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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

JAN 25 1996

NATIONAL OFFICE

SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2350
Herb Hollinger, Vice President
Fax (615) 742-8917
CompuServe ID# 70420,17

(BP)

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Martin King, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 898-7522, CompuServe 70420,250
DALLAS Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 333 N. Washington, Dallas, Texas 75246-1798, Telephone (214) 828-5232, CompuServe 70420,115
NASHVILLE Linda Lawson, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300, CompuServe 70420,57
RICHMOND Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151, CompuServe 70420,72
WASHINGTON Tom Strode, Chief, 400 North Capitol St., #594, Washington, D.C. 20001, Telephone (202) 638-3223, CompuServe 71173,316

January 24, 1996

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Baptists win respect
from relief to island

By Wally Poor

Baptist Press
1/24/96

MARIGOT, St. Martin (BP)--Relief efforts after the Caribbean region's bout with Hurricane Luis in September are bearing a harvest of respect for Baptists on St. Martin.

"I can see it in the way people look at the church," said Mike McDaniel, a Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board worker on the island, which is shared by France and the Netherlands. "This has really given us an opportunity to work. The numbers in our churches have steadily grown. We're packed out each Sunday."

McDaniel and his wife, Karen, arrived on the 33-square-mile island -- known as St. Martin on the French side, St. Maarten on the Dutch -- in mid-December to begin a two-year stint as FMB International Service Corps workers. That was just before career missionaries Tom and Patti Higginbotham, who lost all their household furnishings in the hurricane, left on a furlough to Louisiana.

McDaniel, of Roanoke, Va., is reaping the benefits of Higginbotham's work as pastor of the St. Maarten International Baptist Church. After the storm, the church was a distribution center for Baptist aid to hurricane victims.

The Foreign Mission Board provided \$214,500 in disaster aid for St. Maarten and the nearby island of Antigua, also hit hard by Luis. The board also sent another \$5,000 to the French West Indian island of Guadeloupe for aid after a later hurricane, Marilyn.

In the wake of Luis, about 130 Southern Baptist volunteers roofed houses and helped with water purification projects on St. Maarten and Antigua. The Foreign Mission Board sent food and building materials. The project was sponsored by the Foreign Mission Board and Brotherhood Commission.

About 40 volunteers worked on St. Maarten, where all three Baptist churches sustained damages from Luis' violent winds.

Veteran construction volunteer Herb Adams of Humboldt, Tenn., who led the volunteer crew on St. Maarten, began repairing the Higginbothams' home, which was destroyed by the hurricane. He hopes to return to St. Maarten soon to finish.

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Adams' wife, Marie, says her husband -- a carpenter for 44 years -- is "trying to retire" from his woodworking and blacksmith shop in Humboldt. He has also participated in construction projects on mission fields in South America, Africa and Europe.

On St. Maarten and Antigua, there's still plenty of need for volunteers with Adams' skills. But Foreign Mission Board funds for reconstruction have been exhausted, as coffers for relief have dipped dangerously low resulting from a long slide in giving.

"There are still thousands of homes which need to be rebuilt," said Foreign Mission Board missionary Jerry Cowin of Imperial, Mo., who lives on Antigua.

"Recovery has been pretty slow," agreed McDaniel. "Tourist traffic is way down. There are a lot less cruise ships. Normally the winter months in the United States and Europe are the 'high season.' But not this year. Many of the island's main resorts are closed."

Many businesses on the island simply have not reopened. "People are having a hard time finding work," he added.

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**BWA protests delays
in Bulgarian building**

By Wendy Ryan

**Baptist Press
1/24/96**

WASHINGTON (BP)--The Baptist World Alliance has written to the new mayor of Sofia, Bulgaria, Stephan Sofiansky and expressed concern that months after the government gave the Union of Baptist Churches in Bulgaria permission to build a combination church/orphanage, the Baptists there still do not have the required documents and cannot proceed.

"We continue to have problems with our Baptist project in Sofia," said Theodor Angelov, president of the union and president of the European Baptist Federation.

"The Sofia municipality does not want to give us the documents we need to continue the building work," he said. "We went to court and they offered all kinds of objections why the Baptists should not be allowed to build an orphanage. I am very much troubled by this situation."

The Baptist project is the first new building for Baptists in Bulgaria since the fall of communism. After many appeals by Baptists around the world for help, the Sofia government approved the building plans last September for a church and orphanage. There are 50 churches and 2,400 members in the Bulgarian Baptist union.

"We appeal to you to find a solution to the present impasse and to allow completion of our building projects as soon as possible," Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary, asked Sofiansky in writing to the mayor.

The Sofia government also has refused to see Angelov to discuss the issue.

"For two months I have been trying to arrange a meeting with the new mayor, but unsuccessfully so," Angelov recounted.

Lotz asked the mayor to receive Angelov, "so he might present the concerns of Baptists in Bulgaria, Europe and the world."

"This refusal to give permission to build is a religious freedom issue," Lotz said. "We are very concerned that the Sofia city government does not give permission for our Baptist convention to complete their building project. We had thought with the fall of Communism and the new freedom that has come to Bulgaria that religious freedom would be guaranteed for all people.

"Baptists have pioneered freedom for all people, regardless of ideology and religion," Lotz wrote Sofiansky, "and religious freedom includes freedom to build sanctuaries for worship and projects of social concern."

Lotz said he also was concerned Bulgaria has threatened the freedom, "not only of Baptists but other Protestant groups."

Baptists and other Protestant groups in Bulgaria do not have full religious freedom because they are viewed as sects or minority religious groups that do not rightly belong there.

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"Baptists are a historical movement with a long history of roots in Europe and with more than 100 years history in Bulgaria," Lotz told Sofiansky. "Our people are good workers, loyal citizens, law abiding and productive members of society."

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Conviction on moral issues
spawns Pastors for Life group

By Dwayne Hastings

Baptist Press
1/24/96

GREENVILLE, S.C. (BP)--There is a stretch of public sidewalk along Laurens Road in downtown Greenville, S.C., upon which certain people are forbidden to stand.

Michael Cloer, pastor of Siloam Baptist Church, Powdersville, S.C., calls the 20-foot strip a "gospel-free" zone. A circuit court judge in Greenville calls the area a bubble zone.

No matter what it's called, the faded copy of the court order posted on the fence outside the Palmetto State Women's Center is clear: Pro-life advocates are prohibited from drawing close to the Greenville abortion clinic. The restricted area includes the sidewalk and even a 10-foot encroachment into the neighboring property.

The temporary restraining order -- which after three years is still in effect -- has failed to dampen Cloer's zeal for the rights of the unborn. Instead, he has become a pioneer in the mobilization of pastors across denominations in the right-to-life movement in upstate South Carolina, founding the pro-life ministry group, Pastors for Life.

The court order was handed down only days before pro-life advocates came to together in Greenville's Memorial Auditorium for a solemn assembly led by more than 150 pastors who were part of the Pastors for Life group. Cloer, in addressing the crowd three years ago, sounded a call of peaceful defiance that continues to sound on the streets of Greenville.

"They told us we can't pray in our classrooms and we stopped. They said we can't pray at graduations and we stopped, and they said you can't do it at football games and we stopped. Now they're saying we don't want you to pray in public on sidewalks in front of an abortion center," Cloer recalled telling worshipers in the auditorium back in January 1993.

"But I'm drawing the line at this," he told the 4,000 people gathered for a solemn assembly, a service of worship, confession, repentance and commitment based on Joel 2:15-17.

"Our desire in that service was to repent," Cloer recounted. "Instead of pointing a finger at politicians, we wanted to say to God, 'It's our fault that all of this has come upon us.'"

This Southern Baptist pastor was familiar with controversy: First arrested in 1989 for trespassing at a Greenville abortion clinic, Cloer drew the stiffest penalty the law would allow for the misdemeanor charge -- 30 days in jail. Ironically, the judge who sentenced Cloer was a Southern Baptist.

When you meet Cloer, a native of Pickens, S.C., you meet a man who holds forth no pretenses but exudes a confidence that, even at personal risk, life is worth protecting.

"The court was sending a clear message to the pro-life community," Cloer said as he recalled his first arrest during a 1989 "rescue" at the Greenville Womens Center, a location he sadly noted is "the second-largest killing center in South Carolina.

"I was not proud of the fact I was arrested; I was broken. All we were trying to do was to ask women not to have an abortion."

So it was not surprising at the solemn assembly in 1993 Cloer reminded worshipers the Bible says Daniel, even after he was instructed no longer to pray, continued to pray as was his custom.

"It's one thing to do it to say I am going to defy the law, but it's another to do what my custom has been," Cloer declared to the assembly, noting a day earlier a judge had ordered police to begin making arrests if more than 10 people gathered to pray per block.

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Cloer arrived outside the abortion clinic before 6 a.m. the following day. Even at that hour, hundreds of people were already lining the streets. Yet as Cloer stepped onto the sidewalk, a police officer came up to him and told him he was under arrest.

"I hadn't even started praying yet. I had just walked on the sidewalk," Cloer said of the day three years ago. "I hadn't even said the RA pledge. That Saturday they arrested nearly 600 people."

The pro-life protests in Greenville that Saturday attracted little attention across the country -- a media blackout was in effect, Cloer said, because at that time the city of Greenville was courting BMW in their decision to select a location for their first U.S. factory -- but within upstate South Carolina, it was clear God was blessing the area churches' newfound concern for the rights of the unborn.

The year before, Cloer had mailed letters to 1,700 pastors in upstate South Carolina, telling them he had come to understand it was the church's responsibility to take an active role in the sanctity of life issue.

"Many in the pro-life movement had been waiting on the government to do something about abortion. They've been hoping the government will halt the decay and penetrate the darkness," Cloer said. "All of that I believe is unbiblical. It is the church's responsibility, and if we don't do it, we can't ask anybody else to step in."

Cloer explained his study of Scripture, particularly Jesus' call in Matthew 5 for his followers to be salt and light in a dark world, convinced him it was the church, not para-church organizations, that should take the lead in moral issues.

He suggested the presence of para-church ministries might indicate the local church is not doing its job: "We had been waiting on pro-life organizations to lead the way. Some pastors were involved; but where was the church as a whole?"

The church began to talk about abortion in the late 1980s but failed to organize to do something about the problem, Cloer noted.

Eighty-seven pastors responded to Cloer's letter, meeting first in September 1992. "For the first time in this area, I saw Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and 11 other denominations hold hands, get down on their knees, cry together and pray together."

This meeting was the genesis of Pastors for Life, a nondenominational fellowship of pastors -- "from Catholics to charismatics" -- who meet to pray and prepare to lead their churches in pro-life activities in upstate South Carolina.

"We didn't have to come up with an organization," Cloer remarked. "There was one that already existed. It's called the church." The authority structure is already established within the church, he said; Pastors for Life allows the pastor to lead his church as he sees fit.

"The pastors have to be the ones to lead," he continued, citing 1 Peter 5: "The pastor is to be an example to the flock. I love to preach to my people about soul-winning, but it's useless if I am not a soul-winner."

Beginning in November 1992, pastors led their churches in praying one hour each month at one of the two abortion clinics in Greenville. "Every time a clinic was open, some church was there praying," Cloer said.

Since Pastors for Life was organized in 1992, the pro-life community has gained two remarkable footholds in their battle for the unborn in South Carolina.

Initially, a beauty salon next to the Laurens Road clinic closed. The group saw a rare opportunity to locate a crisis pregnancy center adjacent to an abortion clinic. The building was for sale for \$100,000.

"We called for 40 days of prayer. Within that time we had the cash to buy the building," Cloer said.

It wasn't long before a ramshackle house in a pine thicket next to the largest abortion clinic in town went on the market. Church members in the greater Greenville area again wasted little time in pulling together the money to buy the building.

"I don't know of any other city in the nation that has two crisis pregnancy centers right next door to abortion clinics," Cloer said, smiling, "Unbelievable!"

Many of the women who come to the crisis pregnancy centers turn into the wrong driveway, intending to go to the abortion clinic.

"They walk into the door and say they're here for an abortion. We ask them what counseling they've received and ask them if we can spend a few minutes with them before they go through with the abortion -- and that's the end of that," Cloer said. "You can imagine how the abortionists don't want us next door."

Cloer explained the divinely placed crisis pregnancy centers are not just there for crisis counseling. Unlike para-church organizations, he said the number one task for the Pastors for Life centers is soul-winning.

"So what if we save the baby, and the mother and baby eventually die and go to hell? Our ministry doesn't end at saving the baby's life; it ends at bringing the mother to Christ," Cloer insisted. "Saving a life is one thing; saving a soul is another."

The group has estimated the abortion clinic on Laurens Road must abort 30 babies a week to remain financially solvent. The number of abortions appears to have fallen below that number recently, Cloer said, adding "private contributions from groups such as NOW and Planned Parenthood are keeping them going for now."

"They know what kind of message shutting down will send," Cloer said.

As intense as Cloer's views are on the rights of the unborn, he said there is no allowance for violence or harassment in the group's efforts, dismissing those who resort to violence as "weirdos who have brought a blemish on the pro-life movement."

Holding aloft his well-worn Bible, Cloer said there are three weapons most useful in the battle to close down abortion clinics: Scripture, praise and prayer.

"The weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but are mighty through God," Cloer said. "The Bible is a two-edged sword; the Israelites circled the wall praising God and the walls fell; and prayer is always powerful. These are the only weapons we use."

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How church members can help
pastors see pro-life issues

Baptist Press
1/24/96

POWDERSVILLE, S.C. (BP)--What should a believer do if he or she is in a church where the pastor is pro-life but is not active in the right-to-life movement?

Michael Cloer, pastor of Siloam Baptist Church, Powdersville, S.C., and the director of Pastors for Life, a pro-life ministry for pastors, missionaries and lay leaders, suggests:

- 1) Do not leave the church. If you leave the fellowship, who will help?
- 2) Pray for your pastor. Pray that God will give him a vision for the sanctity of life issue.
- 3) Encourage him to be involved. Give him materials. That's the way it's done in other issues; this shouldn't be any different.

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Church's moral-issues advocacy
poses no hinderance to outreach By Dwayne Hastings

Baptist Press
1/24/96

POWDERSVILLE, S.C. (BP)--Everybody who has come to Siloam Baptist Church since 1988 knows what they are getting, Michael Cloer said confidently. That's the year Cloer, a former Southern Baptist Home Mission Board missionary to upper New York state, shook the church off its staid moorings.

"This was the largest church in three counties when I came here and was steeped in tradition," Cloer said of the 164-year-old church in Powdersville, S.C. "I came in with ideas for evangelism and for the church to become salt and light in the community."

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Many did not like the new direction; 432 people left in his first two years as pastor. "It was a tremendous cost, but over the last eight years, we have baptized over 700 people," Cloer said.

The year Cloer spent the most time in jail and court for his right-to-life activism was also the year the church registered its largest number of baptisms.

Siloam is a radical church, Cloer said, citing a strategy recently developed by the church's deacons to rid the community of four establishments with video poker machines.

Two by two, deacons went to these places every night of the week to ask the manager to stop that business and to tell them the church was praying for them.

"They did this night after night, and in less than six months, all four had closed down. I give God praise for that," Cloer said. "These men were salt and light."

Cloer acknowledged some believe a church should not be involved in anything controversial or militant for fear the church's vision will be drawn away from missions and evangelism.

Not so, Cloer said: "Our mission giving has increased through the years. Every year we have been involved in pro-life work, we have been in the top 10 in the state in baptisms and in the top 20 in South Carolina in missions giving.

"I say that not to brag, but to say evidently those people have not read the Book of Acts," Cloer added.

Pointing to a map of the Republic of Moldavia on his office wall, Cloer said "as soon as the walls went down" Siloam members began a partnership with the Eastern European country, which is wedged between the Ukraine and Romania.

"This church has never left the priorities of evangelism and missions," he continued.

Yet Cloer is quick to note the largest group of unreached people in the United States are the pre-born. He said Southern Baptists must see them as that and call out full-time missionaries to the pre-born, a key component of the "Pastors for Life" group, an organization Cloer pioneered in Greenville.

Compassion runs deep at Siloam. The church holds classes for women who have had an abortion. Church leaders recently voted to set aside a burial plot and memorial in the church's cemetery as a place of remembrance for the millions who have been killed in their mother's womb, Cloer said.

There will be benches in this garden spot, he explained, noting, "... these women who have lost a child to abortion have no place to grieve."

Cloer admitted it would be much more comfortable in his office at the church than on the sidewalk praying for the unborn or being led out of a courtroom in handcuffs; yet God compels him to a broader ministry: "It's one thing to stay in our stained-glass salt cellars, but we need to go to the source of the problem."

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BGCO board of directors
calls Jordan as executive

By Dave Parker

Baptist Press
1/24/96

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Following the recommendation of its executive director search committee, the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma board of directors approved Anthony Jordan as the new executive director-treasurer.

Before the near-unanimous vote, the board welcomed Jordan with a standing ovation at its special called meeting Jan. 19. He received another standing ovation after he was approved 49-1 on a secret ballot vote.

At age 46, the pastor of Oklahoma City's Northwest Baptist Church becomes the third-youngest executive director-treasurer in the convention's history. He is the eighth man elected to the post.

Jordan's resignation from his church becomes effective after Easter services, April 7. He will begin work at the convention May 1. Under convention bylaws, he also must be approved by messengers to the BGCO annual convention in November.

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William G. Tanner, outgoing executive director-treasurer, is retiring, effective June 30.

Keith Russell, chairman of the seven-member search committee and pastor of First Baptist Church, Elk City, Okla., said the committee felt God's leadership in calling Jordan.

During meetings held at Falls Creek Baptist Convention Center and across the state, Russell said Oklahoma Baptists said they wanted certain qualities in their executive director: good leadership skills, a good communicator and a good administrator.

"The qualities that the people are looking for are the same qualities that Anthony Jordan has," Russell said.

Jordan had served as chairman of the search committee, but was asked to resign so the committee could consider him. At first, he declined, but later agreed to be interviewed. When he resigned, Russell became chairman and another member was added to the committee.

"Some suggested this was a done deal," Russell said. "If so, it was done in the heart of God, because this committee only sought the will of God."

Russell said Jordan is a family man, a preacher, a pastor and a visionary.

"Anthony Jordan is a very dedicated family man," Russell said, and he encouraged Oklahoma Baptists to be understanding if Jordan has to decline some preaching invitations.

"Dr. Jordan is a preacher," Russell continued. "As a preacher, there will be times when he will need to study God's Word. There will be times when he will not be able to return your telephone call immediately.

"If he is to be able to serve God's children that we know as Oklahoma Baptists, he needs to be able to spend time with the Father."

Tanner praised the committee's selection.

"I don't know of anyone that, in a Christian sense, I love more than Anthony Jordan," Tanner said. "This decision was done totally by this committee. I prayed for them just like you did."

He said he did not attempt to influence the committee in any way.

"I cannot tell you how thrilled I am with this recommendation," Tanner said. "Am I at peace? You better believe I am."

Jordan told the board of the struggle he and his family had gone through before deciding to accept the invitation.

"In the beginning, these guys asked me to talk with them," he recounted. "I said, 'There are other guys you really need to talk to, because I am not interested.' I have always enjoyed being a pastor."

"But we have come to a place where we have sensed, through long periods of prayer, God's calling in our lives," he said. "Every day when I come to work I will see the steeple of a church that I have loved for 14 years. I come as a pastor.

"I come with a Bible in my hand. I know no other way to lead than through the Word of God.

"I love pastors," Jordan said. "I think pastors are in the greatest places in the world. My responsibility is to lead the Baptist Building staff to support pastors and associational leaders in doing the Lord's work.

"I don't come without an agenda," he noted. "I have an agenda burned in my heart over many years. I come with a heart full of dreams and visions God has burned in my heart over these many years."

Jordan said he has been an Oklahoma Baptist all his life, and that his earliest recollections were attending Oak Hill Baptist Church between Skiatook and Hominy.

He said he did not seek the executive director position but felt God's call.

"Because I love Oklahoma Baptists and sense God's unmistakable call, I am getting ready to do something I never thought I'd do," he said. "I can promise you I will seek God's face in every single thing I feel led to do."

Ted Lam, pastor of International Baptist Church, Tulsa, asked Jordan if he felt a burden for ethnic ministries.

Jordan noted Northwest has two ethnic missions and a multiracial congregation. He said he feels the Baptist Building staff should include ethnics.

Gary McKeen, pastor of Brush Hill Baptist Church, Muskogee, asked Jordan about supporting small churches.

"I very much have a heart for guys who serve in these small churches," Jordan said. "If you don't like small churches in Oklahoma, you're in big-time trouble, because a vast majority of our churches have fewer than 100 members."

Jordan said the change will be hardest on his daughter, Alisha (Sissy), 10.

"She is a little girl who has a strong view of things," he said. "She lobbied me through this, because she did not want to leave Northwest."

"The hardest thing for me to do was to tell my daughter. She spent an hour crying. My wife (Polla) spent many nights crying."

Still, the family could not ignore God's call, he added. Once the decision was made, he said Northwest said the Jordans could attend as long as possible.

"Sissy's happy because she's going to stay at Northwest," Jordan said. "There's grief going on in our house. Polla said, 'I can't imagine the last time you preach at Northwest' on Easter Day, April 7. I can't either."

"The first time the family is going to church and I'm going (somewhere else), it's going to be different."

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Baptist military academy
nurtures 2nd Heisman winner

Baptist Press
1/24/96

FORK UNION, Va. (BP)--Fork Union Military Academy once again has contributed to the making of a Heisman Trophy winner.

In receiving college football's top honor, Ohio State running back Eddie George joins Vinny Testaverde as the academy's second alumnus to carry a Heisman away from his collegiate career.

Testaverde, the 1986 Heisman winner from the University of Miami, is a former post-graduate cadet at the Fork Union, Va., school affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

George, a consensus All-American who capped his senior year by winning the coveted Heisman Trophy, is a team leader lauded as much for his work ethic and humility as for his amazing statistics.

George reported to Fork Union in August 1989. "He learned quickly that to be successful on the field, he had to prepare off the field. He had to be a good student and a good cadet," said coach Micky Sullivan.

After a typical period of adjustment, George caught on to the cadet lifestyle and became a leader. He was elected captain of the academy's prep (high school) team. He rushed for 2,551 yards on 277 carries and scored 37 touchdowns. As a senior, he won all-prep honors and was voted the academy's best offensive player.

"A lot of my work ethic comes from my Fork Union days," George acknowledged. "Down there, they instill discipline and teach you to work hard to succeed. Being a cadet was a great experience. I think I did most of my growing up at Fork Union."

George joins a host of former Fork Union athletes who have gone on to outstanding careers in college and professional sports. On Feb. 29, the academy will host its sports hall of fame induction ceremony and banquet at the Richmond Marriott in Richmond, Va. Eight charter members will be honored. If his schedule permits, George said he hopes to attend as an honored guest.

"Eddie is more than a great athlete," beams Sullivan. "He is an articulate, confident gentleman who will contribute great things to his community and his country."

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'I tried to slow down
but the need is so great'

By Kristi Hodge

MIAMI SPRINGS, Fla. (BP)--If anyone deserves to enjoy retirement, it's Reinaldo Medina. But, to him, his work is not finished as long as there's a need to be met.

Medina established Mission Bautista Hispana Sion (Zion Hispanic Baptist Mission) 15 months ago in Miami Springs, since baptizing more than 50 converts.

Sion reaches out to refugees who have come to the United States -- an important ministry to Medina and his second wife, Tina, because they understand the hardships refugees face.

On Feb. 28, 1965, the Cuban government arrested and convicted Medina and 50 other pastors, missionaries and laymen on charges of being CIA spies. For the next 13 years, Medina was moved from prison to prison, living under unspeakable conditions, but still managing to make an impact for Christ wherever he went. He led worship services and circulated Bibles in prison with the goal that everyone there hear the gospel.

His 1991 book, "The Gospel Behind Bars," detailed his experiences. He dedicated it to his now-deceased first wife, Iraida, to his four children and "to the many thousands of political prisoners who filled the prisons all over Cuba," some of whom have passed away, others who now live in freedom and many others who are "still imprisoned where they dream of one day being free."

Tina Medina, a former religious education director in Cuba, was also a political prisoner accused of being a CIA spy.

"I was a native missionary in Cuba for 17 years," she said. "Three of those years I spent in prison, but I still count them as part of my ministry."

After being released in 1978, Medina served as pastor of Star of Bethlehem Church in Hialeah for 11 years before retiring. When White Street Hispanic Church needed an interim pastor, Medina spent a year in Key West opening a transient home for refugees.

"Rev. Medina is one of the most dedicated men I know," said Bill Coffman, director of the Cooperative Program department of the Florida Baptist Convention. "He does not give up, he keeps on working."

Sion is a mission of Miami Springs Baptist Church, holding worship services in the church's fellowship hall. A mission team from Piedmont Baptist Church of Marietta, Ga., recently built a stage in the fellowship hall for a pulpit and choir seats. Sion already is poised to start a mission in Opa Locka.

"At 70 years old, years of mistreatment in prison plus two open heart surgeries show wear on a body, but I try to stay active," Medina said. "When I retired I tried to slow down but the need is so great I felt I had to do something. The Lord has been with our church, giving us victory in winning souls."

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Hodge is an Oklahoma Baptist College student and interim at the Florida Baptist Witness.

Hispanic mission's thrust:
to be a 'spiritual hospital'

By Barbara Denman

Baptist Press
1/24/96

MIAMI (BP)--The West Kendall area of Miami has been settled by the city's new breed: affluent, professional, first- and second-generation Hispanics who immigrated to the States in search of the American dream. Their dreams have come true.

"Look at the houses and cars they have in this neighborhood," said church planter Darris Coto. "They say, 'Whenever I need God, I'll talk to you.'"

That is, until their world comes tumbling down and they discover there is more to life than material things.

That's where Coto comes in, building a church -- Neuva Esperanza Mission Bautista, or New Hope Baptist Mission -- from the lives of scarred and hurting people in the West Kendall area.

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"The divorce rate in this area is incredibly high, many broken homes," Coto said. "We are the spiritual hospital in our community, in the midst of a lot of hurting families."

Coto serves as a bivocational pastor who was educated at the Ethnic Branch of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, located in Miami. The branch was created to train and retain ethnic young men, such as Coto, to serve in the area.

A second generation Cuban-American, Coto was born and raised in Hialeah by his Cuban-born parents. He is a prime example of how someone who is "indigenous" to the area can minister most effectively to the needs in the community.

Neuva Esperenza meets in a storefront child-care facility. Neuva Esperenza and West Kendall Baptist Church, a storefront mission that reaches Anglos in the area, are the only Baptist congregations in West Kendall where 154,797 people live in 35.6 square miles.

These two storefront churches are Southern Baptists' western-most missions outpost in Dade County. Even further to the west, in next two years, a city within itself -- The Hammocks -- is expected to be built. Other religious groups have eyed the community's residents as souls ripe for the harvest, too. Down the street from the mission's storefront presence, the Mormons are building a church to draw in new converts.

The Neuva Esperenza congregation reaches out to the community through a food ministry targeted to serve the poor, a Vacation Bible School in the park, a children's ministry and a nursing home ministry. Because gangs are common to the area, the congregation sponsors a youth group whose activities include repainting public places where gangs have sprayed graffiti.

"I don't want this to be a church with four walls," said Coto. "We want to penetrate the community where needs are so great.

"We come to praise God and we leave to serve our community."

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CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled, "Baptists homeless from floods, missionary belongings ruined," dated 1/23/96, please substitute the following paragraph for the last paragraph.

Baptist churches unaffected by the flooding gathered clothing and food to help flood victims, said missionary Ron Greenwich of Monticello, Ark., who directs the work of Baptist Friendship House. Local governments had relief efforts "pretty well controlled," he said.

Thanks,
Baptist Press

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