the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. The movie opens in theaters Sept. 26, with a wide distribution to a general audience.

The movie opens with the young Luther, played by Fiennes ("Shakespeare in Love"), beneath a violent sky, cutting a deal with heaven to save his life. But even after becoming a monk, Luther cannot find peace with God.

"I live in terror of judgment," Luther tells his mentor in the Augustinian religious order, Father Johann von Staupitz (Bruno Ganz). The order sends him to pursue a degree in theology, hoping the young monk finds the answers he's searching for in advanced study.

As Luther struggles at the university to understand history, tradition and Scripture, he changes his views. Sent to Wittenburg to teach in that city's university and serve as priest, Luther calls his parishioners to trust God's mercy rather than cower before God's wrath.

"Those who see God as angry, do not see him rightly," he proclaims on the screen. "To see God in faith is to look upon his friendly heart." Meanwhile at the Vatican, in order to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the pope has authorized the selling of indulgences, documents granting purchasers release from divine punishment. The film portrays indulgence-seller John Tetzel (Albert Molina) as a manipulative marketeer of divine mercy for a price.

When Tetzel's preaching impacts the people of Luther's own parish, the monk reacts by drafting his famous "95 Theses." After Luther nails the document to the church door in Wittenburg, the reformer's ideas spread across Germany like wildfire, the flames fanned by the recent invention of the printing press.

In the film, Luther's ideas put him in conflict with church and state, forcing him to seek refuge from the friendly German prince Frederick the Wise, played by Ustinov. Summoned before the political and religious leadership, Luther refuses to recant his ideas.

"My conscience is captive to the Word of God," he says, uttering the now famous line from church history. "Here I stand. I can do no other."

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The new film was the dream of Thrivent Financial, according to Dennis Clauss, Thrivent corporate projects leader and executive producer of "Luther."

When the Aid Association for Lutherans, an organization that later merged into Thrivent, wanted to celebrate its 100th birthday, some leaders suggested a movie honoring Luther, Clauss explained. Thrivent then entered into an agreement with Neue Filmproduktion in Berlin, Germany, to produce the film. The Lutheran organization contributed slightly less than a third of the film's financing, Clauss said, estimating the final costs of production and distribution to be between \$30 and \$35 million.

The producers' aim was not a religious niche film but a movie about a major historical figure that would have broad audience appeal, Clauss explained.

"A religious-specialty film [is] the kiss of death," Clauss said about movies pigeonholed by viewers as Christian-oriented. He explained that the makers of "Luther" wanted "to remain true to the integrity of the story and the person and the message," while avoiding the stereotypes of a made-for-Christians movie.

But striking the balance wasn't easy, Clauss said, calling the process "a very, very difficult tightrope."

The film's portrayal of Luther as always triumphing over his religious foes is troubling to Barbara Nicholosi, a Roman Catholic and the director of Act One: Writing for Hollywood, an organization helping Christian screenwriters sharpen their skills.

Rather than showing Luther as a human being with a full range of strengths and weaknesses, Nicholosi says the moviemakers heroized him.

"They had to ... get rid of all his rough edges," Nicholosi said. She called the film a "missed opportunity" to say something about the universal themes in Luther's life by allowing his life, in all its complexity, to speak for itself.

Luther scholar Guy Erwin, professor of religion and history at California Lutheran University near Los Angeles, pointed out that Luther himself had moments of doubt as he wrestled with the momentous changes cascading around him. At the end of his life, Erwin added, Luther felt "thoroughly disillusioned" as he watched the message he thought would liberate believers fall prey to strife and bloodshed.

For Erwin, a far-reaching message in Luther's work is his defense of the freedom of individuals to make their own moral decisions. The reformer's contribution to history was the conviction that "the last arbiter of right is one's own conscience," Erwin explained.

In Hollywood terms, Luther could even be seen as a "Jimmy Stewart-like character," the professor said -- "a person standing up and calling the system wrong."