

CBF leader says ministry-excellence training can boost clergy's image

ATLANTA (ABP) — A moderate Baptist leader says a recent poll showing public confidence in clergy at a three-decade low should be a wakeup call for the importance of maintaining excellence in ministry.

"In a culture that qualifies success as bigger being better, it is easy to lose sight of the claim upon our lives that calls for fidelity to the excellence of God's justice and mercy, grace and healing," said Steve Graham, director of ministerial excellence for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

A recent Gallup Poll found just 50 percent of Americans rate the ethics and honesty of clergy as "high" or "very high." While still relatively robust when compared to other professions, trust in clergy declined by 6 percent in the last year and 17 percent since 1985.

The Atlanta-based CBF recently published a resource to help encourage healthy attitudes toward ministry and life-work balance by educating both the congregation and the minister.

Well-Being and Excellence in Ministry: A Practical Guide for Ministers and Caring Congregations equips ministers and congregations to work together to enhance their church's quality of ministries.

"Our calling as ministers is to be Christian first and then clergy," Graham said. "The pursuit of excellence in ministry requires that one engages himself or herself in the discovery of a flourishing Christian way of life." (Bob Allen, ABPnews.com)

Central Seminary sees turnaround

SHAWNEE, Kan. (ABP) — Students and faculty at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan., will have a lot to celebrate on Jan. 1 — the fifth anniversary of Molly Marshall's presidency of the 108-year-old institution.

Since Marshall took the helm, the seminary has turned around — from facing financial ruin to expanding its facilities. Under her leadership, Central Seminary has moved to a new location, begun new programs, received two major monetary gifts and broken ground for a new chapel.

"We were nearly at a point of closing the doors," Marshall explained in a recent interview. "We had to make hard decisions on property and personnel. It was painful but necessary for sustainability."

She credits trustees for their insight and nerve, the ability to recognize issues and the courage to make the changes required to keep Central functional and ministry-oriented.

"The board knew they needed someone with 'trust capital' here," Marshall, who had been a Central professor for nine years before being called as president, said.

"No one knew how radical some of the decisions were that had to be made," she added. "I think the board had a lot of confidence in me.... I felt very much that I had been called to this role."

Marshall — who made history as the first woman to head an accredited Baptist seminary in the United States — added that she had had no personal ambition or desire to become a seminary president. But she "wanted to do what was right for this institution," she said.

"The board recognized that if we didn't focus on our compelling mission, there was no point in staying in business," Marshall explained. "The board has moved nimbly" to make the required changes, she added. The "hardest" decision they had to make was to reduce both faculty and support staff by a third. (Vicki Brown, ABPnews.com)

Churches asked to invite women to preach

ATLANTA (ABP) — Baptist Women in Ministry is seeking pulpits for an annual emphasis to promote and encourage women preachers.

The organization, which promotes and nurtures Baptist women in church leadership roles, has begun soliciting churches for the fourth Martha Stearns Marshall Month of Preaching in February. Last year 110 churches reported giving a woman an opportunity to preach, many for the first time.

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Worth repeating

"If there's a chance of making a difference, that's what we want to do. But we never want others to think that we think they should do this, too. God has called us to this."

—Jeannie McGowen of Jefferson City, Mo., on her husband's and her decision to sell their suburban dream house to move into a diverse neighborhood to better minister to the poor.

This year, BWIM is encouraging congregations to invite a woman who would like to preach but has never had the opportunity.

"Of all the stories I have heard from churches and women about Martha Stearns Marshall Sundays, the most meaningful are those of churches that for the first time invited a woman to preach — or those of women who for the first time were invited to preach," said Pam Durso, executive director of the Atlanta-based Baptist Women in Ministry. "I have heard life-changing stories," she said, "church-changing stories." (*Bob Allen, ABPnews.com*)

National race track chaplaincy group to relocate to Kentucky

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) — A national chaplaincy group that ministers to the horse-racing community is moving from California to Kentucky at the beginning of 2010. The Race Track Chaplaincy of America will relocate Jan. 1 from its current home in Inglewood, Calif., to the campus of Georgetown College in Georgetown, Ky.

A website describes the RTCA as "an evangelical, interdenominational, Christian organization whose purpose is to minister to those persons involved in all aspects of the horse racing industry."

The group oversees about 72 chaplains who serve at more than 100 racetracks in the United States. RTCA has chaplains at tracks in 11 other countries as well.

A working agreement signed last year by Georgetown and the association "provides for the enhancement and facilitates the mission and programs of both organizations," according to a news release. (*Drew Nichter, ABPnews.com*)

Carter says religion can help end violence against women

ATLANTA (ABP) — Former President Jimmy Carter recently told the world's largest inter-faith gathering that religion has a vital role to play in ending "the global scourge of discrimination and violence against women."

Speaking by remote video from Atlanta to the fifth modern-day Parliament of the World's Religions meeting in Melbourne, Australia, the 39th president of the United States and Nobel Peace Prize winner addressed the gathering Dec. 3 as "a Christian layman and a former political leader."

"Every generic religious text encourages believers to respect essential human dignity, yet some selected scriptures are interpreted to justify the derogation or inferiority of women and girls, our fellow human beings," said Carter, a former Southern Baptist who teaches Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga.

Carter told representatives from 80 nationalities and more than 220 faith traditions that "all of us have a responsibility to acknowledge and address the gross acts of discrimination and violence against women that occur every day." (*Bob Allen, ABPnews.com*)

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Creating carol for the troops inspires student

CAMPBELLSVILLE, Ky. (ABP) — Thousands of American soldiers will be apart from their families this Christmas, but Campbellsville University graduate student Matt Hodge has written a Christmas carol for them in hopes of providing a way for the troops and their families to feel closer together during the holiday season.

"What is Christmas?" came out of a brainstorming session between Hodge and Frieda Gebert, associate professor of music at the Kentucky Baptist school.

Gebert said she remembered her parents telling her about being apart at Christmas during World War II while her father was away fighting. They would both listen to "I'll Be Home for Christmas," which they called "their song," to think of each other while they were apart.

"When I heard President Obama say that 30,000 more troops would be heading for Afghanistan, my heart went out to their families," Gebert said. "When he said that many of those would be leaving home before Christmas, I thought of my parents and the years they spent apart.... I wanted to find a way for those back home to say, 'Christmas will be here when you get back.'"

She then called Hodge and asked what he could do to help. "He came through in a big way!" she said.

Hodge's carol recently debuted during the school's annual holiday concert. It was performed by the Campellsville Chamber Choir. Gebert said the enthusiastic standing ovation by the audience convinced them that the carol conveyed the message they had hoped.

Hodge said after the concert he and Gebert were "flooded with people wanting to share their personal stories of how the song touched them."

"Dr. Gebert and I are so happy that we could bring a song to the public that could touch people in their own personal experiences," he said. (*Ashley Zsedenyi, ABPnews.com*)

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