



BAPTIST PRESS
News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE
460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
Telephone (615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Jim Newton, Assistant Director

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Walker L. Knight, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30309, Telephone (404) 873-4041
DALLAS Billy Keith, Chief, 103 Baptist Building, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) 741-1996
NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Lynn M. Davis, Jr., Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37203, Telephone (615) 254-1631
RICHMOND Jesse C. Fletcher, Acting Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (703) 353-0131
WASHINGTON W. Barry Garrett, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

September 8, 1970

**Baptist Churches Merge In Effort
To Cooperate, Minister to Needy**

BAYTOWN, Tex. (BP)--Two Baptist churches here have voted to merge "in order to minister to an economically and ethically changing neighborhood," and to "cooperate more and compete less."

In an unprecedented move, members of First Baptist Church in the older business section of Baytown, and the Shiloh Baptist Church, located seven miles away on Interstate 10, approved the merger details overwhelmingly.

Shiloh Baptist Church has changed its name and become First Baptist Church, North. The older congregation is now known as First Baptist Church, South.

Gary Bonner, pastor of First Baptist Church, is now pastor of the merged congregations, and Glenn Walker, pastor of the former Shiloh church is associate pastor of the combined church.

The two units of the same church will maintain separate Sunday School and church training classes, and regular worship services at both locations. They will meet jointly for church business conferences, alternating the meetings at the two locations.

The merger has the wholehearted support of the mayor of Baytown. Walker, pastor of First Baptist Church, North, has been mayor of the city of about 40,000 population for the last year.

He is also manager of a radio station KWBA, partner in the Kelly-Walker Advertising Agency, and his wife operates a book store here.

Before Bonner became pastor of First Baptist Church nine months ago, Walker was interim pastor of First Baptist, and was aware of a study being conducted by the church's planning and survey committee concerning the possibility of moving at some future date to the fast-growing area north of town.

First Baptist is located in an area that is declining socially and economically, Bonner said, and a large number of Latin Americans are moving into the area. For the past ten years, the church has been declining in terms of membership and giving, he added.

Bonner, however, was reluctant for the church to move away from the area and leave the neighborhood without the strength of the ministries a downtown Baptist church would provide.

Gradually, in talks between the two pastors, the idea of a cooperative ministry between the two congregations began to emerge.

First Baptist Church, South, currently with about 1,500 members, will emphasize in the future more ministries to Latin Americans and elderly who live in the immediate neighborhood, Bonner said.

The congregation currently has a "Friends" program featuring Bible studies, crafts and handworks, and efforts "just to make friends" with the neighborhood people, he added. The church also has a tutoring program involving about 15 tutors, including two Spanish teachers.

It is located near Lee College, a junior college in Baytown, and has an extensive program for students and youth.

About 46 per cent of the members live in the immediate area and predominately blue color workers in industries, especially the oil companies that center their work in Baytown. The church has some Latin Americans, but no Negro members. About 54 per cent live in the suburbs and are primarily professional people, Bonner added.

First Baptist Church, North, is located in the area which the Baytown Chamber of Commerce predicts will be the future population center of Baytown. Though the area is now predominately rural, it is already under development as a residential and shopping center area.

Lee Collège is planning a new campus right across the street from First Baptist Church, North, and the president of the school is already a member of the North congregation.

Both Bonner and Walker insist that their approach to a unique situation will provide both congregations with stronger leadership and financial support.

Both pastors also agreed that they know of no precedent for the type merger the two congregations had approved in the Southern Baptist Convention.

It will offer advantages to both congregations, they added. First Baptist South, in a declining neighborhood, will be able to continue to offer increased ministries to the neighborhood, and First Baptist North will draw on the leadership strength of the other congregation as it grows into a strong suburban church.

The merger also fulfills a strong conviction Walker has that churches should cooperate more and compete less.

Bonner said he does not feel they will have too much a problem with the two congregations feeling that they still are members of "Shiloh Church" and "First Baptist," and not one big congregation meeting at two locations.

"We will plan programs for us to be together as much as possible, and will, of course, meet together every month for business session," Bonner said. He added they will bus youth from the North location to the South unit for youth meetings, and said some adults have told him they plan to work in Sunday School at the North location and worship at the South one in the evening.

All members will be recognized as First Baptist members, and the deacons and committees will be composed of members from each location.

Bonner and Walker also plan to exchange pulpits, giving the two congregations a variety in sermon styles and approaches.

Walker said he would probably have to cut out some of the many things he has been doing in the city, and said he had already told officials at radio station KWBA he planned to resign as manager.

When asked how he was able to do as much as he did, Walker quipped, "I don't sleep much."

Before coming to Baytown as manager of the radio station, Walker was a full time evangelist, leading evangelistic efforts primarily in the Southern Baptist churches in "pioneer areas" including Washington and Oregon, Colorado, North and South Dakota, Utah and Idaho, etc.

He has also been pastor of Second Baptist Church, Highlands, Tex., near Baytown, and two churches in Limestone County, Tex.

He served a two-year term as a city councilman before being elected mayor about a year ago. His advertising agency partner, Lamar Kelly, is also on the city council.

Both Bonner and Walker are graduates of Baylor University, Waco, Tex., and both attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth. Bonner earned the bachelor of divinity degree at the seminary, but Walker still lacks one semester completing his work.

Before becoming pastor of First Baptist, Bonner was associate pastor of First Baptist Church, Abilene, Tex., and held a similar position at Highland Park Baptist Church, Austin, Tex. He also has been pastor of First Baptist Church, Schulenberg, Tex.

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Alaska Baptist Convention
Adopts Budget, Sets New Office

9/8/70

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (BP)--The 25th annual Alaska Baptist Convention meeting at First Baptist Church here adopted a budget of \$254,458 and voted to construct a new state convention office building on property owned by the Turnagain Baptist Children's Home here.

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Under terms of the convention action, the present Baptist Building will be sold, and a new office headquarters constructed on already-owned Baptist property. No time schedule for the move was given.

Re-elected president of the convention was Bill Duncan, pastor of First Baptist Church, North Pole, Alaska.

Twenty-eight churches sent 137 messengers and 298 visitors to the 25th anniversary session of the convention.

A youth choir and hand bell group from Cliff Temple Baptist Church, Dallas, provided special music for the anniversary convention, and three Alaska pastors were featured speakers.

The convention recognized the publication of a book, In This Land, outlining the first 25 years of the convention's work. The book, written by Mrs. Naomi Ruth Hunke, wife of the convention's executive secretary, is scheduled for publication in March, 1971, by Word Books, Waco, Tex.

In other actions, the convention reassigned the responsibility of the Alaska Baptist loan committee to the finance committee of its Executive Board, established the office of Woman's Missionary Union as a half-time staff position in the convention office, and authorized the Executive Board to develop the Orton Ranch on a long-range basis as a facility for use by all Alaska Baptists.

Next year, the convention will meet at University Baptist Church, College, Alaska, Aug. 10-12, 1971.



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460 James Robertson Parkway
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HISTORICAL COMMISSION, SBC

DAVIS C. WOOLLEY HO
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
127 NINTH AVE. N.
NASHVILLE, TENN. 37203