

October 23, 1963

Blocking Back Now
Tackles Church Needs

(Editor's Note: This is the 13th feature from Baptist Press in its series on SBC leaders.)

By Reuben Herring
For Baptist Press

The visiting preacher and the church's education director entered the pulpit area to the accompaniment of music.

It wasn't organ music, though. It was the kind of music disc jockeys play.

"At first I thought a member of the choir had slipped a transistor radio under his robe," the visiting preacher reports. The education director discovered that, for some reason, the pulpit microphone was getting a feedback from the local radio station.

He turned the mike off.

All went well until the moment the guest supply went to the pulpit to begin his sermon. At that moment, the janitor noticed the pulpit mike was turned off. Unaware why, the janitor rushed to the control room and turned it on full force.

"Just as I stepped to the microphone," the speaker recalls, laughing, "Elvis Presley comes on full blast singing, 'You Ain't Nothing but a Houn' Dog.' I thought things would never settle down after that."

The visiting preacher that out-of-tune Sunday morning was James L. Sullivan, fortunately a man with a sense of humor who enjoys a good joke. A man who laughs as loudly at his own joke as he does at someone else's joke without anyone's objection, for most of Sullivan's jokes are on himself.

But just because he laughs easily, few ever make the mistake of failing to take seriously the blue-eyed Irishman who heads the Southern Baptist Convention's Sunday School Board.

A former football coach (Jimmy played nine years of varsity football in Mississippi in high school and college) once said, "I remember Sullivan as hard-hitting, aggressive, with a great determination to win."

At 53, the Sunday School Board executive secretary still looks like a blocking back today. He tackles one of the most demanding jobs among Southern Baptists with the same vigor and enthusiasm.

"My biggest weakness," he says, "is impatience. I'm a fast starter and built for speed. I like to stay with a problem until it's licked before I relax. Then I'm ready to go again. I have trouble controlling my impatience."

The chief executive of a multimillion dollar organization to reach persons for Christ and train them in Christian living, Sullivan says administration is largely problem-solving.

"Not that you ever solve all the problems," he says emphatically, "for when you solve one problem you may create another. But the administrator gets one problem out of the way so that he can get at another one."

Get the right man in the right job, and do the right thing at the right time--these are guiding principles for the rugged Mississippian, whose agency employs about 1500 full-time workers.

"I believe in getting the right man for the job and letting him make his own decisions," says the former pastor. "If an administrator is a dictator, he soon loses the loyalty of his men. On the other hand, if he hands out too many favors the institution soon goes bankrupt."

Timing, says the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary graduate, also is essential in successful administration.

When action is taken at the right time and in the right manner, he explains, it is accepted without question. Otherwise, it becomes an issue, all have to take sides, and someone loses.

"Southern Baptists are in for their greatest period of growth and development," Sullivan declares with confidence. "And it is not just growth in numbers but growth in spiritual development as well. It has taken about 10 years to fashion a program being recommended to the churches, but it is now ready and it is being accepted. This program of teaching and training will reach more people, and it will do more for them after it reaches them."

The dedicated leader of the 19 major programs of the Sunday School Board is the product of many influences, but chiefly those of the church and a Christian home. He is a harmonious blending of a scholarly and devout mother and a father with a sense of humor and a knack for dealing with people--particularly his sons.

"I remember the time my brother and I wanted to camp out overnight, but my mother didn't want us to because of bad weather," Sullivan remembers with a twinkle.

"We asked Dad and he told us we could--but we didn't see him wink at Mother. When Dad was ready for us to come in the house, he made a whizzer--a stick tied to a piece of string which he whirled around his head.

"That's a wildcat!" my brother and I agreed when we heard the roaring sound of Dad's whizzer in the darkness, and we ran for the house."

When James Lenox Sullivan was an Intermediate boy in Tylertown, Miss., he and his pastor made an agreement. Jimmy would keep the church clean if he could open the Sunday school literature when it arrived. And Jimmy read every piece, from Nursery through Adult materials. Thus was God helping prepare him for the supervision of the Board's 93 publications today.

Constantly Sullivan sees evidence of God's continuing leadership in his own life and in the work of Southern Baptists. He has learned to lean heavily upon that guidance. Prayer and meditation are an important part of his early morning activity--which begins at 4:30.

Sullivan and wife Velma Scott Sullivan have an apartment in downtown Nashville close to his work, and a lakeside home several miles from town--away from the telephone. Here the Sullivans relax and enjoy fishing, boating, and puttering.

James David is completing his studies at Mississippi College, his father's alma mater. The Sullivans' two daughters are married to men in church-related vocations.

Trying to please more than 10 million Southern Baptists day after day brings its problems, but the durable Irishman has learned that it is more effective to crack a joke than to crack a whip.

"Right after I came to the board in 1953," he says, "a country preacher in Kentucky told me that horseflies will bite the finest thoroughbred. The bites hurt, but they won't kill the horse unless he loses his head. Then he may run off and break his neck."

Cutlines

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Baptist Press Photo

UNION PROMOTES--Union University, Jackson, Tenn., Baptist school has a new president--Francis E. Wright, formerly academic dean. Wright was acting president from the retirement of Dr. Warren F. Jones until trustees elected him president. (BP) Photo

Cutlines

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WATCH OUT, FISH--A fishing reel gets a cleaning at the lakeside home of James L. Sullivan as the Sunday School Board executive secretary prepares to go after some bass. (BP) Photo from Sunday School Board

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(accompanies feature article)

