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WMU focuses on God's call, inspirational testimonies

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Arkansas Baptist, Baptist New Mexican and Word & Way

PHOENIX—"Survivor" could have been the theme of this year's annual meeting of Woman's Missionary Union, but viewers of the popular TV show would have found a message of faith rather than fear on this stage.

Gathered in Phoenix prior to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting, WMU members heard testimonies from a breast cancer survivor, a survivor of a shooting in a mission hospital and a former missionary who survived her husband's death at a young age.

The women also celebrated the 90th anniversary of Girls in Action, the mission organization for pre-teen girls, and re-elected Janet Hoffman as president and Yolanda Calderon as recording secretary.

WMU Executive Director Wanda Lee announced a new GA Alumnae of Distinction Award named in memory of Martha Myers, one of three Southern Baptist missionaries slain at the Baptist hospital in Jibla, Yemen, Dec. 30. The award will be given annually to a GA who exhibits a missions lifestyle.

Mission worker Don Caswell, who was wounded by the gunman in Yemen,

and his wife, Teri, testified of their call to return to Yemen.

Caswell told how the gunman entered the pharmacy where he was at work and fired three shots, two of which wounded him. He did not know if he would live or die, he said, but in those moments, God clearly revealed several things.

First, Caswell said, he became aware that God is sovereign and is in control. He felt God's presence and the assurance of his final destination, and said, and he realized surrender to God must occur daily.

God's grace is always sufficient, he said. "The times we are in the biggest storms and trials are the times we draw closer to God and he draws closer to us. He gives us peace through the Holy Spirit. It was like God wrapped his arms around me and gave me a feeling of peace and comfort."

Caswell said he remembers telling God, "I'm ready if you want to take me."

Mrs. Caswell told of their initial call to go to Yemen as mission volunteers. She admitted that they struggled with going to a difficult and dangerous location. However, God spoke to her through Luke 5, a record of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his admonition to love enemies.

After their ordeal, and as her husband began to heal, they struggled again with God's will for them, she said. God spoke to her again through Luke 6:27, which admonishes that worry cannot add a single hour to life.

"On Aug. 1, we plan to go back to Yemen," she said. "By his grace and mercy, we will stand. God will walk us through. He has proven himself to us."

Brenda Ladun, a TV news anchor in Birmingham, Ala., and author of "Getting Better, Not Bitter," said the day she learned she had breast cancer was the worst day of her life.

But God turned it into a blessing, she added. God used cancer, “a terrible, despicable thing,” to bring her to her knees, thanking God for all God had done in her life.

“The only thing we need in our lives is the Lord Jesus Christ,” Ladun said. “God took the worst day of my life and made it the best day of my life. I learned I'm not in control anymore. God is in control.”

When she noticed a lump on her breast, her husband encouraged her to get it checked out, she said, encouraging the women to get a medical exam at the first sign of a lump or any other irregularity.

While performing her mastectomy, the doctor discovered the cancer was worse than he had expected, requiring a double mastectomy. Then came chemotherapy and the resultant loss of hair, a difficult proposition for a TV personality.

Her husband shaved her head, an experience she said drew them closer than ever before. Her son gathered her hair up in a plastic bag to take to show and tell. Then the family went out for pizza and celebrated life.

“Hair really isn't that important,” Ladun said. “Prayer is important. Faith in God is important.”

Her young children showed maturity and wisdom during the family's trauma, she said.

“Angels will take care of you,” her daughter told her.

“I feel God's arms around us right now,” her son said.

“Together we fielded one of life's curve balls,” Ladun said. “I'm going to give God the glory ... I am in remission. God gave me every single thing I needed to pull me through.”

Christina Beatty Olson, whose missionary husband, Charles, addressed the SBC annual two years ago before dying of cancer, told the God likes happy endings.

After the pain and grief of losing her husband, she was not looking for a happy ending, she admitted. But God placed in her path a missionary whose wife had died. The two began to commiserate and console each other's grief.

"With all the pain we had both experienced, God gave each of us someone who truly understood," she said.

They married in December, blending their eight children into a new family. Now, they believe God has called them to return to North Africa and the Middle East as missionaries.

"God's goal is not about making us happy," she said. "It is not about us. It's about him. His plan, through our pain and our sorrow and our joy, is to see people all around the world come to know him. His plan is to bring glory to himself."

Testimonies highlighted each of the WMU annual meeting's four general sessions. Among them:

Sandy Wisdom-Martin, executive director of Illinois WMU, told of leading a 15-woman team to Ghana to build homes for the needy.

- ♦ Lucy Driggers, who serves with her husband, Larry, International Mission Board associate for West Africa, traced her pilgrimage from her call to missions as a GA at age 12 through various places of service. "Don't park your car beside the road," she said. "Keep going down that winding road" with God.

- ♦ A missionary working among Muslims in Southeast Asia told of his own

pilgrimage of faith as a college student, learning to disciple others, becoming a summer missionary in Branson, Mo., and later serving a missionary journeyman to Aberdeen, Scotland. In the work he and his wife have done among Muslims, they have seen God do "amazing things," he said.

- ◆ Gihwang and Hye Sun Shin of Federal Way, Wash., told of their call to reach other Korean-Americans for Christ by working with Korean churches, opening their home to Korean neighbors and praying for opportunities to share God's love.

In her address, WMU President Janet Hoffman recounted the call of Samuel, Saul and Moses to illustrate both the differences and similarities in God's call to different people.

God's call comes in different places and in different ways, she said, noting that call is always unique and specific and is "empowered by his Spirit."

"God is calling," she said. "While the souls of men are dying, the Master calls for you."

Debra Berry, a ministry consultant for national WMU, addressed aspects of the conference theme during each session.

She urged those present to consider Mary of Bethany, who anointed the feet of Jesus with perfume.

Mary's love was "extravagant," Berry said, noting the perfume she poured on Jesus would cost more than \$20,000 today. "She was willing to move beyond the minimum to give the maximum to God."

In another session, Berry used the story of Timothy's heritage to illustrate how God calls families to missions. "Timothy was strong in the faith because he had a strong foundation through the fires of ministry started in

the home by his mother, Lois, and his grandmother, Eunice.

“What is the best gift we can give our children?” she asked. “It is more valuable than anything Bill Gates can give his children. We can give them the gift of life eternal and a life with purpose.”