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Baptists Play Equipping Role
To "Indian-ize" SBC Missions

By Everett Hullum and Sandy Simmons

WOUNDED KNEE, S.D. (BP)--During the recent American Indian Movement seige here, AIM President Vernon Bellecourt charged that Christian churches are more responsible for the plight of the American Indian than any other factor.

Now, more than ever, the future of Christian missions on Indian reservations is in question. Bellecourt and other AIM leaders blame many of the Indians' problems today on Christianity.

"They have stripped the native people of their religious identity and set about to destroy the Indian religion," he said. "The loss of religious identity is the root of the high alcoholic rate and suicide rate, and in fact the almost total cause of the poverty conditions of the Indian people in this country."

One of the biggest objections to Christian missions has been the "white" missionary coming in to convert the Indian to a "white man's religion."

In response to these charges, Southern Baptist missionaries among the Indians are playing an "equipping role," seeking not to "Americanize," but to "Indian-ize" Christian mission efforts.

Southern Baptists have 135 Indian-language missionaries, including three US-2ers and nine who serve with Eskimos in Alaska. Most of these missionaries work in Indian-populous Oklahoma, Arizona and New Mexico.

Of the 135, only a few are native Indians.

Frank Belvin, a Choctaw Indian who works as missionary in Oklahoma, is convinced that if Christianity is to take further roots among the Indians, "it's going to be planted by Indians themselves."

However, lack of trained Indian laymen has hurt Indian missions. But missionaries are now seeing themselves in a different role.

To remedy its failure to attract native leadership, the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board a few years back shifted to a policy of "equipping" Indian missions. Along with mission work to other ethnic groups, missionaries began--whenever and wherever possible--taking supportive roles, training lay leadership to carry the responsibility of Christian outreach to its own people.

"I preach every Sunday," says Mississippi's Dolton Haggan, missionary with the Choctaws, "but preaching is not my primary role. My main objective is equipping. We work with the view of teaching and training preachers and laymen."

"My goal is to make the church self-sustaining," Haggan adds, "so that someday there'll be no missionary here."

"I try to stay in the background," echoes Al Holman with the Papago tribe in Arizona. "It's the best way, to let the indigenous people take over. If I went out to do everything, they'd let me. But it wouldn't get the work moving at all."

"We're just trying to work ourselves out of a job," adds John Mouser, who serves with the Apaches in northern Arizona.

Architect of the philosophy of "train-others-to-lead" is the Board's Oscar Romo, a Mexican-American and the first member of an ethnic group to head the board's language missions department.

"We've learned the leaders must come from the people," stresses Romo. "When the leader has an understanding of the culture values and the psychology of the people, it makes him able to identify. He also lives among the people."

Lumbee Indian and missionary Tony Brewington agrees. "Because I'm an Indian, I've been able to do some things a white man might not have been able to accomplish," he says.

"Missionaries, especially Anglos, are serving more as catalysts today," continues Romo, "in an effort to develop indigenous churches."

Romo disagrees with the charges leveled by AIM President Bellecourt, pointing out that Christianity is not just a white man's religion, for God is the creator of all people, and that Baptists are diligently seeking to help Indians understand who they are in relationship to God and other people.

"The charge that Christianity contributes to alcoholism and suicide should be considered in the light of a worldwide problem of meaninglessness that sees drugs, alcoholism, and suicide with all people increasing," says Romo.

"The increased rates for these does not come with those who are Christians, but with those who have lost faith in the old religions and have nothing to replace it."

For Mouser, who's worked with the Apaches for 17 years, significant inroads are just now being made.

"A lot of the time," he says, "the men drift away, even after they're 'saved,' because of pressure from their friends.

"'You're not one of us now,' they'll be told by other Indians. 'You're white now, you believe in the Bible and Christianity...'

"The big problem in our mission work," Mouser adds, "has been our failure to attract men."

And attracting men is crucial, for Indian culture is strongly male-dominated. Any work built primarily on a missionary's presence or the attendance of women and children is tenuous and almost certain to collapse under pressure.

The most precarious work, says Jack Comer with the Navajo, "is that work where we have both white and Indians in the congregation and the whites dominate."

But in light of the growing Indian-awareness, Comer adds, "we're going to get a good offshoot because we've already shifted gears" in taking a more supportive role, becoming teachers, not doers.

"We'll be all right in most areas," he feels, "but where the missionary is still taking a more active and personal role, there may be some trouble."

"I know it sounds terrible," admits Mrs. Barbara Mefford, who with husband Richard has been working with Montana Cheyenne for seven years, "but we don't encourage whites to attend our church.

"We have some BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) people and some teachers who come, but we don't promote it among them. As bad as it sounds, it won't help make the church indigenous if they continue to come."

Although the church is no more Anglo-populated than several other reservation churches, Mrs. Mefford says it has been called the "white man's church," a reputation she feels unfair and absolutely essential to overcome.

Among the missionaries who live closest to the Wounded Knee area, the Meffords have felt no effects from violence there, but are realistic enough to admit it could spill over to them at any time.

Nevertheless, she recognizes the uncertain status of their work and the fact that all whites are on Indian reservations as "guests" of the tribe--subject to expulsion at tribal demand.

Southern Baptist church buildings on reservations are also on land loaned by the tribe, usually under written agreements. With the white man's past record of treaty violations, it would not be surprising if Indians had learned the lessons of history well enough to void an agreement on occasion.

In the long run, however, it seems likely that the vision of people like Romo will at least buy SBC missionaries precious time. But how much is uncertain.

"No longer will it work for white man to come in trying to run things," says Brewington in North Carolina. "We've experienced this and it hasn't worked.

"A lot of whites have come in with the attitude to bring the Indian up to their level, with the presumption that their level is better than the Indian level. Then they pat themselves on the back and say, 'Look what I've done for the Indian people.'"

For Brewington, a Lumbee Indian, this doesn't make Christianity a white man's religion, to be rejected along with other white thought-patterns.

"Christianity has always been a part of our lives," he says, "so we Lumbee consider it our religion, our God, as much as the white man does."

"It is a mistake to think that Christianity is a white man's religion," says Wonder Johns, pastor of First Seminole Baptist Church on the Hollywood Reservation in Florida.

Johns practiced Seminole religion until he was 14 years old, then "accepted Christ as my personal Savior." He directs the community action program of the Seminole tribe, which numbers about 1,300.

As for Christianity, it too has denigrated, depressed and looked down on the "heathen" Indian. From early days, missionaries of all faiths believed they took Christianity and civilization--though not necessarily in that order--to pagans.

Indian religion was ignored, denied, but never studied.

"Our people hate to be called pagan," explains Mrs. Mefford, "and I don't blame them." Mrs. Mefford is one of a number of SBC missionaries who have studied Indian religion and come away surprised at many of its concepts.

"Sweet Water is our (Cheyenne) giver of legends," Mrs. Mefford says, "and among the legends are ones of a flood and of a man with miraculous powers who fed many people with a small amount of food.

"It is as if God were revealing himself to these people through Sweet Water," Mrs. Mefford concludes.

The attitude of missionaries like Mrs. Mefford is a significant departure from traditional thought about Indians.

But some critics argue that it didn't come soon enough, and Christianity's failure to recognize basic truths in the Indian religion and build upon them--as Paul had done with the Greeks--is partly responsible for the growth of the Native American Church and other quasi-Christian movements among the Indians.

Mrs. Mefford confirms a "big push" for the Native American Church on the reservation at Lane Deer, where some leaders boast 80 per cent or more Indians belong to it.

Christian church people, too, have a chance to profit from Wounded Knee, but only if they hear the Indian's appeal for justice, self-reliance and economic improvement. And if they learn to "help preserve Indian culture and to rectify the inhuman treatment inflicted upon Indians by white Christians in the past," says American Baptist Frank Sharp.

One thing is certain: yesterday's malignant neglect and maltreatment cannot continue without a rising crescendo of Wounded Knees. And with each such incident, Christian missions will be altered or affected in some way.

The success and future of Indian missions are as likely to be determined by foresight and insight today as by reaction when crises occur. Toward that goal the Home Mission Board has a good start. But will it be enough?

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Illinois Men Build
Church in West Indies

5/10/73

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (BP)--A small Baptist congregation on St. Kitts Island in the West Indies now has a new church building, built by their own members with the help of nine Baptist men from Illinois.

The new Mt. Carmel Baptist Church building will serve several villages on the Atlantic side of the island.

Five villages the church will serve already have mission Sunday Schools, and three have worship services. They meet in empty stores or dwellings, and one meets under a large tree.

The nine Illinois Baptist men went to St. Kitts, not to build the church for the congregation, but to work with the members, side by side, as they constructed the building together.

"Whatever we did, someone from the church worked at also--carpentry, digging, concrete mixing, etc.," said John Whitman, associate editor of the Illinois Baptist and Baptist Men's consultant for the Illinois Baptist State Association who served as team coordinator.

Three pastors and six laymen, including two carpenters, were recruited by Charles L. Chaney, church extension director for Illinois Baptists.

Arrangements for the work crew were made by Eugene Grubbs, Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board consultant for laymen overseas, and William Womack, Southern Baptist missionary in the Windward Islands. Materials were purchased partly from funds given through the 1972 Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions.

The group included three pastors, an airlines pilot who flew six of the men in a private plane, a vocational shop teacher, a mechanical maintenance supervisor for a public school, a lumberyard worker, and a carpenter for an Air Force base.

Before the nine Illinois men arrived, members of the St. Kitts Island church had dug by hand the 45 by 80 foot basement, carrying the dirt out in buckets and wheelbarrows.

Men, women and children worked with the visitors during the day, with others coming at night after working elsewhere all day.

They formed bucket brigades to pour concrete for pillars, and made the concrete blocks themselves. They also sold some concrete blocks they made to buy other materials, Whitman said.

"The younger men were anxious to learn, and our men were glad to show them how to continue with the work after we left," Whitman said.

Each Illinoisan spoke at least three times at Sunday School or worship services during the two weeks, including one open-air service. They also took advantage of personal witnessing opportunities each day, Whitman said.

At least seven persons made professions of faith, including one 20-year-old youth who worked every day on the project.

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FMB Appoints 6; Votes
To Enter 77th Country

RICHMOND (BP)--The Republic of Niger was approved as a new mission field and two couples assigned there during the May meeting of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board here.

With board action, Niger became the 77th country where Southern Baptist missionaries are assigned, and the ninth nation of West Africa. Six of the nine are French-speaking countries.

The board's move, effective June 1, was precipitated by a request from Oumarou Youssoufou, who is a counselor with the Niger Republic's Embassy in Washington, D.C. The Niger national asked the board for help in establishing in his country a vocational school staffed by Christian teachers.

H. Cornell Goerner, the board's administrator for West Africa, at first expressed concern that so few Southern Baptist missionaries are equipped to work in the French language, and that it would take more than a year to prepare someone for service there.

However, plans moved ahead when it was discovered that Hausa is the chief language of the area where the school is to be established.

Two couples, Mr. and Mrs. H. Jerold Palmer and Mr. and Mrs. Robert D. Williams, were missionaries in Northern Nigerian where Hausa is spoken. Because Palmer and Williams have the necessary language skills and vocational training, they have been transferred to the Niger Republic as its first missionaries.

In other action, the board appointed two couples for general evangelism and employed a dentist and his wife as missionary associates.

The new missionaries are Mr. and Mrs. Bill F. Fudge of Youngstown, Ohio; Mr. and Mrs. Dan C. Routledge of El Portal, Calif.; and Dr. and Mrs. Thomas K. Goodman of Arlington, Tex.

The board also allocated \$10,000 for drought relief in Rhodesia and gave approval to travel plans relating to several projects.

Mr. and Mrs. Frank W. Patterson, emeritus missionaries, will go to Brazil for six months or more to assist with the work of the publishing house in Rio de Janeiro. Patterson was director of the Baptist Spanish Publishing House in El Paso, Tex., for 28 years.

Buford L. Nichols, missionary for 35 years in China and Indonesia, will make a trip to Surinam to survey a Javanese community in view of the possible opening of work among this group.

Dr. David Stewart of Louisville, will attend mission meetings in Southwest Asia this summer. Dr. Stewart, a Christian psychiatrist and former missionary himself, will conduct personal and group conferences. He has made several previous trips to Southern Baptist mission fields for this purpose.

Mr. and Mrs. Ivan E. Miles will go to India to work for about nine months with the organization of missionaries there. Miles, a former U.S. Agency for International Development worker, has already completed one assignment with the India missionaries.