



News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

---FEATURES

produced by Baptist Press

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

July 24, 1973

First in a Series

Increased Mobility Makes
Major Impact on Churches

By Sandy Simmons

ATLANTA (BP) -- "We preach to a parade. In this community, it isn't the pastors who move, it's the people," a Baptist minister in the nation's capital said recently. His statement could have been echoed by many pastors throughout the nation.

Mobility is the new American life-style, "going-going-gone" the new national slogan. Although not new, rapid change is becoming typical of the nation as a whole.

Because so many families have moved and moved again, the phrase "hometown" along with "home church" may fade out of the language.

Few institutions are as likely to be affected by American society's new mobility as the church, an organization which has traditionally depended on stability.

Already some churches, reports Home Missions Magazine in its July-August issue, are experiencing leadership problems. Interest in formerly successful programs is lagging, and contributions are dropping in some places.

In some areas, newcomers into a community find the church a "closed corporation," operated by long-time members who unintentionally fail to absorb new members into the body.

In other areas, people new to the church are thrust by necessity into positions of responsibility.

Past movements have usually been laborers, or losers looking for a second chance, or young people fresh out of school in search of that first job.

Today the movers are more often people who would be community leaders, if they stayed long enough. But they move every few years--most of the time not by choice. They are college-educated, professional people, and moving is part of their job.

In his best selling book, Future Shock, Alvin Toffler said, "Census figures show one in five Americans moves every year. Actual mobility is higher because the census doesn't take into account those who move more than once a year. In major residential switchboards, the disconnect rate for telephones has risen to more than 25 per cent. Phone company officials say disconnects nearly always mean moves."

The mobility which changed a regionally-oriented Southern Baptist Convention into a national body now threatens to disrupt its churches with a new era of increasing instability and decreasing loyalties.

When people have no ties to "home," sociologists say, it creates an atmosphere of internal chaos, with a loosening of value systems and often a subsequent relaxation of moral codes. Home and family take on less significance.

Some churchmen argue that now the home church like the hometown is becoming unknown. Loyalties to the church--and to its fellowship--are blurred, often even lost, by repeated moves.

People on the move seem reluctant to put down roots, in both civic and religious work in the community. One airline executive says he avoids involvement in the community life, because "in a few years I won't be living here."

Those who do get involved--giving, teaching or just attending--can no longer be counted on in the traditional sense.

B. Ross Morrison, for 23 years pastor of First Baptist Church, Wheaton, Md., a bedroom community of Washington, N.C., said, "The typical family in the 1950's and 1960's was a higher giving family than now. When we lose one of these older families, it takes two, three, even four families to replace their financial contribution to the church."

Jack Lowndes, who came to Memorial Baptist Church, Arlington, Va., after nine years in Brunswick, Ga., said that in the last four years in Brunswick, the church's membership turned over by one-third.

"This sort of change is destroying some traditional Baptist attitudes," he said. "You can't wait as long for someone to prove himself. You have to use him rapidly, or he'll be gone."

When he was called to the Arlington pastorate, Lowndes said, the chairman of the board of deacons was a rear admiral. "We talked about programs and plans, but before I moved to Arlington, he had been transferred to the Mediterranean. That's how fast things can happen."

That kind of situation has changed some churches' viewpoints toward requirements for deacons and other leadership roles.

Charles Conley, pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church, East Hartford, Conn., says his members stay an average of two to three years. "We have five deacons and within a few months, three of them moved. That leaves you awfully shorthanded."

To deal with the rapid turnover the church now requires a person to be a member only six months before he can be nominated as a deacon.

While a pastor may stay longer than his members, he still faces the emotional drain of seeking new leaders. "You just get them trained and then they move," is a common complaint.

Roy Hinchey of the Georgia Baptist Convention says pastors must approach this situation with an attitude of "here's a challenge; we'll train these people the best we can; if they move away, then they'll just be working somewhere else."

Which would work fine, if new members would fill the shoes of those who left. But not everybody quickly joins a church in his new town.

"We have increasing problems with people who leave one church, but do not affiliate with another church when they arrive at another location," said Warren Rust, who directs the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's metropolitan associational mission work. "It seems largely the church's fault."

"The church has demanded institutional loyalty to 'this congregation' rather than the larger kingdom of God," Rust said. "Our people haven't been sensitized to the realization, 'I am a Christian wherever I am.'"

Rust said we have active church members in Alabama or Georgia, who move north, "and they don't see any reason to become involved in a tiny congregation there. It's not like 'home'. They don't understand that they, as Christians, are missionaries, and must involve themselves."

Wendell Belew, director of the missions division, Home Mission Board, predicts denominations will more and more have to underwrite downtown churches and mission activities.

"I am told there is not a single self-supporting church in New York City," he said. "Many city churches have large endowments that carry them, but none survive by contributions alone."

The downtown church in a medium-sized city often is the first contact for newcomers. They are attracted by programs, music, and convenience if they live nearby. But as a couple increases their income or as their children grow, they are likely to move to suburbs. Then they either drop out of church or join a suburban church. Very few continue the long ride downtown.

How does a church respond to these new situations, and the constant flow of members in and out of the community?

Many church leaders believe the first thing to remember is that the church must minister to people grappling with overwhelming changes in society. It must provide a fellowship, a refuge.

To minister effectively, the church must break away from patterns that no longer work or even break away from the usual times and places for worship. Jack Lowndes in Arlington, for example, has had his church by-laws changed so the pastor and deacons can shift Sunday morning worship to another time and place, if it seems appropriate.

Thursday night worship during the summer has become popular for two Virginia churches, whose members and prospects flock to rivers and resorts on weekends.

A church in a Texas college town experimented with a 10 p.m. Sunday service for the students. "It's ridiculous to say, 'we're having worship at 11 a.m. and if you can't come then, that's just too bad.' If the kids want to come here at 10 at night, then that's when we'll have church services," explains one member.

"The church must be more people-centered, instead of program-centered," said Ralph Longshore, California mission division director. "By the time you create a superstructure, the people you planned for will be gone.

Several churches have created Sunday School classes based on interests instead of strict age grading. Weekday ministries, day care programs, bus ministries, coffeehouse and church sporting events also attract newcomers.

Based on his experience in the fast changing Washington suburbs, William Cumbie sums up the problem this way:

"One problem the church has is a pre-occupation with the typical child-rearing family. It doesn't deal effectively with the young career singles who move in and out, older singles, persons with one partner dead, or old folks generally.

In a highly mobile society, with its uneasy atmosphere of insecurity and disjointedness, part of that "greatest service" may be to offer a quickened sense of community--an opportunity to tie one's life to the lives and concerns of others--and to create an awareness of each individual's role as a member of an organization solidly grounded amid a turbulent, shifting culture.

-30-

Ms. Simmons is a staff member of Home Missions Magazine, and compiled this article from that magazine's July-August issue.

POW and MIA Retreats
Draw "High Flight" Support

7/24/73

GRANBY, Colo. (BP)--A five-week effort to minister to the needs of 26 families of prisoners of war and 284 families of men missing in war action in Southeast Asia was labeled a series of miracles by William Rittenhouse, vice-president of High Flight, a non-profit foundation devoted to Christian ministry.

"We started this project on a shoestring and it became a week-to-week living example of faith in action," explained Rittenhouse who is directing the retreats at remote, 3000-acre Snow Mountain Ranch, 87 miles northwest of Denver.

-more-

Rittenhouse said the original plan to offer two weeks of meaningful spiritual experiences for the families of prisoners of war and men missing in action at a cost of \$125,000 grew to five weeks because of the interest. The cost of round trip air transportation, room and board at the YMCA ranch in the Rockies ballooned to \$250,000.

"We felt the POW and MIA families had been wined and dined and given everything materially possible, but had received nothing spiritually.

"And we haven't been sorry that we have shifted the program. The people were surprised most at the genuine love they found here.

"Suddenly, they found that people really do care about them. And they were so overwhelmed their emotions couldn't stand the strain."

Rittenhouse said High Flight started the project without a dime in the bank to pay for it.

"We just felt it was something which had to be done now. From the funding point of view we also felt that once people learned about the ministry they would recognize its value and want to be a part financially."

Rittenhouse revealed that James Irwin, retired Apollo 15 astronaut heading the budding High Flight, mortgaged his house in Colorado Springs for \$25,000 to pay the transportation for his guests the first week of the retreat.

"I couldn't ask anyone else to do anything financially until I showed I was really committed to this project," Irwin explained.

To make the second week of the retreat possible, Charles Blair, pastor of Calvary Temple Church, Denver, borrowed \$26,000 and loaned it to High Flight for 30 days, Rittenhouse said.

Two Miami, Fla., developers, Fred Roach and Wolfgang von Dunser, helped finance the third week with a 90-day loan of \$27,000.

When funding didn't surface for the fourth week, Rittenhouse said the retreat's legal counselor, retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Bob Haines of Colorado Springs loaned High Flight \$16,000 from his personal savings account to keep the project going.

Only 80 minutes before the deadline to cancel the final week because of lack of funds, Rittenhouse said Bob Green, husband of television personality Anita Bryant, offered to donate \$5,000 and loan another \$15,000 to get the POW and MIA families to the retreat.

High Flight plans to seek funds to pay for the project in a special campaign in ten strategic cities during the next three months. Irwin, president of High Flight, and POWs who attended the retreats will make major addresses.

Was the project worth the financial crisis?

Rittenhouse said he had considered doing it again just to hear this testimony from an MIA wife.

"My husband has been missing in action for more than eight years, and this is the first time anyone has offered spiritual uplifting to us as a group."