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Alma Hunt, longtime Baptist missions advocate, dead at 98

ROANOKE, Va. (ABP) -- Alma Hunt, one of Baptists' best-known missions advocates, died June 14 in a Roanoke, Va., hospital. She was 98. The Virginia native gained national recognition in 1948 when she became executive director of the Birmingham, Ala.-based Woman's Missionary Union, an auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention. She led WMU until her retirement in 1974.

Hunt's influence remained profound over the next 34 years as a volunteer worker with the Baptist World Alliance, the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign (now International) Mission Board, Global Women and numerous Virginia Baptist organizations.

"[Alma Hunt] heralded the cause of missions straight from her heart," said John Upton, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia. "She has been a bold and influential leader not only for women, but also for all Baptists around the world."

"Alma Hunt was an energetic and dynamic leader who helped move WMU forward, expanding its reach into Baptist churches with record growth for the cause of missions," said Wanda Lee, WMU's current executive director. "She was a truly amazing woman who selflessly served others and actively sought to develop women leaders."

Born in Roanoke in 1909, Hunt grew up at First Baptist Church there and was baptized at 10. She left briefly to earn a degree at Longwood College in Farmville, Va., but returned to teach in Roanoke's public schools. In 1943, First Baptist's pastor, Walter Pope Binns, assumed the presidency of William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo., and the next year he asked Hunt to become the school's dean of women. She held that post for the four years -- while also earning a master's degree in student-personnel administration at Columbia University -- when she was elected WMU executive director.

During her tenure, WMU's membership grew to an all-time high of 1.5 million and its publishing arm expanded. National WMU also reorganized under her leadership. Hunt led the organization to help form the Baptist World Alliance's women's division and the North American Baptist Women's Union, which she also served as president from 1964-67.

She was vice president of the BWA from 1970-75, presiding over some of the sessions of the 13th BWA World Congress in 1975 in Stockholm, Sweden. Hunt became the first woman to preside over a BWA general session. BWA General Secretary Neville Callam lauded Hunt for being a reliable and longstanding supporter of the international church body. "We are thankful for people like her who give so much encouragement to those involved in the worldwide Baptist movement," he said.

After retiring in 1974, she joined the Foreign Mission Board's staff in Richmond, Va., as an unpaid volunteer, traveling to 45 countries as a consultant for women's mission work. She maintained a rigorous stateside schedule speaking and writing on behalf of missions.

In 1985 she returned to Roanoke to care for her mother, while continuing to speak around the country and to write. In 1995, she was the only woman invited as a featured speaker at the 150th anniversary celebration of the Southern Baptist Convention. "Missions is what makes me get up in the morning," she said at the time.

In the 1990s, additional recognitions came her way with the naming of national WMU's Hunt Library and Archives and of its Alma Hunt Museum on missions education; of Hunt Hall at Virginia WMU's retreat center; of the Alma Hunt Cottage to house adults with developmental disabilities at HopeTree Family Services (formerly Virginia Baptist Children's Home); and of the Alma Hunt Theological Library at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in Arlington, Va.

In 1998, Virginia Baptists named their state missions offering for her. Other honors followed. In 2001, she received the Jeter Award for denominational service from the *Religious Herald*, the Baptist General Association of Virginia's news journal. In 2002, she was inducted into the Mainstream Baptist Network Hall of Fame. In 2004, she received the Judson-Rice Award for Baptist leadership from *Baptists Today*.

She was awarded an honorary doctor of humanities degree from William Jewell, and an honorary doctor of divinity degree from the University of Richmond.

In 2003, First Baptist, Roanoke, voted to sever its relationship with BGAV and affiliate with the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, a state convention formed in opposition to what it claimed was liberalism in the BGAV. Four days after the vote, Hunt joined Rosalind Hills Baptist Church, ending a nearly 94-year relationship with First Baptist. Last January, the congregation of Rosalind Hills asked Hunt to let them ordain her to gospel ministry -- and she agreed.

Hunt, who never married, is survived by nephew, William D. Roe, Jr. of Roanoke; her niece, Mary Anna Hunt of Indianapolis, Ind.; and by seven great-nephews and -nieces. Funeral services were held at Rosalind Hills June 18, with burial following in the family plot at Evergreen Cemetery in Roanoke.

The family requested that memorials be sent to national WMU, Virginia WMU or the BWA.

Troubled Texas WMU seeks healing with interim director

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Woman's Missionary Union of Texas board of directors has granted its intentional interim executive director broad powers as members seek healing for the troubled missions organization. On the first day of their June 16-17 board meeting, directors learned the organization's executive committee had hired Nelda Seal, former executive director of Louisiana WMU, for the post 11 days earlier.

On June 17, members introduced a bylaws revision to give the chief executive authority to hire, fire and supervise all personnel. Under current bylaws, she holds that authority only over personnel not directly elected by the board -- meaning only over mid- and lower-level employees. Directors are expected to vote on the amendment by mail or e-mail within 30 days.

The board also approved a recommendation to allow the interim executive "to evaluate and restructure the staff as may be deemed necessary and appropriate."

Nina Pinkston had been named the interim executive after former exec Carolyn Porterfield unexpectedly resigned last October. Then last month, the executive committee abruptly dismissed Pinkston from the post. After her dismissal in May, Pinkston publicly acknowledged deep division within the Texas WMU staff.

The board spent part of its meeting in executive session, where members developed a public statement. "Recently, the board of directors of WMU of Texas met in Dallas for its regular summer meeting and board training. In recent days, its foundation has been shaken," the statement said. "One board member stated, 'We came confused and left united.' As a result of training ... the board clarified its roles and responsibilities. The first step taken was the hiring of an intentional interim executive director-treasurer, Nelda Seal, a former executive director of Louisiana WMU for 15 years. "WMU of Texas has moved forward on its firm foundation of reaching, teaching [and] discipling Texas and the world."

The board also spent an extended time in the closed-door session discussing unspecified personnel issues. Members then opened the meeting for an hour-long question-and-answer session that included dramatic public apologies to former staff leaders and what some participants characterized as "first steps toward healing."

The first day of the two-day meeting drew about two dozen guests, including several past presidents of Texas WMU and former staff. At the opening session, Texas WMU president Paula Jeser, who had been acting as volunteer interim executive, noted Texas WMU bylaws give the president and executive committee the authority to fill the position in the event of a vacancy.

In a call to prayer several weeks ago, eight former Texas WMU presidents raised the possibility of hiring "an experienced intentional interim" director.

Affirming that suggestion, Jeser said she sought counsel from national WMU Executive Director Wanda Lee. At Lee's recommendation, the executive committee interviewed Seal, of Alexandria, La., Jeser reported. The executive committee voted unanimously June 5 to hire Seal as intentional executive director-treasurer.

Seal told the board she saw the position as "a servant leadership role," and she urged the organization to stay focused on its mission.

Asked in open session how many candidates the executive committee considered before hiring Seal, Jeser said the committee requested interviews with five candidates -- most from outside Texas -- but some declined to be considered. Jeser also noted that while the bylaws do not stipulate the means for terminating an interim executive, Pinkston's contract included a provision for termination.

The open session included public apologies for unspecified wrongs, hugs and tears. Jeser began by recognizing Porterfield, saying: "I want to publicly say the board of directors failed in its job to hear you when you spoke to us. We did not back you." Turning to Pinkston, she added, "Nina, I made some big mistakes with you, and I offer my sincere apology."

Later, board member Merle Cross of Gilmer, Texas, said the board owed Porterfield an apology for not having a called meeting to hear her concerns at the time surrounding her resignation.

Several board members affirmed Porterfield and Pinkston for their roles as mentors through the years and for the leadership they provided Texas WMU.

In a surprising move, Porterfield asked to speak at the conclusion of the question-and-answer session. "It's time to move forward," Porterfield told the board. "Do the right thing for the right reason in the right way. "I love you. I gave you 15 years of my life. Make me proud. But more than that, honor the Father. Ultimately, that's all that matters."

Opinion: Lawley's Chapel and the communion of saints

By Beth Newman (ABP) -- One a recent Saturday afternoon, I gathered with a small group of family and friends around the graveside of my mother-in-law. The burial ground of Lawley's Chapel United Methodist Church sits atop one of the gentle hills of north central Alabama, looking across a farmer's pastureland to a tree-lined creek bottom.

The oldest, central section of graves are marked by nothing but stones, probably carried up from that creek. Any names that they might have borne are long since gone. The landscape probably remains fairly unchanged, however, since those first bodies had been buried by the Methodist circuit riders in the 1840's.

Certainly, it had not changed much during my mother-in-law's life of almost 90 years. Nor had her life taken her far away from that place. She had never traveled farther away than Georgia, having spent most of her life along that creek and among those hills.

Leaving the graveside to return to our cars, my husband noticed a relatively new headstone bearing, of all things, the seal of Harvard University -- the three open books bearing the word *VERITAS* shining in the slanting sunlight of an Alabama afternoon. A husband and wife were buried there. The inscriptions on the stone described him as a dedicated teacher and her as a nurse, but added that she had been born in Budapest. No one in our party recognized the names. Our lives had taken us far from that place, but she had come a long way to find a resting place.

I know that with the multitude of serious political, economic and social problems pressing on us today, phrases such as "the communion of the saints" or "the mystical Body of Christ" can seem fuzzy or remote or pointless. I know also the responses that anything creedal draws from some of my readers. But it is my profound conviction that all of our discussion must be informed this aspect of eternity.

The divisions that separate the Body of Christ today -- whether "fundamentalist," or "liberal," Democrat or Republican, or even Protestant or Catholic -- as real and painful as these might be, are nonetheless not eternal or ultimate distinctions. The world that produced the woman from Budapest married to a Harvard Ph.D. could not, I imagine, have been more different from that of my mother-in-law. And yet, they were buried within a stone's throw of one another, to become a part of that grand communion of saints about which we sing: "Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea...."

No doubt we are tempted to magnify the divisions of our own time and place, seeing the past and even the future in light of our present time. And yet, a dichotomy such as fundamentalism/liberalism is itself a recent one, with both sides being a product of modernity. An individual reading a biblical text for him or herself (whether literally *or* liberally) was not a concept our early brothers and sisters in Christ would have known. They knew Scripture by hearing it spoken, most of all in the context of worship.

It is this gathered communion of saints that we also join when we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are gathered before the throne of God in worship. This eternal reality transcends our parochial divisions and enables us to look upon one another -- no matter which "side" the person is on -- as also someone worthy of the blood of Christ and the love of God.

In a small cemetery on the back roads of rural Alabama rests not only loved ones, but also a profound truth: The love and grace of Christ make our communion possible.

-- Beth Newman is professor of theology and ethics at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.
