



News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

**---FEATURES**

produced by Baptist Press

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March 14, 1973

A Review

Baptists Attempt Entertaining  
Evangelism on Spring Street USA

By Jim Newton

ATLANTA (BP)--Southern Baptists begin their first effort at mass media evangelism through a new television series called Spring Street USA on April 1, seeking to blend the best of variety show entertainment with short, relevant evangelistic messages.

Already, the first 10 programs previewed on video cassette by dozens of Southern Baptist leaders and television professionals, have prompted many kudos, but little criticism.

When the video cassettes were shown informally to persons attending a recent Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee meeting, one denominational professional sat for hours in a hallway watching the programs. "Tremendous," he kept repeating as he watched.

In Hollywood, where television professionals edited the videotapes, a top professional in the field called it the best religious programming he had ever seen.

An editorial in the Christian Index of Georgia, based on a preview of two of the 10 shows, described the series as "a cut above all religious programming of that nature." And the editor of the Biblical Recorder of North Carolina called it "a wholesome, effective program--refreshingly different from anything now on television."

The series is being produced cooperatively by two SBC agencies--the SBC Home Mission Board here which is responsible for content of the show, and the SBC Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth, which is handling production and distribution.

"Star" of the show is host and regular speaker Kenneth L. Chafin, pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston.

Chafin, former evangelism secretary for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board here, is constantly upstaged, however, by a talented group of 12 young people called the Spring Street Singers.

Almost everyone who has seen the first shows concedes that the most exciting ingredient is the music--directed, arranged and conducted by a young Baptist layman described by top professionals in the field as a "musical genius."

Buryl Red, president of BR Productions and Generic Music Co., of New York City, enlisted, organized and put together the Spring Street Singers. In addition, he composed much of the music used for the show.

The series uses a variety show format, with a guest star appearing on each program. "Variety" is the appropriate word, for the guest stars include a wide range of stars and groups such as former Louisiana Governor Jimmie Davis and a popular black group, Andrae Crouch and The Disciples.

Other guest stars on the first 10 programs include Apollo 15 Astronaut James Irwin, country music singer Connie Smith, comedian Jerry Clower, the Tom Tichenor puppets, "Queen of the West" Dale Evans Rogers, pianist-composer-singer Ken Medema, soloist Cynthia Clawson, and movie star and recording artist Pat Boone.

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Chafin, as host, talks informally with each guest. The personal faith of the guests consistently comes through in a natural, unforced manner.

Following the talk-show interview or performances by the guests, Chafin gives a brief, eight-minute sermonette on a topic related to the theme of that program.

Each program opens and closes with music by the Spring Street Singers. The group, as well as the program, takes the name from the 1350 Spring Street NE address of the SBC Home Mission Board here. Each show ends with an appeal by Chafin for viewers to write to "Spring Street USA" for copies of a free Bible study related to the theme of the program.

The programs are unapologetically, yet tastefully and factfully, evangelistic. There is no pressure, no appeal for funds, no slippy emotionalism. Chafin's sermons are down-to-earth messages that do not sound too "preachy," but deal with practical problems Americans face in finding happiness and fulfillment.

In an editorial commenting on the programs in the Christian Index, Associate Editor Robert LaFavre wrote: "Many religious programs come on so hard that they turn the non-religious viewer off. Others, in an effort to compromise, become so soft there is no substance. Not so with Spring Street USA.

"Filmed in beautiful color with flawless camera work, the show moves from area to area with complete continuity," LaFavre continued. "Each item dovetails into the projected theme. The staging was not on a large scale, giving you the feeling of intimacy.

"This series has made me believe Christians can produce quality viewing without sacrificing the message of Christ," the editorial concluded.

Professionally, the programs are of top quality production. The camera work, color quality, staging, and editing seem to be flawless.

The filming for the series is being done by 21st Century Productions, a Nashville-based subsidiary of WLAC-TV. Bob Thornton of the SBC Radio-TV Commission is producer and Joe Hostetler of 21st Century is director.

Premier of the series will be broadcast over WMAL-TV, Washington, D.C., at 7:30 a.m., Monday, March 26. The premier is scheduled to coincide with the meeting of the National Association of Broadcasters to enable station managers and program directors and others from the nation's television industry to view the premier.

During the first week of April, 12 television stations across the nation will begin carrying the weekly programs, and SBC Radio-TV officials say that by May 1, the programs will be on 30 stations. So far, about one in eight of the stations is providing the time at no charge under public service broadcasting; but most of the time is being purchased.

Though every television program director who has seen it has had high praise for the professional quality of the series, most are reluctant to provide "free" time for the telecasts because of the evangelistic nature, and because they fear it would open a "Pandora's box" causing other denominations to demand equal time, commented Thornton, the producer. No other religious group, however, has matched the quality of "Spring Street," Thornton insists.

Thornton concedes that most viewers will probably compare the series to the Oral Roberts show, but Thornton believes "Spring Street USA" has pulled off an even greater miracle of television production than Oral Roberts.

In producing the series, Thornton studied the approaches used by Roberts, and sought to blend the best of the Roberts techniques in his weekly program with the hour-long Roberts specials.

Thornton said one of the Spring Street Singers in the original recordings, Miss Kerry Martindale who is a student at Oral Roberts University, sang with both the Oral Roberts group and the Spring Street Singers. Thornton quoted her as saying there was no real comparison between the two programs musically, with Spring Street coming off far superior.

Musically, each program in the series begins with a production number that is somewhat "s cular" oriented, Red said. Most shows conclude with a modern, fresh arrangement of an old and familiar hymn. Sprinkled throughout are original compositions by Red.

The music is so lively and interesting, the guests so appealing, that the average viewer will probably watch for ten minutes before he realizes it is a religious program. By then he is "hooked" and won't change channels.

Chafin's messages move subtly, but powerfully, into dealing with problems of life, seeking to show how faith in God through Jesus Christ can give deeper meaning, purpose, and happiness in life. Subjects of the programs range from such topics as death and man's reluctance to face it, to the faith of a little child revealed lightly by the Tom Tichenor Puppets of Nashville.

The programs are designed to bridge all kinds of gaps, and to appeal to a wide span of interests. The Tom Tichenor puppets show obviously will appeal to children. The Andrae Crouch and the Disciples appearance should have appeal to youth and to blacks. Country music fans should respond well to the Jimmie Davis, Connie Smith and Dale Evans Rogers shows.

Admittedly, there is not much in the programs to appeal to the liberal. The shows seem to be aimed at middle America, and one--the program featuring Astronaut Jim Irwin--has a strong emphasis on patriotism that borders on civil religion.

Most of the guests unashamedly tell of their personal faith in Jesus Christ. Connie Smith for example, tells how she "got saved" when she began to talk to a well-known country music row preacher, Jimmie Snow, about the emptiness in her life. Irwin, in contrast, suavely tells of a deep religious experience on his scientific exploration of the moon's surface.

Andrae Crouch, a big burly black who heads a rock and soul group, said his music was designed to be more "than just a foot-stomping good time. We try to share our faith in Jesus."

The strength of the series lies in the balance between beautiful music, tasteful discussion of life and faith, and appealing guest stars.

Musically, five of the strongest shows that left the strongest impression on this writer, were the Pat Boone, Connie Smith, Andrae Crouch, Cynthia Clawson, and Ken Medema shows.

Miss Clawson, the daughter of San Antonio Baptist pastor Thomas W. Clawson, gained national recognition as a soloist for the CBS Newcomers program. Both she and Medema, a blind musical therapist at a psychiatric hospital in Cedar Grove, N.J., sing with a style Red describes as "white soul."

Consistently, the Spring Street Singers bring the freshness and vitality of youth to the series.

Each show opens and closes with a catchy tune, written by Red and his assistant Grace Hawthorne, that resounds with joy and happiness, while the camera pans the scenic beauty of the American countryside and bustling hustle of the cities.

"The sun shines down on the mountaintop, it shines on the early morning dew," goes the theme song. "It wakes up the world and begins the day; hey, we'll share the sun with you... The sun brings love to the whole wide world, it nods to the earth, how do you do. It blows a kiss to the waiting day; hey, we'll share the sun with you..."

"When you share the sun, you never wear a frown. Cause when you share the sun, no one can put you down. For the sun can turn your frown upside down, upside down... On Spring Street, USA, the sun shines every day..."

And it doesn't dawn on the viewer, until after the closing theme song, that the Spring Street Singers could well have been spelling the word, "Son" rather than "sun."

Mission Board Adjusts Support;  
Eulogizes Slain Missionary

RICHMOND (BP)--The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board meeting here approved a \$158,250 adjustment of funds for emergency compensation for mission work in 31 countries, and eulogized a Baptist missionary slain a few days earlier in Taiwan.

The \$158,250 adjustment in missions support was a move to offset the most recent U.S. dollar devaluation and its resultant financial pressures on mission efforts.

Board action followed a report last month by executive secretary Baker J. Cauthen in which he explained the ramifications of dollar devaluation on the purchasing power of mission dollars overseas.

An atmosphere of sorrow and prayerful concern pervaded the March meeting of the board as it learned details of the murder of one of their missionaries, Miss Gladys Hopewell, in Tainan, Taiwan.

Much of the meeting was taken up with news of her death and prayers in behalf of her family and missionary colleagues in Taiwan. A memorial resolution was adopted which said in part:

"To her aged mother and her brother, Joseph, of Talledega, Ala., her home church, the Taiwan Baptist Convention, her missionary associates in Tainan and the Christians of Taiwan, we extend our prayerful sympathies and deepest concerns. May all know afresh the sustaining and strengthening grace of God in this time of overwhelming sorrow."

In his report, Cauthen eulogized the slain missionary, saying, "Gladys Hopewell was a missionary of outstanding dedication and effectiveness. She demonstrated through the years of her service high qualities of devotion to Christ and concern for people with whom she was related."

He added that he hoped the witness of her life and death would impress upon the hearts of many people "the love of Christ which he demonstrated in going to the cross to die for our sins."

Cauthen added: "We also pray that many hearts may become aware of the fact that a comrade has fallen in Christian service and that others need to step forward to fill the place left vacant."

In other reports to the board, Winston Crawley, director of the board's Overseas Division, said, "for six straight years the amount of Southern Baptist giving used for mission purposes (local, state, home and foreign) has increased at a lower rate than total giving."

Crawley's statement was made in the larger context in which he said that as resources increase, a larger and larger proportion is being used to maintain home churches (the base) rather than being used to increase mission outreach.

"According to common methods of reporting," Crawley continued, "Southern Baptists devote a total of about 17 per cent of their giving to 'mission causes.' Much of this, however, goes for preparing, maintaining and strengthening the mission base through denominational organization, services to the churches and training programs."

Crawley added that foreign missions, aimed at 95 per cent of the world's unevangelized, receives not quite four per cent of the funds and less than that percentage of personnel resources.

Illinois Board Sets Goal,  
Services to Unwed Mothers

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (BP)--The Illinois Baptist State Association Board of Directors approved a state missions offering goal of \$100,000 for 1973, adopted a major emphasis on church extension for 1974, and approved a plan for service to unwed mothers.

Half the \$100,000 goal will be used to secure trained leadership to begin new work in up to 20 places with priority needs.

The other half will be divided to provide \$10,000 for buses to be used by churches wishing to start bus ministries; \$20,000 for inner city ministries; and \$20,000 for further development of camping and retreat facilities at Lake Sallateeska.

The first three churches in the state have been selected to use buses leased with funds from the 1972 state missions offering, according to Church Development Director Ron Lewis. They are Southview Baptist Church, Waukegan; First Baptist Church of Beardstown; and Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in East St. Louis.

During a report to the board on plans for a major emphasis in 1974 called EXTENDnow, Church Extension Director Charles Chaney said that the state association with the help of the SBC Home Mission Board has identified 419 communities in Illinois where a Southern Baptist witness is either lacking or inadequate.

Chaney said the major goal of EXTENDnow in Illinois is a new increase of 100 churches by the end of 1976. Most of the new work will be started through Home Bible Fellowships, and sustained through funding superior leadership in at least 20 places of priority, he said.

The association's new service to unwed mothers will be assigned to the social services department of the children's homes.

Under the new service, requests from unwed mothers will be referred to a social worker who will complete a case study and maintain contact with clients. Expectant mothers will be referred to an agency which can furnish physical facilities and maternity care. The department might also provide legal services, study adoptive homes, and supervise adoption placements. The association would not furnish physical facilities, nor an immediate staff. The service would not begin before 1974.

Among numerous other actions in the semi-annual session, the board approved a plan to provide \$150 a year to Illinois college students entering church-related vocations, including ministers, education directors, music directors, youth workers, and mission volunteers who attend a school in the state.