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Homosexual book donations  
fuel questions in schools

By Tammi Ledbetter

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--When the homosexual advocacy group "Project 21" donated 49 sets of books to schools in the Kansas City, Mo., area, several families at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary voiced concern.

Project 21 is an alliance of organizations and individuals affiliated with the national Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). Its book-donation strategy in large cities throughout the country aims at providing "fair and factual information about sexual orientation." Various books portraying homosexuality in a positive light are being donated to school systems which in most cases place them on the shelves of libraries for students to read.

Project 21 was begun in 1990 in the San Francisco Bay area. Its goals have been adopted by the United Way in that area, which has provided a \$4,000 grant for distribution of literature and resources with homosexual themes.

Kansas City Project 21 members raised \$600 to purchase selected books to be hand-delivered to schools in 14 area school districts, including those in North Kansas City where most Midwestern Seminary families reside.

When Midwestern student Roger Woods read in the newspaper of the donations by Project 21, he wrote to school administrators urging them to reject the offer. In a parallel letter to the Kansas City Star, Woods noted, "As public servants, administrators' and boards' failure to properly act in stopping this harmful act against our children is equal to supporting and promoting gay and lesbian behavior."

The books in question include:

-- "Deliver Us From Evie" by M.E. Kerr, the story of a farm girl from Missouri who passes over a local boy she is expected to marry, falling instead for the preppie daughter of a local banker.

-- "Ironman" by Chris Crutcher, the story of a high school boy who learns to accept an elder, homosexual mentor.

-- "Dive" by Stacey Donovan, the story of a troubled 15-year-old girl who unknowingly falls in love with the new girl at school. A review in a homosexual advocacy newspaper said the book reflects the "stream-of-consciousness and truthfulness of a confused, co-dependent teen who is responsible and stressed beyond her years."

-- "The Journey Out: A Guide For and About Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Teens" by Rachael Pollock and Cheryl Schwartz. In this nonfiction work, the authors tell teenagers "homosexuality isn't a choice," Instead, "the choice is whether or not you are going to accept yourself."

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How schools approach acceptance of the donated books varies. A few, like North Kansas City School District where last year's Project 21 donations were accepted for circulation, have a process for reviewing such materials.

"The primary responsibility for doing this evaluation is that of the library media specialist with input from the building faculty and principal at the schools," said Bob Walsh, NKCSO curriculum director. Each book is evaluated individually, he said.

Curriculum standards used to test a book's suitability, Walsh said, include meeting ethical standards, accurate representation of all groups and individuals, background of information to make intelligent judgments in daily lives, the overriding personal opinion of principals and age appropriateness.

Associate pastor Dave Schanuel of First Baptist Church, North Kansas City, Mo., said he is "greatly concerned to see those books on the shelf" of school libraries in the town where his family lives. "I'm proud of our parents for standing up and voicing their concerns. That's a key to strong public school systems -- parental involvement."

Meanwhile, schools in the Kansas City, Mo., Public School District will be given Project 21 books as soon as they are processed, now that the superintendent has given his OK. Project 21 committee member Carolyn MacDonald described the Kansas City system as "an example of a district that tries really hard to be inclusive."

Southern Baptist Convention Christian Life Commission President Richard Land said it is inappropriate for schools to assume the right to expose minor children to homosexual and lesbian themes or literature without first gaining explicit and individual permission from parents.

"Even Hollywood understands this," Land said. "Any movie that contains an overt homosexual or lesbian theme gets an automatic R rating, which means children under 18 cannot view the film without parental presence."

Land said such reasoning is based on the belief that children under the age of 18 are "unable to fully comprehend the consequences of such behaviors and they are to be protected by society from exposure to such behavior and themes unless accompanied by parental authority."

"If Hollywood can understand this, it seems incredible that public school administrators are unable or unwilling to comprehend the problem."

In Liberty, Mo., schools northeast of Kansas City, the media library coordinator reviews the books for the district. Last year's donations from Project 21 were rejected in Liberty, according to reports in Pitch Weekly, a local alternative newspaper.

Olathe School District in nearby Kansas is rewriting policy to reject all donations. Efforts to remove from the shelves one of the Project 21 titles led to an ACLU lawsuit in 1993. Even though an older copy of the book had been on a shelf at Olathe South High School for nearly 10 years without anyone wanting to read it, a district judge ruled that students' rights and teachers' First Amendment rights had been violated and ordered the book's return for circulation.

A distinction was made between rejecting new books deemed educationally unsuitable and removing books previously approved, deeming that to be "viewpoint discrimination".

When a Lee's Summit, Mo., superintendent removed a copy of the same book from high school libraries in 1993, she noted the book was not being used as a resource for any class. "I don't think we are depriving anyone of any sort of factual material that they might be in need of," she told the Kansas City Star.

Project 21's MacDonald said she would like to see books about "all kinds of diverse people" on the shelves of public school libraries.

"If the school has used a criteria, then personally, I don't feel parents should go into the library and try to monitor things there," she said. "I'm sure I could have gone in and found many books my child shouldn't read, but I didn't feel it was my place to have books removed that would have other views. They need to provide variety."

Diane Nobles, director of curriculum for Liberty schools, said, "Parents have every right to stay involved and informed of materials children interact with in school. I don't know why it would be any less important for parents to help shape agendas for schools than any special interest group. They have a much more direct relationship."

Nobles, a Southern Baptist, said it's becoming more difficult for educators to assess so many different agendas. "Educators are going to be put in a position, if for no other reason than for time management, of deciding they can't address all the issues in the classroom that people want us to address."

Her previous experience in Texas schools taught her there were many worthwhile groups with good curriculum on the environment and other areas of study. "But eventually we have to stop and say we can't cover all this."

Some issues that reflect family values are more effectively dealt with in the home or a church setting, Nobles said. "Some of those agencies and institutions need to share the responsibility for education. It cannot fall totally on the shoulders of public schools."

Richard Howard, assistant superintendent for curriculum in Blue Springs, Mo., where last year's books on homosexual themes were rejected, said the district takes "somewhat of a dim view of donations," believing decisions about textbooks and library books are best made by professional staff. "If our staff had felt we need those materials, we probably would have picked them by now."

He questioned the motive behind the advocacy's group's interest in helping schools, saying, "If a group wants to help education and make donations of instructional materials, why do they feel the need to have a news conference to announce the fact? The schools feel they are being used as a distribution vehicle."

For now, the donations of Project 21 have been limited to high schools, but MacDonald said she would like younger grades included. "We have all we can do to deal with high schools. First, we're trying to expand to additional school districts and a small number of private schools that want to be included."

Titles aimed at a younger audience have generated strong reactions from parents in many cities. "Daddy's Roommate," a juvenile picture book showing a child's father shaving alongside his homosexual partner, was the most challenged book in 1994, according to Library Journal. The annual American Library Association-sponsored "Banned Books Week" is staged as a celebration of the freedom to read while attacking censorship. ALA is quick to equate the restriction of books having homosexual themes with objections to such acclaimed literature as "The Diary of Anne Frank" and "Huckleberry Finn."

MacDonald said she supports the distribution of pro-homosexuality books as a means of helping students with their self-identity and self-esteem. "Something that's very important to me is to let students know they're not alone. There is a high suicide rate among gay and lesbian youth," MacDonald said. "Anything that can be done to help make students safer is important."

The suicide argument, as put forth by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network, is drawn from a study published in Pediatrics in 1991 reporting that homosexual youth represent 30 percent of all completed teen suicide. Furthermore, 30 percent of homosexual and bisexual adolescent males attempt suicide at least once. Because of the alleged epidemic, the network argues for greater tolerance in schools for such students.

A more recent survey published last year by Herbert Hendin, M.D., executive director of the American Suicide Foundation and author of the book, "Suicide in America," indicates the suicide rate among homosexual youth is not significantly greater than among heterosexuals.

The CLC's Land discounted the assertion a high suicide rate among allegedly homosexual students can be blamed on an oppressive school environment.

"Could it not be that this is a deviant, unhealthy lifestyle which leads to all sorts of destructive behaviors, of which suicide is just the most extreme? Could it also be that such youth were more troubled and more disturbed emotionally and this is why they turn to what would clearly be considered a rebellion against authority of expressing their homosexuality in the first place?"

Land added, "It's quite an assumption that there is a higher suicide rate solely because of lack of understanding and nurturing of that behavior by society."

A host of pro-homosexual groups and, according to GLAAD, the National Education Association (NEA) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASPP) have endorsed a "Back-to-School Campaign" this year to help educators end homophobia in schools. It urges counselors to be sensitive to homosexual issues, noting "the history of 'psychiatric cures' for homosexuality has led to a climate of distrust between many gay people and the health care profession."

Land does not find it surprising that some school counselors often accommodate or even encourage students to experiment with homosexual behavior. "Once a society loses the backbone to assert a norm, then the only alternative is to declare any lifestyle normal."

For three years Missouri state legislators have refused a hearing on attempts to keep schools from using curriculum promoting homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. Ironically, objections were based on the lack of such a problem in the state's schools. Now that Project 21 has been successful in placing pro-homosexual materials in school libraries, the proposed legislative solution is likely to resurface.

"A state legislature has the right to set those standards," Land said. "It falls under the umbrella of society's right to protect minors." Arizona legislators voted such a prohibition into law recently.

Homosexual rights groups are not content with simply putting a few book in libraries. A network of sympathetic teachers and community activists was brought together by a social studies teacher in Mehlville, Mo., in 1994 to create a month-long celebration focusing on the contributions of homosexual and bisexual people.

A year later, the NEA passed an amendment supporting the concept of a "Lesbian and Gay History Month." GLAAD leaders proclaim it as "a month of pride and a month of remembrance," adding, "It is about visibility and acknowledgment."

San Leandro (Calif.) High School's "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students' Bill of Educational Rights" serves as a model advanced by GLAAD for every school. Citing a "largely unchallenged" stigmatization of these students as responsible for a hostile educational environment that perpetuates homophobic bias, the document argues for inclusion of material on the historical and continuing contributions of homosexual, bisexual and "transgender" people in all subject areas.

Also advocated: the right to positive role models in person and in the curriculum delivered by trained adults who both inform and affirm homosexual students. The NEA has offered such training through regional seminars. The "bill of rights" further argues for "the right to advocacy through concerned staff and faculty."

Back in North Kansas City, Karen Achilles, the wife of a Midwestern student, is another parent expressing concern that her elementary-age daughters might be permitted to read books she and her husband would find offensive. "My child is too young to realize that it's not necessarily the whole truth just because it's in a book."

Achilles readily admitted the restriction of such material is a form of censorship, but she argued that such policies are necessary to protect children from inappropriate materials. While it appears the Project 21 books are only being offered to high schools, Achilles would prefer for the district to refuse the donations for any level, saying, "It's important at any age" to prevent exposing students to homosexual themes.

The Project 21 books "don't tell students about people who have turned away from homosexuality," said Monica McKinney, the wife of a Midwestern student, and mother of three children in elementary school. She said she wonders whether books with opposing viewpoints would be welcome once the pro-homosexual material is put on the shelves.

"If I want to explain about that lifestyle to my children, it should be my choice," McKinney said. "If people want to go to the public library, they can get those type books. But it doesn't belong in the children's section or in our schools. Even the public library doesn't have Playboy for any age level."

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Teen book on homosexuality  
seeks to counter self-doubt

By Tammi Ledbetter

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--Supporters of "Project 21," a movement donating pro-homosexual books to school libraries, say the books they select reflect accuracy, artistic value, readability and award-winning status.

One key book, "The Journey Out: A Guide For and About Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Teens" by Rachael Pollock and Cheryl Schwartz, purports to help teenagers who think they're homosexuals deal with self-doubt. Cited as an example is doubt fueled by "a pastor who quotes from the Bible about sin." The authors suggest the teenager "question what his religion is really saying and to reconcile his faith with what he is discovering about himself."

"Discovering that you might be gay won't change most of these values" the teenager previously had, the book states. "It won't make you suddenly a bad person -- or a good one."

And if parents have a hard time accepting the child who announces he's a homosexual, the book offers resources for counseling, like the local lesbian and gay community center. If the child decides a negative reaction from parents has created an unsafe home environment, other supportive adults are usually available, the authors note, to provide housing while still in school, help in finding a job and making the child self-sufficient.

Ideas for locating homosexual and bisexual people include going to gay socials, rap sessions, dances or "under 21" nights at gay bars when alcohol is not served. A litany of health risks is provided, and teenage readers are reminded of the availability of public clinics where they can get help without telling their parents.

"The Journey Out" also helps teenagers reject the teachings of "the radical Christian right," which is defined by authors as "a group of people from a variety of churches with a biblical literalist tradition and a political agenda of seeing their beliefs enforced by government." They claim that "biblical literalists are selective in what biblical laws they choose to follow. It is simply not possible to live in modern times in the same way that people lived thousands of years to go."

The book teaches that the Israelites saw participation in male homosexual acts as "a rejection of their small, struggling community." To rebut that argument, the authors assert that a modern understanding of human reproduction and the "probable genetic basis of homosexuality" give reason to believe "homosexuality can no longer be perceived as a threat to or a rejection of the community."

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Parental school involvement  
advocated to guard children

By Tammi Ledbetter

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--Parents can stay involved in the education of their children in order to prevent exposure to objectionable materials, according to suggestions drawn from pro-family organizations such as the American Family Association, Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, Citizen magazine published by Focus on the Family and the Washington-based Family Research Council:

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-- Make an effort to keep up with your children's studies. Even if textbooks are not regularly needed for homework, ask them to bring them home from time to time. Be attentive to literature anthologies which may feature short stories on homosexual themes. Determine whether history books have been revised to emphasize a notable person's homosexual identification. Is this pertinent to the person's achievements? How is sexual orientation discussed in biology, health and behavioral sciences such as psychology and sociology? Gender roles may also be addressed in physical education as teachers determine what activities are required and how locker room behavior is handled.

-- Be aware of any testing of your child that is psychological in nature or inquires about personal behaviors of the child and his family.

-- Expect teachers to provide copies of curriculum used for any sex education instruction or AIDS awareness material. Determine your right to restrict your child's participation in these programs. Volunteer to serve on parent committees that oversee or initiate such programs.

-- Be aware of extracurricular activities available to your child that may include groups intended to advance the cause of homosexual youth.

-- Ask school board members to inform you of the procedures for curriculum approval. Be available to serve on textbook review committees. How are donated materials handled?

-- Volunteer to help in your child's school library. Become familiar with the resources available on homosexuality in both fiction and nonfiction sections. If material is not age-appropriate, educationally sound or accurate, organize parents to seek a review of the material.

-- When school districts consider placing homosexual curriculum or resources in the schools, advise all school board members of the medical risks associated with the homosexual lifestyle. Distribute to board members copies of "Medical Consequences of What Homosexuals Do" by Family Research Council (P.O. Box 2091, Washington, DC 20013, 703-690-8536). Ask about the liability the school district faces by promoting an unhealthy lifestyle.

-- Question whether schools that provide studies and resources on homosexuality are indirectly endorsing a behavior termed illegal in states with sodomy laws.

-- Ask school districts that accept library resources with homosexual themes to include books that explain how homosexuals leave their lifestyle to lead a heterosexual life, as well as books on reparative therapy.

-- Encourage state legislators to introduce bills to prohibit inclusion of curriculum or resources that promote homosexuality.

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Ouachita trustees vote to end  
state convention appointment

By Trennis Henderson

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ARKADELPHIA, Ark. (BP)--Trustees of Ouachita Baptist University voted Oct. 10 to immediately resume responsibility for naming their own successors, citing a provision in the school's original charter filed in 1887. In response to the trustees' action, the executive committee of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention executive board held a called meeting Oct. 14 and voted to escrow Ouachita's Cooperative Program funds "until the convention itself directs otherwise or until this issue is resolved."

Calling the series of events "a heartbreaking set of circumstances," Emil Turner, state convention executive director, said, "The executive committee was disappointed by Ouachita's action and felt there were other remedies available to Ouachita than what they chose. The heart of the executive committee is that Ouachita continue to be an institution that is not just fraternal to the state convention but vital to the state convention."

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Executive board president Charles "Chuck" McAlister, who chairs the board's six-member executive committee, said the escrowed funds will be released to Ouachita if the convention and university can successfully reconcile their differences. He added that the escrowed funds will not include designated gifts or convention funds budgeted for student scholarships.

Affirming the desire to maintain "a spirit of reconciliation," McAlister said, "We hope we will be able to arrive at a reconciliation that is acceptable to all Arkansas Baptists and to Ouachita Baptist University."

In other actions, the executive committee voted to research the convention's legal options and to appoint an at-large committee to meet with Ouachita representatives to discuss reconciliation options. "No one is suggesting we get involved in legal action," Turner pointed out, "but we want to understand what our legal standing is."

The historic basis for OBU's decision is found in the school's original charter which states trustees are "invested with full power of self-perpetuation by appointing their successors." The trustees amended the charter in 1914 to allow the convention to elect the school's trustees.

In a press release following the trustees' vote, Ouachita President Ben Elrod said the action was taken to "guarantee a return to a more inclusive trustee selection process." He noted that the effort was designed "to restore broad participation in the process and to remove Ouachita from the line of fire of denominational dispute."

In letters mailed Oct. 11 to Ouachita students, parents, alumni and pastors, Elrod wrote that "stability is necessary for an institution to carry out its mission and add to its strength. That stability cannot be found in the current climate of factionalism in Baptist life."

Along with resuming control of trustee selection, Ouachita trustees plan to adopt bylaw changes to include consultation with the state convention nominating committee, Arkansas Baptist churches and alumni prior to electing new trustees.

In addition to convention messengers electing the school's trustees for more than 80 years, Ouachita was budgeted to receive more than \$2.4 million from the state convention's 1996 Cooperative Program allocations.

As part of that partnership, the convention's articles of incorporation state that "trustees shall be sensitive to the expressions of the convention's will in all matters." Even more specifically, the convention's executive board bylaws empower the board's executive committee to "authorize the executive director to withhold funds from any institution or agency which fails to comply with the policies of the convention or the Executive Board." Despite those stipulations, Elrod indicated the school's charter and bylaws take legal precedence over other documents.

OBU trustee chairman William H. "Buddy" Sutton said he hopes the board's action "will not be perceived as a strongly significant action except for taking the election of trustees out of the political arena. There was a concern for stability which we very much want to achieve without regard to one faction or another in the convention political arena.

"There is the strongest desire in every way to remain aligned with the convention," emphasized Sutton, a former state convention president. "Our desire is to assure the convention that nothing is intended to be a divorcement from the convention."

The state convention's president, Rex Horne, is pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, where Sutton is a member. "I don't know of anybody who would feel a sense of joy about what has taken place," Horne said of OBU's decision. "I don't feel happy this step has been taken although you understand leaders do what they believe is best for the future of the institution. They're doing what their charter gives them authority to do."

Prior to the trustee action, the school's trustees were elected each year by convention messengers following nomination by the state convention nominating committee. The nominating committee is a rotating nine-member committee, with three members appointed each year by the state convention president.

Acknowledging that the trustee nomination process "has been an ongoing concern" in Baptist life, Horne added, "To come to this point shows how crucial the college thinks this is for the future."

Elrod said the OBU trustee board had four openings this year. "I submitted eight names for consideration after being asked to do so" by the nominating committee, he explained. When none of the eight names were among the four nominated by the committee, Elrod said school officials felt ignored in the nominating process.

Voicing concern over "the general air of conflict which seems to bring these things about," Elrod said, "We've fallen into a pattern in Southern Baptist life where the nominating committee becomes a battleground. That's not the way it should be.

"We're not mad at anybody," the OBU president insisted. "We're not wanting to break with the convention. That's the last thing on our minds. We simply wanted to get the school out of line of political fire and remove ourselves from the battlefield."

Calling the OBU trustees' decision a "tragic act," nominating committee chairman William Hatfield said "removing the university from the oversight of the state convention is a grievous wound to Arkansas Baptists and a hindrance to the kingdom of God."

"In our system, messengers to the state convention elect a president, who appoints people to the nominating committee, who in turn nominate trustees -- the supervisors of the presidents of the entities -- whose names are submitted to the messengers at the next state convention for their approval or rejection," said Hatfield, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dierks. "This is an effective way of keeping our entities accountable to the people in the pews. It has worked well for years, and I see no reason to change it."

Elrod said he is "saddened that we had to take this action" and acknowledged, "It's hard to predict what will happen. Anytime you take a difficult position, there is always some disruption. We will be responsive to anybody's invitation to sit down and talk about how we can make this situation workable."

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**'Financial Fitness' centers  
emphasizing accountability**

By Ken Walker

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DALLAS (BP)--Just 18 months after he organized his church's Financial Fitness Center, Gary Shepherd's vision for spreading the message of debt-free living stretches across the nation.

"We were looking at Texas and then the Southwest, but God took it a lot further than that," said Shepherd, director of the center at suburban Dallas' Lake Pointe Baptist Church. "We're getting calls out of the blue from people who heard about the program from someone, and we don't even know (the source)."

A financial planner who left his practice to start Lake Pointe's center, he said the primary difference between it and other debt-retirement strategies is its emphasis on accountability.

After initial counseling, individuals and couples attend a monthly follow-up session for 90 days, he said. During that period the center helps them establish:

- a balanced budget that includes systematic giving to the church.
- a plan to be debt free in one-third to one-half the time normally required.
- future savings goals.

"We feel one-on-one accountability with a counselor for the first 90 days is the key," Shepherd said. "Only two or three people out of a class of 30 will do anything with (teaching material). Our system allows a budget to be tailored to individual needs."

The program includes special software to track expenses as part of debt retirement and payment acceleration plans.

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Lake Pointe also holds weekly workshops to help establish better spending habits during the 90-day period. The latter covers such topics as teaching children money management, staying out of debt, improving quality of life and money-saving tips.

The center taught money management to more than 100 persons during its first year.

The effort proved so successful that recently Shepherd and a partner, Nick Woodall, incorporated New Hope Financial Fitness Centers to offer two-day seminars for other churches wanting to start a center.

The organization also publishes software -- it recently released a budget management package -- and written materials. It maintains a home page on the World Wide Web ([www.flash.net/~debtfree](http://www.flash.net/~debtfree)). Its e-mail address is [debtfree@flash.net](mailto:debtfree@flash.net).

Shepherd set up Lake Pointe's program after attending a seminar last year conducted by the Financial Freedom Foundation of Wyoming. The nonprofit organization teaches money management, helps negotiate agreements with creditors and publishes resource materials.

While he initially patterned Lake Pointe's program on foundation materials, he had a desire to include the biblical basis for money management. That led him to preparing a nine-week workbook, which he hopes will be available by early January.

The "Experiencing God" type, scripturally-based study features six lessons per week, designed to be completed in 15 to 20 minutes a day.

Carter Shotwell, minister to adults at Lake Pointe, said the impact of its Financial Fitness Center can be measured by this year's receipts. They have been running ahead of budget, he said, even during typically slow summer months.

A recent survey of participants in the program showed that in the past, 28 percent gave nothing to the church. Now 80 percent follow systematic giving plans.

It also serves as an outreach tool, Shotwell said.

"When we have a person or a couple in financial crisis, we can plug them into this ministry," said the associate pastor. "For once in life they can have hope; they can pay off their debts. It's great to have a practical tool, to be able to do more than just say, 'We'll pray for you.'"

Although Lake Pointe is one of the area's largest Southern Baptist congregations (3,000 average Sunday attendance), Shepherd hopes financial fitness centers blossom outside the SBC world.

After a session Oct. 17-18, nearly 20 representatives from a variety of churches will have attended counselor training.

The financial fitness approach is being implemented in other denominations, such as Grace Church in Little Rock, Ark., and an interdenominational group in the Tulsa, Okla., suburb of Sapulpa.

The latter is headed by Basker Johnson, a certified public accountant (CPA) who attends an independent Christian church. He hopes to hold the first monthly workshop during November.

"I'm very impressed with it," Johnson said. "It's a very needed service. The concept is so biblical it's almost scary to think it was developed in the secular world. I'm real pleased to be associated with Gary and the Christian environment in which he's taken it."

Southern Baptist churches are warming to the program, too. Among those attending the training are Milfred Minatrea, director of church ministries for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The BGCT is examining the possibility of eventually offering the program through various associations across the state. While Minatrea will evaluate the training before making further recommendations, he said helping people manage their finances will reach the lost and benefit the church.

"I think it would be a tremendous service for associations to offer to their pastors and members," he said. "As I look across urban areas I see consumer debt swallowing people."

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The first Southern Baptist congregation outside Dallas to start a center was Shively Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky. After a dedication service in late June, its center is working with five clients and has scheduled its first monthly workshop in November.

"I'm really excited about it," said director Rick Fields, a CPA who hopes to offer biblically based financial planning at the center. "It's got the possibility for changing lives and that's what ministry is all about."

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Information about Financial Fitness centers can be obtained by calling (214) 606-7739. Walker is a freelance writer in Louisville, Ky., and coauthor of two books, "Warriors" and "Ultimate Warriors."

Relief from debt, church giving  
key 'Financial Fitness' thrusts

By Ken Walker

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DALLAS (BP)--The numbers cited by New Hope Financial Fitness Centers are scary:

-- Between 75 and 80 percent of American households owe \$15,000 in consumer debt.

-- The average family spends more than 78 percent of net disposable income on debt payments, such as mortgage, car payments, credit cards and other installment loans.

-- After reaching a peak in 1993, during 1996 personal bankruptcies are projected to surpass the old record.

-- Most Americans save only 3 percent of their income.

-- Last year was the highest ever for credit card defaults.

Society's ever-present financial troubles motivated Gary Shepherd to organize Lake Pointe Baptist's financial counseling program in suburban Dallas. During 1994 and '95 in his financial planning business he constantly counseled couples who were unable to save because of debt constraints.

"I thought of doing this through my business, but a friend said we needed to do it through the church," Shepherd said. "Five weeks after we met with the pastor we were up and running.

"Our pastors have a vision for ministry. People won't always come to church but they will come and talk about money. But we want to make sure they understand, and are exposed to, the gospel."

Shepherd said the hunger for knowledge of wise money management can be seen by persons driving 40 or 50 miles across the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex for meetings. One client comes from Abilene, a distance of 300 miles.

Rick Fields, director of the center at Shively Baptist Church in Louisville, sees similar needs in Kentucky. In the past, he led several seminars a year using materials by Christian financial advisor Ron Blue. Not only were they always packed, he constantly received inquiries about them, he said.

"What you find is most people aren't giving (to their churches) what they want to give," he said. "The ones I get an opportunity to talk to express a desire to give more and frustration about not being able to do that.

"There's no doubt churches need to teach more about stewardship. The latest figure I've seen is people give an average of 1.4 percent of their income (to the church). As Christians are enlightened about what God's Word says about finances, they will have more control over them and some peace about them."

Shepherd acknowledged finances are a very sensitive subject. When the Lake Pointe Financial Fitness Center suggested holding a support group for those struggling with finances, not one person signed up, he said.

"The information is so sensitive and personal that people didn't want to do it," he said. "It's also something you can mask very easily. You can look like you have a lot and then suddenly everything falls apart."

However, many participants in Lake Pointe's program have been able to avert such disasters (people are only identified by their first names):

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-- Johnny: "I am not sure if we would still be married had it not been the new skills we have learned."

-- Susan: "I was convinced that through faith all would be well and then I was convinced through a little work that I could learn how to spend money the right way. Learning these skills has truly turned my financial life around and now I have no fear of financial disaster."

-- Frank: "We are so happy that God brought the program into our life. It teaches people how to free themselves of harmful spending habits, the burden of debt and the desperate, hopeless feelings that consume you when you are in financial bondage."

Not only is the program important to individuals, Shepherd said, it could impact the church's future. He referred to a recent article noting that 85 percent of the funds received by churches today come from people age 55 and older.

Unless young people are taught the precepts of sound money management, including systematic giving, there is a major cause for concern in the next 10 to 20 years, he said.

"Money is mentioned five times more in the Bible than love," he said. "Ninety-nine percent of most Christians' time is spent in the world and only 1 percent in the Word. We want people to get into the Word and get some good meat."

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FMB writer takes  
European press post

Baptist Press  
10/15/96

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Martha Skelton, a leading writer and editor for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's monthly magazine, The Commission, has been named director of the European Baptist Federation's press agency.

Skelton's assignment with European Baptist Press Service will entail publishing articles about work within Baptist unions in Europe and helping the federation service the unions' other communication needs.

The post previously has been filled by Foreign Mission Board missionaries, including retiring missionary Stanley Crabb, who worked there the past 10 years.

Beginning Jan. 6, Skelton will live in Hamburg, Germany, and work out of federation offices there. She will remain on the Foreign Mission Board staff.

"This is an exciting opportunity for Martha as well as the FMB," said Louis Moore, the board's associate vice president for communications. "Martha is a top-drawer journalist, and we are pleased one of our Richmond writers will have the privilege of filling this role for the next few years."

Skelton, who has reported on missions in more than 40 countries for The Commission, also has been widely published in Southern Baptist media through Baptist Press and other writing outlets. She has won numerous awards in professional writing competitions.

Skelton came to the board as an editorial assistant writer for The Commission in 1978 and became associate editor in 1980. She was named senior editor in 1994. In 1995, she became a senior writer in the board's editorial department during a reorganization.

She graduated from Belmont College in Nashville, Tenn., and attended Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

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(BP) photo (mug shot) mailed 10/11/96 to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press.

Michael & Sharon Arthur  
busy folks in Casper, Wyo.

By Karen L. Willoughby

Baptist Press  
10/15/96

CASPER, Wy. (BP)--Michael A. Arthur is a tri-vocational minister and full-time student at the University of Wyoming.

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Arthur, who moved to Wyoming from Missouri in August 1995, is director of Baptist Student Ministries at Casper College, developer of multihousing ministries in Old Faithful Southern Baptist Association and pastor at Sunrise Baptist Church in Casper.

He also is a full-time student with three declared majors: music, drama and communications at the Casper College UW extension center.

Arthur credits Sharon, his wife for 12 years now, with enabling him to minister.

"Sharon is the backbone," Arthur said. "If she were not willing, it would not be possible for me to do this." Her salary as a receptionist at Hilltop National Bank is the couple's main source of income.

Arthur was a campus minister in Missouri when a call came in for a BSU director at Casper College. When the couple prayed, they sensed God calling them to Wyoming. Funding did not materialize as expected, but "God has certainly taken care of us," through a variety of sources, Arthur said.

About 100 Casper College students have been touched by the ministry of the BSU, Arthur said. About 35 are faithful in attendance and participation.

"What I found in Wyoming, the students here who are involved in our BSU are very mature for their age about spiritual matters," Arthur said. "They're serious about their Christianity."

One group of nine BSUers formed an a cappella ensemble that performed during the Wyoming Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting last November, and they raised money through singing for 17 BSUers to participate in a Baptist spring break evangelism program at Padre Island, Texas.

The Wyoming BSUers led seven people to the Lord, Arthur said.

"I can't get enough of working with students," Arthur said. "I just like it a lot. I don't have the same congregation year after year, and the students have a lot of energy. The students do the maintenance work for the ministry, which enables me to develop ideas like going to Padre Island over spring break."

The multihousing ministry is totally separate from BSU work. It came out of an awareness of the need for ministry in Casper-area apartment complexes.

"When we first moved to town, we moved into a rough complex," Arthur said. "There were drug raids twice a week. One thing we noticed was that children were everywhere, just hanging out. It was just a burden on our hearts."

The couple began to look more closely.

During a 15-minute drive through of Evansville, a suburb on Casper's east side, they counted 75 children. In one section of Casper proper, called Jackson Heights, they counted 40 quadrplexes.

Michael and Sharon plan to staff a Team Kids group twice a week in Evansville and in Jackson Heights. Team Kids is a Southern Baptist ministry program to help develop Bible knowledge through a variety of activities.

Michael Arthur's third ministerial vocation is that of pastor since May 1996 at Sunrise Baptist Church in Casper.

"I supplied several times for them," Arthur said. "They approached me about being their pastor, and after praying about it for quite a while, I turned in my resume and got a call back from them within the hour."

In his first five weeks as pastor, there were at least five and as many as nine visitors each week, most of whom came from non-Southern Baptist backgrounds, the pastor said.

The Sunday morning worship service is fairly traditional; evening, more contemporary. Wednesday is for doctrinal studies for adults; children and youth programs started in mid-June.

"We're pretty laid back here," Arthur said. "I can't think of anybody who's worn a suit. Some come in shorts and I'm comfortable with that."

What he isn't comfortable with is what he calls an "ugly blue-green tie."

"It clashes with everything," Arthur said. "But I'm going to wear it to every service until we reach 75. Then I'm going to cut it in half and never wear one again."

Sometimes his triple ministerial role coupled with a triple academic challenge seems a bit much, Arthur said. But in 12 years of ministry, for the most part he's learned to pace himself.

"The philosophy I live by is that there's no life without God," Arthur said. "There's existence, but not life."

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Frank Peretti: 'Up front'  
he's a Christian author

By Charles Willis

Baptist Press  
10/15/96

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Though his earlier years included career detours into music, pulpit preaching, carpentry and "wannabe" filmmaker, Frank Peretti said he believes a writing career was God's plan for him.

"Regardless of which path I could have taken, I would have wound up a writer," said Peretti, a widely known Christian fiction writer.

Peretti was in Nashville, Tenn., as part of a 13-city tour to promote the newly released paperback edition of "The Oath," an award-winning volume published in 1995 by Word.

In a visit to the Baptist Sunday School Board, Peretti said devoting his more mature years to writing is "a nice full-circle payoff. That which I dreamed about and strayed from, I have come back to by the grace of God.

"The only thing that could change now would be from fiction to nonfiction. But whenever you read a Frank Peretti book, you're going to find a Christian message.

"I don't mind being called a Christian author," he continued. "Oh, I know what people say about getting into the general (book) market. I'm in the business to share the gospel, to spread the Word of God. People may as well know that up front."

Peretti's earlier novels, "This Present Darkness" and "Piercing the Darkness," are spiritual warfare novels. He also wrote "The Prophet" and a series of children's books, "The Cooper Kids Adventure Series." His books have sold 6.8 million copies.

"The Oath," which sold 700,000 hardcover copies, has appeared on the Christian Booksellers Association best-seller list for 14 months. It first appeared on the best-seller list two months before its release, the result of a national pre-publication sales campaign. This year the book received a Gold Medallion Award from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.

Speaking to Sunday School Board employees during a chapel service, Peretti likened his writing projects to Nehemiah, who did not have to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem alone. Others worked on sections of the wall, hung doors and built gates.

"Everybody had their piece of the wall to build. Sometimes people like me get all the attention. I actually get rather intimidated by the position I often find myself in because I wrote this book, and that's supposed to make me an expert. I feel far from it. I'm watching in awe at what God is doing, just like everybody else. That's people like you. We're all building that wall. We're all building the kingdom of God together."

Peretti said his next project may be somewhat autobiographical, though he will not appear in the form of a specific character in the plot. He said he plans to go back through personal journals, stretching back 28 years to the 17-year-old Frank Peretti, "to see what I have learned."

"It's an intense experience to look back and see all the things the Lord has done, and all my silly mistakes," he said. "I don't know what form the book is going to take, but I want it to reassure people that the Christian walk is worthwhile. It pays to serve the Lord."

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(BP) photo (color) is posted in the SBCNet News Room. The file name is Peretti.txt.

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