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March 7, 1996

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
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WRAP-UP

Beware of allegiance to party,
politicians, CLC speakers warn

Baptist Press
3/7/96

WASHINGTON (BP)--The church needs to influence American public life in a righteous manner, but Christians need to beware of offering unwavering support to any politician or political party in the process, speakers warned frequently at the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's national seminar March 4-6.

The theme of the CLC's 29th annual seminar, held at a Capitol Hill hotel, was "Christians in the Public Square: Faith in Practice?" The speakers -- who included leaders of public policy advocacy organizations, Southern Baptist pastors and seminary ethics professors -- exhorted those in attendance to live out a biblical faith in the public arena while keeping their priorities in line.

"We must never sell the birthright of our second birth to any political leader, any human movement, to any political party," said Richard Land, the CLC's president. "Our loyalty and allegiance belongs to Jesus Christ."

Southern Baptist pastors should base their positions on moral issues on God's Word and not "hitch (their) pulpit to a political candidate's star" or take a position because of its popularity among members of a group with which they want to be identified, said Charles Fuller, pastor of First Baptist Church, Roanoke, Va.

"If it's right, it's biblically right. If it's wrong, it's biblically wrong," Fuller said. "Moral issues for God's people are not political credentials and passkeys; they are moral issues."

The failure of most Christians in pre-World War II Germany to practice their faith properly should be a lesson to believers today. The church's inadequate theology led to the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and eventually the Holocaust, said David Gushee, professor of ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"They failed to embrace important biblical, moral norms," said Gushee.

"Too frequently we pick a cluster of values and baptize them as Christian. We are especially enthusiastic about those who skillfully baptize these values in a Christian vocabulary. Then we offer these politicians our uncritical and unquestioning support."

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Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, applied such a warning to the 1996 presidential race.

"We ought to stand and call (a candidate) to task, even if inadvertently it will help a president that many of us don't like," Bauer said.

"I don't think we should get into the business of picking the lesser of two evils. We need to hold out a standard to say what it is we believe and what America needs, and if the candidates are not willing to rally to that standard, then I don't think we need to worry about what will happen to them on election day."

The church needs to experience change before it is able to exert the proper influence, some speakers said.

"We should not blame the politicians for the moral collapse of America," said O.S. Hawkins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas. "We need to put it where it belongs, at the feet of the church. Biblical, moral standards are forgotten in an attempt to appease an immoral culture and in some ways to market the church to a secular world.

"America's biggest problem is an apathetic church who has lost her first love. And in losing that first love, we have lost our influence."

Said Land, "If we are going to have Christians in the public square and have faith in practice, we have to have the faith right first."

Among issues which the church needs to be more faithful to address, speakers said, are abortion, homosexuality, pornography, drugs and poverty.

The church is the institution which can stop the killing of unborn children, and pastors are the key to mobilizing the church, said Michael Cloer, a Southern Baptist pastor who directs Pastors for Life. "The church must respond to abortion both by working to establish justice and by showing mercy," he said.

A potential ruling in a Hawaiian state court will further cripple the culture and "significantly undercut" the witness of the church, said Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice. The court may allow recognition of same-sex marriages, making Hawaii the first state to take such action.

Homosexuals "are getting special rights, and we're barely hanging on to ours," Sekulow said, warning persecution may be near for the American church. "We've seen nothing yet if they legitimize what I am talking about. It will be beyond the scope of our imagination."

With the expansion of cyberporn, Christians, more than ever, need to take action, said Dee Jepsen, president of the Enough Is Enough anti-pornography campaign.

"The church of Jesus Christ can do no less than stand against and root out the moral cancer of pornography," she said. "If it does not, I believe it will stand in judgment for that inaction."

Churches also need to combine social ministry with spiritual outreach, said E.W. McCall, an African American Southern Baptist pastor from California.

"Too often our churches are just there as a country club," McCall said. "No longer can the black community in particular and the whole of America in general depend upon government to take care of all our needs and wants. The black church must see the need to transform itself into a force to deal with holistic approaches to ministry."

Florida pastor Charles Rosel, whose church's evangelistic outreach is based on social ministry, said, "We ought to out-love the pagan world."

When Christians fail to confront social ill, there are tragic results, said Gary Frost, an African American pastor from Ohio and second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"Today on the American scene there is a powerful Absalom who is struttin' his stuff in the face of the church," Frost said. "His name is Louis Farrakhan. He is rising up to become the champion of the oppressed. Why? Because righteous people didn't do anything."

Farrakhan is head of the Nation of Islam.

"There is a sense we all have that America is one wrong turn away from disaster," Bauer said. "Having forgotten God, we have unleashed the hounds of hell on our streets, in our neighborhoods and communities."

Washington, D.C.. pastor Mark Dever said the Bible clearly teaches God "hates the arrogance of proud nations and is committed to bringing them to realize the foolishness of trusting in anything other than him."

"When God decides to judge a proud nation, no economic expansion, no amount of job creation, no Stealth bomber or Patriot missiles can save it."

Three members of the House of Representatives spoke at a congressional breakfast during the seminar. They were Rep. Tony Hall, D.-Ohio; Rep. Chris Smith, R.-N.J., and Rep. Charles Stenholm, D.-Texas.

Hall, who became a Christian after his first election to Congress in 1978, shared about his spiritual life in Washington, including the prayer meeting and discipleship group in which he participates. After he was saved, he became pro-life under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Hall said.

He said the Clinton administration is wrong on abortion. "Why (Clinton) feels this way about abortion, I don't know. Keep praying for him," he said.

In response to questions, both Hall and Stenholm said they were supporting Clinton for re-election.

Smith criticized the Clinton administration for its lack of action on the persecution of Christians globally, calling abortion and homosexual rights the "twin pillars of this administration's policy on human rights."

Total attendance at the seminar was 179, with 101 paid registrants.

The 1997 seminar will be at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

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Compiled by Tom Strode. Marty Croll, Dwayne Hastings and Lee Weeks contributed to this article.

Discernment, compassion listed
as keys to Christian influence

By Marty Croll

Baptist Press
3/7/96

WASHINGTON (BP)--Christians must employ discernment and compassion with others to make a difference in the public square, an ethicist and two pastors said March 6 during the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's 29th annual seminar.

"We ought to out-love the pagan world," said Charles Roesel, pastor of First Baptist Church, Leesburg, Fla. His downtown church grew from a declining attendance of 300 to more than 6,000 members, largely related to ministry-based evangelistic efforts ranging from a rescue shelter for children to a pregnancy care center and a teenage girls home.

But possibly as significant as the growth of the church is the growth of the number of volunteers: 1,400 church members now involved in running 50-plus outreach ministries.

Outreach occurs when a Christian's vertical relationship with God stimulates a need to develop horizontal relationships with other people, said Gary Frost, pastor of Rising Star Baptist Church, Youngstown, Ohio, and second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"Talk is cheap, and tradition is meaningless," he said. "Helpless, hurting and hopeless people are longing for an encounter with genuine love."

Frost drew from the biblical account of Absalom, King David's son, to show what happens when righteous people fail to respond to social ill. After two years passed and David did nothing to avenge the rape of his daughter, Absalom grew bitter and took matters into his own hands. He became an "evil, evil, evil monster," Frost said.

"Today on the American scene there is a powerful Absalom who is struttin' his stuff in the face of the church. His name is Louis Farrakhan. He is rising up to become the champion of the oppressed. Why? Because righteous people didn't do anything."

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Farrakhan, who recently toured the world openly forging alliances with Muslim leaders, recently led a "Million-Man March" to Washington, D.C., to extoll virtues of black unity and power.

Righteous people have failed to address the heart of the drug issue, throwing insensitive blame at the "little gang boys" in the inner city who peddle substances for small-time gain -- not going after the big-time corruption feeding the problem, he said.

Bold believers should target genuine culprits "deeply entrenched in the very fabric of American life," he said.

"Let's elevate our prayers to the CIA, to the military. There's a diabolical chess game that is being played, and the black urban gangster is no more than a mere pawn. Nobody's getting to the kings, queens and bishops. There is wickedness in high places."

The invasion of the gospel into the public square will not come through the White House, he stressed. "Our utmost desire must be to surrender our lives in humble service to the holy and solitary judge." Politics should not be a Christian's highest priority, he added.

David Gushee, acting dean of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky, noted the willingness of Christians to reduce faith to a politically defensible value system and social order was a factor leading to the rise of Hitler and the extermination of Jews.

"They failed to embrace important biblical, moral norms," said Gushee, who has written extensively on the Holocaust. "They failed to embrace the requirements to be concerned for the well-being of the stranger and the alien, the call to peacemaking and to a faith that transcends national loyalties, and the demand for social justice.

"Too frequently we pick a cluster of values and baptize them as Christian. We vote for politicians who articulate those values," he said. "We are especially enthusiastic about those who skillfully baptize these values in a Christian vocabulary. Then we offer these politicians our uncritical and unquestioning support."

Gushee warned against seeing political struggle in the life of America as "merely between a purer-than-the-driven-snow Christianity on the one hand and evil non-Christian movements and ideologies on the other."

In this election year, of all times, Christians should pray that God will help them fulfill their citizenship responsibilities, Gushee said.

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Congressmen say prayer
common on Capitol Hill

By Dwayne Hastings

Baptist Press
3/7/96

WASHINGTON (BP)--Most visitors to the U.S. Capitol don't come to that august building to see the chapel on the second floor but instead are attracted to the visitors' galleries to overlook the political rough-and-tumble below on the House and Senate floors.

But on Tuesday afternoons, visitors would find more serious business taking place in the Capitol's chapel. Rep. Tony Hall, D.-Ohio, and two other congressmen, along with some local pastors, meet there weekly for prayer and reflection.

"We talk about Christ and about things that are important to us," Hall said during the congressional breakfast at the 29th annual seminar of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission. "I find that these moments are really the best moments I spend."

Hall indicated political party affiliation was not an issue: "The other two congressmen are conservative Republicans. We get along famously. They're really my very best friends in the Congress."

Coming to Washington in 1978 as a freshman congressman from Dayton, Ohio, Hall was not a Christian. "I found Jesus here in Washington, D.C. It really made a big difference in my life as (to) where I was when I first came up here."

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Hall, who was presented with the Christian Life Commission's 1995 Distinguished Service Award during the conference, said he was fortunate to be in a position where his faith could impact public policy. As founding member of the Select Committee on Hunger, Hall is known as an advocate of hunger relief policy in the United States and around the world.

In presenting Hall with the award, CLC President Richard Land called Hall "a humble believer who regularly and unashamedly attests to his faith in Jesus Christ in the public square."

"There are a lot of people here who love the Lord," Hall said March 5, acknowledging many people are working together to do good things in Washington, D.C. "You never read about that in the papers," he said.

Every Wednesday morning, Hall convenes a group of believers in the basement of the Martin Luther King library near Capitol Hill to pray for the people of Washington.

"We pray for the President, and we pray for the leadership of the Congress -- Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich. We pray for the mayor, the Cabinet and business people -- we pray for the city because this is the Capital."

His conversion to Christianity also brought Hall to reconsider his view on abortion; he was pro-choice. "I didn't like it, but I had no basis for any other position.

"When I became a believer and I began to read the Scriptures, I realized I had been wrong all those years," Hall explained. "The Holy Spirit changed me, and the love of Christ changed me."

He said the Clinton administration was wrong in its stance on the issue. "Why he (Clinton) feels this way about abortion, I don't know. Keep praying for him."

Charles Stenholm, D.-Texas, also addressed the conference's breakfast meeting, noting that every Thursday at 8 a.m., nearly 50 congressmen gather for the House prayer breakfast.

"It's a special hour that we always block out, for therein is the best opportunity to find the answers," Stenholm said.

Stenholm, who was introduced by Land as a "blue-dog Democrat" -- a conservative Democrat who seeks compromise between more liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans, took the opportunity to educate the crowd on the derivation of that political term.

"You've heard of a yellow-dog Democrat -- someone who will vote for a yellow dog if he is on the right side of the ticket -- a blue dog is a yellow dog who has been choked nigh unto death," explained a smiling Stenholm.

In response to questions from those attending, both Hall and Stenholm indicated they were supporting fellow Democrat Clinton for a second term as president.

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**Congressman takes aim at failed
policy on religious persecution** By Dwayne Hastings

**Baptist Press
3/7/96**

WASHINGTON (BP)--Rep. Chris Smith, R.-N.J., took an invitation to speak to the congressional breakfast meeting of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's 29th annual seminar as the opportunity to lash out at the United States' failure to respond to global reports of religious persecution.

"It is time for the persecution of Christians to become a front-burner, nonnegotiable issue in our foreign policy rather the total non-issue it has been," said Smith, whose subcommittee of the House of Representatives International Relations Committee has held hearings on religious persecution. He criticized the "soothing words of concern" which have come out of the Clinton White House, saying instead, "We need action."

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The reluctance of the Clinton administration to link most-favored-nation status with human rights meant the People's Republic of China could trade with the United States and continue its repression of Christians with impunity, Smith said March 5. The Chinese had promised otherwise, he said.

"They took us for fools," Smith said. "Human rights does not matter with this administration. It's as if nobody cares anymore."

He said human rights in the current administration is nothing more than abortion rights and homosexual rights: "These are the twin pillars of this administration's policy on human rights. That's what they care about, not religious persecution, not about suffering human rights activists; they care about pushing abortion rights around the world."

Smith reserved some of his attack for American companies doing business in China.

"American businesses are complicit, in my view, with most of the things that are going on either by their silence or by their actual promotion of human rights abuses in their own factories and workplaces," he said.

Criticizing the Clinton administration for normalizing relations with Vietnam without linkage to human rights or the POW-MIA issue, Smith said, according to groups like Amnesty International, the government in that Southeast Asia country remains a "brutal dictatorship."

Warning the pendulum is beginning to swing back in Russia, Smith said recent electoral results appear to give hardliners in that country more strength. "We may see repression come back with a vengeance."

He explained Christians are repressed in these countries because they become the bulwark of the pro-democracy movements. "These are the people willing to suffer for their faith. They are liberated from within so they want to liberate others from without by changing the government."

The United States is not immune from similar repression, Smith said, citing the 1993 passage of the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act. "For the first time since the Fugitive Slave Act in the 1800s, men and women who peacefully dissent against what they consider to be an immoral and socially unjust law may be turned into felons."

While decrying the sporadic violence in the pro-life movement, Smith said the law focused on a protester's intent -- a unique requirement. Through this legislation, pro-life dissenters became susceptible to a different standard from all other public policy protesters, he said.

"This is analogous to human rights abuses overseas: Simply because you disagree with your government or something you find immoral, you have the book thrown at you," he said.

The church has failed to be a diligent intercessor for the millions of persecuted Christians around the world, Smith said, calling on Christians to pray for their fellow believers.

"The most powerful weapon on the face of the earth is the persevering prayer of a righteous man coupled with fasting and coupled with a Holy Spirit-inspired heart."

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Fifth- and sixth-graders
reach out by telephone

By Melanie Childers

Baptist Press
3/7/96

GLASGOW, Ky. (BP)--The fifth- and sixth-grade boys at Calvary Baptist Church, Glasgow, Ky., have Brandon Harlow's number -- and they dial it every Sunday so he can join them for Sunday school.

Harlow and his family participated actively in Sunday school, worship and other activities at Calvary until last July, when he was diagnosed with leukemia.

But thanks to a speaker phone and a class of 11- and 12-year-olds who learned early about how the body of Christ should care for its members, Harlow joins his class for Sunday school almost every week from an easy chair in his living room.

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"Once we get our records done, we just dial his number," explained co-teacher Jimmy Manion. "Everybody says hello to him," and then the lesson begins. Harlow takes his turn reading Scripture and joins in the discussion, Manion said.

A few times, Harlow has been too sick to receive the Sunday morning call. Once, on his birthday last December, he was well enough to meet his class at church.

But for the most part, the telephone provides a regular, ringing reminder from the boys to Harlow that they consider him an important part of their group.

"We had prayer for him every day ... and were thinking of taking the class to him, but that wasn't really possible," Manion said. It was Angie Raines, Manion's co-teacher, who suggested purchasing a speaker phone.

The telephone was secured and placed in associate pastor Ronnie Raines' office, where the class has been meeting since last November. Rather than feeling inhibited by the speaker phone in the center of the room, the boys seem to enjoy the unusual circumstances, Manion said. "It doesn't have any effect on the class except positive."

Tim Best, minister of music and education at Calvary, said the experience has taught the boys about being the body of Christ -- "weeping when one weeps, rejoicing when one rejoices. ... They have a sense of what that means," he explained.

Despite their strong Christian faith, Harlow's parents acknowledge the experience has been stressful.

"Everything revolves around the disease now," Harlow's mother, Belinda, said, noting they currently are in the "very hard phase" of chemotherapy treatments.

"I've tried to keep a journal through all of this," she said. "I used to think we were just a normal family; now I guess we're a normal family dealing with cancer. ... Still, physically and financially, it's very draining."

The spiritual drain also becomes difficult at times.

"I miss not being able to worship with the others at church," she said. "But we feel their support. Their prayers are getting us through."

Brandon Harlow's response to his illness -- even after seven months of chemotherapy treatments, blood work and multiple trips each week to Louisville's Kosair Hospital -- has astounded even his parents.

"It's just outstanding," Belinda said. "This kid has so much faith. He prays about it every night, and he says he knows the Lord has got what it takes to cure him."

Although Harlow's leukemia is in remission, close monitoring and chemotherapy treatments will continue for at least three years, his mother explained.

The classmates' compassion and concern for their friend is indicative of a church that emphasizes missions and ministry, Best noted.

"Our church is unique in that we try to look at not so much bringing the church inside the walls, but trying to reach outside," Best said. "We're trying to find ways to meet people where they are, rather than saying, 'This is the systematic way it's done -- you adjust your schedule.'"

The Sunday school class is joining the church in sponsoring a benefit for the Harlow family, Best said. Proceeds from a gospel music fest and cake walk at 6:30 p.m. March 16 at Hiseville Elementary School will help offset the financial strain on the family.

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Louisiana state paper
gets Internet home page

By C. Lacy Thompson

Baptist Press
3/7/96

ALEXANDRIA, La. (BP)--Akin to the kids' riddle, "What is black and white and "red" all over?" here's another:

What newspaper has no black (as in ink) and no white (as in paper) but still can be read all over -- in fact, all over the world?

The Louisiana Baptist Message Online version, for one.

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For more than 100 years, the Baptist Message has published a weekly newspaper mailed to subscribers across Louisiana. In addition, copies are sent to some people out of state and to overseas missionaries who hail from the Bayou State. Even so, the number of Baptist Message copies that crosses Louisiana borders is relatively few.

Since earlier this year, however, the Baptist Message has erased all borders by publishing a version of its weekly newspaper on the Internet.

"In a sense, this is an unbelievable development," editor Lynn P. Clayton said of the Internet version of the paper. "To think that what we produce in Louisiana each week is available absolutely around the world staggers the imagination.

"At the same time, it is exciting to consider. Missionaries with Internet capabilities can now access news quickly. Individuals in countries the Baptist Message would never be mailed to can read of Baptists and their work around the world. In some cases, it may be that the Baptist Message will find its way into areas that have no Baptist witness at this time. Now that's exciting to consider - that the Baptist Message can have a part in directly impacting the world with the gospel. What an opportunity!"

The paper's opportunity to go on the Internet -- at <http://www.lacollege.edu/baptist/message/message.html/> -- comes compliments of Louisiana College.

In the past year, the Louisiana Baptist school has begun moving full force into the Internet age, even to the point of beginning to offer a degree program via computers.

In addition, the college has performed a community service by creating a "virtual community" featuring information about the Alexandria/Pineville area.

And, of course, the college has created its own home page to offer information about itself.

"Still, we're probably in the middle of the pack in terms of Internet," said Roseanne Osborne, chair of the school's division of humanities and the leading force behind the Internet developments. "We were in the first 10 of Baptist colleges to get on and create a home page. Now, it's interesting to see how fast other colleges are coming on."

Still, the college is out front in terms of the service it offers with the Alexandria/Pineville virtual community. And it has helped the Baptist Message move out front as the first Baptist state newspaper to go on line on the Internet.

"The college really has opened an incredible door for us," Clayton said. "They took the lead in contacting us and setting up our pages and everything. And each week now, they transfer Baptist Message stories from disk to the Internet. We couldn't be more appreciative of their efforts."

Currently, Baptist Message Online features about two-thirds of the copy included in the weekly printed version of the newspaper. It also includes an archives feature for persons to look back through 1996 issues thus far. In addition, staff members and Louisiana College leaders are working to provide on-line information about Baptist Message staff members, trustees and subscription rates. Eventually, the newspaper hopes to offer a guest book for persons to sign as they access the newspaper and the means of subscribing to the printed version of the newspaper via the Internet connection.

But even those efforts are just the beginning, Osborne said, noting the variety of opportunities for the school and newspaper. For instance, she speaks of establishing a means of communicating with overseas missionaries as well as setting up a way for persons to communicate with the Baptist Message via the on-line network.

"The possibilities are endless," Osborne said. "And the thing is that as soon as you think of it, you can do it. And beyond that, it just blows my mind that you can do something here (in a Pineville office) and have people in Bunkie or in Hong Kong see it."

Osborne is not exaggerating. At the end of the year, the Louisiana College home page and the Alexandria/Pineville virtual community were receiving more than 500 "hits" per day on the Internet -- from across the nation as well as many foreign countries. In months to come, the college expects to see that number only increase.

From her viewpoint, Osborne also expects to see the number of people with access to the Internet increase as well. "Already, 40 percent of homes have computers. That's going to be an interesting figure to watch. I think it will move like the telephone and the VCR. At one time, they were considered luxury items. But with time, they have come to be seen as necessities."

That means the importance of being able to communicate via the Internet will grow and grow -- and the work being done now by Louisiana College -- primarily through the efforts of Osborne and faculty member Bart Marable -- will be invaluable in days to come.

Osborne acknowledged some people have asked if it is really necessary for the school to devote so much energy into entering the Internet age. Her answer is an unqualified yes. "This is going to change radically how we do business -- on a denominational level as well as an educational level."

Clayton agreed. "We cannot ignore the changes computers have brought and continue to bring to the world. We must continue to do all we can to take advantage of the opportunities those changes present. When we work together like Louisiana College has promoted, we can take advantage of those opportunities."

Doing so will require constant attention, however. As with most new developments, changes occur quickly in the Internet world, Osborne said. "It's interesting to see how if you don't look at things on the network for awhile and then come back to it, so much has been added. This really is a work in process."

And there are still hurdles to overcome. For instance, Clayton noted while the Baptist Message has now become a worldwide newspaper, his staff still has not figured out a way for people to fold up Baptist Message Online and take it along on the carpool to work.

Oh well, perhaps with time.

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Association kindles renewal
for church staff, families By William H. Perkins Jr.

Baptist Press
3/7/96

CARRIERE, Miss. (BP)--A weekend retreat organized by a Baptist association for church staff members and their families kindled spiritual renewal and revealed a deep need for such an event, according to Ken Rhodes, director of missions for Pearl River Baptist Association in southwest Mississippi.

"It's the best thing we've done," said Rhodes, who reported 100 church staffers and their family members from 30 area churches participated in the Feb. 23-24 weekend.

The idea for the retreat was born about a year ago during an intense evaluation of how the association could better serve the county's churches, Rhodes said.

"We wanted to develop fellowship among the churches, and we decided to start with the church staff leadership and their families. We felt church staff members often have difficulty sharing their personal needs," he explained.

Sidney Ellis, state consultant for church renewal in the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board's Brotherhood department, said he knew when Rhodes discussed the idea with him it had merit.

"When I went to meetings in other states, I would ask if anyone had ever conducted a retreat specifically targeted at church staff members and their families. I couldn't find anyone who had done anything like this," Ellis said.

Rhodes and Ellis rolled up their sleeves and began recruiting people to help them plan the retreat.

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The planners decided there would be small-group sharing time, where husbands and wives would be placed in different groups to discuss their personal concerns.

There would be family worship time, giving church staff members and their families time to relax and worship without the worry of planning and conducting the service.

Rhodes said 30 laypeople from the county's churches flocked to help, offering child care, meal service and other any other assistance needed.

"Several of the church staff members, when they saw how many laypeople were involved in the weekend, said to me, 'They really love us,'" Rhodes said.

The retreat ended with a service where church staffers and their families were allowed private prayer time beneath a tall cross at the front of the room. Many of the families walked forward and huddled closely together as they kneeled to pray at the cross.

"For me, this was long overdue. I'd highly recommend it for every association," said Jeanette Everett, whose husband, Rocky, is pastor of Harmony Baptist Church in the county.

"I knew most of the pastors (in the association), but I didn't know their wives and families before the retreat," said Everett, who is pregnant with the couple's fourth child. "The retreat has given me a new perspective; it's taken me back to where I need to be with God."

Billy Dowdy, pastor of West Union Baptist Church, attended the retreat with wife Vickie and teenage daughters Becky and Katie.

"It's the best weekend I've ever experienced, and I've had some good ones," Dowdy said. "I hope these retreats spring up all over the country."

Dowdy said he had attended lay renewal events but had not gone into the small groups or other segments aimed at laypeople. "This was my first small group. Pastors need to share things, too," he said.

Ellis was impressed with the retreat's outcome.

"I saw the need for this retreat, but being here definitely opened my eyes. It turned out to be a time of healing and renewal for church staff members, but it was even more so for their wives and families," he said.

Rhodes said the association will carefully evaluate the success of the event.

"We went in with an open agenda as to the future of these retreats. We're going to decide where to go from here, but we know there's no limit to how far this idea could reach," he predicted.

For more information on the retreat, Rhodes can be contacted at the association's office at 1376 McNeill-Steep Hollow Road, Carriere, MS 39426; phone, (601) 798-2372.

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Patterson urges seminarians
to please God, not self

By Pat Cole

Baptist Press
3/7/96

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Ministers spend a lifetime grappling with the choice of pleasing God or pleasing self, Paige Patterson told a chapel audience at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"To please self means that you will inevitably humiliate yourself in the eyes of the church and the world and before God," said Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina, in the March 5 address at Southern Seminary, Louisville, Ky. "It means that you will inevitably fall and fail."

Those who decide to please God, however, face a different plight, Patterson said. Such a decision, he explained, "may mean to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, maybe to face great inconvenience and difficulty, but nevertheless to emerge triumphant on the other side."

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In his sermon, titled "Sleeping With the Enemy," Patterson used the biblical story of Samson as an example of one whose life of promise turned to disaster because of disobedience. Samson's sexual infidelity and his marriage to a Philistine woman set his life on course toward failure, Paterson recounted.

The women with whom Samson became involved were not his real enemies, Patterson said. "In some sense they were the enemy, but the real enemy Samson slept with every night was himself."

Samson became his own enemy, Patterson said, because Samson chose to please himself instead of God.

"I plead with you my fellow ministers of the gospel this day to make up your mind now how you will live," Patterson urged. "Will you please God or will you please yourself? And if the answer is please self, would you please leave the ministry now and do something else? But do not stay where you will harm the church of God."

Patterson warned that deciding to please self will lead to a life of pain. "I plead with you not to let that happen."

In making choices, Patterson advised taking the long view of life. "In this life and ministry to which God called you, the issue is not how well you start," he said. The principal factor, he stressed, is how well one finishes.

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EDITORS' NOTE: The name of the birth mother in this story has been changed.

'My hopeless situation
turned into a blessing'

By Dana Williamson

Baptist Press
3/7/96

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--"God gives us the freedom to make choices," said Lauren. "I made a wrong choice that turned my life upside down, but ultimately I made a right choice that enabled God to convert my hopeless situation into a blessing."

Lauren was a 32-year-old, divorced mother of a son and an active Southern Baptist when she made a choice that would affect the rest of her life.

"Following an emotional time when I thought there was a chance for reconciliation with my husband, but found there wasn't, I was approached by a man from my church who seemed fun, caring and good," Lauren recounted. "However, I later discovered he had a persuasive nature, was searching for a 'significant other' and intended to have one however he could make that happen."

Confronted with premarital sex, Lauren gave in and found herself facing the consequence of that choice.

"It seemed to be a hopeless situation," she said.

Lauren counseled with her pastor, who told her that to get married to save embarrassment or because she was pregnant were not reasons for a marriage.

Lauren divulged she had already ruled out abortion because "I could not look at my son and actively choose to abort what would be another precious baby."

Her pastor laid out her alternatives, one of which was adoption -- something Lauren had not considered.

Later, however, when the situation with the baby's father grew worse, she began to contemplate the idea of adoption.

"The peace I felt about this option was incredible," Lauren said. "I no longer felt turmoil or confusion, but a growing conviction that this was the option the Lord wanted me to take."

Lauren contacted the Oklahoma City Crisis Pregnancy Center for guidance and for whom to contact about adoption. She was given the opportunity to call the agency of her choice, and chose the Baptist Children's Home in Oklahoma City.

"I was acquainted with a couple in my church who had adopted their child through the Baptist Children's Home," she related.

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"I knew they had to go through a very thorough review and home study, so I realized that whoever the children's home had on a list to adopt a child had been screened well."

Phyllis Gentry, Lauren's counselor at the children's home, said Lauren went through adoptive family profiles and had input on her baby's new parents.

"The profiles help the birth mother to know that this is not some mythical family out there, but they give flesh and reality to a family," Gentry explained.

Lauren said the love and care she received from Gentry was "fantastic."

"Although it was a difficult and emotional time, I know my precious baby girl went where the Lord wanted her," Lauren said.

"I would like to say to any girl or woman who finds herself in this situation, and chooses adoption, that many people will share their opinion regarding your decision, whether they agree with you or not," Lauren warned. "But only you and the Lord know what is best for your baby. Please allow him, not other people's opinions, to help you with the decision. The sacrifice is great, but the blessing to a couple who cannot have children is much greater."

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FIRST-PERSON

'Please don't send me
to Africa,' she once said

By Gloria Blowers

Baptist Press
3/7/96

PORTO NOVA, Benin (BP)--After Mel, my husband, blessed the food, I broke off a piece of the boiled ball of pulverized igname root, swished it around with my fingers in the watery goat broth, raised it to my lips and thanked God for the incredible opportunity we had to be in Benin, west Africa.

We had just attended a church service under a mango tree near a small bush village in northern Benin. The meal was an expression of the love and warm hospitality of these Christian brothers and sisters.

Our visit to Benin began on Oct. 15. For the next 16 days we would visit every section of this west African country, from the southern coastal town of Porto Nova to the northern village of Tanguieta, and our lives would be dramatically and permanently altered.

Culturally, it was like stepping back to Bible times. Throughout the country, women still carry water pots, huge trays of fruit and just about anything else on their heads. They wash their clothes and bathe in the streams near the villages. There is no running water, heat, electricity, air conditioning ... or showers or bathrooms!

There are few cars. Most walk. "Taxi" service is mainly jimijams (motor scooters) which dart about haphazardly causing endless accidents and loss of life to riders and pedestrians. There is little industry, so people are forced to subsist on what they can grow, barter for or forage from the forest and fields around them.

Voodoo and spiritism are still prevalent, holding the people in bondage to incredible fear and superstition.

At our first stop, Porto Nova, we were warmly hosted by Bobby and Becky Coutts, originally from Tennessee. Bobby is the head of the Southern Baptist mission in Benin. He and Becky have lived in this Third-World country 20 years, including a number of years under the communist regime. They endured many difficulties and much persecution. But they stayed because God had called them, and their work was not yet finished. They are now joined by 10 missionary families. Churches are sprinkled throughout the country and reaching into the remotest villages.

How encouraging it was as we went throughout the cities of Porto Nova and Cotonou, then out into remote villages in the interior, to see construction in progress at almost every location: new church buildings or meeting huts for the people to gather, hear the Word of God and fellowship together. How often we heard: "See that? That's your Lottie Moon dollars at work."

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Our hearts were warmed as we realized the inestimable difference our "Lottie Moon dollars" were making. Because of the "good news" of Jesus' love and salvation our Southern Baptist missionaries brought to the people, hope has replaced hopelessness; wisdom, new meaning and a clear sense of purpose has dispelled the meaningless existence and fears of voodoo; joy sparks a new zest for living; love has overcome hatred and strife. There is peace in the hearts and peace in the homes.

We spent two days in Cotonou, then en route to Allada, we passed through the Portuguese slave trade city of Ouidah. What a sobering experience it was to look upon the fort there and be reminded of the indescribable pain and agony of the human beings who had been housed there. I could only think of the prophet Jeremiah's words: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and desperately wicked. Who can understand it" (Jer. 17:9).

Allada is the "capital" of voodoo in Benin. There were fetishes and voodoo temples everywhere. Fear and superstition ruled the city -- until missionaries Jeff and Rene Hale arrived to share the "good news."

At first they were persecuted and harassed endlessly by fetishers who did not want them interfering with their control of the people. The people remained under this oppression, constantly sacrificing chickens or goats to appease the gods or worshipping wooden idols and icons sold by the fetishers. But Jeff and Rene stayed and ministered to the people, helping them with their physical, emotional and medical needs, feeding and clothing them, teaching them simple hygiene practices and sharing the love of Jesus.

Rene is an accomplished musician who left a very promising career as a concert violinist to come here. Yet, when questioned about it, Rene radiated confidence and a deep joy. "I'm where the Lord wants me, doing what he has called me to do," she said. "That's all that really matters."

At the end of the long, dusty, bumpy eight-hour trek to Tanguieta, we were greeted by the warm hospitality of Wycliffe missionaries Paula and Leon Hoover and their three children, Luke, Natalie and Nicole. Leon is a Bible translator/linguist working with the Benin government to codify the Mbelime language into written form. He showed us the long, labor-intensive process. What dedication!

It was encouraging to see how closely our Southern Baptist missionaries work with missionaries in other organizations. They put aside denominational barriers, uniting efforts for the sole purpose of obeying Christ's command to take the gospel into all the world and make disciples.

"We need each other," Leon told us. "The Baptists are great evangelists and church planters. But they don't have the time or training to do translation work. I don't have time to plant churches and disciple converts. So I work night and day to translate the Bible and your missionaries take it to the people and use it to teach and train them so they can tell others and bring even more into the kingdom of God. I think this is how God wants us to fulfill the Great Commission."

During the 20-hour journey back to the United States, I often thought about all the unfounded fears I had before I became a Christian. The thought of being sent to Africa as a missionary had been frightening. I can remember praying after I did become a Christian, "Dear God, please don't send me to Africa."

Yet, there was not one person Mel and I met on this trip who did not radiate a joy I haven't seen in this country for a long, long time. The missionaries were not there begrudgingly. They were there lovingly, joyfully, thankfully. They were there because God had blessed them and graciously called them to serve these people. They were exactly where God wanted them to be and they wouldn't want to be anywhere, doing anything else in all the world.

By the time we left, I understood why. My heart had grown to love this country and the beautiful people who live and work and share together the wonderful life-changing love of Jesus.

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And you know what? I miss Africa now. I really do. I miss it a lot. Thank you, Lord, for sending me ... to Africa.

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Blowers, a frequent missions volunteer, is a member of Mt. Yonah Baptist Church, Cleveland, Ga.

CORRECTION: In the (BP) story, "Executive Committee signs pact with consultant; notes savings," dated 3/6/96, in the second paragraph please replace the acronym, ITF, with its full name, Implementation Task Force.

Thanks,
Baptist Press

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