

# (BP)---FEATURES

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Migrants: Peonage In  
"The Land of the Free"

By The Baptist Press

The misery of the migrants is a topic raised routinely in Congressional hearings and pictured and discussed in the secular press, on television and in mission magazines.

Findings of a 25-member team of medical personnel about migrants in parts of Florida, Texas and Michigan, recounted before the Senate subcommittee on migratory labor in several days of hearings, has focused the national spotlight on the issue once more.

And the findings have drawn response from three Southern Baptist leaders who conduct ministries for the migrants in the three states.

A panel of doctors, which told the subcommittee that these "forgotten Americans (are) living and working in near slavery," reported the plight of the migrants in vivid terms.

Dr. Harry Lipscomb, director of the Institute for Health Services Research at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, one of the spokesmen, said, for example, he was "ashamed, as an American" of the conditions he saw in Hidalgo County, Texas, along the Mexican border.

Hidalgo County ranks first in the nation in the number of resident migrants, estimated to be from 37,000 to 45,000.

Lipscomb, a former student at Baylor University in Waco, Tex., and a graduate of Baylor Med, was one of the team sponsored by the Field Foundation to examine migrant farm workers and their families in the three states.

The Baylor Med official recounted for the committee his findings and the demoralizing effect on the team of what he called "an endless parade of illness, deformity, disability and human suffering."

Malnutrition, Lipscomb said, was "commonplace." So were speech and hearing defects, mental and emotional disorders, chronic skin disease, intestinal parasites, active pulmonary tuberculosis, diabetes, goiter and polio.

He spoke of uncorrected congenital deformities, mothers with "multiple pregnancy syndromes" and dental problems "in every individual we examined."

Another physician, Dr. Raymond M. Wheeler of Charlotte, N.C., described the crowded, unsanitary living quarters reserved for migrant families as "ghettos of horror."

"We saw housing and living conditions horrible and dehumanizing to the point of our disbelief," Dr. Wheeler told the committee. Some of the housing projects for migrants in Dade County, Fla., were built with public funds, he said.

The North Carolina doctor told of inspecting migrant quarters constructed as "long cinder block or wooden sheds, divided into single rooms by walls which do not reach to the ceiling."

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The rooms, he said, were 8 x 14 feet, without heat, adequate light or ventilation and contained no plumbing or refrigeration.

Each room, he said, is the living space for an entire family, "appropriately suggesting slave quarters of earlier days."

The doctors said Congress, physicians and other health providers, owners and operators of farms employing migrants and society in general must take responsibility for rectifying the situation.

#### Baptists Respond

Three men who direct Baptist ministries for migrants in Florida, Texas and Michigan discussed the testimony in telephone interviews from Miami, Dallas and Detroit and commented on what Christians have been and should be doing to assist migrants.

All three--Hubert Hurt in Florida, Dallas P. Lee in Texas and Eugene Bragg in Michigan--are secretaries of Language Missions for their state conventions.

Baptists and other groups have migrant ministries, they point out, but a major problem is getting enough manpower and financial resources involved to do an adequate job.

"Many churches in the Miami area, for example, are already actively involved in helping us with migrant ministries," Hurt said.

"But overall we haven't done enough to get to the deep rooted needs, such as health, housing, and low education levels. The doctors' testimony tells it like it is," Hurt said.

#### Ignorance Compounds Problem for Christians

Hurt and Bragg said indifference by most Baptists compounds the problem. Lee believes the problem is more a lack of knowledge of the real problems than of indifference.

Citing enthusiastic Texas Baptist response when informed of specific needs in the Rio Grande River Ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Lee said:

"If our churches inform people of the needs, create a consciousness of the situation and stir the consciences of people, we'll get the resources and skills we need," he said.

Hurt, Lee and Bragg all agreed that once people get involved, it has been their experience that they go all out in spiritual and physical ministries to migrants.

"Getting the people involved is the problem," Bragg laconically observed.

Dr. Wheeler told the subcommittee that owners of huge farms which produce fruit and food for the nation are especially to blame for the migrants' plight.

He charged that big farm owners have a "cruelly contrived and highly effective system which has been devised to extract the maximum work for...the cheapest possible price."

#### "Virtual Peonage"

Every effort, he continued at the Senate hearing, is directed toward "isolating the farm worker from the rest of society, maintaining him at the lowest level of subsistence which he will tolerate--making certain he has no means of escape from a system that holds him in virtual peonage."

And to that end, Dr. Wheeler charged, "the grower has the full cooperation of the Federal Government, the state and the local community."

The three Baptist leaders recognized shortcomings of farmers involved but disagreed that all of them "cruelly contrive" to oppress migrants.

Lack of responsibility by migrant heads of households, low educational standards, negative influence of years of peonage, fluctuating profit margins, and the transitory nature of the foot-loose crop pickers were cited as problems hampering those farmers who desire to provide decent facilities for migrants.

#### No Excuse for Inaction

The three men, however, emphasized that these problems do not excuse the growers--and especially Christians--from individual responsibility for the spiritual and physical needs of migrants.

"It isn't likely, that a lot of farmers will do much about the migrant problem," Bragg observed. "Many I know aren't Christians, with the Christian concept of ministry. We should put more emphasis on spiritual ministries to them."

Bragg said that despite problems most farmers should do more to improve living and health conditions for migrants and that Southern Baptists should increase educational, spiritual and other ministries to help overcome problems and eradicate the farmers' excuses for inaction.

But even professing Christians are involved in tolerating conditions which, "I wouldn't dignify by calling slums," Hurt said.

#### Christians Among Worst Offenders

"Unfortunately," he said, "many farmers who belong to Christian churches, including Baptist churches, are among the worst offenders with the migrants. Some of them are Baptist deacons."

Hurt observed that racial and economic prejudice are interwoven with response to the migrant problem.

"We must learn to accept them as people of equal worth and value in God's sight--and on a social level," he said. "We must have concern for the migrant as a whole person if we are to follow Christ's command to minister in His name."

"What can we tell a migrant of Christian love when his boss, a deacon at the Baptist church, abuses him daily," Hurt said.

"Who could respect a man who charged him \$60 to \$75 a month for a one-room hovel?" Hurt asked.

"There's no 30-day solution to the problem," Lee said. "We must give them the Gospel to help them rise above the negative influences of years of peonage."

"But corporate denominational action can't salve the conscience of local responsibility," Lee reiterated.

Bragg said that within 10 years, migrants will have another problem--chronic unemployment.

"Mechanization and scientific advance will eventually weed out most migrant labor," he said. It's estimated that in Traverse City, Mich., more than 590 migrant camps will be vacated within the next decade.

"That's when groups working with migrants will really be under pressure to solve problems," Bragg said.

#### Unchanging Problem

In the Senate hearings, Dr. Wheeler said, "The picture we saw (in our survey) is one of a society thriving on greed, cruelty, alienation

July 24, 1970

4

Baptist Press Feature

and fear--a society which either never had or has completely abandoned the concerns, the ethics, the ideals which make dignity and freedom possible."

He waved a report on migrants presented to President Harry S. Truman in 1951 and observed that the plight of the migrant has not changed since then.

Rudy Juarez, a young man who grew up in the Florida migrant fields and is still working there, told the committee that indeed conditions have not changed in the last 20 years.

In fact, Juarez said, "They have gotten worse."

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This story was compiled by the Washington and Dallas Bureaus of Baptist Press.



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July 24, 1970

Baptist College Names  
 Phelps Administrative Dean

DALLAS (BP)--Ralph Phelps, former president of Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark., has been named dean of administration at Dallas Baptist College.

The 48-year-old Phelps is currently vice president for development at Mercer University, Macon, Ga., and served for a period as vice president and trust officer of a bank in Little Rock, Ark., after leaving the Ouachita post.

Phelps, a Dallas native, was president of Ouachita for 16 years. During that period, the student body tripled, a graduate school was added, assets increased from \$1.8 million to \$8.4 million and 22 buildings were constructed.

Charles P. Pitts, president of Dallas Baptist College, said, "The addition of Dr. Phelps is a key move as we continue to set up the administrative and academic framework for our audio-video learning center."

Pitts has assigned Phelps to supervise continued development of the college's unique learning center which currently comprises multiple study units, each with television and sound systems allowing students to learn at their own pace.

Before assuming the Ouachita presidency in 1953, Phelps was associate professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Ft. Worth. In 1967 he took a six months' leave of absence from Ouachita to become director of the Office of Economic Opportunity's regional office in Atlanta.

He is a member of the Baptist Joint Committee for Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., and has served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Education Commission. He was "Man of the Year" in Arkansas in 1960.

Phelps, who has also served as pastor of three churches in Texas, is a graduate of Baylor University, Waco, Tex., and holds master and doctor of theology degrees from Southwestern Seminary.

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Hungarian Baptists Lose  
 Homes, Churches in Floods

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TOKYO (BP)--Hungarian delegates to the Baptist World Congress here reported that all Baptist families in Geberjen, a community in northeastern Hungary, lost their homes in late spring floods that hit large areas of eastern Europe.

Baptists throughout the country have been trying to help the flood victims.

Two Baptist churches, each with about 30 members, at the Hungarian cities of Kisar and Csenger, were destroyed by the floods. In two other communities, homes of Baptist pastors were lost.

Hungary has about 20,000 Baptists.

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Baptist Pastors  
In Island Crusade

ATLANTA (BP)--Forty-three Baptist ministers from the United States have completed a six-day evangelistic crusade in New Zealand and New Guinea, with nearly 1,000 converts.

The effort was the first of its kind in New Guinea and only the second major campaign in New Zealand.

It was initiated by Eual Lawson and co-directed by Jack Stanton, both of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's Division of Evangelism. Lawson participated in the 1965 New Zealand crusade.

Ministers representing 17 states preached in churches throughout the area and participated in home "coffee and tea" sessions. The home fellowships were a departure from the first crusade which featured church services alone.

Included in the group were five black ministers. "One of the finest contributions was made in giving a better understanding of the relationship between black and white preachers in America," Lawson said.

The men preached in schools, shopping areas and military installations. Although church services in the two countries reflect the reserved, sedate British worship pattern, the people adjusted quickly and responded favorably to the informal American style.

Lawson was impressed by the attitude of worship exhibited by the people as they entered a church building. "They have a deep sense of meditative worship. There was no raucous talk so characteristic of church services in the States," he said.

Incomplete reports showed 420 conversions in New Guinea and 557 in New Zealand. Lawson said there will be follow-up by local pastors.

The crusade was a mission project of local churches in the States. Each participating church sent its pastor and, in many cases, the pastor's wife.

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Large Carolina Church  
Elects Women Deacons

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (BP)--Four women have been elected to the board of deacons at Myers Park Baptist Church here.

Although a news agency cited the incident as possibly the first for Southern Baptists, several North Carolina churches are known to have women deacons.

In Kentucky last year, three women were elected deacons at Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown.

No information is available as to the extent of the practice in other states of the Southern Baptist Convention, but it is not widespread.

At Myers Park Church last year, there was talk of electing women to the board, a staff member said, but it was discovered that the church's by-laws indicated only males were eligible.

The congregation of the 1,650-member church later voted to delete the word "male" and add the word "persons" according to Leonard Wilmot, one of Myers Park Church's three ministers of education.

Three of the women in Charlotte were elected from four names presented by the church's nominating committee. The fourth was elected from the floor, Wilmot said.

-more-

July 24, 1970

3

Baptist Press

Eight men were named to the 50 "person" board at the same election.

Mrs. C. W. Upchurch joins her husband on the Myers Park board of deacons, Wilmot said.

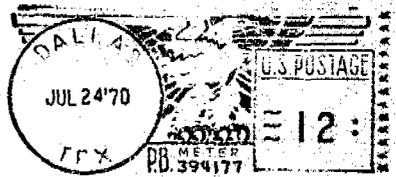
The husbands of two others, Mrs. Robert Laine and Mrs. E. F. Kratt, have served as deacons but are not presently on the active board. The fourth is Mrs. R. S. Dickson, widow of a deceased deacon and one of the 12 founders of the church.

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