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NATIONAL OFFICE

SBC Executive Committee  
901 Commerce #750  
Nashville, Tennessee 37203  
(615) 244-2355  
Herb Hollinger, Vice President  
CompuServe ID# 70420,17

### BUREAUS

ATLANTA Martin King, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 898-7522, CompuServe 70420,250  
DALLAS Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 333 N. Washington, Dallas, Texas 75246-1798, Telephone (214) 828-5232, CompuServe 70420,115  
NASHVILLE Linda Lawson, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300, CompuServe 70420,57  
RICHMOND Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151, CompuServe 70420,72  
WASHINGTON Tom Strode, Chief, 400 North Capitol St., #594, Washington, D.C. 20001, Telephone (202) 638-3223, CompuServe 71173,316

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Personal tragedy becomes  
key to redemptive ministry

By Brenda Sanders

Baptist Press  
10/19/94

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--The daughter of a Baptist deacon and a church organist, Mary Hurd is intimately familiar with the painful emotional aftermath experienced by many women who have had abortions.

As a facilitator for HOPE (Healing of Past Abortion Experiences), a post-abortion recovery group, she meets weekly with women who have suffered emotional and spiritual trauma after undergoing elective abortions. Hurd can empathize with them because she too has had personal experience with what psychologists refer to as "post-abortion distress."

Seven years ago, Hurd recounted, she became pregnant after being raped by her boyfriend. When he found out she was pregnant, he beat her, causing her to begin to miscarry the baby. Then he drove her to an abortion clinic, where a doctor aborted the fetus.

"My story is a little different than the average abortion story," Hurd said. "Yet many aspects are the same. Emotionally, my experience was similar to so many others.

"Something just clicks off in your brain after an abortion," she continued. "You don't want to deal with the reality of what you've done. You're afraid of your parents. You're afraid of God.

"So, instead of turning to them for help, I turned to another man," she related. "I decided to get pregnant on purpose. I wanted to replace the baby I'd lost."

However, when Hurd's second pregnancy ended in a spontaneous miscarriage, she began to experience feelings of grief and inadequacy.

Her parents "wanted to get me into a more positive environment," so she chose to enroll at Southwest Baptist University, Bolivar, Mo. There, First Baptist Church pastor Ray Leininger and his wife Judy "took me into their hearts and became spiritual mentors to me," Hurd said. "They accepted me just as I was and disciplined me."

Joining a support group for women who had been sexually abused, Hurd learned of "healthy responses to the grief I had been feeling."

Through her years in college, Hurd said, many friends helped her discover "truths about who God is and who I am in Christ. That time of discipleship really changed me.

"God helped me realize that he's the one who bestows my sense of self-worth -- not any other person, or occupation, or state of being."

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Hurd left college with a bachelor's degree in psychology and an emphasis in teen pregnancy intervention and abortion counseling. She found employment at The LIGHT House, an independent crisis pregnancy center in Kansas City. Today she serves as the organization's education coordinator.

The idea to begin a recovery group for women suffering from post-abortion distress started when Hurd, a member of First Calvary Baptist Church in Kansas City, talked with her pastor Dale McConnell about her work at The LIGHT House. McConnell expressed an interest in offering use of the church facilities for an abortion recovery group and asked Hurd if she would lead the group.

She agreed and began a lengthy process of study and preparation before launching the effort. Hurd surveyed churches, crisis pregnancy centers and abortion clinics throughout the Kansas City area to determine whether any other abortion recovery groups already were in existence. She found only one, in Overland Park, Kan.

Most agencies told her women suffering post-abortion trauma were referred to personal counselors. Hurd pointed out private counselors' fees are far beyond anything most teens can afford.

She discovered a common attitude among the employees of many social service agencies was, "We don't view abortion as a problem that anyone should grieve over in the first place. If there are women out there who are suffering emotionally because of their abortions, it's the fault of you Christians for placing such a load of guilt on them!"

From the beginning, Hurd desired the group would be non-judgmental and compassionate but "would not compromise the fact that abortion is wrong and premarital sex is wrong."

She affirmed, "They'll never seek forgiveness if they don't see that what they did was wrong. And they'll never get rid of their pain unless they seek God's forgiveness."

First Calvary member Dorothy Gregg volunteered to help Hurd facilitate the group meetings. At age 70, she is a mother of four and grandmother of seven children. Hurd said Gregg's nurturing presence "provides a sense of safety" for the women in the group.

"She's a mother figure to women who because of their abortion experiences may have problems in their relationships with their own mothers," Hurd added.

First Calvary's minister of education Jeff Brundage helped develop a brochure to publicize the formation of the recovery group. Information about HOPE was shared with other area churches. In March of this year Hurd and Gregg began meeting with interested women every Thursday night at the church.

Utilizing "Women in Ramah" Bible study materials published by the Christian Action Council and recommended by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, they follow a 12-week plan dealing specifically with the emotions and concerns of post-abortive women. Open discussions about persistent anger, guilt, anxiety and bitterness experienced by these women help participants begin a healing process, Hurd said.

To date, six women have become regular members of the recovery group. They personify the diversity of women who choose abortion, Hurd said. The women represent a variety of ages, races and social backgrounds. Some have had abortions within the past year; one participant aborted a pregnancy nearly 20 years ago and still suffers anguish over the decision.

Group member Rhonda Toler said the women immediately bonded with one another. "One person will share an experience, and we all understand exactly what she's going through because we've felt that way ourselves. It's like being with someone you feel you've always known."

Not everyone in the group is a Christian, Hurd said, but the weekly discussion time is incorporated into a Bible study that emphasizes the Scriptures' relevance to the needs of modern-day people.

"The bottom line is, Jesus is the only one who can heal us from the inside out," Hurd said. "So what else can we offer them but that? Only faith in Christ brings lasting change to a damaged life."

Hurd believes ~~post-abortive women~~ would be more responsive to the gospel message if the Christian community would "stop directing so much anger at them and stop the shouts of 'You murderer!'"

"With those kinds of feelings directed toward them, they're not going to come to us for help," she said. "They'll go straight to an abortion clinic."

Instead, she suggested Christians could:

- serve as volunteers in crisis pregnancy centers.
- sponsor baby showers for unwed mothers.
- provide meeting space within the church for support groups.
- develop a supportive, non-judgmental relationship with an unwed pregnant teen or with a woman who has elected to have an abortion.
- pray for abortion providers, that God will turn their hearts toward him.

"Only Jesus can replace our mourning with joy," Hurd said. "There are so many hurting people in the world. We must be willing to tell them what we know, that when you feel there is no reason to go on, the Lord's strength will uplift you. You don't have to be haunted by your past. The light of Christ can dispel the darkness in our lives."

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She found healing  
after 3 abortions

By Brenda Sanders

Baptist Press  
10/19/94

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--Rhonda Toler married at age 20 -- three years after her third abortion. She remembers her life at that time was like "living in hell."

She struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, as well as an eating disorder that brought her weight down to 95 pounds.

Trying to forget the past and start a fresh life with her husband, David, Toler now wanted to become pregnant. She pinned her hopes for happiness on being a good mother, but she battled recurring bouts of depression as years slipped by and she found out she now was infertile.

A doctor told her he "didn't know" whether her previous abortions had caused the infertility, but she felt responsible and sank even further into despair.

Toler became a workaholic, putting in 60 to 80 hours per week on the job. She tried to keep her mind occupied, so she wouldn't feel the numbing pain of every thought of her unborn children.

Overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and grief, she didn't care whether she lived or died. It took tremendous effort to get out of bed each morning, brush her teeth and get dressed and get ready for the day ahead. She felt she was not really living, but merely functioning -- "like a robot."

Finally, she became pregnant but lost the baby due to a miscarriage.

"That just totally devastated me," Toler said.

Shortly after that experience, she recalled a prayer her husband uttered in desperation, begging God to bring peace and healing to their home: "Lord, you have got to do something, one way or another."

Two months later, Toler said, "The Lord worked a miracle in our lives. He gave us a 5-week-old baby to adopt."

The couple believed the child was the answer to their prayers, but Toler said her "maternal instincts never kicked in." Her husband would get up at night to hold and feed the baby.

"I couldn't relate to him as my own child," she said. "I wouldn't allow him to fulfill my need to be a mother."

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Through a fog of depression and unhappiness, Toler began attending South Kansas City Baptist Church, where her sister-in-law was a member. Joining a women's Bible study group there, she found acceptance and longed to unburden herself to the group. But she held back. "I felt like I had some kind of plague. I didn't want to share with them about my past."

Slowly, Toler said, she began to feel Jesus' love through the women in the Bible study and she discipleship training that began to "soak in." She made a profession of faith in Christ and sought God's forgiveness for her past.

Her struggles weren't over. "Even though I was in church, I continued to feel depression," she recalled. "I needed some kind of release."

Toler felt she had hit rock bottom when she became pregnant again, then lost the baby through a second miscarriage.

One evening, she couldn't sleep and out of desperation she picked up her Bible and read Isaiah 54: "Sing, O barren one, who did not bear. . . . Fear not, for you will not be put to shame. . . . For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit. . . . with everlasting love I will have compassion on you."

Toler felt as if God were speaking directly to her, urging her to let go of her feelings of grief and shame, to take hold of the love he freely offered her.

When she next attended the woman's Bible study she told the group she felt God wanted her to share with them. Through tears, she told them of her abortion experiences, of her recurring depression and feelings of worthlessness, of her difficulty in accepting her adopted son as her own child.

She was overwhelmed as the women responded to her story with love, support and encouragement. "These Christian women just loved on me!" she related. "I finally realized that what I've experienced is not some kind of plague. What Satan meant for evil, God used to bring about something good."

About a year later, she was watching the program "Something Beautiful" on a Kansas City-area cable television station and saw Mary Hurd being interviewed. Hurd was talking about an abortion recovery group that would soon be launched by First Calvary Baptist Church, Kansas City. During the interview, Hurd quoted Isaiah 54.

As she listened, Toler felt even more strongly God was speaking to her through that Scripture.

Toler became a member of HOPE, the abortion recovery group sponsored by First Calvary and facilitated by Hurd. There, through discussions with other women experiencing post-abortion syndrome, she found others who could identify with her journey through years of depression, anger and pain.

She began to let go of those crippling emotions and took hold of the love and forgiveness of God. The group helped her experience the sense of closure she needed to go on with her life.

"Now I look at my husband and my son, and I see that they are God's gifts of love to me," Toler said, her voice breaking with emotion.

"For so long," she continued, "I believed the lies of Satan -- that I was a horrible person not worthy of being loved. But God has shown me that he created me in his image and that he loves me. He has given me my heart's desire by giving me a child. I may not have received him in the way I thought I would, but then, God tells us, 'My thoughts aren't your thoughts and my ways aren't your ways.' "

One day, two years ago, Toler shared with some of the women at South Kansas City Baptist Church her deep desire to become pregnant.

"Only one of those women completely understood the depth of my prayer request," she said. "She was a single woman facing a crisis pregnancy."

Toler told her, "I wish I were in your place and could make the decision to keep that child."

Weeks later, that expectant mother told church members Toler's testimony contributed to her decision not to have an abortion.

"That made me forget all my pain," said Toler, now a member of Birchwood Baptist Church, Independence, Mo. "Now when I see that little baby, I am reminded of the awesome power of God to break the hold of evil in our lives.

"Satan comes to kill and destroy, but God gives life abundantly and he has given life back to me.

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Virginia contributions alone  
proposed as messenger basis

By Robert Dilday

Baptist Press  
10/19/94

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Church affiliation with the Baptist General Association of Virginia will be based on contributions to Virginia causes alone, if a proposed constitutional amendment is accepted at the BGAV annual meeting Nov. 15-16.

The recommended constitutional change was approved by the Virginia Baptist general board during its Oct. 4-5 meeting in Richmond, Va.

Currently Virginia Baptist churches qualify for messengers to the BGAV meeting on the basis of gifts to the total BGAV budget, which funds state, national and international ministries -- including the Southern Baptist Convention's Cooperative Program unified budget -- and to the annual state missions offering.

A gift in any amount qualifies a church for two messengers, \$500 for three and \$1,500 for four. Additional messengers -- to a maximum of 15 -- may be obtained for each additional \$1,000.

Under the proposed change, which was recommended by the general board's executive committee, qualification would be based exclusively on contributions to that portion of the budget which funds Virginia ministries. Gifts to the state missions offering, which also supports Virginia ministries, would still qualify a church for messengers.

The proposed change reduces the amount of money necessary to qualify: \$300 for two messengers, \$900 for four and \$600 for each additional up the maximum of 15.

Leaders said the lower amounts would keep smaller churches from being disenfranchised, since the larger figures represented gifts to both state and world causes. Smaller churches may have found it difficult to provide the larger gifts to Virginia causes alone.

Executive committee members offered no rationale for the constitutional change itself, which was approved by the board without debate or apparent dissent. However, in the executive committee session the day before, proponents said the change would give a greater voice to churches which contribute most to Virginia Baptist ministries. Others warned it could reduce contributions to state causes.

The suggestion to reduce the amount of money necessary to qualify for messengers was subsequently adopted.

The recommendation cleared the executive committee on a 7-4 vote.

The change is likely to be seen by some observers as reaction to the growing number of conservative churches directing their money away from the BGAV and toward the Southern Baptist Convention. That action in turn is a reaction to what conservative churches say is a weakening of ties between the SBC and the BGAV.

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Director of admissions  
named at Southern Seminary

Baptist Press  
10/19/94

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Richard J. Melson, an assistant director of admissions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1992, has been promoted to director of admissions at the Louisville, Ky., school.

In his new role, Melson will oversee the seminary's nationwide student recruitment efforts as well as its admissions procedures.

The 26-year-old Dayton, Ohio, native holds the bachelor of arts degree from Murray State University, Murray, Ky. He is completing requirements for the master of church music degree at Southern Seminary.

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Melson has served on the staffs of Southern Baptist churches in Kentucky and Ohio. He is married to the former Tammy Lowry of Dayton, who also works at the seminary.

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**Bill Mitchell, leader  
in Jewish ministry, dies**

**Baptist Press  
10/19/94**

ATLANTA (BP)--Bill Mitchell, an interfaith witness leader with Jewish people for more than 20 years, died Oct. 17 in Louisville, Ky. Funeral services were scheduled for Oct. 20 in Louisville.

Mitchell, 82, was director of Jewish evangelism for Union Baptist Association in Houston for two years before joining the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board staff in 1956 as superintendent of Jewish work. At his retirement in 1977, he was associate director of the HMB's interfaith witness department.

After retiring, Mitchell frequently spoke during world missions conferences and revivals.

Born in Louisville, Mitchell graduated from the University of Louisville; Greenville College in Greenville, Ill.; and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

He is survived by his wife, Claudia, of Louisville.

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