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Illinois Baptist Association
Sponsors Prison Bus Route

By Robert Hastings

CHESTER, ILL (BP)--Pete (not his real name) snuggled close to his mother, dripping a half-melted ice cream bar down his shirt.

"Do you go to kindergarten?" I asked. "No," cut in his mother, Alice (not her real name). "He looks five, but he's only three. All my children are tall, except the oldest. And he's the one I'm going to see."

We were on the Calvary Baptist Church bus from Lebanon, Ill., driven by pastor Claude Francis. I boarded at Westview Baptist Church in Belleville, Ill. It had already made earlier stops in E. St. Louis.

Our destination was Menard Prison, near Chester, Ill.

There were 17 of us, counting the driver. Faye Hughes and I. Two children. And 12 women.

Every other Thursday, Metro East Baptist Association sponsors a free bus to Menard for relatives who have no cars.

Faye, who directs social ministries in the association, is usually aboard, moving up and down the aisle, talking with riders he knows from prior trips.

But back to Alice. She has 15 children, two of them in prison. One at Menard. One at Pontiac. One for armed robbery. One for murder.

"My boy's at Pontiac for 14-20 years," she told me. "I've only seen him twice--got no way. If the Baptists didn't run this bus to Menard, I couldn't see my boy there, either."

The rolling country from Belleville to Chester, part of which is known as the Great American Bottom, is scenic anytime. But especially in May. We stopped at a roadside market for fresh strawberries, which we nibbled on with about the same relish as Pete did his ice cream.

The unfolding beauty was in stark contrast to the prison walls, which soon loomed into sight.

"You fellows go on in, and I'll park the bus," Claude suggested. So Faye and I went inside with the 12 wives, mothers and sweethearts.

There is a relaxed atmosphere in the visiting room, and one could almost forget he was in prison. When a prisoner comes in, he is allowed to shake hands or kiss his visitor.

Then he is seated on the opposite side of a long, wide table, with a glass partition running down the middle. Visitors sit opposite. From a snack bar they order hamburgers, fries and Cokes.

Relatives bring along small children, and there is so much noise that it is often hard to talk across the wide table.

"We sure 'preciate you church people sending this bus," one man told me. "Otherwise, I wouldn't never see my family."

One young man kissed his wife but hesitated when she leaned over with the baby. Then he gave it a quick kiss. Did he feel some sense of shame that his youngster had to see him there? I don't know.

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Standing there, I couldn't help but compare our attitude toward the ill. When church members get sick, we put their name in the bulletin, and the pastor and other friends rush to see them.

But if a member is jailed, do we publish his name in the bulletin? Pray for him? Send him cards and letters? Visit him? I don't know. I do know that the same Saviour who told us to attend the sick also said to visit those in prison.

On the way home, I sat near Alice. She talked more freely now. "None of my other kids ever gave me trouble. They was brought up in church--Baptist and Methodist. But these two got in with the wrong crowd. My boy at Pontiac was teased because he wouldn't join the 'organization' (street gang). They called him chicken and honkie and sissy. One day he couldn't take no more. So he got in a fight and killed a boy.

"He come home and told me and his daddy. So me and his daddy, we went down to the police station and he turned himself in. I don't know why the authorities in E. St. Louis allow what they do. If you say anything the 'organization' will burn you out."

"Does your husband work?" I asked. "He has a pickup truck and does odd jobs. A white man helped him get it. But the city started picking up the trash, and he don't find much to do."

"Do you worry about your boys in prison?" I asked.

She didn't need to answer.

Big tears welled up from deep inside. And the tiny scrap of Kleenex with which she tried to dry her eyes said more than words can tell.

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Robert Hastings is editor of the Illinois Baptist.

BP PHOTO mailed to state Baptist paper editors.
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Alaska Baptists Adopt Record
Budget; Plan \$350,000 Facility

8/22/73

SOLDOTNA, Alaska (BP)--Messengers to the 28th annual session of the Alaska Baptist Convention adopted a record 1974 budget of \$311,701 and heard plans for a new \$350,000 facility for family services and child care.

Alaska Southern Baptists also announced an increase in gifts to Southern Baptist Convention-wide causes through the Cooperative Program, the SBC's unified budget, from \$29,000 this fiscal year to \$34,220 in 1974.

Total Cooperative Program gifts through Alaska churches for the previous year amounted to \$93,562, while total mission contributions added up to \$133,504, according to Troy Prince, the convention's executive secretary.

The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for foreign missions in Alaska collected \$19,714, and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for home missions, \$8,719.

Herbert Cotton, a layman from Fairview Baptist Church, Anchorage, was re-elected convention president for a second term during the three-day convention at Soldotna's First Baptist Church.

Convention leaders said plans for the construction of the family service and child care facility will begin in the Spring of 1974 after the sale of property owned by the Alaska Baptist Convention.

Next year's convention site will be Calvary Baptist Church, Anchorage, Aug. 13-15. In 1975, First Baptist Church, North Pole, will host the annual gathering.

WMU Schedules National Conference for Acteens

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--A national conference for Acteens, girls' missions organization sponsored by the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, is scheduled, June 25-29, 1975, in Memphis, Tenn.

At a meeting of WMU leaders at Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center here, WMU officials said registration for the convention for girls in grades 7-12 will be limited to 4,300--the capacity of the North Music Hall of the Everett R. Cook Convention Center.

Additional conferences will be scheduled if applicants exceed that total, said Miss Alma Hunt, executive secretary of the Birmingham-based woman's missions auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention.

The meeting will mark the fifth anniversary of Acteens, which has enrolled almost 150,000 members.

WMU leaders first held a national Acteens meeting in 1972, when almost 1,000 teens flocked, on short notice, to Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center for sessions held concurrently with the WMU Conference.

Registration for the 1975 meeting will not be accepted before August, 1974.