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TENNESSEE--SBC Annual Meeting.

WASHINGTON--Same-sex marriage gains may be awakening citizens.

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Restructuring, presidential vote
highlight New Orleans SBC meeting By Herb Hollinger

Baptist Press
4/2/96

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--The annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention returns to the Superdome in New Orleans June 11-13 with the election of a new president, reports on a major restructuring of the denomination, consideration of a myriad of business items, sermons, music and fellowship.

It will be the 139th session of the nation's largest evangelical body -- which is in its 151st year -- and will mark the ninth time it has met in the Crescent City. The first was in 1877 when 164 messengers were registered and the last was in 1990 when 38,403 messengers were in attendance. Last year in Atlanta for the SBC's 150th anniversary celebration, 20,654 messengers were on hand.

The theme for the 1996 meeting is "If My People ..." taken from 2 Chronicles 7:14, with a different person each session sharing a subject from the familiar Old Testament revival passage.

Messengers will elect a president to succeed Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla., who finishes a second one-year term. The only announced candidate for the non-salaried, largely ceremonial post, but one with important appointive powers, is Tom Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Okla. If elected, Elliff is seen as continuing a denominational direction begun in 1979 called the "conservative resurgence."

Messengers also will get to see the first blueprints of the restructuring of the denomination, called the "Covenant for a New Century," which was approved at last year's annual meeting. A second vote on SBC Bylaw 15, which lists the 19 agencies of the convention, will be taken and, if passed, will reduce the number of agencies to 12 through dissolution or merger of several entities. SBC officials hope to provide messengers with some of the transition plans for the restructuring and some indication of the economies of the new structure.

The opening gavel will be Tuesday, June 11, at 8:30 a.m. and the three-day session will conclude Thursday, June 13, at noon.

In between, messengers and guests will hear reports from all the SBC agencies, vote on a range of business items and resolutions, hear a bevy of sermons and special music and spend time visiting with friends in the Baptist family.

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Major addresses will be heard from Henry; the convention sermon by Ronnie W. Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church, Springdale, Ark.; and the final message by Bill McCartney, founder of Promise Keepers, the fast-growing men's renewal movement across America.

Another highlight is the Wednesday evening presentations by the foreign and home mission boards followed by a "commitment invitation." A special evangelistic blitz of the metropolitan area, called Crossover New Orleans, will precede the convention, as has been the custom for a number of years.

Preceding the annual meeting are a host of satellite meetings, like the Pastors' Conference and the Woman's Missionary Union annual meeting.

The Superdome also will have a unique configuration for the meeting, with a large curtain, from roof to floor, separating the dome's main seating area. Half of the floor will be the exhibits area, with the other half for the meeting itself. SBC officials said the configuration has been tried by other religious groups in the cavernous Superdome and proven effective.

Moderating the six sessions of the annual meeting will be Henry; first vice president Larry W. Wynn, pastor of Hebron Baptist Church, Dacula, Ga.; and second vice president Gary L. Frost, pastor of Rising Start Baptist Church, Youngstown, Ohio.

Leading the music for the meeting are John V. Glover, Jr., convention music director and minister of music, First Baptist Church, Atlanta; Becky Lombard, organist, Dauphin Way Baptist Church, Mobile, Ala.; and Teresa Thomason, pianist, church music department of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, Alexandria.

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(BP) photos mailed to state Baptist newspapers and available upon request from the central office of Baptist Press. This story, the following SBC program and other stories/programs relating to the June 1996 annual meeting of the SBC in New Orleans will be compiled in the library section of SBCNet's Ministry B Forum.

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION
Annual Meeting
June 11-13, 1996
Louisiana Superdome
New Orleans, Louisiana
Theme: " If My People ... "
Scripture: II Chronicles 7:14

Tuesday Morning, June 11

- 8:15 Music for Inspiration -- Adult Choir and Orchestra, John Walker, director, interim minister of music, Summer Grove Baptist Church, Shreveport, La.
- 8:30 Call to Order
Congregational Singing -- John V. Glover, Jr., convention music director, minister of music, First Baptist Church, Atlanta
Prayer -- Bobby D. Brewer, layman, First Baptist Church, Quitman, Miss.
- 8:35 Registration Report and Constitution of Convention -- Lee Porter, SBC registration secretary, retired, Lawrenceville, Ga.
- 8:40 Committee on Order of Business (First Report) -- James W. (Jim) Richards, chairman, director of missions, Northwest Baptist Association, Rogers, Ark.
- 8:45 Welcome -- Leon Hyatt, retired, Pineville, La.
- 8:50 Response -- Tony Rengifo, foreign missionary, Costa Rica
- 8:55 Announcement of Committee on Committees, Credentials, Resolutions, and Tellers
- 9:00 Theme Interpretation - "If My People ... Called by My Name" -- Larry D. Nail, pastor, First Baptist Church, El Dorado Springs, Mo.

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- 9:10 Prayer for Revival -- Tim Lafleur, BSU director, Nichols State University, Thibodaux, La.
- 9:15 Crossover New Orleans -- Darrell W. Robinson, vice president, evangelism, Home Mission Board, Alpharetta, Ga.
- 9:20 Introduction of Motions and Resolutions
- 9:35 Commission on the American Baptist Theological Seminary Report -- Stephen P. Carleton, secretary-treasurer, Nashville, Tenn.
- 9:45 Executive Committee Report (Part 1) -- Morris H. Chapman, president and chief executive officer, Nashville, Tenn.
- 10:40 Southern Baptist Convention Canada Planning Group Report -- Larry L. Lewis, president, Home Mission Board, Alpharetta, Ga.
- 10:45 Denominational Press Report -- Herb Hollinger, vice president for convention news, Executive Committee, Nashville, Tenn.
- 10:55 Woman's Missionary Union Report -- Dellanna W. O'Brien, executive director, Birmingham, Ala.
- 11:05 Congregational Singing -- Ragan M. Vandegriff, III, minister of music, First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla.
- 11:10 Music -- Lightshine, Ragan M. Vandegriff, III, director, First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla.
Kate (Kitty) Henry Campbell, soloist, songwriter, Nashville, Tenn.
- 11:20 President's Address -- James B. (Jim) Henry, SBC president, pastor, First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla.
- 12:00 Benediction -- Joe Gebhardt, layman, Two Rivers Baptist Church, Nashville, Tenn.

Tuesday Afternoon, June 11

- 1:00 Music for Inspiration -- The Centurymen, Buryl Red, director, ministers of music of the Southern Baptist Convention
- 1:20 Congregational Singing -- Price Harris, music evangelist, Shreveport, La.
- 1:25 Theme Interpretation - "If My People ... Humble Themselves" -- Ron Dunn, evangelist, Irving, Texas
- 1:35 Prayer for Revival -- Daniel Gage, evangelist, Houston
- 1:40 Business
Committee on Order of Business (Second Report) -- James W. (Jim) Richards
Introduction of Motions and Resolutions
- 1:50 Annuity Board Report -- Paul W. Powell, president, Dallas
- 2:00 Christian Life Commission Report -- Richard D. Land, president, Nashville, Tenn.
- 2:10 Congregational Singing -- Danny Martinez, minister of music, Immanuel Baptist Church, Highland, Calif.
- 2:15 Committee on Nominations Report -- Ronnie W. Rogers, chairman, pastor, Lakeside Baptist Church, Hot Springs, Ark.
- 2:25 Messenger Information Survey -- David W. Atchison, SBC recording secretary, director, Turning Point Ministries, Franklin, Tenn.
- 2:35 Election of Officers (First)
- 2:50 Executive Committee Report (Part 2) -- Morris H. Chapman
- 3:50 Bold Mission Thrust Report -- Ernest E. Mosley, executive vice president, Executive Committee, Nashville, Tenn.
- 4:00 Congregational Singing -- Richard (Dick) Thomassian, minister of music, Whitesburg Baptist Church, Huntsville, Ala.
- 4:05 Committee on Committees Report
- 4:15 Introduction of Motions and Resolutions
- 4:30 Election of Officers (Second)
- 4:45 Benediction -- Larry D. Reagan, pastor, Hill Station Baptist Church, Goshen, Ohio

Tuesday Evening, June 11

- 6:00 Music for Inspiration -- Marshall Kellam, music evangelist, Louisville, Ky.
Friends IV, gospel quartet, Nashville, Tenn.
- 6:20 Congregational Singing -- Mark Blankenship, director, music department, Sunday School Board, Nashville, Tenn.
- 6:25 Theme Interpretation - "If My People ... Pray" -- Donald Whitney, assistant professor of spiritual formation, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Mo.
- 6:35 Prayer for Revival -- David Clark, layman, South Oaks Baptist Church, Baton Rouge, La.
- 6:40 Brotherhood Commission Report -- James D. Williams, president, Memphis, Tenn.
- 6:50 Election of Officers (Third)
- 7:00 Sunday School Board Report -- James T. Draper, Jr., president, Nashville, Tenn.
- 7:10 Sunday School Board Presentation
- 7:50 Congregational Singing -- Rob Hewell, director, church music ministries, Arkansas Baptist Convention, Little Rock, Ark.
- 7:55 Committee on Order of Business (Third Report) -- James W. (Jim) Richards
- 8:00 Theme Interpretation - "If My People ... Seek" -- Don McMinn, professional associate, Intimate Life Ministries, Irving, Texas
- 8:10 Previously Scheduled Business and Introduction of Motions and Resolutions
- 8:15 Denominational Calendar Committee Report -- Wade Burleson, chairman, pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Enid, Okla.
- 8:25 Benediction -- Richard Vera, pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church at Riverside, Denver

Wednesday Morning, June 12

- 8:30 Music for Inspiration -- New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary Chorus, H. Leroy Yarbrough, director, professor of choral conducting, New Orleans Seminary, New Orleans
- 8:40 Congregational Singing -- Byron Johnson, music director, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans
- 8:45 Introduction of Local Arrangements Committee -- John R. (Jack) Wilkerson, vice president for business and finance, Executive Committee, Nashville, Tenn.
- 8:50 Theme Interpretation - "If My People ... Turn" -- H. Paul Pressler, layman, First Baptist Church, Houston
- 9:00 Prayer for Revival -- Joe Strahan, pastor, Northside Baptist Church, Vicksburg, Miss.
- 9:05 Election of Officers (Fourth)
- 9:10 Radio and Television Commission Report -- Jack B. Johnson, president, Fort Worth, Texas
- 9:20 Congregational Singing -- H. Leroy Yarbrough
- 9:25 Seminary Presentation and Reports -- William O. Crews, president, Golden Gate Seminary, Mill Valley, Calif.; Mark T. Coppenger, president, Midwestern Seminary, Kansas City, Mo.; Charles S. Kelley, president, New Orleans Seminary, New Orleans; Paige Patterson, president, Southeastern Seminary, Wake Forest, N.C.; R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president, Southern Seminary, Louisville, Ky.; Kenneth S. Hemphill, president, Southwestern Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas
- 10:25 Congregational Singing -- William J. Reynolds, distinguished professor of church music, Southwestern Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas

- 10:30 Business
Committee on Order of Business (Fourth Report) -- James W. (Jim) Richards
Introduction of Motions (Last Time)
- 10:40 Previously Scheduled Business
- 11:00 Committee on Resolutions (First Report)
- 11:05 Election of Officers (Fifth)
- 11:10 Music -- Awaken America Singers and Band, Buster Pray, director, associate pastor of worship ministries, First Baptist Church, Springdale, Ark.
- 11:20 Convention Sermon -- Ronnie W. Floyd, pastor, First Baptist Church, Springdale, Ark.
- 12:00 Benediction -- Barbara O'Chester, director, Great Hills Ladies Retreat Ministry, Austin, Texas

No Wednesday Afternoon Session

Wednesday Evening, June 12

- 6:00 Music for Inspiration -- Sanctuary Choir and Orchestra, Larry Black, director, minister of music, First Baptist Church, Jackson, Miss.
- 6:25 Congregational Singing -- Bill Cox, coordinator of volunteers in evangelism, Home Mission Board, Alpharetta, Ga.
- 6:30 Business
Committee on Order of Business (Fifth Report) -- James W. (Jim) Richards
Election of 1997 Convention Sermon Preacher, Alternate, and Music Director
- 6:35 Home Mission Board Report -- Larry L. Lewis, president, Alpharetta, Ga.
- 6:45 Home Mission Board Presentation
- 7:05 Congregational Singing -- John S. Conrad, Foreign Mission Board, music ministry, Korea
- 7:10 Baptist World Alliance Report -- Denton Lotz, general secretary, McLean, Va.
- 7:20 Foreign Mission Board Report -- Jerry A. Rankin, president, Richmond, Va.
- 7:30 Zambian Acapella, singing ensemble, Zambia
- 7:40 Foreign Mission Board Presentation
- 8:55 Commitment Invitation
- 9:00 Benediction -- June Cosby, layperson, Woodland Park Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tenn.

Thursday Morning, June 13

- 8:30 Music for Inspiration -- Tim Kaufman, music evangelist, Winter Springs, Fla.
Gwen "Ms. Chocolate" Williams, soloist, New Orleans
- 8:50 Congregational Singing -- Carlo Sciara, Jr., bivocational music director, Faith Baptist Church, Clayton, La.
- 8:55 Theme Interpretation - "If My People ... Then I Will" -- John Avant, pastor, Coggins Avenue Baptist Church, Brownwood, Texas
- 9:05 Prayer for Revival -- Clark Fooshee, bivocational pastor, Sweet Spirit Baptist Church, San Antonio, Texas
- 9:10 Historical Commission Report -- Slayden Yarbrough, interim executive director, Nashville, Tenn.
- 9:20 Memorial Service -- W.A. Criswell, senior pastor emeritus, First Baptist Church, Dallas
- 9:25 Education Commission Report -- Stephen P. Carleton, executive director, Nashville, Tenn.

- 9:35 Southern Baptist Foundation Report -- Hollis E. Johnson, Ill., president, Nashville, Tenn.
- 9:45 Stewardship Commission Report -- Ronald E. Chandler, president, Nashville, Tenn.
- 9:55 American Bible Society Report -- Eugene Habecker, president, New York
- 10:05 Congregational Singing -- Jim Watson, minister of music, Germantown Baptist Church, Germantown, Tenn.
- 10:10 Introduction of Past Presidents -- James B. (Jim) Henry
- 10:15 Presentation of Outgoing SBC Officers -- Morris H. Chapman
- 10:20 Presentation of Newly Elected SBC Officers -- James B. (Jim) Henry
- 10:25 Previously Scheduled Business
- 10:35 Committee on Resolutions (Final Report)
- 10:50 Congregational Singing -- John V. Glover, Jr.
- 10:55 Music -- Greater Vision, gospel trio, Morristown, Tenn.
- 11:05 Testimony -- Rick Scarborough, pastor, First Baptist Church, Pearland, Texas
- 11:20 Message -- Bill McCartney, founder, Promise Keepers, Denver, Colo.
- 12:00 Prayer for Revival and Benediction -- Frank Whitaker, pastor, First Baptist Church, Lake Wales, Fla.

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**Same-sex marriage gains
may be awakening citizens**

By Tom Strobe

Baptist Press
4/2/96

WASHINGTON (BP)--March 25, 1996, will not be remembered as a red-letter day for the biblical and traditional view of marriage.

Not only did Colorado Gov. Roy Romer become the first governor to veto a bill which would have prohibited same-sex marriages, but the mayor of San Francisco officiated at a "wedding" for 175 homosexual couples on the first day of the city's same-sex marriage ordinance.

The news may not be all bad for opponents of same-sex marriage, however. "Monday was a wake-up call," said Robert Knight, director of cultural studies at the Family Research Council in Washington, "but it was only the latest in a series of events that show how seriously the homosexual rights movement takes this issue. None of this is definitive, because people all over America are waking up to the threat and are responding."

As an example, Knight cited a survey reported March 29 which showed 74 percent of Hawaiians oppose same-sex marriage, an increase of 3 percent from the month before, he said. In a case going to trial this summer, a Hawaii court is expected to declare homosexual marriage constitutional.

"So same-sex marriage is like a used car -- the closer you look at it, the uglier it gets," Knight said. "It sounds like an extension of tolerance at first, but upon closer look it is revealed as a major power play by homosexual activists to harness government to force the affirmation of homosexuality on an unwilling populace."

"I think the homosexual activists may have triggered a reaction that they had not foreseen in that their arguments for tolerance may fall apart when people realize the threat their agenda poses to the larger moral order. It's one thing to say, 'Live and let live;' it's another to radically define marriage and family. So I am actually encouraged."

The danger remains, however, that homosexual marriage will be legalized in Hawaii. If such a union is legal in Hawaii, it likely would be considered legal in all other states, unless a state is able to show it has a compelling policy opposing such unions.

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The Hawaii case has prompted action not only in the Colorado legislature but in several others. South Dakota, Utah and Idaho have enacted laws either denying recognition to such out-of-state marriages or limiting marriage to a union between a man and a woman. A similar bill is awaiting the governor's signature in Georgia. Legislators in about two dozen other states have attempted or are considering such legislation.

A bill limiting marriage to a man and a woman may be introduced in Congress as early as May, Knight said.

If same-sex marriage is legalized, it will not only legitimate homosexual relationships and harm heterosexual marriages, but it "will further make it virtually impossible to maintain legal and societal restrictions on homosexual and lesbian couples' attempts to adopt children," said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"The attempt to legalize and thus legitimate same-sex marriage is a dire threat to the sanctity of marriage and the family," he said. "We as a society, as every society in Western civilization has always done, have both the right and the responsibility to define, prefer and promote male-female marriage as the norm and the model for adults as well as for our children.

"We should never underestimate the power of law in American society to legitimate behavior. Vast multitudes of Americans, unfortunately, equate what's legal with what's right. That's a truly impoverished standard of morality but a very prevalent one in our country. Same-sex marriage in such a society would be an unmitigated moral, social and societal disaster.

"At present, most polling data show that at least two-thirds of Americans are opposed to same-sex marriage," Land said. "If the radical homosexual rights movement succeeds in their efforts to raise homosexual relationship to the level of legalized marriage, that percentage will eventually tilt dramatically in the other direction. The homosexual movement understands this. Evangelicals should understand it as well and oppose this initiative with all the means at their disposal in every state and locality of our nation."

In Colorado, Romer, a Democrat, said he vetoed the legislation because it would have placed same-sex marriages on the state's list of prohibited marriages, which include bigamy and incest, The Washington Times reported. He called the bill "mean-spirited," saying, "We can reaffirm our commitment to marriage between a man and a woman without condemning those who have different relationships," according to The Times.

He would sign legislation which does not explicitly ban homosexual marriages but says the "strong public policy of Colorado (is) that marriage shall only be between a man and woman. It is the policy of Colorado only to recognize marriages from other states that are between a man and a woman," Romer said, according to The Times. He also said the bill must establish a commission to review "the legal and policy issues involved in recognizing same-sex relationships," the paper reported.

Opponents of homosexual marriage said Romer's action is an attempt to compromise where none is possible, The Times reported.

San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown conducted a mass ceremony on the inaugural day of an ordinance which provides homosexual couples with a right to a city-approved marriage just like heterosexual couples. The city also issues marriage certificates, though they are symbolic. California does not recognize homosexual marriages.

In another development, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the largest group of Reform Jewish clerics, adopted a resolution March 28 endorsing legal homosexual marriages.

**Plateaued, declining church growth
is pervasive, pesky, sneaky illness**

By Terri Lackey

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--A pesky illness is pervading Southern Baptist churches, but it's nothing a good dose of innovation can't cure, a church consultant said.

Infecting nearly 70 percent of Southern Baptist congregations, this sneaky ailment is called plateaued or declining growth, and often churches are not aware they've contracted it until atrophy begins to set in, according to Ralph Hodge, a contemporary church specialist for the Baptist Sunday School Board's discipleship and family development division.

Hodge has become one of the BSSB physicians for plateaued churches. He said he gets calls daily from church leaders across the country asking him to assess their condition.

"Some say, 'We don't know what to do here. We don't know if we need to do anything. Who could help us?'" Hodge said.

Those who aren't sure they are ailing simply call for a checkup and consultation, he said.

Feeling healthy is the foe of most plateaued churches, Hodge acknowledged. Churches that feel successful or healthy have difficulty acknowledging they need to make changes.

"Unlike other evangelistic denominations, Southern Baptists have continued to expand in numbers and have large successes. The fear I have is that Peter Drucker's principle for businesses can be applied to us. Success may be our greatest enemy.

"When churches feel successful, the ideas that got them where they are seem to be so right to them that they don't think they need to make any changes."

Hodge said a church recently called him for planning consultation. The pastor had resigned and the church wanted to assess its goals before seeking a new pastor.

"Eventually, after much dialog with them, they diagnosed their own disease. They said, 'Gee, we're plateaued.' And they said it with a big lump in their throat.

"Churches just plan and program from day to day, and they don't really look back enough to see what they are doing," Hodge said.

He gave the example of a church he visits often, yet always misses the turn into the street on which it is located.

"It's one of the most beautiful and imposing buildings you've ever seen, but I always take the wrong street because of an ambiguous street sign that has been there for 40 years. Every time I go, I have to stop at a nearby McDonald's and ask directions."

Hodge said that type of behavior -- "a mind-set that everybody knows where we are" -- is indicative of an attitude of infallibility to cultural changes.

"This is a great church that feels good about itself because it has been an effective community-impacting church for two centuries. But in the past two years the community around the church has tripled and the church membership has stayed the same.

"They are still the biggest church in town, and they are gaining some people, but they are primarily swelling.

"Swelling," Hodge explained, "is gaining new members from other churches." He calls true growth "kingdom growth or reaching lost people that you bring into the kingdom of God."

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Hodge said churches not growing have plenty of company. According to 1994 figures culled from the Southern Baptist annual church profile, 69.7 percent are plateaued or declining. (Of those, 49.5 percent are plateaued and 20.2 percent are declining.) Plateaued churches are congregations with plus or minus 10 percent membership change within a five-year period, and declining churches are congregations with a membership loss greater than 10 percent within a five-year period.

The most common problem Hodge said he sees in churches that have stopped growing is lost focus.

He said one way he can tell if a church's vision is skewed is by looking it up in the yellow pages of the phone book. One church's yellow page announcement gave the century it was founded, just as the sign in front of the church did.

"Essentially that's what they are promoting. On their great big sign out front and right across the top, it tells the year it was founded. And 'Come grow with us' was written way down at the bottom.

Who is that talking to?" he asked.

"What they are doing is enjoying the fruits of those growth years when they were still focused; they are re-reading the best chapter of their life. But if they don't get back on focus, it's going to be a nightmare," Hodge said.

Hodge said when he consults with a church staff, he opens the meeting as if it were a group therapy session.

"It's very conversational. I give them several principles of growth. I just throw these out and that causes conversation. And then I have some questions related to that. For instance, one principle I give them is, 'A church must deliver what it promises.'

"It promises to be a place spiritually connected with God. And when I ask if they are delivering that, boy, they start telling me how they are doing it, and one side of the room starts disagreeing with the other side, and the younger and the older staff members begin disagreeing. And it begins to open up discussion and ideas they had never thought of."

Hodge said following these types of honest dialogues, church staff members begin to realize the barriers that exist between the church world and the unchurched world they are expected to reach.

"Many churches, particularly older churches that have the syndrome of success -- the ones who are now plateaued or declining -- have allowed a lot of cultural barriers to emerge between the lost or unchurched world and them."

Hodge said church leaders must identify the hurts and needs of the unchurched population in their communities and reach out to them in a language they can understand.

"We can't use the Southern Baptist language we are so used to. We have to say, 'Gee, I've got to be more conscious out there with my church sign, with my brochures, how I promote things.'"

Hodge said churches which find their membership plateauing or declining have great potential to "to get back on track" by realigning their focus and realizing the cultural barriers that exist between their church world and the world outside their walls.

"The potential is there to grow a church. Success comes when congregations talk and pray and look at new ways to build their church. If they grow or not, that's in God's hands, but at least they are dialoging and looking at what they need to do to grow."

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(BP) graphic and a resource list to accompany this story are posted in the SBCNet News Room.

**Renewed focus, assimilation
help get, keep church members** **By Terri Lackey**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--If you're lucky enough to be a member of one of the 30.2 percent of Southern Baptist churches that are growing, you are part of a congregation probably doing at least two things right, according to a church consultant.

Focus and effective assimilation are the two most important ways to grow a church, said Ralph Hodge, contemporary church consultant for the Baptist Sunday School Board's discipleship and family development division.

Lost focus is the most common reason established churches quit growing, and poor assimilation is why many lose the new members they do get, Hodge said.

"Focus on lost people is what it takes to reach the unchurched, but once you've reached them, what do you do with them? Assimilation is part of it, you know; there's just more than reaching them."

Established churches that are growing, he said, have not only readjusted their focus, but they are assimilating their new members effectively.

According to 1994 figures culled from the Southern Baptist annual church profile, 30.2 percent are growing. Growing churches are congregations with membership growth greater than 10 percent within a five-year period.

Getting new members involved in church takes sociological strategy, Hodge said.

Most churches Hodge consults with believe themselves to be friendly congregations, he said. When a church touts itself as being friendly, then it had better deliver, he said.

"A church that is friendly promises that this will be a place where you will easily make friends, but not every friendly church makes it easy for you to do that. Most admit, when asked, that it takes a while for new members to break into an established Sunday school class."

Hodge's suggested solution: start new Sunday school and discipleship training classes with the new members.

"New people bond best with new people. That's just social dynamics," he said.

Churches, like society, are made up of small groups of acquaintances, Hodge said, adding that research shows if a person does not bond in a small group within the first two or three months, "then you're not going to see them long."

"A church is not one big, happy family as we like to say. That is absolutely, scientifically untrue. When our church has a special celebration of some kind, we don't all go in there and hug each other.

"We all go into our little pockets -- it's normal. It's more coherent that way. What churches are having to do is realize the 'small group' movement that's been around a long time is now making a new surge across the country."

Although small groups are a re-emerging trend in society, Hodge said they are not new to Southern Baptists.

"Small groups are not an introduction of something new to Southern Baptists; they are an introduction of something new to the rest of the world. But Southern Baptists have so institutionalized our Sunday school and discipleship program structure that when I mention small groups to the churches I consult with, they say, 'No, we don't have that, but we have Sunday school.'"

Consequently, Hodge said, Southern Baptist churches that have quit growing need to re-educate themselves about the effectiveness of small-group structures, while readjusting their focus.

"We have to teach our people to renew the inclusiveness that makes the small group the great structure that it is," Hodge said. "Focus is what it takes to reach these lost people, and once you reach them, you've got to help them fit in."

**Hodge lists principles
for growing churches**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--To assist church leaders in moving toward a church growth mind-set, Ralph Hodge provides a list of principles for building church membership.

Hodge, contemporary church consultant in the Baptist Sunday School Board's discipleship and family development division, consults with leaders of churches with plateaued or declining membership.

He advises:

- Make change a friend. Develop a "culture of change."
- Deliver what you promise.
- Learn to fail fast.
- Write rules that enable people to do things, not stop people from doing things.
- Learn from everybody and everything.
- Structure around relationships.
- Provide for broader training needs.
- Provide practical life application training.
- Provide for skills to overcome today's barriers to effective Christian living.
- Provide for experience and relationship-based learning instead of content learning.
- Provide additional worship times and styles.
- Provide small-group ministry development.
- Provide personal mission opportunities.
- Provide personal spiritual growth opportunities.
- Development of an attitude for evangelism.
- Issue personal invitations to events.
- Appeal to a deeper faith.
- Schedule speakers who address specific needs.
- Provide specific ministries through same-aged, active church people.
- Design an approach that uses accessible secular language.

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**Annuity Board denies
breaking Florida law**

By Keith Hinson

Baptist Press
4/2/96

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--The Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention has denied a charge published in a Jacksonville newspaper that it illegally sold insurance in Florida.

A news story in the March 29 edition of the Florida Times Union indicates the state of Florida launched an investigation after a maintenance worker at First Baptist Church, Plant City, was rejected for health insurance coverage by the Annuity Board.

"During their probe, investigators found that the (Southern) Baptist Convention was not authorized to sell insurance in Florida. ... The investigators recommended filing charges," the article stated.

But Florida insurance commissioner Bill Nelson halted the investigation and decided to support legislation that would "exempt church groups from state insurance regulations," according to the Times-Union.

The story said Nelson's decision came after he met on Feb. 8 with two Florida attorneys representing the Annuity Board: Jim Smith, a former state attorney general, and Brian Ballard, one-time chief of staff for Gov. Bob Martinez.

"The day after the meeting, according to an electronic memo obtained by the Times-Union, his office ordered investigators to stop their probe," the story stated.

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Though the Times-Union writer characterized Smith and Ballard as "prominent lobbyists" for the SBC, they are better described as "legal counsel retained by the Annuity Board to assist in communication with the insurance commissioner and the legislature," said Thomas E. Miller Jr., senior vice president for public relations at the Annuity Board.

Regarding the attorneys' conference with Nelson, Miller said, "The Annuity Board appreciated the opportunity to meet with the Florida insurance commissioner. ... We cooperated fully with the commissioner to assure his office that our coverage is an appropriate, financially stable program that offers excellent protection to pastors and other church employees. ...

"We believe this record of service, along with proof of the stability of our program, was sufficient to satisfy the commissioner that further pursuit of the investigation was not needed," Miller stated.

The Times-Union story said insurance was denied to Duane Diana, maintenance supervisor at the Plant City church, because he "had a mild case of diabetes, treatable by a regulated diet or limited medication."

Ron Churchill, the congregation's pastor, said the application to have Diana covered was made shortly after his employment.

"We applied just after he'd been here the regular time," Churchill told the Florida Baptist Witness. "At some point during that process, he was turned down."

Diana, who was also interviewed by the Witness, said the church is providing health insurance to him as part of his benefits package but is paying higher premiums to another health insurance provider.

People with pre-existing health conditions face a real challenge when it comes to acquiring health coverage, Diana noted.

"It's something that needs to be addressed. ... I don't think diabetics should be alienated from having coverage, even if they do have to pay a little extra," Diana stated. "It's like disregarding that they're even alive in some sense of the word."

Diana was asked what the financial impact would be to other consumers if people with health problems are underwritten for insurance. "I think the person who has the existing condition is going to have to pay a higher rate to start with," he said. "I don't think everybody should have to pay for that one person."

The complaint to the insurance commissioner was based on a "Florida law (that) requires businesses with fewer than 50 employees that offer group insurance to cover all members of the group, regardless of previous health conditions," the Times-Union article suggested.

Miller said the health plan in question is not group insurance. "The newspaper report ... was in error when it said he had applied for group coverage," he said. "He applied for individual coverage in the Personal Security Program (PSP), which always requires underwriting (evidence of good health) for admission."

By contrast, Miller noted, the Annuity Board does have group coverage in the Employer Security Plan (ESP) that is available to "Baptist institutions, agencies and churches with 10 or more employees.

"In the ESP, participation by employees is under group coverage, whereas the PSP provides for individual coverage. ... Underwriting is generally not required for our ESP," Miller stated.

Miller suggested the Annuity Board's practices are in line with other insurance providers.

"It is common in the industry to require underwriting for individual coverage to protect a plan from an intentional selection by sick people, which would create (a) ... devastating claims experience," Miller said.

If the Annuity Board were required to accept all applicants to the PSP, Miller said the results could be disastrous.

"The rates for coverage could skyrocket and send the program into a death spiral," Miller declared, "Our actuaries tell us the individual coverage of the PSP cannot be offered without underwriting, without ultimately resulting in closure of the program."

Miller noted the Annuity Board does not cancel health insurance for PSP participants who have "high or frequent claims."

The Annuity Board's position, Miller said, is "that our plan is not subject to the Florida law. It fails to acknowledge our religious rights under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution to determine for ourselves how our religion is practiced."

"The Florida insurance laws impact our program differently from the programs of other denominations due to our congregational structure," Miller noted. "Southern Baptist churches are free and autonomous. ... Southern Baptists would have to surrender congregational autonomy and submit to a hierarchy that has the power to compel participation. ..."

"I'm sure the legislature never intended to deny a million Florida Baptists their religious liberty," he said. "Florida alone, among the 50 states, is seeking to impose regulations on the Annuity Board's program."

A state senator, John Ostalkiewicz, R-Orlando, had offered to introduce a bill exempting religious organizations from state insurance regulations, but after Ostalkiewicz learned details of the complaint, he indicated that until the Annuity Board agrees to cover every employee who applies for a policy, he won't support a change in the law, the Times-Union story said.

But Miller said legislation is the proper remedy.

"The lawmakers can fix the problem by granting an exemption to church plans like ours that are structured in concert with our religious beliefs and for financial safety and proper service to participants," he said.

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Spring break enthusiasts hear
witness of Baptist students

By Barbara Denman

Baptist Press
4/2/96

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (BP)--Iced Budweisers cooled in a giant tin tub on the boardwalk guarded by a young woman in a bikini. The song "Let's Talk About Sex" by Salt n Pepa blared from large speakers prompting the disc jockey to goad rowdy students into recounting their sexual escapades on the beach.

Down on the boardwalk a crowd offered catcalls and cheers at a couple who took first place in a dirty dancing contest. An endless stream of cars parked on the beach and cruised along the water's edge while riders and sunbathers screamed suggestive comments and popped yet another beer-can top.

Spring break at Daytona Beach lures thousands of college students from Quebec to Chicago to its annual ritual, which also draws "hanger-ons" trying to compete with younger and firmer bodies to recapture their own carefree days of youth and lust.

Scattered throughout this scene, college students wearing modest T-shirts and shorts combed the boardwalk and sidewalks to distribute fliers with offers of free Pancake breakfasts, van rides and a crisis intervention hotline. Some carried clipboards and asked sunbathers and beach walkers to complete surveys designed to lead them to consider their own spiritual condition.

These students came to spring break intent on talking about Jesus instead of sex and offering others the same purpose they have found in their lives.

The efforts of these students from Baptist Student Unions across the country were part of a three-week "BeachReach '96" emphasis designed and implemented by the National Student Ministry of the Baptist Sunday School Board and local associations and churches in Panama City, Clearwater and Daytona Beach.

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The effort brought nearly 800 BSU students from more than 50 college campuses to the Sunshine State to offer activities and services for spring breakers -- and engage them in conversation and ultimately share the gospel. At the conclusion of the three weeks, 20 to 30 students in each location had prayed to receive Christ and four runaways -- including two boys, ages 13 and 14 -- made professions of faiths and asked to be returned home.

In each location, city managers and police were informed of the BeachReachers' efforts. Only the week before the BSU students arrived in Daytona Beach, a Canadian student had been shot and killed in a robbery attempt.

"The police departments and city managers are backing this 100 percent," said Dennis Belz, resort ministry director at the Halifax Baptist Association in Daytona Beach. Officials also seemed pleased that the free van rides during the evening kept drunk students off the roads. "This is bringing some good and stable things to this area," Belz added.

The Daytona Beach group worked out of Calvary Baptist Church on the island and First Baptist Church of Daytona Beach which offered additional resources for the students.

Some BSU students -- especially from Southern Baptist colleges -- were a little shocked at the explicit behavior displayed during spring break. Ron Little, BSU director from the University of Georgia, tried to prepare his group and warned them throughout the week, "Stay in your comfort zone."

But Veronica Stockton from Southeastern Oklahoma State University was not taken aback by the week's festivities. "This is how I was when I was not a Christian," she said. "All the partying and drinking are cries for help. Mine were. My being here is a way to share with them what God has done for me."

Little said he brought 20-plus students to "prepare them for a lifetime of ministry. These students will attempt to grow in ways here they'd never try back home. In two days I've seen folks share their faith who never even shared a testimony."

Getting the gospel message past the many spring break distractions was not easy, Little noted, but results can be measured in different ways. "If it's to provide a listening ear, help a runaway connect with authorities or help people with finances -- that's all a part of the gospel," Little said.

During the first day's pancake breakfast, Josh McGee from Valdosta State University led a student to pray to receive Christ. "It's the first time I actually had someone pray to receive Christ," McGee said, his voice brimming with excitement. "I feel pumped."

McGee said he originally had planned to go to Destin over spring break, but after learning of the BeachReach opportunity and praying, he felt led to participate. "That's what we were committed to do, make disciples," he added.

According to Bob Hartman, director of National Student Ministries who participated in all three BeachReach locations, repetition can be a key to winning spiritually lost people.

His daughter, a student at Murray State University in Kentucky, led a student to the Lord on the final van ride during their last night in Panama City. The young man told her that he had spent all week seeking happiness, but after talking to the BSU students six times during the week, he realized they seemed to be the only truly happy people there, Hartman reported.

Another group witnessed to a young man and prayed that someone would take him to the next step. An encounter with another BSU student later that evening resulted in the young man's profession of faith.

The names and addresses of students who make spiritual decisions are collected and will be sent to the students' campus ministers for follow-up, said Hartman. Names of other tourists will be sent to local Southern Baptist churches in their communities.

Just north of the Daytona Beach pier, a crowd of beachgoers gathered to watch the filming of a segment of the "Baywatch" television show that will feature Daytona Beach's infamous spring break. The shooting took place directly in front of the sunburn unit supplied by the Lake County Baptist Association and staffed by Georgia Baptist volunteers. The location offered BSU students many opportunities to meet and share while onlookers tried to glimpse someone famous.

Behind the unit a volleyball game broke up. Scott Brawner, student minister from Brunswick, Ga., struck up a conversation with one of the players. "He wanted to know more about Christ and what he could do for him." The young man didn't accept the Lord, Brawner reported, but he did allow the BSU students to pray with him.

"This is a chance to witness unlike any other opportunity," Brawner said. "It's literally carrying a light in the middle of darkness. The sun's up during the day, but the sin is so prevalent around here that it blocks out light -- except the light of Christ."

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Students trade transportation,
food for witness opportunities By Stella Anderson

Baptist Press
4/2/96

PANAMA CITY BEACH, Fla. (BP)--When it comes to spending spring break on the beaches of Florida, most college students don't mind dishing out massive amounts of money for food, fun and entertainment. It's just part of the trip.

This year, however, those vacationing in Panama City Beach discovered they could obtain a few things for free.

Transportation, food and entertainment were among the luxuries made available to thousands of spring-breakers visiting the sugar-white beaches in March during "BeachReach '96," an evangelistic thrust sponsored by the National Student Ministries department of the Baptist Sunday School Board and the Florida Baptist Convention. The BeachReach project was the first National Student Ministries outreach event held in Florida.

In Panama City Beach, nearly 400 Baptist Student Union students from 20 colleges, universities and churches took a break from their studies to participate in the evangelistic event to share their faith in Christ with fellow students. They utilized free van rides, pancake breakfasts and entertainment and fun at a "coffeehouse" to ultimately offer the free gift of eternal life.

Gulf Beach Baptist Church in Panama City Beach served as the local host church for the effort. "This being my first time participating in this type ministry, I expected tremendous things to happen and they did," said Rudy Guta, the church's youth minister. The students' youthfulness and willingness have "excited our church members and we are expecting to involve more of our local BSU college students next year," he said.

When Laura Lee Britt, a BSU student from the University of South Florida in Tampa, participated in the Panama City BeachReach project, she discovered that travel to a foreign land isn't necessary to share the gospel. "I had served as summer missionary in Africa last year and saw the tremendous need of people who need Jesus," Britt said. "But participating in the beach project made me realize that we have mission opportunities right here in our own backyard."

The first-time event was an "opportunity to give college students the chance to share the gospel message with their peers in a natural, non-offensive way," said Bob Hartman of the National Student Ministries department and BeachReach director. Each activity "centered around going into the spring break students' world and meeting authentic needs in their lives." From these ministries, the students were able to build a bridge to share Christ naturally and authentically, he said.

All of the BSU students completed six weeks of training involving spiritual growth and sharing their faith in Christ prior to participating in BeachReach.

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"The week of missions and ministry was a tremendous success," said Keith Inman, on-site BeachReach coordinator in Panama City Beach and student minister at Murray State University in Kentucky. "It was a great experience for us as mission-oriented people coming and working together and creating a tremendous network -- all for the same cause."

Most all of the BSU students had never participated in an evangelistic effort of this type, Inman said. "It took the students a while to get prayed-up and to receive courage and strength and to learn that people out there are open and eager to talk about spiritual things," he said.

According to Hartman, National Student Ministries launched the evangelistic project after he attended a similar type event held each year in South Padre Island, Texas. Everyone who hears the words "spring break" thinks of Florida, he said, recounting that, with the thousands of college students visiting Florida beaches, God laid it on his heart to attempt a beach project in Florida.

Each morning during the project, the BSU students served more than 2,000 free breakfasts of pancakes and orange juice to the spring-breakers in the parking lot of Miracle Strip Amusement Park, a popular Panama City Beach hangout. During the meal, provided by the Georgia Baptist disaster relief ministries, the BeachReach students dispersed among the crowd to share the gospel message.

During one pancake breakfast, Joni Hannigan, director of the Baptist Student Union at Indiana University and several BSU students, presented the gospel message to a runaway teenager from the Atlanta area. The teen later made a profession of faith in Christ and was reunited with her parents.

As the daily afternoon sun beamed down on the "miracle strip," the BSU students headed to the beaches, utilizing witnessing surveys and recreational activities including volleyball, sand sculpting and tug-of-war to draw crowds of onlookers. Upon concluding the activities, the students scattered to share the gospel message with their peers.

The nightly less-than-normal weather temperatures didn't chill the spring-breakers' efforts to check out the local Panama City hot spots. Many of them, not wanting the responsibility to operate automobiles, were eager to catch a ride with the numerous church and BSU vans patrolling the beach.

"What's the catch" and "wow" were a few responses voiced by the nearly 4,000 students who took advantage of the free rides nightly from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.

"We just want you guys to have fun and stay alive," said Steve McLemory, a student from South West Oklahoma State University. "There's no catch at all."

According to Inman, many local business establishments helped promote the free service. "Clubs, bars, motels and bartenders distributed hundreds of our yellow cards displaying the phone number for the free rides," he said.

Gulf Beach Baptist Church, near the east end of the beaches, served as a base station for the van rides. Several BSU students staffed the station, equipped with four telephone lines, to receive transportation requests. Other students remained in the church's sanctuary on their knees praying for the van ministry.

After obtaining the location of the spring-breakers and their final destination, the base station telephoned available vans via cellular phones in each van.

Cellular One in Panama City donated the cellular airtime for the week and 16 cellular phones for use by the BeachReach group.

"We realize there are many dangers out on the roads for the college students during spring break, and we think the free rides were a great idea," said Mike Pledger, a sales manger for Cellular One. Donating services "is our way of helping keep them safe and as we seek to become involved in community activities," he said.

Several BSU students joined the passengers to strum up conversations, invite them to the coffeehouse at the Gulf Beach church and ultimately attempt to share the gospel.

The rides were an excellent outreach, said McLemory. "This is totally awesome; I could do this all night."

Diedre McIntosh, a BSU student from University of Kentucky, discovered the van rides were personally rewarding after she shared God's love and forgiveness with a "less than sober" passenger.

"He just wanted to know that someone cared and I was fine with that," said McIntosh. "The guy believed he couldn't be forgiven because of things in his past. He didn't think there was hope, but I assured him that with God's forgiveness he could change his future.

"God used me in his life to let him know that not only I cared, but most importantly God cared, McIntosh said.

In addition to the Gulf Beach church, several other local churches joined in the evangelism project through donations of monetary and needed paper products and prayer support. Fifteen churches hosted the BSU teams during their Wednesday evening service where the students shared "exciting testimonies and experiences about BeachReach," said Julia Rudd, special ministries director for the Northwest Coast Baptist Association.

"I have received several calls from local churches praising the BSU students and the beach project," said Rudd. "They are excited and want to know how their church can be more involved with the ministry."

Rudd called the beach project a "divine appointment." God orchestrated the right students to come down to Panama City Beach and share with their fellow students, she said. The effort resulted in 32 students making professions of faith in Christ and more than 50 rededications.

"Plans are already under way for next year's project, scheduled for two weeks," Inman said. "We are looking forward as many of students returning will bring experience and additional training back next year."

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CORRECTION: In the (BP) story, "Ga. church criticized for request that infant be buried elsewhere," dated 4/1/96, please replace the 23rd paragraph's second sentence with the following: He and Lewis said they were confident a black person would not be denied the opportunity to attend or join the church solely on the basis of race.

Thanks,
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