



**BAPTIST PRESS**  
News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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September 27, 1972

New Center Identifies  
Baptists with Choctaws

By Walker Knight

PEARL RIVER COMMUNITY, Miss. (BP)--The increasing identification of Baptists with the emerging goals of the 4,000 Choctaw Indians of Central Mississippi was underscored here with the dedication of a new \$30,000 Baptist Indian Center.

The identification moves both ways. The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the Mississippi Baptist Convention provided the funds for the new center. The Choctaws provided the tree-studded land near tribal headquarters at fast-growing Pearl River, and encouraged the transfer of the center from nearby Philadelphia to Pearl River.

This community, one of seven Choctaw settlements in the state, exhibits all the earmarks of a new town. The Choctaws have added a fast-growing housing and industrial development to their high school, churches, and offices in Pearl River.

This beleaguered Choctaw band, once stripped of their land and reduced to less than a thousand when the government was moving Indians west like cattle, now occupies more than 17,000 acres in four East Central Mississippi counties.

They speak today of the Choctaw nation. Their youth attend the Central Choctaw High School, plan for college and live comfortably in a bi-lingual world.

The Choctaws quietly push for a greater independence from the ever-present Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), more self direction and authority for their tribal council, and more Choctaws in jobs related to Indians. Forty five percent of BIA workers are now Choctaws.

The new Baptist center here contains offices, a kitchen, a reception area, and a large multiple purpose room for meetings, recreation, special classes, religious services and church functions. The old center in Philadelphia is being sold.

Transfer of the center from Philadelphia to new quarters in Pearl River is more than physical. Baptists are moving philosophically as well.

But Baptists fitted well into Choctaw thinking from the start, contributing largely to making them one of the most Christian groups (50 percent) of all Indian groups in the nation.

A Choctaw from Oklahoma, Peter Folsom, started the Baptist trend in 1879 that now has produced 13 churches, two missions, the Choctaw Baptist Association, and has placed one of every four Choctaws on Baptist church rolls--1,000 in all.

The association is part of the Mississippi Baptist Convention and has a representative in the convention's Executive Committee.

Choctaw Indians serve as pastors of all their churches even though most pastors are handicapped by less than a fourth-grade education and have to work other jobs to support their families. All services are in the Choctaw language, with some translation into English for association meetings.

One mission, served by missionary Dolton Haggan, conducts services in English for those Choctaws who do not speak the language well, for other Indians who have married Choctaws,

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and for Anglos working with the tribe.

Slow-talking Haggan, a former Mississippi pastor and now employed along with his wife Sarah by Mississippi Baptists and the Home Mission Board, said during the dedication that "our ultimate goal with the Choctaws is to work ourselves out of business. I'll count myself successful when I am no longer needed, when a Choctaw takes over this center."

Haggan's time schedule for the Choctaw takeover is somewhere between 10 and 25 years, when the land and improvements revert back to the tribe.

Two things need to happen before he leaves, Haggan said: first, enlistment of more Choctaws for stronger financial support so that they will not have to depend on Mississippi Baptists or the Home Mission Board for such centers and for leadership, and second, the development of an educated ministry.

Haggan directs most of his energy and time now into leadership training. "By training them to carry out a good, strong, constructive program, this helps them to become self-supportive. We work to strengthen the churches educationally and financially."

Haggan said the biggest adjustment he has made in his six years with the Choctaws, has been the shift to their concept of time.

"When I came I was going 90 miles an hour to get everything done. They just sat on the sidelines and let me go 90 miles an hour. I just had to relax and work at their pace, fit into their lifestyles. They just do not get in a hurry."

With the national rise of concern for the welfare of the American Indian and the trend toward emphasis on the Indian determining his own future, that, too, may be changing. Haggan hopes the Choctaw will take over much sooner than 10 to 25 years.

He and other Baptist leaders believe the new Baptist center will be a big step in helping the Indians move even faster toward their goals.

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#### First Baptist Church Houston Votes to Move

HOUSTON (BP)--The downtown First Baptist Church of Houston, which for years has proclaimed in a huge neon sign that "Jesus Saves," has voted to move to a site seven miles from their central city location, leaving the downtown area without a Baptist church.

Leaders of the 7,000 member church said the congregation was bursting at the seams, that the buildings were too small, and that it could not expand in its current location.

About 80 per cent of the 1,200 members attending Sunday morning worship services here voted to make the move to a site at Katy Freeway and West Loop 610, a location seven miles from downtown at the intersection of a loop circling the city and a major freeway in west Houston.

John R. Bisagno, pastor of the church, made a plea for unity in his sermon following the secret ballot.

The recommendation was made by the church's future plans committee, which earlier had proposed a possible merger of First Baptist and River Oaks Baptist Church, a wealthy congregation which owns 12 acres in the plush Rives Oaks section. Deacons at the River Oaks church, however, declined the proposed merger.

Bisagno said the church would build new facilities and move in about 2 1/2 to 3 years. The downtown site at 1020 Lamar is valued at about \$3.5 million. Church leaders estimated it will take another \$2.6 million for the new location facilities.

After the congregation moves, South Main Baptist Church, located about two miles from the central business district, will become the closest Baptist church to the downtown business area.

With nearly 200,000 members in 240 churches and missions, the Union Baptist Association which includes the metropolitan Houston area, is the largest concentration of Southern Baptists in the nation.

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the first of four articles on "Christian Morality and National Politics" written for Baptist Press by Phil Strickland, associate secretary of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. Strickland delivered a series of addresses on this topic at a citizenship conference sponsored this summer by the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission at Glorieta Baptist Assembly.

Political Involvement:  
Try, it, You'll Like It

September 27, 1972

By Phil Strickland

"I really can't do anything," is a statement frequently heard in conversations among Baptists concerning political action.

It reflects an attitude that is far too common--the attitude that the individual cannot really do anything to affect his government.

But if that attitude is right, it is indeed tragic. For it would mean that we have ceased to be a democracy and have become, instead, an oligarchy, a government of the elite and powerful.

The individual can still be heard in our country. But to be heard, he must understand political power. He must know how to speak the political language. And far too few Americans have learned to speak the language of government and decision making.

To have effective political influence, the first requirement is to do the necessary homework. It means doing homework on political power.

Who are the real decision makers in a particular area? Who knows the politicians? Who is involved in legislative activities? Which power structures influence a particular individual? Some legislators, for example, are known for their commitment to a particular person, industry, or other group.

To be effective, it is also necessary to understand the legislative process. What are the basic rules of the game? What power does the school board have? the city council? the Speaker of the House? the Governor?

One must not understand just the written rules, he must understand how the game is really played behind the scenes. Very few decisions are actually made when an issue comes to a vote on the floor of the legislature. Nor are they often made in formal committee hearings. Most political decisions are made over lunch, in the office, on the telephone, and in other places remote from the formal halls of government.

One must also do his homework on the issues in which he is interested. Nothing compromises a person's effectiveness as much as not really knowing what he is talking about. If one leads a legislator to act on inadequate or false information, he will lose all effectiveness with him when that legislator discovers he has been misled.

Determining priorities is another important step in effective political action. It is amazing how much time, money, and effort are wasted on legislation already certain to pass or certain to fail. Priorities must be determined in the light of political reality. Not only must one determine what is most important, but also what is a realistic possibility.

Finally, it is important to do your homework on the representative himself. What does he do for a living? What are the names of his wife and children? What church does he attend? How does he make decisions?

The best way to answer these questions, of course, is to establish a personal relationship with the legislator. And that relationship should be developed in a Christian way, with concern and sensitivity to his needs. All legislators are not crooks. But all of them, like

all of us, are sinners. Often they desperately need the help of concerned people in making difficult decisions or finding forgiveness when they do make mistakes.

The best way, of course, to really learn how to be politically effective is to jump into the political world. Try it. You'll like it. It's an exciting world.

There may not be much you can do at first. But you can at least find others who feel as you do and get to work with them.. Work for a candidate or for an issue. Contribute. Pass out brochures. Type name cards. The list is endless.

The person who genuinely wants to be involved will not find it difficult to locate a starting point. There are many who need to get more deeply involved--to the point of actually running for political office. There is a desperate need today for elected officials with Christian values.

The greatest enemy of democracy is apathy. When people don't care about government enough to get involved, it will cease to be responsive to the needs of the people. It is not easy to wrest with the difficult decisions of government. The chambers of politics may be fraught with difficulty and temptation for the Christian. We must always remember, however, that Christ walks there before us. And one of the most rewarding experiences of life is to try to walk with Christ as He goes to the difficult places of life.

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2. The Economy May Be the Key Political Issue
3. Welfare: The Candidates' Stands Compared
4. The Ecology Crisis: Till Death Do us Part

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