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Graham issues invitation  
after receiving gold medal

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press  
5/3/96

WASHINGTON (BP)--As Billy and Ruth Graham received a Congressional Gold Medal, government officials showered them with accolades for their faithfulness to the Bible and for being role models of family life, humility and gentleness.

But the evangelist's acceptance speech featured another attribute for which Graham has become internationally famous: his invitations.

"I see more than a few good men and women here who have the ability to lead us into the next century. A lot more people are here today than were at Pentecost, and they changed their world. We can do the same with the help of God and his Holy Spirit," Graham said, although he didn't ask people to walk an aisle to make a public commitment.

The gold medal is Congress' highest honor. The first gold medal was bestowed to George Washington in 1776. More recent recipients include Winston Churchill, Jonas Salk, Bob Hope and Lady Bird Johnson. The Grahams are the third couple to receive the medal. (The others: musicians George and Ira Gershwin and human rights advocates Natan and Avital Shcharansky.)

Ruth Graham, who was at the May 2 ceremony despite a recent case of spinal meningitis, did not address the audience.

More than 600 people -- ranging from actor Pat Boone to the daughters of former presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon -- attended the Grahams' ceremony. Southern Baptist Convention leaders there included Jim Henry, SBC president and pastor of First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla.; Larry Lewis, Home Mission Board president; Jerry Rankin, Foreign Mission Board president; and Morris Chapman, SBC Executive Committee president.

Since preaching his first sermon in 1937, Graham has shared the gospel with an estimated 100 million people in crusades and 2 billion people worldwide through his television ministry. The Grahams are both authors, and currently they are launching an endowment for children's health and supporting a children's health center at an Asheville, N.C., hospital. The hospital is near their home in Montreat, N.C.

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By honoring the Grahams, U.S. leaders "make a powerful statement about what is important in life," said Vice President Al Gore. The Grahams address "the hunger that all Americans feel, although we may describe it in different ways . . . . As a Christian, I appreciate the poetry and power (in Graham's messages); the force of convictions fueled by the gentleness of your soul."

Henry echoed Gore's remarks after the ceremony. "For a spiritual leader to receive the highest honor of our country says that underneath everything else that's going on is a recognition that what's spiritual is important."

During the ceremony, House Speaker Newt Gingrich described the Grahams as role models for generations to come. Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole noted Graham's activism in human rights, from removing ropes that separated blacks from whites at a crusade in the 1950s to traveling to South Africa in the 1970s and calling apartheid a sin. In an opening prayer, Senate chaplain Lloyd John Ogilvie thanked God for Graham's "uncompromising faithfulness to the Bible and clarion call to those who do not know you."

Graham responded with humor and humility to the one-minute standing ovation when the medal was presented. "We have enough family here to keep the applause going." The Grahams have five children, 19 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. "Our ministry has been a team effort, and without our associates and our family, we never could have accomplished anything."

Graham stressed the need for individuals to respond to Christ, but he also called the nation to repent and demonstrate faith in tangible ways.

"We are a society poised on the brink of self-destruction," Graham said as he cited racial tension, crime, broken families, children taking weapons to school, poverty, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and corruption. A sense of emptiness, guilt caused by sin and a fear of death drive people to such activities, Graham said.

"Why is the human heart this way? The reason is we are alienated from our Creator," Graham said. "I believe the fundamental crisis of our time is a crisis of the spirit. We have lost sight of the moral and spiritual principles on which this nation was established -- the principles drawn largely from the Judeo-Christian tradition as found in the Bible."

The cure, Graham said, is for people to repent, turn their lives to God and translate their commitment into action in their homes, neighborhoods and society.

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(BP) photo of the event should be available May 6 from the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. To request a photo print or electronic image, call the bureau at (770) 410-6533.

10 years later, ministry needs  
remain in Chernobyl's shadow

By Shari Schubert

Baptist Press  
5/3/96

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BP)--People who watched the CNN documentary, "Chernobyl: Legacy of a Meltdown" on April 7, may remember a segment featuring Vladimir Pivavarov, one of the Chernobyl "liquidators" -- the term used for the more than 600,000 post-disaster cleanup workers.

Pivavarov, who was exposed to massive doses of radiation while flying aerial photography missions over the damaged reactor after the April 26, 1986, nuclear power plant explosion in northern Ukraine, spoke of his feelings of anger and abandonment.

But there's more to the story than was included in the documentary, according to researcher Cham Dallas.

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Dallas, one of three American scientists featured in the documentary, recalled Pivavarov had been abandoned by his wife after radiation changed him from a "beast" of a man to a weak, emaciated shadow of his former self. His children and his former army buddies -- perhaps acting on fear and ignorance about radiation sickness -- wouldn't have much to do with him. But in the midst of his struggles, Pivavarov did find one friend -- Jesus Christ. All he had now was God, Pivavarov told the Americans.

Dallas, director of toxicology at the University of Georgia in Athens, is a Baptist who first became involved with post-Chernobyl research and relief efforts while working with City Hope -- a Christian charitable group based in New York -- to get chemotherapeutic agents into Belarus. More recently, he has worked with a group doing toxicology and genetics research in the 30-kilometer exclusion zone surrounding the accident site near the Belarus-Ukraine border.

Ten years after the explosion, it is still not possible to accurately assess the damage caused by the cloud of radiation that spewed out of the reactor's core. Some sources now estimate the amount of radiation released was 200 times that of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings combined. The initially reported death toll of 32 plant workers and firemen represents only a tiny fraction of Chernobyl's victims. The Ukrainian government now acknowledges hundreds of thousands of people are suffering from Chernobyl-related illness. The World Health Organization says 5 million people in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were affected. Thyroid cancer in the affected areas has increased 80- to 100-fold.

Trying to cope with the situation is "like grappling with an elephant," said Dan Panter of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's Eastern Europe office. Literally every one of Belarus' 14 million people has been affected psychologically, if not physically. There is a desire among Belarussian Christians to minister, but "the ones offering support are also under the shadow."

The people whose health is most affected are the liquidators. But information on their health is virtually impossible to compile, Dallas said. "Nobody knows where they are." A few come forward when they begin to have serious health problems, but "most don't want people to know. There's a sort of social stigma involved." Sometimes people who have not been educated about the nature and affects of radiation think they can "catch" it from others.

Among the general population, the fear generated by the accident is perhaps as great a concern as the radiation itself. In the year following the disaster, hundreds of thousands of women -- fearing birth defects -- aborted babies, bringing the birth rate in the region down 38 percent, Dallas noted.

The preliminary findings of Dallas and his research colleagues suggest such fear may be out of proportion to the actual circumstances. While they have found an incredibly high rate of genetic mutations in the hot-zone mice they are studying, they also have observed a remarkable resiliency in the animals and plants that continue to live in the contaminated area. The radiation has not created monsters. The feared increase of birth defects in animals and humans has not happened. While a statistical increase in thyroid cancer, leukemia, lymphoma and other diseases is expected over the next 20 years or so, the risk for any given individual is small, Dallas said.

People in the area probably are more at risk from an increase in cigarette smoking as they pick up Western habits.

But people "don't know what to believe," Panter said. They've been told everything from "it's not that bad" to "you're going to die of cancer."

Panter noted pastors and leaders in Belarussian churches have not had much opportunity for the type of pastoral care training available in the States. "They need equipping to help them understand what could be done" in the way of ministry and how to do it. "But I don't know who would be able to teach them from an experienced background," Panter acknowledged, pointing out the disaster situations in which American ministers have worked are not really comparable in scope or in long-term consequences to the Chernobyl catastrophe.

Mike Norfleet, Southern Baptist mission administrator in Kiev, Ukraine, said churches near the Chernobyl resettlement villages minister on a weekly basis to people who were evacuated after the accident, never to return to their homes. "They continue to share humanitarian aid, but more importantly, are ministering spiritually to them," he said. "I have been to the villages several times to participate in evangelism services. The churches do the best they can with the resources they have.

"I believe we need a strategy to coordinate efforts and to discover the needs of these victims," Norfleet continued. "We need someone who has the time and desire to target these resettlement areas with a view of ministry. It will be difficult, because they are protected areas by the government and they have been abused by many.

"Missouri Baptists have taken the lead in ministering to the needs of Chernobyl victims in Belarus," Norfleet said, citing the state's partnership with Belarus Baptists. "We praise the Lord for the abilities and expertise that have been provided . . . . There is a need for specialists -- not just medical specialists, but specialists of all kinds." He mentioned needs for community centers, "helping them learn how to help themselves," and sports education and equipment. "Any kind of recreation is needed.

"Right now I could use a Southern Baptist that is a government politician on the national level to come to Ukraine and express interest as a Christian in the needs of these people."

Missouri Baptists are hoping to continue and expand their work in Belarus, said physician Dick Bowles of Liberty, Mo., who worked at the Baptist children's camp in Kobrin last summer and has been closely involved in planning and developing the medical ministry. Missourians learned on their fact-finding/ planning trip to Belarus in March that children must meet certain health requirements in order to attend the camp. While such regulations are intended to guard the health of children who attend the camp, they may exclude some children who could benefit from the health services offered there. Medical project planners are exploring the possibility of addressing additional needs through a mobile clinic.

Some experts are not convinced another Chernobyl-type accident won't happen. Two of the original four RBMK-type reactors continue to operate at Chernobyl, and though some changes have been made in their design and operating procedures, many experts still consider them unsafe. About 40 tons of radioactive dust has accumulated inside the badly cracked concrete-and-steel sarcophagus that houses the remains of the ill-fated Reactor No. 4, and Ukraine's environmental minister has warned another explosion could occur.

Norfleet, whose location in Kiev places him only about 60 miles south of Chernobyl, acknowledged "our Western Republics Mission has made plans in consultation with our Europe area office in regard to emergency procedures if another accident happens. We do not think about this possibility very often, but we do want to be prepared if it occurs."

While another reactor accident is possible, Dallas said he believes it is not near as likely to happen as is a terrorist attack with small-scale nuclear weapons. Some 70 tons of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium are stockpiled in the former Soviet Union, and its defense industries are still producing three tons of such material annually. "It's not being accounted for like it should be," Dallas said, and "it is inevitable that it will wind up in the wrong hands."

Still, Christians can learn a lesson from the experiences of the former Soviet countries, Dallas said. Communist purges emptied the churches, he pointed out, but they were not able to stop the Christian faith. "The churches are filling up again." Recalling the abandoned churches he and his colleagues saw while visiting villages evacuated after the reactor accident, he observed, "Chernobyl has emptied the churches again. That hasn't stopped the Lord, either."

Belarus has 'nothing to lose,'  
translator/tour guide says

By Tim Palmer

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BP)--Elena Bogdanova is quite comfortable communicating in the English language -- whether leading a bus full of Missouri Baptists on a tour of Minsk, Belarus, or discussing the recent Belarus-Russia political/economic pact.

"I don't approve all the moves of our president, but I definitely vote for this union," said Bogdanova, who visited Missouri Baptist offices in Jefferson City in April. Bogdanova has served as a tour guide for every group that has visited Belarus through Missouri Baptists' missions partnership with the former Soviet republic.

Baptists have been concerned about restrictions on religious freedom in Belarus, but Bogdanova raised an even grimmer possibility. "There might be, as they say, another revolution. That would be a terrible one."

Belarus is fairly poor in mineral resources, she pointed out, but it was known in pre-independence times as a place for skilled labor. The best tractors, trucks and metal-cutting lathes in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics were manufactured in Belarus from raw materials brought in from elsewhere. Belarus formerly supplied 60 percent of all the computers used in the USSR, Bogdanova said.

Many skilled professionals remain in Belarus but cannot find employment, she explained. "What drives me mad," she said, is to see a highly qualified engineer who has to make a living by importing and reselling poor-quality, foreign-made goods instead of practicing his profession.

Belarus is becoming a country with a few very rich people, a huge number of poor people and no middle class, Bogdanova said, noting, "Many older people await the return of the Soviet Union." When the union with Russia was finalized, she reported, her mother watched coverage on television all day and then cried when the document was signed.

Her mother's generation sees the union as assurance they can have a good life again. "Now, for the majority, it is poverty and poverty and poverty."

The union with Russia cannot hurt, in Bogdanova's opinion. "We have nothing to lose. We'll try it -- if it works, good; if it doesn't, we shall invent something else."

Missouri Baptists are performing an important service in Belarus, Bogdanova said. "You're giving people hope." She said she would never forget the eyes of the Belarussian women last May during the national Baptist women's meeting in Minsk. "They looked happy."

Bogdanova has seen her own life changed through the partnership. "If you would put it this way, I owe my life to your organization."

When the first groups from Missouri began to arrive in 1993, she was employed by Intourist, the state tourism agency of Belarus. Partnership coordinator Willard Zeiser said Bogdanova made a good impression from the start. "We were attracted to her because of her congeniality and interest in our partnership, and because of her thorough knowledge of Minsk and Belarus."

Then, in the type of downsizing that has become a familiar story in the United States, she and 26 other Intourist employees lost their jobs.

Being unemployed took Bogdanova by surprise and left her feeling desperate about how she would survive and take care of her mother. But partnership organizers retained her services as a free-lance guide. "You people actually saved my life," she said.

A native of Russia, Bogdanova was born in a small town near Moscow. Her father, who had fought in the Soviet army during World War II, was in the construction business. Because he was a member of the Communist Party, she recalled, it was out of the question she be baptized as a child into the Russian Orthodox Church.

She was baptized as an adult, after her father's death. "I have always believed there is something that helps," she said. "I thought it's kind of important to consolidate my relationship with that force."

"I cannot call myself just a believer, but I do believe in someone helping me, and that I should not cause troubles to other people."

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On this, her first visit to the United States, she has been impressed with Americans' homes -- "They're so big, compared to ours" -- and stores. "Now I understand why you have such a difficult life," she joked. "There's so much to choose from!" Meeting Elena Bogdanova has blessed many Missourians. They, in turn, have prayed for her. She was unaware the missions partnership had been extended through the year 2000.

"You don't know again what that means. I thought that next year I will fight again for my life. That's very good news."

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**Baptist leaders assess future  
of denominations at NABF meeting**

**Baptist Press  
5/3/96**

**By Trennis Henderson & Mark A. Wyatt**

WASHINGTON (BP)--Daniel Weiss, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches in the USA, was elected president of the North American Baptist Fellowship during the group's April 26-27 meeting in Washington. The NABF, a regional fellowship affiliated with the Baptist World Alliance, includes 10 Baptist denominations based in the United States and Canada.

Assessing future ministry needs and challenges facing the member denominations, Weiss delivered the conference's closing address on "Baptists and the Future of Denominationalism."

"It is increasingly clear that the context in which our ministry will occur makes our task more than formidable," he noted. "There is no question that our ability to make an impact, in the name of Jesus Christ, within this rapidly changing, incredibly complex world will be a difficult challenge. Business as usual will not be adequate for the task."

Emphasizing Christ's commitment to the church, Weiss noted, "We do fail Christ by making weak and impotent what he intended to be strong and powerful; to trivialize and minimize what he envisioned to be tremendous and magnificent."

Jesus "initiated a radical upheaval, a spiritual and social revolution," Weiss said. "He generated something that would dramatically change lives and confront society when and where it falls short of God's vision for it."

Today's church has become "so organized, categorized, systematized and homogenized that we often become paralyzed," he lamented. "The organization is often seen as an end in itself rather than a means to an end."

Declaring "it doesn't have to be that way," Weiss offered six conditions which can assure "the best days in ministry for Baptists in North America are still ahead:"

-- Affirm the polity we believe God teaches us. "The denomination exists for local churches; local churches do not exist for the denomination . . . . Baptist congregations are called by God, through Jesus Christ, to be communities of faith empowered by the Holy Spirit."

Weiss emphasized historic Baptist distinctives include commitment to soul freedom, priesthood of the believer, biblical authority without creedalism, doctrinal convictions, racial inclusiveness, separation of church and state, evangelism and peace and justice.

Baptists also must remember "God's circle of friends is always larger than our own," he said, noting the need to "seek relationships within the whole household of God."

-- Be authentically open to the renewal God offers. Citing the need for renewal in worship, evangelism and service, Weiss said, "We must never forget that renewal is a gift of God mediated to us by the Holy Spirit . . . . It cannot be programmed."

Highlighting Baptists' historic "fidelity to the authority of Scripture," he noted "we have always invested authority in the Bible, not in its commentaries or interpreters. It is interesting that often our discussions about the inerrancy and authority of Scripture are really debates about the inerrancy and authority of the interpreters of Scripture."

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-- Accept the diversity God gives us. "Baptists are probably the most diverse people in North America ... particularly in our racial ethnic composition," Weiss said. "This reality presents us with a tremendous opportunity to witness to the world.

"If we are willing to embrace this diversity as a gift from God to be celebrated rather than as a problem to be solved, the kind of witness and impact we all hope to have in this troubled world is a real possibility."

-- Actualize the community God offers us. Although "it is easy to focus almost exclusively on our differences," Weiss urged fellow Baptists to "pay increased attention to what we hold in common."

"We come with a common commitment to Jesus Christ ... . We submit to the authority of his Word. We are sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, not political adversaries. To be divided and divisive people is a scandal to the world, an affront to God ... and an obstacle to our carrying out the mission God has given us."

-- Carry out the new mission to which God calls us. "What does it mean to be a people worthy of and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ in today's world?" Weiss asked. "We must be willing ... to struggle for an answer to that question. There is much more to be learned about God's vision for us."

-- Exercise the kind of stewardship God expects of us. Weiss said personal commitment, generous giving and prudent management "are an absolute necessity" for Baptist denominations "to face creatively and aggressively the world into which God is calling us."

Urging humility, charity, fidelity and unity in denominational relationships, Weiss said, "There is no room for demonizing" fellow Christians.

"Even when we differ," the new NABF president concluded, "we owe each other the benefit of the doubt that each is seeking to affirm the lordship of Christ ... . Jesus Christ longs for the wholeness of his body."

The NABF is "at a crossroads," said Morris Chapman, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee. Speaking before his election as one of three vice presidents for the organization, Chapman suggested it is "time to reexamine, to determine is there a real reason for us to be together. If we do find that reason, we will be able to grow together for the Lord Jesus Christ."

Chapman urged Christian groups "to speak and preach the whole counsel of God. The only source for all distinctly Christian knowledge is the Word of God. The only true wisdom is from God himself."

In an address titled, "The Evangelical Nature of the Church," Chapman traced the beginnings of evangelicalism to a 19th century movement "broadly called liberalism." Its first attacks, Chapman said, were "directed against the authority and integrity of the Scripture" and extended to such "essential tenets as the deity of Christ and the bodily resurrection."

As liberalism gained control of denominational structures, "many conservative Christians simply walked away," Chapman said. That made liberal control "more complete and deep damage resulted," he continued. The result was that "serious Christian missionary practice" was undermined and memberships declined sharply.

"The departure from the doctrinal base of traditional Christianity" is the reason for the great declines many denominations have experienced, Chapman said.

Wallace Charles Smith, senior minister of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, was among the featured speakers at the NABF conference.

Describing the quest for spiritual renewal as "an issue of keeping the bread fresh," he warned "stale, hardened, barely digestible sermons filled with 19th-century imagery and warmed-over illustrations do not constitute fresh bread."

Addressing the topic, "The Need for Churches to Experience Renewal," Smith said today's church members are "savvy consumers who know quite well the condition of the bread we place on the table."

"Stale bread sits on the table when the telescopic lens of vision is replaced by mirrors of maintenance and ... we lose the focus of what lies above and beyond the horizons of possibility and predictability," he declared. "Stale-bread religion is dangerous because it affords no counter for the words of cynicism and smothering blankets of materialism that blind us through lack of vision."

Insisting "renewal continually breaks forth when the bread is fresh," Smith asked, "How do we achieve spiritual renewal? How do we keep the bread fresh?" The answer, he said, is found in renewed hope.

"If we want to keep the bread fresh, we must get hope back in the equation," he explained. "Spiritual renewal is possible when we overcome our cynicism and understand that the radical belief in God's possibilities can subdue the anti-God legions in our world. We have got to hope and teach the hope that God is not through with us yet."

Emphasizing "there is hope in community," Smith acknowledged "community will not happen on its own. It must be preached, it must be taught, it must worked at.

"Fear of others ensures we will almost never cross barriers and get to know each other," he noted. "When we do make the effort, the human community is larger and brighter and more enriched. Diversity is not the bane of our existence; genuine human community is what God wants for us -- but we have to work at it."

Citing barriers to achieving God-honoring community, Smith said, "If we allow self-love to flourish, community will never happen. Without agape love, community breaks down into conflict. With agape love, there is health and joy and peace.

"When we learn to feel unconditional love for those most unlike us and least in keeping with our cultural norms, we are on our way to genuine community."

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Chapman: Evangelicals hold to  
Scripture truth, Jesus as Savior By Mark A. Wyatt

Baptist Press  
5/3/96

WASHINGTON (BP)--Evangelical Christians "are compelled to proclaim the life-changing message of the gospel to all men everywhere," a key Southern Baptist Convention leader declared at a recent gathering of Baptists from across North America.

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, said that will happen "only as local churches are renewed and revitalized."

"Local churches, not denominations, are best positioned to do this. The Word of God is the key to lasting renewal," Chapman told the North American Baptist Fellowship meeting April 26-28 at First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

Asked by another denomination's top executive to state an "irreducible minimum for an evangelical theology," Chapman responded: "I would have to say the Word of God is absolute truth and ... Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the Savior of the world. That's absolutely irreducible."

Chapman said Southern Baptists "are in a time when we are struggling to perhaps remain evangelical in the purest sense." But while acknowledging that some Southern Baptists "would debate whether we are evangelical or not," he reminded his audience that "one of the greatest voices of evangelicalism is Billy Graham, who is a Southern Baptist."

Chapman noted that a commitment to Christian values is declining -- of all places -- in the church.

"The world is getting into the church faster than the church is getting into the world. It is leading to a compromise of Christians," he lamented. "Time will tell whether we can survive the kind of moral decay and demonic onslaught that I believe is occurring not only in America but all over the world."

Responding to another question, Chapman described evangelicalism as "separate and distinct" from fundamentalism. But, he continued, "evangelicals would believe strongly in the fundamentals of the faith."

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Chapman said there are "differences in methodology (and) sometimes in intensity about things" between evangelicals and fundamentalists, but he indicated the labels are not mutually exclusive.

"Sometimes it is possible for those considered fundamentalists and evangelicals to walk together," Chapman stated, "and that could ultimately become a mighty force for our God."

Chapman said he sees "a bridge" between evangelicalism and fundamentalism. "I think the bridge is faith and the convictions about the Word of God, a theological bridge that is very real and acceptable," he explained.

Referring to evangelical Christians, Chapman said: "I believe we must make every effort in every phase of life ... race reconciliation, world missions, going into the suburban communities ... to not only be a spoken witness but to be a living witness for Christ, so that we speak for Christ and our actions do not betray us.

"I would say there is a wedding of my faith and my action, and if those are not wedded, then there is some misunderstanding of the faith that we preach so glibly from the pulpits," the Southern Baptist leader said.

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Spanish Catholics open  
chapel to Baptist choir

Baptist Press  
5/3/96

CACERES, Spain (BP)--Barriers to an evangelical gospel witness rolled away when a team of Southern Baptist volunteers from Mineral Wells, Texas, traveled to Caceres, Spain, for a series of Easter-time concerts.

In a staunchly Roman Catholic country where Baptists are unknown and looked upon with suspicion, fervent prayer and a goodwill gesture from the United States opened the way for thousands of people to hear a gospel witness in music.

When David and Joy Borgan, 25-year Foreign Mission Board missionaries, moved to Caceres in 1994, they faced a tremendous challenge: leading people to faith in Christ and starting a Baptist church.

But Caceres, a city of 100,000 people in central-western Spain, had never in its 2,000-year history had a Baptist church. To the city's residents, Baptists were unknown and therefore suspect.

Aware the cultural "walls" were thick and tall, the Borgans, of Fort Worth, Texas, and Cullompton, England, respectively, settled into their apartment in central Caceres. They began praying for a strategy to contact people.

Then, in 1995 Joy had to come back to the United States for medical reasons. During their visit, members of the 1,750-member First Baptist Church in Mineral Wells, offered to help in any way possible. "Great!" the Borgans said. "Come to Spain and sing."

One of those First Baptist members was Myron M. Crawford, mayor of Mineral Wells. Crawford sent a letter on official city stationery greeting the mayor of Caceres. That letter helped Borgan win an appointment with the mayor, who had been "unavailable" to him for three months.

Borgan met with city officials and laid out his dream of bringing an American choir to Caceres during Easter week. Although Mayor Jose Mara Saponi Mendo was receptive, Borgan could see some civic leaders were unconvinced.

Prayer requests flew hot and heavy over the Atlantic and to friends and co-workers across Europe. Borgan asked for prayer support for each discussion and each person involved.

It was then that remarkable things began to happen:

-- City officials offered Borgan the free use of the San Francisco Cultural Complex, the city's leading auditorium.

-- The dean of the Roman Catholic cathedral offered to let them use the Church of the Precious Blood, an historic 18th-century chapel in the center of the old part of town.

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-- A 15th-century palace was offered as a hostel for the Texas volunteers to stay in at low rates -- an especially important gesture when the city's hotel prices and occupancy rates are at their highest during Easter.

"We knew God was at work opening up the city for him," Borgan recounted.

A financial problem was solved in a similar way. As time for the group's arrival neared, Borgan learned that several thousand dollars he had counted on to support the project was not available. He wrote the largest bank in the city and asked if they would help. Banker Raimundo Holgado eventually funded 20,000 fliers, 150 posters and two large banners in the busiest part of Caceres.

When the Texas Baptists arrived for Easter week, they were joined by 30 Southern Baptist foreign missionaries from across Spain and more than 50 Spanish Baptists.

Several times the choral group sang in the Church of the Precious Blood -- by the end of the week to standing-room-only crowds. Each night they sang for hundreds more at the cultural center. The handbell choir rang its way through narrow city streets, helping draw attention to concerts.

Spanish Baptists also sang, and the Spanish Baptist young people performed a series of skits that conveyed a gospel message.

Baptists received positive, front-page coverage in both local newspapers and were featured on television news one evening, a stark contrast to an evangelistic effort a year ago by another group that the newspapers derided as "filthy pigs."

A Spanish count whose family has occupied a local castle since 1500 invited choir members to his home three times. On the last visit, his wife asked missionaries Calvin and Diane Wittman for a copy of the book "Experiencing God" for use in her personal devotions.

When the viscount learned Baptists were hoping to start a church in Caceres, he told an elated David Borgan he and his wife would like to help.

Four neighbors of the Borgans who heard the choir sing attended a closing banquet. One man asked for a Bible and agreed to be part of a weekly Bible study.

Although the Caceres effort did not result in any immediate decisions for Christ, it did help get Baptists off to a good beginning by introducing themselves and making friends. Evangelism and church planting, hopefully, will follow.

"We'll never know, never be able to measure the good that has been done this week," said missionary Larry Henry, a 20-year veteran of work in Spain. "But I've never seen anything like this week, with such a dedicated group of volunteers coming in and working together and how the city has opened its doors.

"We'll advance the work in Caceres hundreds of years -- hundreds of years -- with what we're doing here this week," Henry declared.

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(BP) photo mailed May 1 to Baptist state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press. Cutline available in SBCNet News Room.

St. Louis Baptist Association  
begins Botswana partnership

Baptist Press  
5/3/96

ST. LOUIS (BP)--The African country of Botswana is "spiritually hungry," according to Benny King, director of missions of the St. Louis Baptist Association.

The association's executive board will meet May 20 to consider a recommendation to link with the southern Africa nation for five years.

Said Ray Shumake, co-pastor of Canaan Baptist Church, St. Louis: "My opinion of the country is it's ripe for harvest when a lady will walk 20 miles to tell the missionary, 'Why haven't you come to my village to tell the people about Jesus?'"

King and Shumake and two others made an exploratory trip to Botswana in March in conjunction with a request for the partnership from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

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Shumake said the response of people and churches in the St. Louis association also confirms the value of the partnership. "I already have men in the construction business wanting dates now when they can go over and build a church."

King emphasized the association's partnership with Botswana would not undermine or compete with its support of the Missouri Baptist Convention's Belarus and Wyoming partnerships, which have been extended through the year 2000.

Botswana is a nation of 1.6 million people. King said it was rated the poorest nation in the world IN 1966. Then large diamond reserves were discovered in the 1970s and today it is among the richest nations in Africa. The government, which owns the diamond mines, is using revenue from exports to develop the nation's infrastructure.

Foreign Mission Board missionaries have worked in Botswana since 1980, King noted, and currently eight missionary couples are assigned there. The national Baptist convention has 23 churches; only one has a trained pastor. All the others are led by laymen, mainly deacons.

"Their real crying need is leadership training," King said. "That's what they want from us -- people who will train pastors and Sunday school workers."

Prayer would be another major component of the partnership. King envisions prayer teams of volunteers who would work in villages -- which in Botswana can mean cities of 50,000 people with no evangelical work -- to encourage Christian believers.

Another aspect of the partnership would be linking evangelism with discipleship, particularly for youth. All the schools are government-controlled, King noted, and they are open to Baptists going in and teaching the Bible and Christian life. The senior high schools are boarding schools, and the Missourians visited one that had nearly 1,000 students. "The headmaster asked us, 'Please come back and teach us the Bible.'"

Jim Furgerson, director of the volunteers in missions department of the Foreign Mission Board, said the St. Louis association would become the third metropolitan Baptist association to enter a foreign missions partnership. Union Baptist Association in Houston has a partnership with the city of Taipei, Taiwan. Noonday Baptist Association in Atlanta has a partnership with Nicaragua.

Furgerson, who visited Botswana in November, said the country is somewhat unique in that its government is inviting Baptists in with open arms. Missionary doctor David Livingstone went to Botswana in the late 1800s and won many tribal chiefs to Christ.

Today the Bible is a required book in public schools, Furgerson noted. Thus many of the people have been "inoculated -- just enough to know you don't have the real thing."

Few people there live to the age of 40, he said. Thus 20-year-olds are thrust into leadership roles, and a major challenge of the partnership will be to take the young leaders and help them develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

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CORRECTION: Please substitute the following paragraph for paragraph three in (BP) story titled "Foreign board to cut Japan force by 30%," dated 5/2/96:

The high cost of living in Japan -- dovetailed with the realization that Christian growth there has plateaued at low levels -- led agency officials to the difficult conclusion that resources deployed there could produce significantly greater results in other countries.

Thanks,  
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