

WMU focuses attention on passion for God's mission_62705

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Passion for God's mission filled 1,400 Baptist women gathered at First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tenn., for the annual meeting of Woman's Missionary Union, June 19-20.

With a theme of "Pass on the Passion," WMU members heard testimonies and challenges from missionaries, agency heads and WMU leaders during the two-day meeting.

Arkansas missionary Diana Lewis shared her passion for those who live in poverty and for matching people in the pews with mission opportunities in their own back yards.

"God has given us in Arkansas a passion for those in our state who are lost without a Savior," Lewis said. "God's desire is for all of them to know Him."

Janet Hoffman, outgoing WMU president, joins in singing as WMU meets at First Baptist Church Nashville. (Photo by Justin Veneman)

Lewis told of a volunteer who reached an 89-year-old man through the Mississippi River Ministry. If she and 350 other volunteers had not gone that day, Lewis said, “that 89-year-old man and 21 other people would not be joining us in heaven.”

Rebekah Naylor, a missionary surgeon to India for more than 30 years, described the satisfaction she has ministering to people through Bangalore Baptist Hospital and in church planting.

With almost 1.1 billion people, predominantly Hindu and Muslim, India is the world’s second largest nation and its largest democracy, Naylor said.

“God planted in my heart a passion for the people of India,” Naylor said. God answered prayer in marvelous ways, ultimately giving Naylor management responsibility for the hospital. In that role she fostered an environment where doctors and staff prayed regularly and shared their

faith freely.

“What is passion?” she asked. “That for which you are willing to sacrifice anything, even your life. ... Perhaps my greatest joy comes from being a partner in church planting.”

West Virginia missionary Debbie Cannada explained how she and her husband, Norman, reach out to non-Christians, welcoming sinners as they are. “We’re fishers of men,” she said. “You catch ‘em. He’ll clean ‘em!”

Southern Baptist worker Carrie McDonnall, whose husband, David, was killed in a terrorist attack in Iraq just over a year ago, spoke of the many opportunities God has given her to glorify him since the attack, which also took the lives of three other Southern Baptist humanitarian workers.

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Acknowledging that the past year has been a time of “recovering physically and learning to live with grief,” McDonnall emphasized, “We are all called to glorify our Lord.”

She said she would have been “just fine” remaining one of the many “nameless, faceless” people on the WMU’s prayer list. But God had something else in mind, she said. “God will be exalted ... and His glory will fill the whole earth.”

Outgoing WMU President Janet Hoffman of Farmersville, La., challenged participants to have a passion for missions and to pass it on to the next generation. A passion for missions is always only one generation away from being extinguished or from explosive growth, she added.

Hoffman urged the women to fan the spark in their hearts for God’s mission. “Stir it up daily in your intimate time with Christ, and pass it on.”

In a session emphasizing inner-city ministry, leaders of First Baptist Church of Nashville explained that they purposefully decided to stay in the inner city and aggressively minister to inner city needs.

Church members Linda Leathers and Becky Sumrall spoke of their work through the church’s Downtown Ministry Center. Leathers described their ministry to women released from prison, helping them avoid returning to the dysfunctional relationships and environments they knew before.

“Life can be different for them through Christ’s love and grace,” Leathers said “They are not bad women. They are women who made bad choices.”

Leathers and other volunteers also help the women through Christian Women’s Job Corp, individual and group counseling, GED programs and job placement.

More than 400 women have completed the jobs corps program, including

homeless women and women from the exotic dancing industry, according to Sumrall, who serves as the church's coordinator.

One woman helped through the ministry shared how the program enabled her to overcome an eating disorder and other lifestyle issues.

"I called out to God for courage and strength," she told the crowd. "I'm a whole person now, and that's a beautiful thing."

First Baptist Pastor Frank Lewis praised "100 wild praying women" who met regularly to pray for the inner city. From that sprung the Downtown Ministry Center for women in crisis.

"It would be so much easier to put a for sale sign on Seventh and Broadway and move out," Lewis said. "But you know what? God called us to be here. ... We are committed to be here."

Kaye Miller of Immanuel Baptist Church of Little Rock, Ark., was elected president of Woman's Missionary Union during the meeting. Miller, president of the Arkansas WMU since 2002, is the daughter of Harland and Jo Willis, who were medical missionaries to Thailand.

Receiving the gavel from Hoffman, Miller said. "My missions heritage has prepared me for this day."

Miller's father closed the session by praying in the Thai language, which Kay Miller described as her family's "heart language."

In WMU's structure, presidents of the state organizations serve as vice-presidents on the national level. Kathy Hillman of Waco was re-elected as recording secretary.

During her report to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting June 21 in Nashville, Lee announced that the WMU Executive Board set the 2006 Lottie Moon Christmas Offering goal at \$150 million and the 2007

Annie Armstrong Easter Offering goal at \$57 million. Lee also recognized Hoffman for her five years of service as president and announced Miller's election.

In other action at the WMU annual meeting:

— Nancy Fountain Carroll, a missions leader from Bethlehem Baptist Church of East Dublin, Ga., was named the 2006 recipient of the Martha Myers GA Alumnae of Distinction Award. The award recognizes a leader whose life was transformed through WMU children's and youth missions programs and who now models a missions lifestyle. The award was named in honor of Martha Myers, a missionary physician who invested more than two decades of her life at Jibla Hospital in Yemen before she was killed by a terrorist in December 2002.

— Linda Leathers of First Baptist Church in Nashville received the Dellanna West O'Brien Leadership Award for her work with First Baptist's Downtown Ministry Center, which offers a program of transitional living, mentoring, life skills and job skills for women recently released from prison. The award was named in honor of the retired longtime WMU executive director to recognize women who demonstrate an ability to foster leadership in others and who display potential to become leaders in their community and the world.

— WMU celebrated the 10th anniversary of the WMU Foundation by presenting a plaque of appreciation to foundation president David George.

— Nashville Mayor Bill Purcell welcomed WMU members to the city. He paid homage to WMU's heritage of mission support and education. Purcell concluded by thanking WMU, on behalf of his mother, for the organization's continued support of the Women's Department of the Baptist World Alliance. The Southern Baptist Convention voted in 2004 to withdraw from participation with BWA but WMU, despite its auxiliary

relationship to the SBC, voted to maintain ties with the worldwide Baptist organization.

— Attendees heard words of challenge and encouragement from James Porch, executive director-treasurer of the Tennessee Baptist Convention; Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board; and Robert E. “Bob” Reccord, president of the North American Mission Board. Rankin thanked the national missions organization for its “faithful support and passion for missions” that has enabled Southern Baptists “to reach a lost world together in partnership.” He reported that the past year’s Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions had remained strong, falling slightly short of its record the previous year but almost reaching the \$134 million mark.

— During Wanda Lee’s report to the SBC annual meeting, a messenger from Texas asked why WMU makes it difficult for all state conventions to be able to participate in mission offerings. Specifically, he said, the Southern Baptist Convention of Texas was not sent promotional materials for the offerings. Lee responded that WMU works with all state conventions, state WMU organizations and SBC churches. She said materials were shipped to the Southern Baptist Convention of Texas.

Compiled from reports by Tony Cartledge, John Loudat, William Perkins, Charlie Warren and Bill Webb.