

\*\*\*\*\*

# ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

\*\*\*\*\*

June 20, 2008

(8-63)

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- CBF General Assembly begins with historic commissioning service
- Civil-rights struggle ongoing, journalists at ABP event say
- Mission projects precede CBF General Assembly in Memphis
- Civil-rights leader garners Whitsitt Courage Award
- Women's wrestling draws attention to Missouri Baptist University

### CBF General Assembly begins with historic commissioning service

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship commissioned 18 people for global missions service June 18 in a history-making place -- a local church.

Traditionally, CBF has commissioned new personnel at the same venue in which each annual meeting has been held. This year's service, held at First Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., celebrates a turn toward recognizing the local church role in mission efforts. "We held the commissioning service in a local church because we are focusing on the work churches do for global missions," Lance Wallace, CBF's communications director, explained. "The concept in the past was that missionaries are sent out as paid agents. Now people are traveling globally. The church is on mission itself." The commissioning service kicked off the CBF's annual General Assembly in Memphis.

The new personnel will serve in a variety of ministries -- from teaching English in Asia to starting kindergartens in Africa. "[Our mission] is about the lost, the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the people who have no Christian presence in their midst. That is the path we are called to," Nash said.

In a challenge to approximately 1,000 attendees, Nash said missions must change because the world is changing. "It's not enough until we join together and become engaged together in reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ," he said. "What excites me the most is the possibility as we join hands together in ministry and mission in the name of Jesus Christ."

New CBF field personnel include Carita, Southeast Asia; 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; Christopher and Jessica Rose, Peru.

For safety reasons, CBF does not release the names and specific locations of some of its missionaries.

CBF now has 163 field personnel. At the commissioning, attendees contributed \$12,750 to CBF's Offering for Global Missions to honor Jack Snell, former director of field ministries, who died of cancer last year. "His greatest passion, besides his family, was missions. That was his main passion -- he gave his life, his soul and his time for missions," said Jim Smith, who now directs field ministries.

### Civil-rights struggle ongoing, journalists at ABP event say

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- The struggle for civil rights is not over, and moderate Baptists must carry the cause, journalists exhorted participants at the annual Associated Baptist Press dinner June 19 in Memphis, Tenn. On various levels and in numerous locations, the cause of Christ demands that people of faith and good will stand up and speak out for the poor, the disenfranchised and the weak, they said during the ABP event. The banquet is held each year during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly.

"We all know race plays out in [political] campaigns, and we know this is going to be a really important one for America," Christine Wicker said of the 2008 presidential election, referencing the contest between the first person of color likely to be nominated by a major party, Barack Obama, and John McCain. Wicker, a former Dallas Morning News religion reporter, is the author of a new book, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation: The Surprising Crisis Inside the Church*.

Wicker's topic was "Race in the 2008 Elections," but she set the context of her remarks by referencing her new book explaining how progressive Christians -- the profile of Baptists who relate to the CBF -- face a vital opportunity to

provide moral leadership. For years, Wicker was “wowed by megachurches,” she said, explaining that congregations that regularly draw more than 2,000 worshippers not only are huge, but they’re typically well-run and efficient, and their ministries help huge numbers of people.

As she set out to write a book on the successes of such congregations, several pastors of those churches ironically complained to her about their ineffectiveness, she said. One pastor told her, “We can’t save anybody.” Another suggested, “Stop looking at the front door and look at the back door,” admitting the megachurches’ huge numbers of converts are offset by the people who leave those churches every year.

Wicker pored over statistics from the Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of God and other conservative evangelical groups. She found denominations in decline. “The more I tracked, the more I saw [evidence of evangelicals’ dominance] wasn’t there. It was a façade,” she said. “I realized this isn’t bad news; this is the best news of my lifetime. The jig is up.”

For years, “the fundamentalists were hiding behind the Bible, authority and marketing strategy,” trumpeting their dominance and labeling other Christian groups as inferior or even counterfeit, she noted. They were so successful in their proclamations that others believed them -- even when conservatives’ statistics didn’t back up their argument.

Turning to the 2008 presidential race and other political campaigns, Wicker observed that progressive Christians have an unprecedented opportunity to articulate their understanding of the gospel. Because of the presidential showdown between Obama and McCain highlights race, it’s not a new issue in American politics, she said. “Richard Nixon played the race card with his ‘Southern Strategy’ in 1968,” she remembered, noting race has been used to divide American voters ever since. Sometimes, the appeal is subtler, camouflaged in issues such as crime, but it’s still present, she insisted.

“I don’t know if we should vote for Obama,” Wicker said of the current contest. “What I do know is you have been on the front lines,” she said, noting moderate or progressive Christians have rolled up their sleeves and served the poor and disenfranchised and suffering people of America, and those Christians have more influence than they realize, in part because fundamentalists have less influence than they claim. “You have been helping people,” she said. “People are going to call on you.”

Wicker called on progressive Christians to be expansive and inclusive in their service, urging them not only to minister to like-minded Americans, but to reach out to those for whom race remains a bitter, divisive issue in U.S. politics. “You can do it,” she affirmed. “The world is watching.”

In separate speeches, ABP editors emphasized the high calling of journalists -- particularly Christians practicing their faith -- to combat racism.

ABP News Editor Robert Marus -- a native of nearby Little Rock, Ark., who completed his undergraduate degree at Rhodes College in Memphis -- noted the unique context of the region. Little Rock made global headlines 50 years ago, when black students integrated his alma mater, Central High School. Memphis became a focal point for race in America 40 years ago, when Martin Luther King was assassinated there, igniting riots nationwide.

“Journalists were the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement,” said Marus, who also serves as ABP’s Washington bureau chief. “They stood at the apex of what our profession does best ... comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.”

Journalists’ images and words from the Civil Rights Movement -- particularly from Little Rock and Memphis, but also from other communities, like Selma, Birmingham and Washington -- turned the tide of public opinion toward integration, he reported. “They showed Americans what they were doing to their own people,” he explained. “Americans didn’t like what they saw.”

Tragically, “one of the saddest ironies of the Civil Rights Movement” was that white Christian ministers, on the whole, were nowhere near as exemplary as journalists. “The bearers of the gospel of light” often justified segregation theologically, Marus lamented, while practitioners of the secular craft of journalism championed the cause of African Americans.

In fact, a former seminary student who turned to journalism became the first American martyr for civil rights 130 years before Martin Luther King died in Memphis, noted ABP Executive Editor Greg Warner.

In 1833, Christian businessmen in St. Louis approached Elijah Lovejoy about starting a newspaper to “advocate for morality” in the booming Mississippi River city, Warner reported. So, that year, he launched *The Observer*. But within two years, Lovejoy championed a kind of morality his financial backers didn’t have in mind. In 1835, he started opposing slavery. Gradually, he advocated complete abolition.

Lovejoy’s supporters and readers turned against him, calling for his lynching. He relocated his newspaper across the river, to Alton, Ill., Warner said. First, his former readers from St. Louis followed him, chopped up his printing press and threw it into the Mississippi.

Lovejoy remained undeterred, Warner reported. He bought another press and continued his assault on slavery, believing 2½ million fellow humans should not be oppressed. In time, his enemies destroyed more presses, and Lovejoy replaced them until, one night just before his 35th birthday, a mob in Alton shot him to death and threw his last printing press into the Mississippi.

Although the crowd took Lovejoy's life, the newspaper editor who battled slavery because of his Christian beliefs actually won the battle, Warner said. The bullets that killed Lovejoy were, effectively, the first shots of the Civil War -- more than 20 years before Union and Confederate troops looked across a battlefield.

"Elijah Lovejoy was the first American martyr for freedom of the press" and freedom of all people, Warner insisted. "The mid-19th century, like our day, was plagued by many Christians whose God was too small," he said, noting "the evil today" for most Christians is apathy and complacency in the face of crying needs and oppression around the world. "Where is our great cause? Are there no issues worth dying for?" Warner asked.

"There are civil-rights issues today," he answered, citing human trafficking and sex slavery in Thailand and racial genocide in Darfur. And issues of equity of all people should dominate the concerns of Christians who love people for whom Christ died, he added. "We should say, 'Let's expand our world ... by making room for other people and new ideas.' ... Let us contend with the cobwebs of complacency," he urged, challenging Christians to see that all people have access to "safe water, clean earth and the dignity of a job."

Associated Baptist Press is an independent news service that works with religious and secular news outlets nationwide. It is a founding partner of the New Voice Media Group, a collaboration with the Baptist Standard in Texas, the Religious Herald in Virginia and Word & Way in Missouri.

### **Mission projects precede CBF General Assembly in Memphis**

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Andrea Zintzun, 16, knows she's been blessed by others, so packing boxes of rice at the Memphis Food Bank just seemed like a good thing to do. "There are people who blessed us, and we need to bless back," said Zintzun, one of 13 Homestead, Fla., teenagers who traveled to Memphis for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's annual General Assembly.

The teens are from Open House Ministries, a CBF partner ministry that serves a poor area of Miami-Dade County. They arrived the day before the assembly so they could serve at the food bank. "We want [the teenagers] to be a part of our kingdom work, and they can," said Wanda Ashworth, one of CBF's field personnel who directs Open House Ministries.

The group also traveled to Memphis to support Open House associate director Leah Crowley, who was commissioned as one of CBF's field personnel during the assembly. Most of Crowley's ministry is with children and teenagers, so having a group present "will make it meaningful," Ashworth said.

The 20-hour journey to Memphis included stops in each state for everybody to put their feet on the ground and have it count as a state they had visited. After the Assembly, the group will travel to summer camp in North Carolina and back to Homestead -- stopping at several of the ministry's supporting churches along the way.

The Homestead group was among more than 60 people that arrived before the General Assembly to serve at Memphis-area ministry sites. One site was Girls Inc., where members of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Lee's Summit, Mo., helped serve lunch to approximately 100 girls.

There, Cornerstone member Kaylea Burke, 7, started the serving assembly line by adding a pint of milk to each lunch tray. She pointed to her dad, Ethan, who was busily handing out trays to girls. "That's my dad," she said. "He's the messy one. He's been working hard."

Seventeen members of Cornerstone also helped at the Memphis Food Bank labeling boxes and sorting food. Already coming to speak at a General Assembly workshop, Ethan Burke said, "We said, 'Why not just combine the two trips?'"

An hour south of Memphis, about 20 college students spent two days serving in Helena-West Helena, Ark., where CBF field personnel Ben and Leonora Newell live and minister. The service project was part of the Memphis Sessions, CBF's first collegiate event at the annual General Assembly.

The students played kickball, made jewelry, read books and played board games with children in the community center. They also worked at a new 4-acre community garden, where they helped pull weeds, till the ground and make stands for growing tomato plants.

Ben Newell said community gardens will not only provide up to 10 tons of produce this year, but will also encourage the community. And, ultimately, the community is what all mission efforts are about. "We come to realize that the end product -- though important -- is not the most important. It's the relationship" with community members, Newell said. "A lot of times people come on mission trips and it's like, 'How much can I accomplish? How much can I work?' But it's the relationships that really make the difference."

Casey Green, a student at Jacksonville State University in Alabama, served as a student intern last summer in Helena-West Helena and was excited to return and serve. "I jumped at the shot to come back to Helena," she said. "What the garden produces makes a big difference here."

"For years, the Fellowship has been gathering at annual assemblies. We felt it was time we actually got out there and worked in the community we were visiting," said Chris Boltin, CBF's short-term and partnerships manager who organized the mission projects. "Memphis is a convention city. The people are used to having people come and go. I wanted us to leave a positive touch on the city and to be the presence of Christ."

### **Civil-rights leader garners Whitsitt Courage Award**

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Fred Shuttlesworth, one of the last remaining lions of the Civil Rights Movement, received the Whitsitt Courage Award at a meeting of Baptist historians in Memphis, Tenn., June 19. The award honors individuals who demonstrate "Baptist ideals of freedom and faith in the force of any and all tyrannies." The William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society presents the award during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly each summer.

"Fred Shuttlesworth led the fight against racism, bigotry and segregation in the United States. His work, his ministry, has lifted the standing of Baptists," noted Whitsitt Society president Kirby Godsey, who insisted Shuttlesworth "embodies the very meaning of courage."

Shuttlesworth worked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. to guide the Civil Rights movement. He was pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., which was bombed three times, and the Ku Klux Klan bombed Shuttlesworth's home on Christmas Day 1956. "He pushed the United States a little closer to what Martin Luther King called 'the beloved community' and Jesus Christ called 'the Kingdom of God,'" said Andrew Manis, associate professor of history at Macon State College in Macon, Ga., and author of a Shuttlesworth biography, *A Fire You Can't Put Out*.

The Civil Rights Acts of the mid-1960s, which helped ensure the equal rights of Americans of all races, would not have been enacted without Shuttlesworth's leadership, Manis said. He presented the keynote address at the ceremony, during the Whitsitt Society's annual breakfast. "Nobody put his rear on the line in the black freedom struggle more than Fred Shuttlesworth did in Birmingham," he said.

Referencing some of the key crisis points of the Civil Rights Movement, Manis said, "16 sticks of dynamite, the tenacity of [infamous Birmingham police commissioner] Bull Connor...and the occasional timidity of Martin Luther King did not hold him down. He was a modern-day Daniel in the lion's den."

The Whitsitt audience watched a documentary that showed a crowd beating Shuttlesworth when he tried to integrate Phillips High School by enrolling his children there. That event took place immediately after the KKK threatened castration and death for "anyone" who attempted to integrate Birmingham schools, Manis said, adding the threat was targeted for Shuttlesworth, the only parent who attempted integration.

Years later, Shuttlesworth sat in on debate about whether to build a museum focusing on slavery in the South. Shuttlesworth did not comment until another participant asked what he thought. "If you don't tell it like it was, it can never be as it ought to be," he told the crowd. "That's the best advice for preachers and historians, especially for white preachers whose track record for speaking out on race is abysmal," Manis said.

Shuttlesworth's "light" illuminated the evils of segregation, the foolishness of idolizing culture and color, and the myriad blights of racism, Manis said, noting Shuttlesworth's "little light was lit by a fire you can't put out." "We still have a long way to go to reach 'the beloved community,' and sin being what it is, we probably never will reach it," he said. "But...nobility lies in being willing to accept reality" and taking on seemingly impossible challenges.

Shuttlesworth set the standard for Christians who want to eliminate racism by demonstrating courage "both in the pulpit and in the streets." Accepting the award, Shuttlesworth said, "I'm here to thank God for using me in moving forward the standards of bravery and courage and for letting him use me. I'm here to say what a great thing it is to stand up for God in a serious thing. Standing up is what God wants us to do."

The Whitsitt Society and its award are named for an early president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who lost his job in the late 1800s for persevering in his assertion -- later widely affirmed by reputable historians -- that Baptists date to the 16th century English Separatist movement rather than to John the Baptist, as many Baptists believed at the time.

### **Women's wrestling draws attention to Missouri Baptist University**

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- This fall, Missouri Baptist University in suburban St. Louis will join a handful of other schools nationwide in offering a women's wrestling program. MBU officials hope the program will help more of the small liberal-arts institution's student athletes become Olympians.

Athletic Director Tom Smith said he believes the new program will give the university more national exposure and draw more women to its programs. "It will help our gender side," he said.

Women's wrestling became an Olympic event in 2004. MBU administrators have been thinking about adding the sport for the past couple of years. Since women athletes overall tend to be more disciplined than their male counterparts, Smith noted, he hopes the wrestling program will enhance the school's academics as well.

Women's wrestling is more prevalent in high school than at the college level. Few universities have a good program, Smith said. In some high schools that do not offer women's programs, female students participate on men's teams.

The new sport will provide more opportunities for women on the campus, Smith added. Like other MBU sports, scholarships will be offered on the basis of skill. "We want to be in that position to present an Olympic athlete," Smith said. "It really is a competitive sport."

The university already has women signing up to participate. Erica Poe, an incoming freshman for the fall term, said she's excited about being able to wrestle on a college women's team. "This will be my first year," she said.

To be on a women's wrestling team that is. She wrestled on the men's team as a student at Warsaw High School in Warsaw, Mo. Only one other female student also participated on the 30-man team.

Poe was excited when she found out MBU was offering a team. Otherwise, she would have had to go to college out of state. "I wanted to help build up a program," she said.

Smith, the athletic director, said he anticipates having 10-15 members on the team the first year. He thinks the new sport will draw women from across the country since so few programs currently exist.

Although school officials said they had some concern over how conservative Baptists might react to the concept of a women's wrestling team, Smith said he hasn't heard much from Baptists in Missouri. It "places a certain level of responsibility on us to do it responsibly," he said. "I have not heard a whole lot of negativity in the church arena."

As long as the wrestling isn't co-ed, pastors contacted for this story seemed to have no objections to the idea. The publicity the program will generate initially for MBU is one of its benefits. "I think it is going to generate a real strong curiosity for the athletic programs," Smith said. He thinks the first few meets will be highly attended.

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, of which MBU is a member, does not include women's wrestling. The new team will compete in the Women's College Wrestling Association, which has about 15 member institutions.

\*\*\*\*\*