

April 30, 1965

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is an interview between John J. Hurt Jr., Atlanta, editor of the Christian Index, and SBC President Wayne Dehoney of Jackson, Tenn. The Christian Index is the weekly Baptist state paper in Georgia. This interview pertains to Dehoney's year of activity as SBC president and his comments on issues which have faced Southern Baptists. The Christian Index, through Baptist Press news service, has made this interview available to all other Baptist state papers.

- Q. It appears as we look back over your activities of the year you may have set some kind of a record for travel of a Southern Baptist Convention president. Have you any idea of how many miles you have traveled?
- A. I have logged in excess of 125,000 miles of travel in five foreign countries and 31 states.
- Q. How many days did this take you away from your church and what has been its reaction?
- A. I have been away 197 days but have missed only two more Sundays than normally. The members and staff have done "double duty" with a sense of pride as they have shared my Convention ministry. They have said, "If you will take care of the pulpit on Sunday, we will take care of the church and its needs during the week." Consequently, the church has had one of its best years in every sense of the word.
- Q. Speaking engagements are just one of the duties for a president. We assume your correspondence has been quite heavy. Any estimate of the volume?
- A. The president receives a huge stack of correspondence every day. I personally answer every letter. In addition, I initiate considerable correspondence such as writing letters of congratulations to newly appointed missionaries, personal letters of commendation to all Scouts earning the God and Country Award, messages of condolence to pastors and missionaries who have had death in their families as reported in state papers, etc. I try to note new buildings dedicated, anniversaries, and unusual revival experiences in order to drop a note of encouragement to the pastor and his people. I feel this personal touch through correspondence is a marvelous opportunity for the president to develop an esprit de corps and a sense of unity within the denomination. This work alone requires a fulltime secretary and the Convention reimburses the church for her salary, and the cost of stationery and postage. I use portable battery-operated dictation equipment which I carry at all times. I do a tremendous amount of dictating while traveling by car to and from the airport and engagements, waiting in airports, in hotel rooms, etc.
- Q. We assume through your travels and from your correspondence there has been a liberal education in what Southern Baptists are thinking. What have been the most popular topics?
- A. A frequent question has been "How to come to grips with the racial problem?" Southern Baptists generally are deeply concerned that we should make an effective contribution in this area. But there is great diversity of opinion as to how this can be done. Also, I have had considerable correspondence protesting the listing of an objectionable book in a Sunday School Board quarterly. However, when it has been explained how this editorial mistake occurred and the safeguards against a repetition, most everyone has seemed satisfied. Pastors generally are greatly concerned about the stagnation, the leveling off and actual losses in some areas in local church programs. They seem anxious for a positive challenging "call to action" in the field of evangelism and outreach.

- Q. You failed to mention any theological crisis. What is the significance of this omission?
- A. It appears that the theological controversy has been settled by the action taken in the Kansas City Convention. I can count on one hand the number of letters of inquiry I have received concerning this issue. The Convention constituency generally feels that its agencies and institutions are sincerely committed to working within the guidelines of the articles of faith.
- Q. We recall an article you wrote last year saying Southern Baptists had no plans to join any national or world council of churches. Do you still feel this is true?
- A. Yes, as these councils are now constituted. However, I believe that we are more and more interested in developing broader channels of communication and understanding with other Christians. In this twentieth century conflict our enemies are certainly not Baptists in other national bodies or Christians in other denominations, but the great pagan forces of materialism, communism, moral and social decay. There are many areas of cooperation wherein we can effectively join hands against these common enemies without officially joining an organization or merging agencies or churches.
- Q. Do you see any signs of this becoming an issue for Southern Baptists?
- A. No.
- Q. The Southern Baptist Convention, we would assume, has some divisions which might be described as geographically centered now that it has churches in all 50 states. Do you see any of this?
- A. We do have wide diversities in our Convention but they do not fall into geographical patterns. In almost any geographical area you can find extremities on any issue. A study of the messenger enrolment at Atlantic City and an analysis of the votes cast on the controversial issues indicate that there was really no geographical "bloc voting," but, generally speaking, messengers from all areas were about equally divided.
- Q. Is there any danger of this leading to a geographical split in the Convention?
- A. In my opinion, no.
- Q. There is the possibility of another problem. A new generation, to which you belong, is in the Convention leadership and there is an even younger generation serving the churches. What does this mean to the future, or, more particularly, will there be any changes in Convention policy?
- A. Of course, every generation must cut its own path in the future. This must be done with a sense of historical continuity combined with an awareness of personal destiny. I believe our ecclesiology will remain the same because this is an essential part of our tradition. The Convention will continue to be a loose-knit confederation of independent autonomous churches. There will be tensions at times when some may feel that an agency or the Executive Committee is thwarting democratic process or threatening the autonomy of the churches. But the charters and constitutional limitations placed on the agencies and the Executive Committee actually prevent this from happening. I believe the younger generation is more conscious of the social issues confronting the gospel and the denomination will be more acutely aware of the church's responsibility in these areas. Theologically, I see no change in our basic structure. A younger generation is always more acutely aware of the current theological "fads" and is more readily given to their sampling, discussion, and debate. For this reason, we will always have some measure of theological tension as historical faith is tested by new and passing ideas. But tension keeps a muscle strong! And theology is the muscle of our faith. It is significant to me that in Kansas City Southern Baptists adopted essentially the same articles of faith worked out by a Convention almost two generations ago in 1924. No passing theological fad has or will change this essential core of our faith.

- Q. Back to the present, have Southern Baptists checked their decline in growth rate to where there will be another spurt in baptisms?
- A. Yes! There has been a small but significant upturn in baptisms over the past two years.
- Q. Is your answer the same for Sunday School enrolment and other church statistics?
- A. There was an upturn in Sunday School enrolment this past year also. We are still far from the tremendous annual net gains of the late forties and early fifties but I believe we are on our way toward a new era of tremendous growth and expansion. I believe this will come as we give priority to the Sunday School as the major people-producing agency, give priority to outreach as the major objective of the church, and as we mobilize for an all-out thrust to establish more new churches in the great urban and industrial areas of the north, east and west.
- Q. What is the significance between a trend to level off in baptisms but a continued healthy growth in financial gifts?
- A. There are two explanations in my opinion. First, there is natural gain that will come from the rising economy. Secondly, since the leveling off that began in the late fifties in the older established areas of the Convention, churches have "caught up" in their local building programs and more money is available for the Cooperative Program. Significant long range growth in mission giving is ultimately dependent upon a continual broadening of our membership base through a re-emphasis upon outreach and evangelism.
- Q. What will be the major issue for the annual session in Dallas over which you will preside for the first time?
- A. In my opinion, the major issue is whether Southern Baptists will catch a fresh vision of a lost world and, in Dallas, launch the greatest evangelistic and missionary thrust this world has ever seen.
- Q. Will the racial issue cause some bitterness since some undoubtedly will want a Convention statement?
- A. I would hope that we will be free from bitterness in the conduct of all business at the Convention, having confidence in the integrity and the sincerity of all messengers even though there may be differences in judgment and opinion as to how to come to grips with some of the complex problems facing our society.
- Q. A proposed by-law amendment is before the Convention to limit the presidents to serve one year. How do you feel about this?
- A. It would be out of place for me to comment. I am grateful for this opportunity of service which has been the most thrilling and invigorating experience of my lifetime.
- Q. What would be your 100-word sermon, if you want to call it that, for all Southern Baptists?
- A. May God give us a new sense of direction, to look from ourselves toward a lost world that needs the gospel; a new dynamic, that of the cross itself; and a new sense of destiny. By God's grace Southern Baptists are the largest evangelical denomination in the United States and the largest free church group in the world with 10.6 million members and 33,000 churches. What God could do through us is limitless, if we would but pay the price in sacrifice and dedication. Let us make that commitment in Dallas and go forth to match our spiritual resources against our unlimited opportunities.