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Obama's controversial pastor submits to first TV interview

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Pastor Jeremiah Wright, who became a household name recently after video snippets of his sermons created a stir on the Internet and a headache for his most famous parishioner, is defending himself in an interview scheduled to be televised April 25. The video clips, which began showing up on YouTube and were seized on by journalists and talk-radio hosts in February and March, contained comments that some have interpreted as anti-American and anti-white.

"I felt it was unfair, I felt it was unjust, I felt it was untrue -- I felt that those who were doing that were doing it for some very devious reasons," Wright said, when PBS journalist Bill Moyers asked him how he felt when he first saw the clips and how they were being used.

The interview with Wright, who recently retired as pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, is his first since the controversy broke. It will be shown on *Bill Moyers Journal*. Trinity, which counts Democratic presidential front-runner Sen. Barack Obama among its members, is the largest church in its denomination and one of only a few predominantly African-American congregations in the largely white UCC.

For example, perhaps the most inflammatory clip came from a 2003 sermon in which Wright recounted the historically inequitable treatment of African-Americans by state and federal officials. "The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no. God damn America - that's in the Bible -- for killing innocent people," Wright exclaimed. "God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme."

A message Wright preached the Sunday after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks also has drawn significant fire. In it, he noted that Americans seemed shocked and bewildered that anyone would want to visit their country with violence. "We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye," he said in the Sept. 16, 2001, sermon. "We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost."

Obama has been an active member of Trinity for more than 20 years and has credited Wright with helping bring him to Christ and being a spiritual mentor. But, in response to the uproar, Obama delivered a speech in which he denounced his pastor's most controversial statements.

While acknowledging that his pastor came of age in a day when African-Americans were burdened under segregation's heavy yoke, the candidate said that Wright's words nonetheless "expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country -- a view that sees white racism as endemic, that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America."

In that sense, Obama continued, "Rev. Wright's comments weren't only wrong but divisive -- divisive at a time at which we need unity."

But, in the PBS interview, Wright said the out-of-context nature of the clips created a false impression of his beliefs -- but that both his sermons and the people who excerpted them were sending exactly the messages they wanted to, respectively. "Persons who have heard the entire sermon understand the communication perfectly," he told Moyers. "When something is taken like a sound bite for political purposes and put constantly over and over again -- looped in the face of the public -- that's not a failure to communicate; those who are doing that are communicating exactly what they want to do, which is to paint me as some sort of fanatic."

Wright told Moyers -- himself a member of a congregation that is dually aligned with the UCC and the American Baptist Churches USA -- that he thought the sermon clips were intended to distort his image. "I think that they want to

communicate that ... I am unpatriotic, that I am un-American, that I am full of -- filled with hate speech, that I have a cult at Trinity United Church of Christ, and by the way, guess who goes to his church, hint-hint-hint; that's what they wanted to communicate," he said.

"They know nothing about the church," Wright said, ticking off a list of Trinity's many social ministries in its economically depressed neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. "They know nothing about all that we try to do as a church and have tried to do and still continue to do as a church that believes what [University of Chicago Christian scholar] Martin Marty said, that the two worlds have to be together, and that the gospel of Jesus Christ has to speak to those worlds -- not only in terms of the preached message on a Sunday morning, but in terms of the lived-out ministry throughout the week."

Christian credit union pledges \$232,000 to support ABC workers, Thai villages

VALLEY FORGE, Pa. (ABP) --The ministry of two American Baptist Churches missionaries to underdeveloped Thai villages will be undergirded with a \$232,500 gift from Christian Community Credit Union. According to the American Baptist News Service, the nationwide Christian banking group's gift will support the work of ABC International Ministries workers Mike Mann and Becky Mann, who work with the Integrated Tribal Development Program in northern Thailand.

The donation will fund water and sanitation, construction of a school and a clinic, and support microenterprise loans for three different hill-tribe villages in the "Launch a Village" project. The money will also help provide agricultural and business training for villagers, purchase a 4-wheel drive truck, and enable local production and marketing of fair-trade coffee.

The 'Launch a Village' project is a powerful example of how Christian Community Credit Union members are making a difference to improve the lives of people in desperate need," said Reid Trulson, executive director of International Ministries, according to the news release. "Working together with [the Integrated Tribal Development Program] allowed us to apply the credit union movement's philosophy of 'people helping people,'" said John Walling, Christian Community Credit Union president and chief executive.

"The 'Launch a Village' project is an answer to prayer," Becky Mann said. "Not only do we help bring water and life skills to the poor and remote villages in Thailand, we're also sharing about the Living Water that will flow into each of the villager's heart and soul!"

The California-based credit union operates nationwide, serving more than 29,000 members. It regularly contributes to Christian ministries around the world.

Baptist communicators big winners in ecumenical awards competition

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Baptist communicators garnered several awards from an ecumenical awards competition for religious journalists and public-relations professionals. Three of the 10 best-in-class prizes at the recent Religion Communicators Council DeRose-Hinkhouse Awards contest went to Baptist professionals. Scott Camp, senior graphics designer at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., won best of class in public-relations materials for a worship guide for Beeson Divinity School's year-long "Walking with the Saints" convocation series. Camp also won awards of excellence in poster and booklet and an award of merit for brochure.

Polly House, corporate communication specialist for the Southern Baptist Convention's LifeWay Christian Resources won best of class in writing for the story "Cops, others let down their guard at law enforcement summit." House also won an award of excellence in the newspaper single story category and an award of merit in magazine single article for "With 2000+ prayers of salvation, Nell Kerley is still going strong."

Lance Wallace, director of communication for the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, won best of class in non-broadcast audio and video for the group's "Embrace the World" fall emphasis. The entry also won an award of excellence in the promotional video category.

Other award winners from CBF were: Lance Wallace, Patricia Heys and Carla Wynn Davis, who won the award of excellence in the national-newsletter category for <i>CBF Fellowship!</i> and an award of merit in the single-issue category for the November/December 2007 issue; Davis, who won the award of excellence in the promotional video category for "Together for Hope: CBF's Rural Poverty Initiative;" and Wallace, who won an award of excellence in the integrated marketing category for the CBF Offering for Global Missions, and an award of merit in the CD-rom category for "Embrace the World."

Other Samford University winners were Carlie Stamper, graphics designer, Samford University, award of merit for a poster advertising the opera *Die Fledermaus*; Monica Washington, graphics designer, award of merit for the 2007 homecoming gala program booklet; and Carissa Bradley, web editor, award of merit in web design for department of communication studies home page design.

Winners from American Baptist Churches USA included Susan Gottshall, associate executive director of communications, award of merit in the miscellaneous-writing category for “Deliver us from evil: Baptists, slavery and freedom,” and award of excellence in the promotional-video category for “Rebuilding lives one family at a time;” Danny Ellison, award of merit in the miscellaneous design category for the “Deliver us from evil” exhibit.

Winners from the Dallas-based Baptist charity Buckner International included Jenny Pope, Alan Paul, Russ Dilday, Luis Perez, Analiz Gonzalez and Scott Collins, who received the award of merit in the national-magazine category for *Buckner Today* and an award of merit in the single-issue category for “The People” issue; Dilday, Collins and Paul, who received an award of excellence in special print materials for Advent Guide; Gonzalez, award of merit in newspaper single-story category for “Buckner Provides Aid to Tornado Survivors” and award of excellence in web writing for “The gift of two moms; Pope, award of merit in web writing for “Miracle home;” Paul, award of merit in design publication cover for “Our stories: missions in first person;” and Dilday, Pope, Perez, Tasasha Kelly, Ronnie Bock, Bradley Vinson and Matt Searcy, an award of excellence in the public-relations campaign category for “It’s Your Mission.com.”

Jennifer Davis Rash and Grace Thornton of *The Alabama Baptist*, received the award of excellence in the local or regional newspaper category.

Kelly Davis Shrouf, Katie Shull and Jenny Rice of LifeWay Christian Resources received an award of excellence in the local or regional newsletter category.

Will Hall, executive director, Baptist Press, Nashville, Tenn., won an award of excellence in the miscellaneous periodicals category for Baptist Press and award of merit in web editorial writing for “Choosing life is the right option.”

RCC is a national interfaith association of about 500 professional communicators and is the oldest organization for public-relations professionals in the United States. The awards were given during RCC’s recent national convention in Washington.

‘God is still in control’ despite tornado, Tennessee pastor says

ETHRIDGE, Tenn. (ABP) – Members of Liberty Hill Baptist Church are mourning the loss of their church building to a tornado but celebrating signs of new birth. Just two days after a tornado ripped through Giles and Lawrence counties April 11, severely damaging the historic building, a woman who had been attending the church professed her faith in Jesus, said Pastor Kyle James. “God is still in control,” the pastor said during an April 13 service, held in another church’s sanctuary.

He noted members are saddened about the loss of their church, which is more than 100 years old. In addition, part of the building was historic, having served as the old Liberty Hill School. For now Liberty Hill, which averages about 55-60 attendees each week, will meet in a former church facility provided by Victory Baptist Church in Lawrenceburg.

As of April 16, the church had not received official word from its insurance company as to whether the building is a complete loss, but James and others feel the damage is so extensive that the building will have to be torn down and rebuilt. A structural engineer is to visit the church and would make the final determination, James said.

James told the congregation April 13 it is okay to be sad about the loss. Many of the members have been in the church their entire lives. But he also told them, “It is okay to be excited about what the Lord is going to do through this.” Though the tornado’s path was narrow, it caused extensive damage in the community. “A building can be replaced,” James said. “We praise the Lord there was no loss of life.”

James also expressed gratitude for Giles County Baptist Association, of which the church is a member, and churches in neighboring Lawrence County Baptist Association. He noted that within three hours after the tornado hit, about 70 volunteers were on site, clearing away trees and debris. Many more also worked all day April 12. “There was a tremendous outpouring of love and compassion,” James observed.

In addition to the volunteer labor, James said the church has received donations and has been the beneficiary of numerous prayers. “Without them I don’t know how we could have gotten through this. The prayers have been felt,” he said. The pastor is not sure how long the building process will take. He said the church is insured for both structure and content, but he expects the congregation will utilize volunteers to help rebuild.

James, who is bivocational, is not discouraged. “I am more excited than ever. I want to be the pastor here more than at any other time that I’ve been here,” he affirmed. “The Lord is already working here and it is exciting to know what the Lord will do through this.”
