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KENTUCKY--Mohler: Neglect of Scripture afflicts today's preaching.

CALENDAR

TENNESSEE--Baptist Sunday School Board trustees, Feb. 5-7, Nashville.

One-fifth of new churches

lost to SBC within 14 years

By David Winfrey

ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)--One-fifth of all Southern Baptist church starts are gone from the convention's records before their 14th birthday, according to a study by the Home Mission Board's research division.

The study, designed to learn more about the early stages of church life cycles, discovered the first seven years are the most critical period for losing churches through disbanding, reverting to mission status, merging with another congregation or breaking away from the convention.

Improved selecting and training of church planters will help lower that figure, predicted Charles Chaney, HMB vice president for church extension, which includes church starting.

Researchers analyzed the records of 7,625 churches constituted between 1972 and 1990. An average 359 churches were constituted annually, reported Richie Stanley, director of HMB planning and services research department.

Of those studied, 16 percent were gone from the Southern Baptist Convention role by 1993. Of churches 14 years and older in that group, 20 percent were gone, Stanley wrote in the study.

Chaney noted Southern Baptists are not very different from most Christian denominations, which lose 0.8 percent of existing churches annually.

"Our record is better than the average," he said. "I'm not happy with it, but it's better than what the whole body of Christ is doing as far as lost churches."

Chaney, however, lamented the "infant death rate" for new churches and missions. Southern Baptists start an average 1,200 congregations annually, he noted, but the report states only 359 are constituted each year.

Meanwhile, the number of missions has stayed relatively flat, meaning mission congregations are dying.

"We have to start three mission congregations in order to get one constituted church," he said. "I think that is unacceptable and one of the major things that I'm going to be giving my life to is developing a system that will cut that rate down."

In January, the Home Mission Board began a new process to mentor church planters and offer opportunities to fellowship with their peers. Two training seminars were conducted in January for church starting leadership in eight state Baptist conventions: Georgia, Tennessee, Illinois, Kansas/Nebraska, Iowa, Colorado, Nevada and California.

Chaney said the new approach should strengthen church starts, making them less susceptible to an early death. "Sponsoring churches don't always do a good job of supporting the new churches they try to start."

Veryl Henderson, Colorado director of missions, backed the idea. "The goal is to keep the pastor renewed," he said. "Unless the minister gets some refueling, he'll get burned out."

Chaney added this process also intends to build into a congregation's "genetic code" the desire to start other churches.

"A church reproducing itself is just as vital as having an evangelism program or a Bible teaching program or owning a building or anything else that is in the genetic code of most of our churches."

Stanley offered three options Southern Baptists may consider for responding to lost churches:

-- Start more churches for a larger net gain.

-- Start churches with a greater chance of survival. The study did not suggest what factors safeguard a church from being dissolved or leaving the convention.

-- Develop programs and strategies to conserve existing churches. Southern Baptists might reconsider how soon they expect a mission to become self-supporting and constitute as a church, Stanley wrote. Currently the Home Mission Board promotes a mission becoming self-supporting in five years.

Chaney said longer support would not help. "In five years a church has pretty well determined what it's going to be unless it has a massive redirection."

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**HMB study: Mega-churches
the exception, not rule**

By David Winfrey

**Baptist Press
2/2/96**

ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)--Despite a few high-profile exceptions, Southern Baptists are not a denomination of mega-churches, according to a study of church starts by the Home Mission Board research department.

"Pastors of new churches in urban areas need to understand few churches reach mega-church status," wrote Richie Stanley, director of the Home Mission Board planning and services research department.

Researchers analyzed the growth of 7,625 churches, constituted between 1972 and 1990, in relationship to the size of their communities.

The report stated in urban areas of 10,000 to 50,000 residents, churches typically have less than 300 members after 22 years, but show no sign of plateauing.

In urban areas of more than 50,000 residents, churches typically have less than 350 members after 22 years, and demonstrate no leveling of growth, the report stated.

And while HMB researchers have no official definition for a "mega-church," Stanley said of the 39,571 Southern Baptist churches, only 504 have memberships of 2,500 and above. The median Southern Baptist church has 504 members, he added.

Among the report's other findings: Southern Baptists constitute churches in rural areas disproportionately to the population. While 25 percent of Americans live in rural areas, 39 percent of Southern Baptist churches were started there. Also:

-- Most new churches are growing churches.

-- The typical new church has 65 members its first year.

-- The typical 20-year-old church has 161 members.

-- Rural churches typically have 47 members after their first year and plateau at 120 members after 17 years.

-- In small cities, with populations between 2,500 and 10,000, churches began with 53 members and plateau after 18 years at 170 members.

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"Pastors and congregations in rural areas and small cities probably need to temper their expectations for growth beyond the church's 20th year," Stanley wrote.

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Russian's spiritual quest
fueled by Oklahomans' prayers

By Marty O'Gwynn

Baptist Press
2/2/96

SWAWNEE, Okla. (BP)--"It started with, 'Alexander, many people in America prayed for you last night'"

As Russian Alexander Ourov described it, the start of a message from a friend was also the start of his journey toward a lasting relationship with God.

Ourov works at the Moscow Economic School alongside several employees of Oklahoma Baptist University-Global Options Inc. When he fell ill in late November he was overwhelmed by the prayer support he received from OBU-GO personnel and Americans -- mostly Oklahomans -- who joined an international prayer chain during a two-day coma.

Rushed by ambulance to a Moscow hospital on Nov. 25, Ourov was admitted to the intensive care unit. Doctors told his family they were uncertain whether he would live or die.

Through the use of fax machines and electronic mail, OBU-GO personnel were able to alert prayer partners in the States about Ourov's critical condition and quickly lined up prayer support for him.

When he awoke from the coma, his wife told him Beth Hammons, a friend of theirs, had sent a message to let him know of the broad-based prayer support. Hammons, a member of Oklahoma City's Quail Springs Baptist Church, is serving through OBU-GO in a one-year teaching assignment at the Moscow Economic School.

"I don't know why, but I couldn't help crying," said Ourov. As he considered the magnitude of having people he didn't know interceding on his behalf, Ourov said he wondered why they would be concerned about his welfare. "Who am I for them?" he pondered.

Writing a letter of thanks to his American prayer warriors a few weeks later, Ourov said the experience had motivated him to work toward a personal relationship with God. "You know, I'm still looking for the road to my God," he wrote. "I was ignoring him for many years. But now something has changed inside and I have a feeling that my way to him is very near."

Bringing the gospel near to people was a vision of founders of OBU-GO. Started in the spring of 1993, the organization is designed to facilitate personal evangelism at points around the world through long-term business and educational services.

OBU-GO opened its first office in Moscow in the summer of 1993. OBU-GO will open an office in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, later this winter. The organization also is finalizing work for offices in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and in Poland.

OBU-GO is designed to place laymen in places where they can effectively minister through their careers.

"It shows what ordinary people can do when they understand they are messengers for the kingdom," said John P. Cragin, OBU-GO director and OBU's Peitz professor of business. "The whole concept of reaching the world for Christ fundamentally depends on laymen," said Cragin. "Wherever you happen to be, if you will recognize that both the gifts and career path God has given you are purposefully and wholly for kingdom impact, opportunity for ministry will be unavoidable."

The opportunity for Oklahomans to minister to Ourov through prayer had an added impact for the grateful Russian.

Through OBU-GO efforts, Ourov was part of a group of Russians who came to Oklahoma last July to learn English and experience American culture firsthand. Impressed by the friendliness of people in the Sooner State, he said at the time that America "must be very proud of Oklahomans."

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He echoed that sentiment in his thank you letter.

"I had been in the U.S. several times before, but only my visit to Oklahoma showed me the true America," he said.

Ourov is back at work and doing well physically. Cragin said many who prayed for his physical well-being in the fall continue to pray for his spiritual well-being.

OBU-GO programs are supported by local "partner groups" at churches across the United States. For information on starting a partner group, contact the OBU-GO offices at (405) 878-3279.

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**Mohler: Neglect of Scripture
afflicts today's preaching**

By Pat Cole

Baptist Press
2/2/96

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--A neglect of Scripture in sermons has created a "crisis in preaching" that cuts across denominational and ideological lines, warned a Southern Baptist seminary president.

"In the left wing of the churches, the Bible's authority and inspiration are often rejected and thus the Scriptures are often absent (from preaching)," said R. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. "Among evangelicals, the Bible's authority and inspiration are confessed, but the Scriptures are often soon abandoned."

Mohler addressed a Jan. 30 convocation opening the spring semester at the Louisville, Ky., seminary. In his address, Mohler said there is "a revolt against Scripture" by some mainline Protestants.

Mohler noted one mainline scholar has written recently that authority, including biblical authority, has no place in a post-Enlightenment age. He quoted another professor at the same school who termed certain biblical passages "irrelevant or sub-Christian." Both scholars, Mohler said, argue that Scripture should be severed from preaching.

"We cringe, we flinch and we are repelled when we hear the Bible rejected, impugned and maligned, and we would say to ourselves that 'evangelicals preach the Word,'" Mohler said. "Surely, those who confess the infallibility, the authority, the inspiration and the inerrancy of the Scripture, certainly we preach the Word."

Such an assumption, Mohler emphasized, can be mistaken. "I wonder, in listening to much evangelical preaching, if it is actually gospel, biblical preaching at all," he said. Mohler cited a study by sociologist Marsha Whitten which concluded that evangelicals, including Southern Baptists, often fail to match their high affirmation of Scripture with preaching that is solidly biblical.

"We, as evangelicals, are so easily seduced and coopted by the culture around us," he said. "The Bible is often displaced by the authority of our experience or programmatic concerns or pragmatic goals."

Biblical preaching "seems misplaced" in a culture saturated with an entertainment mind-set and a consumer mentality, Mohler said. "We see ourselves pressed by a marketing mentality, not only in the larger world but in the church itself," he said. "We see ourselves confronted with congregations that want quick 'how to' messages addressing their personal concerns."

Too much preaching is concerned with "the self" instead of Scripture, Mohler said. He called for a return to the priority on Scripture championed by the apostles and church reformers. The reformers, he said, emphasized Scripture in order to guard against excessive reliance on the church hierarchy and tradition. Those threats pose no imminent threat for contemporary evangelicals, Mohler maintained. "The greater danger for us is not that we listen to a magisterium above but to the inner child or whatever seems to be within."

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Mohler challenged students to preach biblical truth even if their proclamation proves unpopular. "We are charged to preach a message we have received, not to invent a message that will be well received," he said. "We are to preach that which has been sent, delivered and addressed to us, not a message that has been developed or altered."

During convocation, the seminary installed John Mark Terry as the first A.P. and Faye Stone associate professor of Christian missions and evangelism. The Stones, longtime members of First Baptist Church, Springfield, Mo., endowed the chair through a trust they arranged to go to the seminary upon their deaths.

Five other faculty members were installed into existing endowed chairs: Kathryn Chapman, Gaines S. Dobbins professor of childhood education; Robert Don Hughes, M. Theron Rankin professor of cross-cultural communications and missions; Walter C. Jackson, Lawrence and Charlotte Hoover professor of ministry; Craig A. Loscalzo, Victor and Louise Lester associate professor of Christian preaching; and Ronald A. Turner, Carolyn King Ragan professor of church music.

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