

**(BP)**

**-- BAPTIST PRESS**  
News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

September 17, 1996

96-164

TENNESSEE--Ronnie Floyd reiterates call to SBC for fasting & prayer.  
TENNESSEE--RTVC facilities to continue in use after SBC restructuring.  
VIRGINIA--Virginia conservatives form new state convention.  
TENNESSEE--Disney sitcom character may embrace homosexuality.  
NEW ORLEANS--Schedules, safety, celebrations came together for convocations.  
ST. LOUIS--Religious Heritage names Rogers for clergyman honor.  
ARKANSAS--Rally-goers urged to build coalitions against racism.  
TENNESSEE--Correction.

Ronnie Floyd reiterates call  
to SBC for fasting & prayer

By Art Toalston

Baptist Press  
9/17/96

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Southern Baptists would find power in agreeing on the need for revival, said Ronnie W. Floyd, reiterating an Oct. 27-Nov. 3 call to fasting and prayer across the Southern Baptist Convention.

"There is power in agreement," Floyd told members of the SBC Executive Committee meeting in Nashville, Tenn., Sept. 16.

"Baptists are not known to agree a lot together," Floyd, the committee's chairman, acknowledged. "But we ought to become known as a people who know how to agree with one another about the right things. And we might have to repent over some past things in order to move on to agree on the right things.

"And what is right?" Floyd asked. "That God would move in our generation. What is right? That we will call the people of God to repentance, to be holy, to exercise the righteousness of God that they have already been clothed with ... through Jesus Christ and the power he gives to each one of us."

Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church, Springdale, Ark., also is president of the SBC Pastors' Conference.

He first voiced the Oct. 27-Nov. 3 call to fasting and prayer during the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting last June in New Orleans when he delivered the convention sermon.

Four thrusts are involved in the week-long emphasis:

-- on Sunday morning, Oct. 27, preaching on the subject of fasting and prayer, calling Baptists to fast and pray on Oct. 30.

-- on Sunday evening, Oct. 27, holding a "solemn assembly" of prayer to call people to repent of personal sin and the sins of the nation, asking God for mercy on his people.

-- observing Wednesday, Oct. 30, as a day of humiliation, prayer and fasting for personal, church and national revival.

-- On Sunday, Nov. 3, in both morning and evening services, preaching on the subject of personal, church and national revival, challenging God's people to do whatever it takes to see revival in America.

Floyd noted: "While the rest of America thinks that the future of this country will be determined two days later in the ballot box, we are saying, 'No, that's not where the future of this country will be determined.'" It will be determined "in the prayer closet," he stated in comments based on Psalm 63:1 and Joel 2:12-13.

Floyd added, "God has opened up so many unbelievable doors ... by every major influential Christian body in America ... saying right now, 'We're going to do everything in our power to cross it over denominational lines.'

--more--

"This is of God," Floyd said. "It's something that God has put on the hearts of people one by one by one." The result, he said, is "the opportunity to see a major difference made for Jesus."

Tom Elliff, the SBC's new president, also addressed the Executive Committee Sept. 16.

Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Okla., had just concluded a series of convocations emphasizing the crucified life and prayer for spiritual awakening that included stops at the SBC's six seminary campuses and the Home Mission Board.

Saying he "came away from every one of those convocations deeply, deeply moved," Elliff voiced an urgency to issue an appeal to Executive Committee members "from my heart to your heart ... an appeal which I believe has been borne in the heart of God."

"It is simply this: In the midst of all that we're saying, and in the midst of all that we're planning to do ... in the midst of all of the programming, please don't you forget to pray."

It would be easy "to preach about praying, to write about praying, to call people to pray" -- and yet not pray, Elliff said in a message drawn from John 18, reminding, "The closer our Lord came to the cross, the more he prayed. ... The more chaos there was, the more confusion there was surrounding him, the more the burden of the cross was before him, the more he prayed."

Saying the nation is in "an unbelievable time of chaos," Elliff pointed out: "It is the person who prays who's going to walk calmly in the midst of conflict and speak as an oracle of God. ... Otherwise, you're going to be right out there in the crowd, fighting with them. And what you have to say will be taken about as seriously as what they have to say, because it will not have seemed to them to have come from the heart of God. ... It's hard to argue with someone if you are convinced they have been with God."

Elliff said he is "convinced more and more that God has only one purpose in everything he's doing in your life and mine ... that we might be conformed to the image of his dear Son."

"And what a tragedy if he can never get to you quietly in prayer," Elliff said. "For instance, if he's going to teach you humility because Christ was humble, he's either got to find you humbling yourself before him in prayer, or since you'll never be private, he's going to have to humiliate you publicly. But he's going to get to you, because he is on an agenda to conform you and me to the image of his dear Son."

"I just believe if God would just find us in prayer ... there's such wonderful things he would be pleased -- rejoicing -- to do," Elliff said.

Floyd, in his comments to the Executive Committee, cited "the essence of what we are called as leaders to do: We are to call the people of God to return to him."

Describing America as "a moral mush" of "every opinion, every belief and every mind-set," Floyd stated: "We're living in this moral mush because we have lost a moral compass in our culture ... not just the commandments of God, but the very essence of who God is, that he is a holy God, that he is a righteous God, that he is asking for his people to give him their whole heart."

"And if and when we do not give him our whole heart," Floyd continued, "he activates becoming a jealous God. He wants our purity. He wants our devotion. He does not want to share any part of us with anything or anyone. He wants our allegiance to be fully to him."

Baptist leaders must assess: "How desperate are we for God to move in our generation?" Floyd said. "I really believe what the Lord is doing in America is that he is bringing you and me to a point of desperation."

That desperation, Floyd said, will lead to "fasting and weeping and mourning ... in other words, spiritual brokenness ... not the kind of mourning that exists when someone dies ... (but) mourning over the sinfulness of our day, where your heart is literally broken and you are aching for the Lord Jesus to do something mighty in your life."

"Are we desperate enough to join together in pursuing God?" Floyd asked. "Are we desperate enough to put down our own biases, to tear down our own walls, to be willing to join hands together in pursuing God in ... what he may want to do in our day and time?"

If Baptists and other evangelicals seek God by fasting and praying for revival this Oct. 27-Nov. 3, it would be "absolutely unbelievable what God may do," Floyd said.

--30--

The text of Floyd's comments are posted in SBCNet News Room.

**RTVC facilities to continue  
in use after SBC restructuring** By Art Toalston

**Baptist Press  
9/17/96**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The facilities of the Radio and Television Commission will continue in use in Fort Worth, Texas, in the restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention, according to a report received by the SBC Executive Committee Sept. 16 from its Implementation Task Force.

A new North American Mission Board, to be formed in a merger of the SBC's current Home Mission Board, RTVC and Brotherhood Commission, will be based in suburban Atlanta, according to previous recommendations from the 10-member ITF, created by the Executive Committee after SBC messengers approved the "Covenant for a New Century" convention-wide restructuring during the 1995 annual meeting in Atlanta.

The ITF's Sept. 16 report noted NAMB's radio-TV "executive leadership team" would be based in Alapahretta, Ga., site of new facilities opened by the Home Mission Board in 1995, while radio-TV "operational facilities" will remain in Fort Worth, where the RTVC has been based since 1955.

The ITF said its decision on the Fort Worth facilities involved much discussion and incorporated input from Coopers & Lybrand consultants with expertise in media and technology.

The Brotherhood Commission facility in Memphis, Tenn., however, "has been officially listed for sale," the ITF reported to the Executive Committee.

Among other matters reported by the ITF Sept. 16:

-- "Benefits for retirees of affected agencies shall become the responsibility of successor corporations or the Executive Committee." The restructuring will reduce the number of convention agencies from 19 to 12. In addition to the merger forming NAMB, the restructuring includes the dissolution of the current Historical, Education and Stewardship commissions, with a number of their responsibilities to be assumed by ongoing SBC agencies such as the Executive Committee or the Baptist Sunday School Board.

-- Efforts are being made to assure "that no issues or people 'drop through the cracks'" in the SBC downsizing. The ITF stated, "Entities facing dissolution have addressed the needs of their employees in a thorough and careful way. Great care is continuing to be exercised toward the reasonable and fair compensation of any who serve in such entities. ... Every effort is being made to arrive at a proper balance between caring for employees and conserving the assets of all affected agencies in the implementation of the Covenant for a New Century."

The restructuring, aimed at sharpening the SBC's Great Commission focus for the 21st century, is to be complete at the end of the 1997 SBC annual meeting in Dallas. Messengers to this year's annual meeting in New Orleans approved for the second year a change in Bylaw 15 which lists the SBC agencies, the only part of the restructuring which needed approval at two successive SBC meetings.

In an ITF recommendation approved by the Executive Committee Sept. 16, \$150,000 will be granted to the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools. The request was initiated by the SBC Education Commission for an orderly transfer of its ministries to the association.

The grant will entail \$100,000 from Education Commission funds budgeted for 1997 and \$50,000 from the Executive Committee in 1998 from funds received after the Education Commission's closure.

--more--

The Education Commission will close Dec. 31 of this year, according to an announcement by its trustee administrative committee Sept. 12.

After the Education Commission's closure, only the administration of various funded scholarship programs will remain as an SBC ministry.

Among other facets of the restructuring, the Southern Baptist Foundation will become a subsidiary corporation of the Executive Committee; the Stewardship Commission's Cooperative Program promotion responsibility will be assigned to the Executive Committee; the Historical Commission's archives will be operated by the Council of Seminary Presidents; the BSSB will assume assignments for stewardship and Baptist history education; the Foreign Mission Board will be renamed the International Mission Board; and the Christian Life Commission will become the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. The Southern Baptist Commission on The American Baptist Theological Seminary already has been dissolved. The SBC Annuity Board does not change under the restructuring.

The total number of personnel in the seven affected agencies was 566 as of mid-1995. The ITF's report to the SBC in June said the vast majority will continue in their current jobs after the implementation, but "because of the provisions (of restructuring) some employees will be severed or relocated to a new entity." Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church, Springdale, Ark., and chairman of the SBC Executive Committee, told SBC messengers after their 1995 vote for restructuring, "Never before has a denomination of this magnitude ever restructured all of its entities ... all for the purpose of taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world."

In its June report, the ITF estimated savings of approximately \$34-\$41 million over five years under the restructuring. Monies saved will "be made available for the front lines of missions church planting and evangelism," said Bob Reccord, ITF chairman and pastor of First Baptist Church, Norfolk, Va.

--30--

Virginia conservatives  
form new state convention

By Tom Strode

Baptist Press  
9/17/96

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Conservative Southern Baptists in Virginia voted unanimously Sept. 16 to form their own state convention in an apparently unprecedented action in the 151-year history of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Virginia now has two conventions identified with Southern Baptists: The Baptist General Association of Virginia and the new one, Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, a name which may be changed as transitional decisions are made. It appears to be the first time Southern Baptists have had competing conventions in the same state.

About 500 messengers to the annual meeting of the SBCV raised their ballots in support of their executive committee's recommendation to form a new convention. When no one raised a ballot in opposition, the messengers stood and applauded in the auditorium of Richmond's Grove Avenue Baptist Church. The SBCV already had 115 member churches before voting to become a state convention.

Virginia conservative leaders cited three primary reasons for the historic action:

- Theological differences with the moderate-dominated BGAV.
- A desire to support fully the Southern Baptist Convention rather than continue as part of a convention identified with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a national, moderate organization formed in reaction to the conservative resurgence in the SBC.

- An inability to change the BGAV because of bylaw changes on messenger representation.

"We are clearly a group of people that really stand unanimously on the Word of God," said Bob Melvin, outgoing SBCV president. "That's what's brought us together -- our uncompromising stand on the inerrancy and infallibility of the Word of God.

--more--

"Another thing that gave birth to the convention, or at least to the SBCV, was really our total commitment to the Southern Baptist Convention, especially how God had brought about the resurgence there," Melvin said after the afternoon meeting. "We just began to sense that there was a falling away from the Southern Baptist Convention on the part of, unfortunately, some Virginia Baptists, especially when they incorporated and brought in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. We just sensed there was no place for us there."

While conservatives had expressed dissatisfaction for several years with the BGAV's direction, they had not actively pursued forming a convention until a vote at the BGAV's November 1994 meeting changed the basis of messenger representation from the amount given to the Cooperative Program to the amount contributed to the BGAV. A month later, the SBCV executive committee voted to study becoming a convention. The study and executive committees did not recommend the formation of a state convention at the SBCV's November 1995 meeting, citing a 50-50 split by conservatives over such action.

"As long as conservatives in Virginia had a fair, constitutional chance to change the BGAV by voting, I worked as hard as I could to keep this from happening and encouraged conservatives to hang in there, get their messengers to the state convention and change the BGAV by the voting process," said T.C. Pinckney, a leader of Virginia conservatives, after the vote. "Once the BGAV amended the constitution as they did in November of '94, in my judgment -- and I think this was a universal judgment; I think this is why they did it -- it made it impossible for us ever to change the BGAV by voting. And so we immediately turned to another alternative."

Reginald McDonough, the BGAV's executive director, said he was disappointed but not surprised by the SBCV's action.

"I think there are certain theological differences between the conservatives and the more moderate Baptists in Virginia," McDonough said Sept. 17. "So I don't rule out the theological differences."

"One of the significant things to me is the fact that the more conservative brethren feel like they have been excluded from the decision-making process in Virginia" like moderates in Virginia have felt excluded from the SBC in recent years, McDonough said.

McDonough said he believes the 1994 bylaw change would have cost conservatives about 300 to 400 messengers to the BGAV, not 2,000, as he has seen by some estimates. However, McDonough said, "in (the conservatives') mind, it was considered a punitive action."

Most of the loss in contributions to the BGAV already has been experienced, because most of the conservative churches "were giving only 15 to 17 percent to the state convention program," McDonough said, after the BGAV included the CBF in one of its giving plans in the early 1990s. The SBCV's vote to become a convention probably will mean a loss of about \$500,000 from a \$15 million BGAV budget, he said.

Many questions surrounding the SBCV's decision deal with relations to the national convention and its agencies.

"Our legal counsel advises us that the Southern Baptist Convention relates directly to individual churches from the various states through the messengers the churches select for that purpose," said Bill Merrell, the SBC Executive Committee's vice president for convention relations, in a written statement. "The bylaws do not prevent cooperation with more than one convention of Baptists from a geographic area."

"Constitutionally, though the Southern Baptist Convention is independent and sovereign in its own sphere, it does not claim, nor will it attempt, to exercise any authority over any other Baptist body, including any convention of Baptists."

"The Executive Committee is charged with receiving and distributing contributions from the churches for missions, theological education, ministry and evangelism in keeping with the Cooperative Program formula agreed to by the convention. We remain committed to faithfully carrying out that responsibility."

When the SBCV began its study in December 1994, Executive Committee legal counsel James Guenther said representation on boards and committees called for in the SBC bylaws is based on total Southern Baptist membership in a state. Therefore, state representation on these entities would be based on the total membership in cooperating churches, regardless of the state convention with which the churches were affiliated.

"The SBC Executive Committee recognizes us basically by receiving our gifts and reporting those gifts as a state convention," said Doyle Chauncey, the SBCV's executive director. "If they continue to report those gifts as miscellaneous, then that's not recognition. For us to be truly recognized, we'll have to appear in the annual of the SBC as a state convention.

"I don't anticipate (a problem)," said Chauncey, who became full-time director in April. The Executive Committee "won't give us any kind of indication as to how that will be received. They said, 'It's never been done before,' so they really are reluctant to say, 'We will' or 'We won't.'"

At least one SBC agency appears near some form of recognition. The SBCV and the Annuity Board are prepared to reach a working agreement, Pinckney said.

The implementation of the SBCV's decision "will be different for every church," Chauncey said. "Some churches will need to have a dual alignment with the two state conventions in Virginia. Some churches will not want to do that.

"We have never advocated that a church discontinue a relationship either with the Virginia state convention or a local association."

The text of the approved recommendation is:

"The Executive Committee recommends that the SBCV, at its September 16, 1996, annual meeting, declare itself a state convention aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention. The Executive Committee further recommends that the present organization of the SBCV, including the constitution, committees, etc. remain in place until a transition committee, as appointed by the president, has brought its recommendation at the 1997 annual meeting or at a called meeting prior thereto."

Melvin, a pastor in Fredericksburg, appointed the following people to the transition committee: Howard Baldwin, Richmond; Ron Boswell, Richmond; Kelly Burris, Virginia Beach; David Johnson, Rileyville; D.B. Martin, Natural Bridge; Pinckney, Alexandria; and himself.

The SBCV approved a 1996-97 budget of \$774,000, as opposed to last year's approved budget of \$221,000.

The SBCV elected by acclamation all four officers for 1996-97: Terry Harper, Colonial Heights, as president; Burris as first vice president; Ken Gooch, Newport News, second vice president; and Steven Smith, Richmond, secretary.

The new convention also passed five resolutions, including ones commending the SBC seminaries and Pinckney's work on the Baptist Banner, a conservative newsletter, as well as ones opposing homosexuality and abortion.

While Melvin and Pinckney expressed some surprise over the unanimity of the vote, Chauncey did not.

"I really wasn't surprised, because I have traveled over 12,000 miles in the last three months visiting with pastors around the state, trying to get the heartbeat of where their people were coming from," Chauncey said. "Most of the churches ... have already determined that this is the direction that they wanted to go."

One of the issues the transition committee will deal with is the name of the new convention.

"I anticipate probably more controversy over the name than over the decision" to become a state convention, Chauncey said.

**Disney sitcom character  
may embrace homosexuality**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The Disney Company may be flirting with the lead character of its ABC Network situation comedy, "Ellen," declaring herself a lesbian in the new fall television season.

The rumored move to cast Ellen DeGeneres, the comedian who plays an unmarried Los Angeles bookstore owner in the show, is bound to further concern conservatives who believe the company has purposely drifted from its roots as a purveyor of wholesome entertainment.

"This rumor is only the latest move by Disney to suggest its hearty embrace of homosexuality," said Dwayne Hastings, director of communications for the Southern Baptists Christian Life Commission. "It only gives critics of the Disney empire more reason to allege the entertainment giant has abandoned the traditional family in favor of the perverse."

"This is a troubling moment in network programming -- for the first time an entire show's content will revolve around a homosexual role," said Donald Wildmon, founder of the American Family Association in Tupelo, Miss.

While several television shows have openly gay characters, there never has been a show with a homosexual lead character, according to The New York Times.

A spokesman for the national Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation told the Times, "if the character Ellen comes out, it would be a milestone for network television."

"Disney is doing a poor job at keeping the lid on their secret and sly agenda to cast the abnormal as normal," Hastings said. "It appears the company is taking pleasure at spitting in the face of the overwhelming majority of Americans who find that lifestyle distasteful and dysfunctional."

"If Touchstone does do this, advertisers will now have to make a choice -- either withdraw their support of the show or reveal their true allegiances to themes which gnaw at traditional family values," Wildmon added.

Disney, which owns Touchstone Television and the ABC Network, refused to comment on the rumor which was triggered by a report in the current TV Guide.

Yet a Disney spokesman did admit the Ellen character will be going into therapy this season in an attempt to "re-evaluate things." Asked Hastings, "Wouldn't it be novel if Ellen instead went to a church and sought God's help in dealing with her confusion over her sexual orientation?"

--30--

**Schedules, safety, celebrations  
came together for convocations**

By Debbie Moore

Baptist Press  
9/17/96

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Although flying on tight schedules for approximately 15,000 miles on more than 20 different commercial flights in a 14-day period, the team leading the recent convocations for spiritual awakening on Southern Baptist seminary campuses had only one minor delay -- and that was on a weekend.

It occurred at a convenient time -- a Friday. At the beginning of the weekend in between the two weeks of travel, a flight out of Memphis, Tenn., was one hour late as each team member headed home for the weekend, causing a few to miss their connecting flights to their respective hometowns.

"The Lord really watched over us these entire two weeks, protecting us and giving us the strength we needed," said Mike Hand, assistant to Tom Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Okla., and president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"It was amazing how everything worked out so well while we were flying on such tight schedules, meeting connecting flights," Hand said. There were no bad weather problems, no mechanical difficulties, "none of us ever lost a piece of luggage and we never arrived at a seminary late."

--more--

"The one problem, and that was nothing much to speak of, couldn't have happened at a better time," Hand said. "It's just simply amazing to think that we made that many trips with six people in two weeks, and we had only that one problem. You know the Lord had to have been in charge of this."

The response at each seminary was similarly significant, Hand said. Everything went smoothly and the initial impact of the convocations seems to have been profound. "Those who attended won't soon forget what they have gone through," Hand said.

"And a most amazing thing that occurred on every campus was the utter silence, an absolute holy hush that filled the room" as those in attendance listened to the keynote speakers, Hand said. Throughout the audiences, which on just about every campus numbered more than 1,000, "you could have heard a pin drop," Hand said. "People were listening intently."

True to their call to ministry, team members took advantage of several witnessing opportunities on the planes and in the airports throughout the two weeks. And one of the flights included a birthday celebration for soloist Ron Owens. Together with the help of flight attendants and other passengers, convocation team members threw a 60th birthday party for Owens Sept. 11 at 20,000 feet somewhere between Atlanta and New Orleans.

Elliff, after being elected in June, asked each SBC seminary to sponsor a day of prayer, together with a special chapel service on its campus to emphasize the crucified life and prayer for spiritual awakening. The first convocation was held Aug. 29 at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, N.C., concluding Sept. 12 at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Speaking with Elliff on the campuses were Henry Blackaby, author of the "Experiencing God" discipleship materials and director of the Home Mission Board's prayer and spiritual awakening office, and Avery Willis, author of the "MasterLife" discipleship curricula and senior vice president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board. Owens and his wife, Patricia, associates with Blackaby, led the convocations' music.

"It was a real thrill to see the number of buses, vans and cars making their way to the seminary campuses" as pastors, church staff members and lay leaders joined with seminary students, professors and staff to participate in the convocations, Hand said.

"The Lord moved not only in the hearts of people but also in their lives," he said. "I think very few walked out of the chapels the same as when they walked in."

--30--

Religious Heritage names  
Rogers for clergyman honor

Baptist Press  
9/17/96

ST. LOUIS (BP)--Adrian Rogers will be among the honorees at Religious Heritage of America's 46th annual national awards program Oct. 14 in Memphis, Tenn.

Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, Tenn., will be honored as "Clergyman of the Year" by Religious Heritage, a St. Louis-based interfaith organization seeking, according to its mission statement, "to help America reclaim the religious values upon which it was founded by demonstrating how these values add to the quality of life." Its national awards program seeks to recognize positive role models of people guided by religious values in their daily lives.

Rogers is a former three-time president of the Southern Baptist Convention and, in addition to his pastorate, national speaker on the "Love Worth Finding" TV and radio ministry.

Other honorees are:

Churchman of the year: Edward Lee White Jr., president, Cecil B. Day Foundation, Inc., Atlanta.

Churchwoman of the year: Shirley Dobson, chair, National Day of Prayer Task Force, Colorado Springs, Colo.

--more--



Business and professional: Charles Hogren, executive director, Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic, Chicago; Gary Moore, founder, Gary Moore and Company, Sarasota, Fla.; Bruce Ryskamp, president/CEO, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Mich.; and Jay Sekulow, chief counsel, American Center for Law and Justice, Virginia Beach, Va.

Faith and freedom: James Grassi, executive director, Let's Go Fishing Ministry, Moraga, Calif., and Rosalie Slater, president, Foundation for American Christian Education, Chesapeake, Va.

Outstanding educator: Donald O. Ericksen, president, Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minn.

--30--

Rally-goers urged to build  
coalitions against racism

By Russell N. Dilday

Baptist Press  
9/17/96

HOPE, Ark. (BP)--Hope scored two victories the second weekend of September. The Arkansas town's first win occurred when coach Joe Kell's Bobcats rallied from a 20-6 deficit in the fourth quarter of its Friday night high school football match-up against Warren to win the game.

The second happened when about 3,000 area residents returned to Hammons Stadium two nights later to focus on racial reconciliation at the "Building Unity" community worship service.

The praise and worship program, sponsored by 27 churches in Hope, Prescott, Magnolia and Patmos, featured Tony Evans, pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Church in Dallas.

Standing on a stage set up on the field's 5-yard line, Evans urged participants "to be salt and light in Hope, Ark."

Evans is an author and popular speaker in the Promise Keepers movement. He also is featured on the "The Alternative with Dr. Tony Evans" radio program and is the chaplain of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team.

Recalling the coalition of countries formed in 1990 by then-President George Bush to combat "a madman by the name of Saddam Hussein" during the Gulf War, Evans challenged Christians to form a similar coalition to fight racism.

"God has called for himself an allied coalition made up of black people and white people and red people and yellow people, made up of Baptists and Methodists and Episcopalians ... to serve notice on this mad person called the devil that not only can he not take over more territory, he must give up the territory he now lays claim to."

Using the football field as an illustration, Evans said, "This is a nice huddle tonight where we are all gathered, but Satan has never been scared of a huddle. What he's terrified of is if we break huddle and start scoring touchdowns for the kingdom of God."

Just like the Bobcats during their Friday night game, the town has had to rally from a deficit to address its racial problems. Glen Smith, a member of First Baptist Church in Hope and a service steering committee member, said planners "perceived a racial division in this community and they wanted to do a healing and a bringing together of the community."

"It is not a particular division," Smith said, "but you know it's here. It's typical of the southern United States."

Logistics team coordinator Tom Mitchell agreed. "Southwest Arkansas is historically prejudiced. Racial disunity has been building. No one could better speak to it than Tony Evans. This is his heart and he has been able to do it," said Mitchell, pastor of Central Baptist Church, a Prescott congregation affiliated with the Baptist Missionary Association.

Highlighting "problems" experienced by many Christians in the area of race relations during his sermon, Evans often stirred participants to clapping, standing, cheering and whistling as he spoke his views.

--more--

"Our problem is that Christians don't know how to be Christians," he emphasized. "We know how to gather together on Sunday and worship the same God, but then on Monday we don't recognize we're part of the same family. Until Christians decide to be Christians when we break huddle, we'll never turn anything around.

"We may have all come over here on different ships, but we're in the same boat now," he declared. "This city ... is waiting for the church of Jesus Christ to wake up and start being the people of God.

"When it comes to the body of Christ, there's only one color that matters," he said. "That's the color red, the precious blood of Jesus Christ that was shed on Calvary."

Preaching from Matthew 5, Evans noted "salt comes in a group. You must become a coalition. Unity means that you are the same. Unity means that you take your differences and move to a common cause. It is oneness of purpose."

He said even though Christians "are called to be light, there is no place the darkness has been seen more than in the area of racial relationships. We've not taken a stand.

"Racism embarrasses the name of Jesus Christ," he said. "You have no right to disassociate yourself from another brother or sister because they are another color. Let your light shine in a way that men don't just hear your good word, they see your good works."

Telling participants he would meet with Hope community and church leaders the following day, Evans said, "I'm going to challenge them to build in our area a formal coalition of believers. Not a denomination or a program, but a coalition who will decide as a group of believers that we're going to have an impact for the kingdom of God in this area of Arkansas and that on a regular basis we will call the Christians together to make a difference for the kingdom of God."

The proof area Christians have given up racism "is not tonight," he concluded. "The test is tomorrow. Tomorrow, when you bump into each other at work, when you pass each other on the street. Anybody can have a worship service. Worship is always the first, but worship is never the finish."

Joann Knapper, a member of Bethesda Full Gospel Baptist Church in McNeil, said the service "was wonderful, a blessing to my soul -- the atmosphere, the anointing of God."

The event also attracted Arkansans like Karl Cunningham, who traveled from Mena to attend the service. "It was an awesome service," he said. "There was a wonderful spirit here that seemed to unite the races. I met several black Christians who have a real desire for a reunification of the races."

Steering committee member Stan Parris, pastor of First Baptist Church, Hope, said the idea for the service began when "four pastors, two white and two black, were together praying, burdened for our community, and we felt like God wanted us to do something like this -- an event that would bring the body of Christ together."

Those four pastors, including Parris, Calvary Baptist Church pastor Scott Neathery and African Americans Alvin Hunter of Lonoke Baptist Church and Lawrence Kemp of Garrett Chapel, then initiated plans for a special community gathering.

"God initiated this and we're going to come together as a steering committee and a group of pastors and pray that God will let us know what he wants to do next," Parris said. "We hope to see not just a one-night service but a week-long evangelistic crusade in this same place and using this same preacher."

Smith credited prayer for the event's success. "When we started this, the school was going to allow us to have two little four-by-eight-foot platforms out there," he laughed, gesturing at a large stage with image magnification screen and room for two choirs.

"I thought I did a wonderful job negotiating with the coach," he said, "but the night before, 35 people prayed for him specifically by name to have an open and receptive heart on this. You see the Lord's hand in every aspect of this."

--more--

The day after the rally, Evans met with about 150 religious and civil leaders during a prayer breakfast. "He spoke to church and community leaders, the mayor, city leaders, law enforcement, quorum court," Parris noted. "It was a very good representation of the community."

Evans challenged the leaders to recognize when God "troubled" them. "If God is your problem, then your only solution is God," he insisted.

Parris noted Evans told the leaders "the church is the institution already in place to impact a community" and received a standing ovation.

Parris said the steering committee was scheduled to meet Sept. 17 to evaluate the service and to begin praying for guidance about future plans.

--30--

---

CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "Southern Baptist disaster units continue post-Fran relief work," dated 9/16/96, please correct the references to Sept. 15 in the ninth through 11th paragraphs to Sept. 16 and Sept. 16 to Sept. 17.

Thanks,  
Baptist Press

---