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**SBC Cooperative Program  
up for month and year**

**Baptist Press  
9/3/96**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Southern Baptist Convention Cooperative Program gifts for the month of August were up more than 10 percent and gifts for the SBC fiscal year were up nearly 2.5 percent over the previous year, according to Morris H. Chapman, president and chief executive officer of the SBC Executive Committee.

Gifts for August were \$13,101,189 compared to \$11,836,667 last year, an increase of \$1,264,522 or 10.68 percent.

For 11 months of the SBC 1995-96 fiscal year, Cooperative Program gifts totaled \$135,935,202 compared to the same period of 1994-95 of \$132,859,801, an increase of 2.31 percent or \$3,075,400.

"With just one month left in the SBC's fiscal year, the record pace of giving is another reminder that Southern Baptists are wholly committed to missions," Chapman said.

Designated gifts were also up for the month of August and for the year. For August, designated gifts totaled \$3,071,865 compared to last year's month of \$3,001,934, an increase of \$69,930 or 2.33 percent. For the fiscal year, designated gifts have totaled \$136,201,883 compared to the same period a year ago of \$130,330,099, an increase of 4.51 percent or \$5,871,784.

For the SBC Cooperative Program Allocation Budget, the August gifts were \$1,298,762 above the budget requirement of \$11,802,427, or an increase of 11 percent for the month. For the fiscal year, the required budget figure of \$129,826,699 has been surpassed by \$6,108,502 or an increase of 4.71 percent.

The SBC Cooperative Program total includes receipts from individuals, churches, state conventions and fellowships for distribution according to the 1995-96 Cooperative Program Allocation Budget.

The Cooperative Program is Southern Baptists' method of supporting missions and ministry efforts of state and regional conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention. Designated contributions include the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for foreign missions, the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for home missions, world hunger and other special gifts.

State and regional conventions retain a percentage of Cooperative Program contributions they receive from the churches to support work in their areas and send the remaining funds to the Executive Committee for national and international ministries. The percentage of distribution is at the discretion of each state or regional convention.

**AIDS: Scott's long journey  
brought him home again**

**By Robert O'Brien**

ABILENE, Texas (BP)--Prodigal son Scott Levrets came home from a far country to die of AIDS. He risked the journey home when he could bear the loneliness no longer.

Many AIDS sufferers -- more feared than lepers -- can never go home again. No one wants them. They die shunned -- minds and bodies ravaged, starving for a human touch.

"During my last days, I realized I wanted those around me to be those who love me," Scott told his mother.

Marylou Levrets and her husband, Fred, retired early as Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board missionaries in west Africa to care for their youngest child.

They and their family also risked a journey -- through stigma, anger, pain and fear -- to help Scott. (See related story.)

Their first victory came when they stopped carrying the burden alone. They dared to open up to family, missionaries, and members of their home church, First Baptist Church, Abilene, Texas.

Missionaries, family and friends didn't criticize, label or shun them.

"In those darkest hours, my faith was overhauled by those who surrounded me with love," says Fred. "They put their arms around us all the way."

Now, it was the Levretses' turn to embrace Scott who had drifted away from God and family after college and was living in France.

They made him a home in Abilene, where he died 27 months later at age 34. It was the Saturday after Thanksgiving 1994.

By then too sick to eat, he wanted Thanksgiving dinner, as planned, on Thursday.

"I want to smell the food," Scott said.

And to bask in the love of Christ it symbolized.

Friday, he asked to "tell everyone goodbye." Aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews flocked to his bedside. He died the next day, surrounded by his parents; sisters, Susan Walker and Jan Powell; and brother, Stan Levrets, all of Abilene.

The "aroma of Jesus Christ" -- flowing through family and church friends -- miraculously turned tragedy into thanksgiving for spiritual healing and reconciliation.

Through their tears, Fred and Marylou knew it had healed Scott's broken fellowship with God and family.

It had changed them forever. Now, they'll devote their remaining years to ministering to AIDS victims and families from their home in Abilene.

"The saddest thing I've ever heard of is people who die alone," Fred says.

The Levretses served with distinction for three decades in Southern Baptist foreign missions. But their son's pilgrimage back to them and to God took them to a new level.

It made them understand more than ever "love is more important than anything," Fred says.

"I remember the people I've labeled over the years before I knew them and what they were all about.

"God was saying: 'If only you knew that I come to help -- not condemn; to love -- not label; to draw you to myself -- not ostracize. If only you knew...'"

Fred and Marylou thought they knew. They'd brought God's love to others all their lives.

They'd seen love transform lepers in Nigeria. Missionaries there operate a leprosy ministry called "The Promised Land" because it gives hope and promise to outcasts.

"The love the workers have for the lepers really struck me," Fred says. Their touch changed the lepers' lives -- even more than skills they taught, like farming and weaving.

Marylou bought a fan from a man with no fingers or toes and partly worn-away feet. But he wove a beautiful fan -- using his teeth and stubs.

"The beauty I saw in the fan was external, but it helped me see the man who made it -- and the internal beauty he had because of Jesus Christ," she says.

"I compare that to the internal beauty we saw happening -- blooming fully -- in our son in his last days."

Marylou had come home to Abilene heartsick and asking "Why?"

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Her exercise of love as her son's primary care giver wasn't easy -- for Scott, her or the rest of the family.

"It took a year for us to mesh ... to re-establish a wholesome relationship and really enjoy being together," she says.

"I realized I didn't need to know why. This had happened -- and I must accept, love, forgive and move on."

That approach healed the "spiritual AIDS" that had withered Scott's faith before physical AIDS decimated his body.

Fred and Marylou still wipe away tears as they reflect on their "baby." But tears of sadness and joy flow in a bittersweet blend from the same eyes. "In my mother's heart, I remember Scott for the joy he brought us (as a child), his gentle spirit, his love for people, flowers and God's creation," Marylou says.

"I remember his beautiful singing voice and his gentle touch on the keys of an organ."

That gentle touch had produced chords to praise God. And it symbolized Scott's return to God.

God used human touch -- made gentle by his love -- to make a way into Scott's "wilderness" and refresh his parched "desert" with a river of living water.

When Scott reopened his life because of love, he opened up to discussion and prayer with his parents -- and to Bible study, worship and service to others.

That allowed God to "weave" a thing of beauty in him as he had with lepers before him. Scott, in turn, refused to let AIDS defeat him.

He "wove" a ministry in Abilene with a frail body and a creative mind that miraculously remained clear until the end.

Scott, a former information systems manager, used his computer skill to help his church. He developed a manual for its intercessory "PrayerWorks" ministry and reorganized its family life center computer system and trained its staff.

He also spent hours in volunteer work to help other AIDS victims.

Love had brought him back to faith -- love from people not afraid to give him a hug.

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(BP) photos (one horizontal and one vertical) mailed to state Baptist newspapers 8/30/96 by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press. Cutline(s) available on SBCNet News Room.

### **AIDS shatters 'comfort zone' of foreign missionary parents**

**By Robert O'Brien**

**Baptist Press  
9/3/96**

ABILENE, Texas (BP)--One phone call blasted Fred and Marylou Levrets from their imagined "comfort zone" of immunity.

"Scott has AIDS," said their daughter Susan Walker, a nurse in Abilene, Texas.

Now, Scott, their youngest child and a family prodigal, wanted to come home to die.

The Levretses -- tested by the gritty tribulations of 30 years as Southern Baptist missionaries in west Africa -- faced a new test.

Could they accept that the dread disease sweeping the world had invaded their lives -- that it wasn't "something that just happened to others?"

Could they overcome their devastation, shame, denial and anger so that they could accept, love and forgive their son?

Could they summon the courage that had brought them through the dangers of political coups, contact with lepers and travel over perilous terrain?

Could they even talk about their shame to others -- especially missionaries where Scott grew up as an MK (missionary kid)?

In their grief, they cried out to God asking why this had happened to their family.

Other questions plagued them. "What will your mission family think of you? What will church members back home think? What will others think when they hear Scott has AIDS -- and has come home to you?"

Fred resolved to keep it quiet -- to hold it as a painful, devastating secret.

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"But the burden became too great to bear alone," Fred said.

Finally, the Levretses poured out their grief to all their fellow missionaries and to family members and church friends in Abilene, where they moved to give Scott a final home.

That decision changed lives -- theirs, Scott's and others'.

God's love, flowing through others, conquered their darkest despair. It lifted them into another "comfort zone" -- the one that passes understanding.

Missionaries, family and church members embraced them, wept with them, comforted them, helped them.

"They loved us back to faith again," says Fred.

And so it went with Scott. A miracle changed his life.

Silence, anger and denial would not have allowed that miracle to happen.

Openness, love, acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation did so -- in the lives of Scott and those who love him.

The Levretses will now minister to AIDS victims and families. (They may be contacted at 3710 Santa Monica Drive, Abilene, Texas 79605, or at 915-690-6401.)

"This disease will touch everyone before it's eradicated," Marylou says. She and Fred know some people will resist.

"We must be patient with those who can't accept this kind of tragedy," says Fred, noting a member of his own family has had trouble doing so.

"Since my son died of AIDS," Marylou adds, "I've prayed:

"Lord don't let me waste my sorrows, because so many other people out there are hurting."

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## **Educators seek perpetual funding for Book-Link**

**By John Loudat**

**Baptist Press  
9/3/96**

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (BP)--The National Fellowship of Baptist Educators is encouraging its members to contribute to a fund that will provide for its Book-Link ministry until Jesus returns, according to Book-Link Executive Director Olin Williams.

Book-Link is one of the ministries of the organization made up of Southern Baptist educators, which calls itself "an arm" of the Brotherhood Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

According to promotional literature on the Book-Link Foundation, established earlier this year to provide funding for the project, Book-Link's goal has been "to establish a fund that will guarantee operating costs for years to come. Once a goal of \$100,000 is reached, the interest could provide from \$4,500 to \$5,000 per year, the cost for shipping and operating expenses -- 10 percent for operating and 90 percent for shipping."

Williams told the Baptist New Mexican, weekly journal of the Baptist Convention of New Mexico, in a telephone interview Aug. 27, Book-Link volunteers have shipped approximately 18 tons of books to 66 countries and five U.S. states since Book-Link's beginning in 1988.

Hal and Dot Buchanan, retired educators living in Tupelo, Miss., have spearheaded Book-Link since its inception, until he stepped down as chairman of the Book-Link Foundation this past July.

Southern Baptist laymen Owen Cooper is credited with first envisioning a ministry of textbook and Christian literature distribution. Cooper, who died in 1986, was a Mississippi businessman who worked primarily in the manufacture and distribution of fertilizer. While in India on business, Cooper discovered the Indians needed help with education. His burden for textbook distribution led to the formation for Books for the World, which primarily collected and shipped secular books, in 1983. Cooper issued a challenge to Buchanan and NFBE to do the same with Christian literature, leading to the formation of Book-Link.

Most of the funding for Book-Link was provided by Books for the World until 1993, when Books for the World ceased operation. The Book-Link ministry has continued, Williams said, because of contributions from churches and individuals.

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Most of the requests for material come from Southern Baptist missionaries, national pastors, seminary students and school libraries that operate under SBC sponsorship, according to Buchanan in a letter to NFBE members and friends in February. "In most cases," he explained, "items are given by churches, retired ministers, educators and others who wish to donate all or part of their personal libraries."

The current chairman of the Book-Link Foundation is Bill Reeves of Tupelo.

Williams said Merle Ensor, a member of Bethel Baptist Church, Aztec, N.M., is Book-Link's director of shipping for New Mexico and the surrounding area. He said Ensor is responsible for collecting books and funds to ship the books, and for shipping the books. Occasionally, Williams said, the NFBE is able to send Ensor funds that it has received to help with the shipping costs.

Both Ensor and his wife, Florene, are involved in the ministry although neither is an educator. He is a retired electrician and she is a retired nurse and Woman's Missionary Union director for the church.

Williams explained membership in NFBE is not limited to professional educators, it is open to any Southern Baptist with an interest in education at any level, kindergarten through college.

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### Church starter sees God at work through setbacks

By Sarah Zimmerman

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9/3/96

ALEXANDRIA, Ind. (BP)--A rained out block party, water leak, termite infestation, personal health problems and lack of Bible school workers would discourage most church starters.

But Harrison Williams sees God at work and sums up the situation with his trademark phrase, "Idn't that neat?"

Williams leads the only Southern Baptist congregation in this Indiana town of 11,000 people. Despite the setbacks, he says, "I couldn't get away" from the needs of the community. "My desire to do work here was so strong, I couldn't quit."

While his desire is strong, his back isn't. A deteriorating spine forced the bivocational pastor to undergo three surgeries in three years and take disability leave from his full-time job.

"I'm not strong enough to spend real long days on the church field," said Williams who lives 30 miles away. "In order for us to build a church, everybody has to go out and do what they can."

Williams has baptized 27 people since starting Calvary Baptist Chapel two years ago. He visited one woman undergoing kidney dialysis and led her to make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Her son, who listened to the gospel presentation, also became a Christian.

Another man who visited the church with his aunt initially indicated he was saved. But as he continued to attend, he told Williams, "I need the Lord."

The church originally met in a community building used primarily for senior adult activities. The congregation included two non-Christians, one Christian, Williams and his wife Nancy.

To teach the basics of Christian living, Williams used Total Church Life material in Sunday school for two months. Written by Darrell Robinson, Home Mission Board vice president for evangelism, the book emphasizes three points: exalt the Savior, equip the saints and evangelize the sinner.

Williams added an emphasis on prayer to those building blocks of worship, discipleship and evangelism. "Now we have 35 or so on Sunday mornings, and we had 67 on Easter," Williams said. "We've reached about a dozen youth. Idn't that neat?"

This summer 71 children attended two Backyard Bible Clubs sponsored by the church. Since most church members are new Christians, the church did not have seasoned workers for the clubs. Church members volunteered, however, and the teachers learned the material as they taught their students.

One couple, Christians a number of years, joined Calvary Chapel this summer. They will help start a van ministry to bring area children to church.

Dick Morgan, member of Kingston Avenue Baptist Church in nearby Anderson, teaches the adult Sunday school class at Calvary Chapel.

"It's exciting to see people come to the Lord in their homes and here at the church and in unexpected places," Morgan said. He said he's seen alcoholics change their lifestyles after becoming Christians and one woman bring her entire family to church after she became a Christian.

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As the church grew Williams began looking for a permanent place to meet. He found an abandoned church building surrounded by knee-high weeds. At first he was told the building was not for sale, but was later told the congregation could lease it. However \$225 a month for a lease payment is a high cost for a small congregation.

Last year the church sponsored a revival meeting under a tent. A man from another town who attended the services said God told him to help pay the rent on the building. He paid the lease for a year.

The congregation wanted to buy the building, but the asking price was \$23,500, well beyond their budget. Then a water line broke and repairmen discovered that the building was infested with termites. The congregation was told the stained glass windows were the only thing worth saving.

The building was sturdy enough to provide a short-term meeting place, however, so the congregation bought it for \$8,000. Members borrowed the money, but the man who paid the first-year's lease paid off the debt. The church has started a building fund for a future site, and the same man donated \$3,000 toward it.

"Idn't that neat?"

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(BP) photo (horizontal, black and white) mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press and posted on SBCNet.

### **Mohler encourages students to theological deeper level**

**By Heather Oldfield**

**Baptist Press  
9/3/96**

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Citing a lack of depth and consistency in most of the theology that is presented today, R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, urged students and faculty to be among those who will be faithful to a deeper level of theological understanding.

In the Aug. 27 convocation address which opened the 1996-1997 school year at the Louisville, Ky., seminary, Mohler described the necessity of raising a generation of church leaders who will stem the tide of laziness in the soul and in the mind.

Directing students' attention to Hebrews 5:12-14, Mohler described the frustration and exasperation the writer of Hebrews felt with the lack of depth of theological understanding that the people displayed. "They should be eating theological meat, but they are able to take and to digest only milk, and it seems to be for milk alone that they have appetite," said Mohler.

A laziness in the ear, the soul, and the mind of the Hebrews is paralleled in the contemporary church, Mohler noted. "They are busy about many things, but they are lazy about that which matters most. Never before have there been so many activities, so many programs, so many slogans, and so little depth.

"A low theological appetite is a symptom of spiritual distress just as a low physical appetite in the body is a symptom of physical distress," Mohler stressed. "The healthy Christian desires to grow, and in desiring to grow, also desires to know the deep things of God."

Mohler described two great dangers to developing Christian maturity. He said he believes theological minimalism, typified in the lack of theological and biblical knowledge and the absence of doctrinal conviction, has led to a relativistic conception of truth and the loss of the ability to think in a Christian manner.

Quoting George Barna, Mohler cited, "The religious climate in America these days reflects the true soul of the population, one which thirsts for experience rather than knowledge, for exposure rather than understanding, for choices rather than the simplicity and the security of a limited set of alternatives."

Commenting on Barna's findings, Mohler said, "This is not even milk. It is a 'Christianity-Lite,' packaged for the 1990s. It tastes great, but it is less filling. It is not an authentic gospel."

The second threat which often accompanies theological minimalism, Mohler noted, is popular anti-intellectualism. "We see a fervent revivalism among evangelicals, often with a very unbiblical notion of revival tied to activism and emotivism as a replacement for authentic Christianity. All of these have shaped the evangelical mind, and none of these has encouraged theological maturity."

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Citing Jesus' commandment to love the Lord with the mind, Mohler urged, "The life of the mind is important because it is important to God, and thus is important to the church." Mohler charged a new generation of evangelical scholars who are accountable to the church and to the word of God are needed to be "theological meat eaters," with an appetite for solid spiritual food and a calling to feed others the same.

Encouraging the faculty and students to take up this challenge during their time at Southern Seminary, Mohler quoted the author of Hebrews, saying, "By now you ought to be teachers. Learn here that you might teach well."

Preceding Mohler's address, Daniel Akin, associate professor of Christian theology and Brian Richardson, professor of Christian education, became the 195th and the 196th faculty members to sign the seminary's Abstract of Principles. This original, handwritten document dating from 1859 details the pledge of faculty members to teach in accordance to the principles detailed within the document.

Akin was also installed as the dean of the School of Theology. He is among a dozen new and visiting professors who have joined Southern Seminary's faculty. Those faculty members and the new trustees were introduced to the seminary community during the ceremony.

Four faculty members were also honored with endowed professorships and chairs. Craig Blaising was named Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology. Daniel Block was installed as the John R. Sampey Professor of Old Testament Interpretation. Richardson was named to the Basil Manly Jr., Professor of Christian Education chair, and Robert Smith Jr. was named Carl E. Bates Associate Professor of Christian Preaching.

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CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "Bible as 'moral compass' must be restored: Cooper," dated 8/30/96, please make this correction. At the end of the 2nd paragraph add the following:

"Cooper took office as Midwestern's vice president for academic affairs last October."

Thanks,  
Baptist Press

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