
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

May 13, 2008

(8-50)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Baptists mobilize relief efforts after Mother's Day tornadoes
- Blogging Baptists: As many motivations for blogging as there are bloggers
- Blogging Baptists: Guidelines for ethical blogging? Start with the New Testament
- Blogging Baptists: Blogs only latest battleground for historical Baptist contention
- CBF to commission 18 missionaries under new online cohort process
- Longtime Baptist musician, seminary professor dies

Baptists mobilize relief efforts after Mother's Day tornadoes

(ABP) – Various Baptist disaster-relief groups began mobilizing chainsaw teams and feeding units May 12 to assist victims of deadly tornadoes that tore across the Midwest and Southeast Mother's Day weekend. The storms claimed the lives of at least 22 people, including 15 in Missouri, six in Oklahoma and one in Georgia.

Among the dead in Missouri was a former volunteer worship leader at Forest Park Baptist Church in Joplin. Rick Roundtree, 52, and three family members – his wife, Kathy, 47, son, Clayton, 13, and mother-in-law, Ruby Bilke, 76 -- were killed near Racine, Mo., May 10 as they traveled to a wedding. Roundtree had completed interim work at the church on May 4.

The Missouri Baptist Convention has a handful of chainsaw units in the area, according to disaster-relief coordinator Rick Seaton. "We are planning to send a head cook, but we don't know how involved we will be yet," Seaton said. "We're still trying to coordinate with the Red Cross." The disaster team from Blue River-Kansas City Baptist Association has sent a feeding unit.

According to the *Baptist Messenger*, Oklahoma Baptist Disaster Relief has two feeding units in place. One has been set up in Miami, Okla., near the hard-hit town of Picher. Six people were killed there, and the tiny town was virtually wiped off the map. Another Oklahoma Baptist unit has been stationed at Albion, in the southeastern part of the state.

One person was killed when a tornado touched down near Dublin, Ga. Georgia Baptist Disaster Relief has sent volunteers to three locations – Douglas County, Wrightsville and Macon. Clean-up and recovery, feeding and childcare units, and shower trailers are among the units dispatched, according to Eddie Oliver, communications specialist for the Georgia Baptist Convention.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has not yet responded but plans to do so, according to Charles Ray, CBF's national coordinator for disaster relief. The Fellowship normally waits 72 hours for utility companies to declare affected areas as safe. "We are not first responders. We are not set up as feeding units," Ray said. "We have been in contact with Missouri and Oklahoma people to check on CBF-supporting churches."

The National Weather Service notes that 819 tornadoes have been reported since January, making 2008 the most active tornado season, to date, in a decade.

Blogging Baptists: As many motivations for blogging as there are bloggers

DALLAS (ABP) -- For some people, blogs are like a family reunion where people barely know each other. There's a lot of talking going on, but there's little agreement on much of anything. But for many of the increasing number of Baptist bloggers, that's the beauty of it.

A blog -- short for "Web log" -- is a website or online journal where authors regularly publish commentaries on personal and public issues. Typically, blogs allow readers to comment on posts, creating the opportunity for readers to engage in dialogue with each other and the blogger. The blogosphere is the world's online dinner table, where people from all perspectives can share their thoughts and opinions on what is going on in their lives and the world around them.

Diane Schiano, researcher at the Palo Alto Research Center in Palo Alto, Calif., said people sit at the cyber-table for as many reasons as there are blogs. Some are meant to update friends and family about what's going on in someone's life.

Some authors blog as a kind of self-validation, seeing other people reading their blog as an indication that what they're doing or saying is important. And younger people are clamoring to have their own place in cyberspace, she added.

"There are a lot of people who want to feel in constant contact" Schiano said. "I call it hyper-connectivity. Wherever they go, whatever they're doing, they want to be able to reach out to someone."

Amanda Sturgill, a journalism professor at Baylor University, blogs on media and religious issues at aejrmig.blogspot.com. She believes Baptists, in particular, blog for two reasons: they are family-oriented, creating a desire to share their family lives with others; and as evangelicals, they believe they have something important to add to the global conversation.

Baptists may be supplying information and perspectives that Internet surfers are wanting, Sturgill noted. Research indicates 25 percent of 'net-surfers' have looked for religious information. "People from evangelical faiths have classically seen new media technologies as being a great witnessing tool, allowing believers to reach all the world in an expeditious manner" Sturgill said. "This has been true for everything from print to the World Wide Web. It's no accident that Gutenberg's first product was a Bible." However, he added, "But usually it doesn't live up to hopes. There is Christian broadcasting, but mostly existing Christians watch and listen, for example." He continued, "Blogs have the potential to be different because they can, at the same time, be both a megaphone and an intimate conversation. But to do this requires the blogger to actually interact with readers through comments and the like."

Many Baptist bloggers point to participating in the online conversation as the primary reason they write. They talk about "iron sharpening iron," noting that thinking through blog posts and responding to comments helps them improve their ministries. They also hope it helps others. "Blogging is like a conversation; it's people sharing what's on their hearts and mind," said Ferrell Foster, communications director for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which has a blog at texasbaptists.wordpress.com. "The BGCT staff wants to be part of that conversation because we serve our churches and need to be in constant contact with them. Blogging is simply a great way to talk and to listen via the burgeoning electronic media."

Marty Duren, a former contributor at www.sbcoutpost.com -- a prominent blog pushing for change within the Southern Baptist Convention -- now blogs on missional living at www.iemissional.com. Duren said his blog is a way of increasing his spiritual influence, which is what he said Christ called each Christian to do. He's learned some lessons in ministry and hopes to help others in ministry. The blog also has given him the opportunity to meet people he otherwise wouldn't have met, he added. For example, Duren recently had lunch with an Atlanta atheist he met through his blog.

Melissa Rogers, director of Wake Forest University's Center for Religion and Public Affairs, also blogs about faith and public life at melissarogers.typepad.com. She said her blog was a natural outgrowth of her regular media tracking and discussions. "I thought, since I'm tracking these things anyway, they may be of use to others as well," she said.

Aaron Weaver, a Baylor graduate student who blogs at www.thebigdaddyweave.com, uses his blog to keep readers informed about Baptist issues related to politics, but he also advocates what he calls Baptist distinctives. He believes blogging is a way to connect with younger generations. "I believe that young Baptists can be reached by blogging. For the most part, the young Baptists that I know don't read Baptist publications. They don't read denominational newspapers. But they do read blogs; they like blogs. Many even have blogs of their own. They are exchanging ideas with each other, and they are willing to read blogs from other Baptists of all ages," he said.

"Their blogging is definitely not limited to Baptist or even religious subjects, but some young Baptists are thinking and writing about topics of interest to other Baptists. It is my hope that more younger Baptists will discover the Baptist blogosphere and become more interested in our distinctives, history and the future of Baptists. "In our increasingly pluralistic, postmodern, post-denominational world, what is the future of Baptists? That is a question [that] Baptists -- young and old -- should be dialoguing about. The Baptist blogosphere is the perfect place in which to have that much-needed conversation."

Blogging Baptists: Guidelines for ethical blogging? Start with the New Testament

By Ken Camp

(ABP) -- The New Testament book of James compares the tongue to raging fire and a wild beast that cannot be tamed. And the author of that book never was "flamed" on a blog, in a chat room or on a discussion board. Words have power, whether spoken or written in cyberspace. And Christians don't get a free pass to ignore the Golden Rule when they log on to their computers, according to ethicist Bill Tillman.

"Basic civility and communication etiquette should always be in place for a Christian, no matter the medium," said Tillman, the T.B. Maston professor of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary. "The same guidelines such as those from James regarding discipline with our tongue should be translated over to any form of getting words to others or for others. Unfortunately, too many in the Christian circles who blog have operated with the guidelines

you can find anywhere else in society. Usually, when cultural guidelines are used on format, style and word choice, things move to a lower level of style.”

While self-expression has its place, some bloggers cross the line by focusing more on themselves than on the ideas they are trying to express, Tillman observed. “I recognize a dynamic at work in some of them that the blogger is so intent on establishing herself or himself as a person of significance and all his or her ideas are so important that the communication comes off as nearly yelling,” he said. “There is quite a bit of emotional exhibitionism going across the Ethernet.”

Not everyone who claims to be speaking prophetically -- or blogging prophetically -- truly bears the mantle of a prophet, Tillman noted. “Being prophetic is not clearing off a space and having a fit, whatever the subject matter or the medium in which it is communicated,” he said.

Like any tool, blogging can be used for good or bad purposes, said David Gushee, distinguished professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology. “Blogging at its best represents the democratization of the media. It reflects an entrepreneurial culture in which skill and interest can override official status, title, or position. An effective blogger can have more influence than the evening news or a thousand official press releases,” Gushee, who also writes a weekly column for Associated Baptist Press, said. “Blogging at its worst represents public speech unbound by public standards. It can damage both the blogger and especially the blogged-about. It can also waste enormous amounts of time and can become habitual or even addictive. It is the latest but not the last form of an addictive new technology.”

Tillman echoed that theme of time-wasting, but he also noted the potential of blogs as ministry tools. “There are actually ministry facets that can be addressed through blogging,” he said. But he urged caution -- particularly for ministers who blog during office hours.

“Pastors and other ministers often have a great deal of time that is essentially handed to them by a church for the minister's discretionary use,” he said. “So much is left to the individual's conscience to handle the time and how it's used. With that said, I have to say that from some of the blogging I have read, probably some infringement is done on churches' good will regarding their staff's time.”

Blogs as a communications medium are neither good nor bad -- but they have the capacity for both good and bad, Tillman added. “There is a certain neutrality about the technology and the medium. But, just like fire, it's how it's used that qualifies its ethicality,” he said.

Some characteristics of blogs set them apart as distinctive, such as their potential reach and their capacity to allow anonymous expression in a public place. But those traits really just demonstrate the human capacity for good or evil, Gushee observed. “Like all things human, blogging illustrates the exalted and debased nature of the human person and human community,” he said. “Moral responsibility involves curbing the damaging dimensions of blogging while elevating those dimensions that contribute to human well-being and the common good.”

Blogging Baptists: Blogs only latest battleground for historical Baptist contention

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- One classic joke about Baptists is that wherever two or three are gathered, there are four opinions among them. The same can probably be said of bloggers, and Baptists seem to have taken to the blog medium with particular gusto, on both the institutional and individual levels. But as a democratically governed and notoriously fractious bunch, blogging Baptists also seem to have put a new virtual twist on the time-honored tradition of contentious business meetings.

For instance, the recent highly publicized spat over homosexuality, pastoral leadership and other issues at a prominent Texas Baptist church made headlines in local and national media outlets after a handful of members wrote about it in their personal blogs.

Two years ago, reform-minded bloggers in the Southern Baptist Convention helped an outsider candidate get elected president of the denomination for the first time in more than a decade. But their critiques of the denomination's entrenched power structure earned them the enmity of some of their fellow conservative SBC supporters, who have denounced bloggers like Wade Burleson and Benjamin Cole with the ugliest accusation possible in modern-day Southern Baptist life -- calling them “liberals.”

Are Baptists prone to fighting on-line, and, if so, why? Prominent bloggers said that the rancor associated with many Baptist blogs may simply be a reflection of the rancor of Baptist life in general. And such contentiousness, while aired more prominently when viewed in millions of homes via the Internet, isn't inherently evil.

“Historically, we Baptists have been dissenters,” said Aaron Weaver, a graduate student at Baylor University who operates the Big Daddy Weave blog (www.thebigdaddyweave.com). “The blog is merely a new medium ... Baptists use to dissent when dissent is necessary. In some ways, blogs are a form of congregationalism.”

But in an age when megachurch pastors have a strong hand in their congregations' decision-making and when an entrenched and well-funded bureaucracy holds tight political control over the Southern Baptist Convention, such congregationalism is less common, according to bloggers. "The blog medium has tapped into the growing sense that congregational polity is an increasingly rare commodity among Baptists," said Cole, an associate pastor at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla.

Two years ago, Cole's now-inactive Baptist Blogger site helped contribute to the election of Frank Page as SBC president. He currently is a regular contributor to the SBC Outpost blog (sbcoutpost.com). "The frustration that the disenfranchised and unempowered have sensed on account of the new Baptist magisterium has given rise to their advent in the blogosphere," he said in an e-mail interview.

And heretofore powerless bloggers can produce results that dissenting groups couldn't have expected in Baptist life just a few years ago, in the pre-blog era. That, he said, is because "bureaucracies on both the local-church and denominational levels are too big and too slow to counter the speed with which dissident bloggers have articulated their ideas and advanced their causes."

Weaver, who supports the alternative Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and describes himself as "theologically moderate and politically progressive," agreed. "The format of the blogosphere disallows coercion tactics that have been employed in the past by dictatorial church leaders," he said. "The blog medium serves as a safe haven for those who feel that public dissent is their only option."

Both Cole and Weaver agreed that blogs can lend themselves to nastiness. But, they warned, don't throw the baby out with the proverbial bath water. "Blogs are not inherently bad," Weaver said. "Negative and destructive blogs are a reflection of the blogger, not the blogosphere. I suppose anonymity can lead to people being dishonest. But if honesty is an issue, it is an issue of character and not the medium of blogging itself."

Cole and other SBC bloggers have been criticized by their fellow conservatives for their use of the medium to political ends. And Cole has used his blogging to reveal less-than-flattering information about prominent SBC leaders.

But critics of Baptist blogging are overlooking the whole of Baptist history, he said. "Quite frankly, those who lament the 'unhealthy' and 'un-Christian' character of blogging must have been ridiculously blind or purposefully naïve for the last 400 years of Baptist bickering," Cole said. "That some of the current SBC leadership weep and wail over blogging and gather 'round like huddled martyrs, and yet they were the selfsame provocateurs of the fundamentalist juggernaut, would be laughable if it wasn't so pathetic."

Cole concluded: "Would Christ blog about the malfesance run amok in Baptist life? Probably not. Neither would he sit quietly and cover the backsides of the worst denominational offenders, as some of our convention trustees seem content to do."

CBF to commission 18 missionaries under new online cohort process

ATLANTA (ABP) - An innovative missionary-training process has produced 18 new Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missions personnel, who will be commissioned June 18 during the group's General Assembly in Memphis, Tenn. The appointees are the first to apply through CBF's new online "cohort" process.

The 10-week stints allow candidates to learn about CBF Global Missions and hear first-person testimonials from current field personnel and staff through online discussion, video and audio streams. The cohorts are the first step in a process -- which includes personal interviews, an exploratory conference and orientation -- toward more permanent assignments.

The cohorts are divided into 10 sessions, which lead candidates through a process of self-discernment and reflection on how God is calling them. Topics include introduction to CBF missiology and mission strategy; reflection on childhood, adolescent and adult experiences; personal religious history and identification with CBF; and missional church discussion.

"The ability to combine technology with our written reflection process has been transformational," CBF selection manager Matt Norman said. "These cohorts allow candidates a condensed time of self-reflection and missional discernment that helps inform and empower the unique way they will continue to serve God in the world. Reading and interacting with each other weekly adds a dimension of community building and peer interaction that is essential during times of discernment."

The commissioning service is slated for 7:30 p.m. June 18 at Memphis' First Baptist Church. New field personnel include Carita and Lindsay, Southeast Asia; Brittany Phillips, China; Matthew and Melanie Storie, Alabama; Elaine Childs, Croatia; Leah Crowley, Florida; Cynthia Levesque, China; Eric and Julie Maas, Belize; Gene Murdock, India; Karen and Kenny Sherin, Missouri; Dan and Jolene Tucker, Mexico; Dee Donalson, Ethiopia; and Christopher and Jessica Rose, Peru.

-- Due to security concerns, CBF does not disclose the full names and specific assignment locations of some of its field personnel.

Longtime Baptist musician seminary professor dies

ORANGE PARK, Fla. (ABP) -- Longtime Baptist hymn writer and music professor Hugh McElrath passed away May 8 at his winter home in Penney Farms, Fla. He also resided in Louisville, Ky. He was 86.

McElrath was a professor of church music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., for nearly 50 years, serving from 1948-1992. Officially retiring as the V.V. Cooke Professor of Church Music in 1992, he taught part time as a senior professor for a few years afterward. He also served as minister of music at Beechwood Baptist Church in Louisville for 22 years.

A native of Murray, Ky., McElrath earned a bachelor of arts degree in English from Murray State University, intending to become an English teacher. Instead, he entered Southern Seminary's first music degree program. He completed requirements for a bachelor of sacred music degree in 1947 and a master of sacred music degree in 1948. He earned a doctor of philosophy degree at the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester in 1967.

Singing With Understanding, a music textbook co-authored with Harry Eskew, is among his most noted works. He wrote several hymns, including "We Praise You With Our Minds, O Lord."

In 1992, he was the first church-music professor to receive the Findley B. and Louvenia Edge Award for Teaching Excellence, the highest teaching honor Southern awards. President of the Southern Baptist Church Music Conference from 1987-89, McElrath served on the doctrinal/theological committee for the 1991 edition of the *Baptist Hymnal*, the Southern Baptist Convention's official hymnal. He also served as editor of an accompanying handbook. He later served on the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Coordinating Council. *Minds and Hearts in Praise of God: Hymns and Essays in Church Music in Honor of Hugh T. McElrath* was published in December 2006 to celebrate his life and mark his contributions to church music.

He is survived by his wife, Ruth, and three children, Hugh Donald McElrath, Douglas McElrath and Margaret Partridge. Funeral services will be held in Alumni Memorial Chapel at Southern Seminary at 2 p.m. Wednesday, May 14.
