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Option for Singles

South Main Church's
'Main Point' Ministry

By Larry Jerden

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HOUSTON (BP)--The romanticized lifestyle of the so-called "swinging singles" often leads to dead ends of emptiness and loneliness for many of the one-quarter million young adults in this sixth largest city in the United States.

As in other cities, entrepreneurs cater to Houston's young "swingers" by offering places like T.G.I. Friday's and the Sportspage Club for eating, drinking, dancing and just mingling.

Singles apartment complexes abound, with clubs and recreation facilities designed to maximize interaction.

Not all of the young single men and women in Houston, or any other American city, will fit into the party lifestyle. However, when confronted with those who do fit the "swinging singles" description, most churches react with resignation.

At best, some congregations may offer to help when age, loneliness, emptiness or marriage take a person off the singles circuit.

Houston's South Main Baptist Church decided that local Christians shouldn't write off an estimated 20 per cent of the city's population and began a ministry with a "place" aimed directly at the Friday's-Sportspage crowd.

The "place" is The Main Point, at Main and Peggy Point Plaza.

"For directions," says South Main's Dan Yeary, "we tell people it's across from Sears, Loew Delman Theater or the Zipper Lounge--whatever your orientation, you can find it."

For the church-oriented, the Main Point is on property adjacent to South Main Church, the largest of the city's 222 Southern Baptist congregations.

The Houston church called Yeary as minister to students and young adults on the recommendation of Kenneth Chafin, who left the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board as director of evangelism to assume the South Main pastorate in 1972.

Formerly of Lubbock, Tex., Yeary served as minister of students for the First Baptist Church in the city where Texas Technological University is located.

When the decision was made to attempt a ministry to the city's singles, the need was seen for a building from which the program could radiate.

A 20,000-square-foot, two-story structure, vacant for seven years, stood near the church.

The owners, American General Investment Corp., had offers from Sears Roebuck and Co. who wanted the property for a parking lot, and from a bank. All the church could do was tell the corporation what it would do with the building, then pray, Yeary said.

"Less than a month later," he recalled, "they gave us the building. We bought the land for \$300,000."

Since the \$1 million worth of property and buildings, even choice Houston property, didn't make a ministry, South Main proposed an option to the sex-drink-dance lifestyle that appeared

to dominate the singles culture. Yearly and his co-workers realized that not everyone involved in such a life was waiting to leave it and jump into the arms of the church. But it wasn't hard to find many ready for a change, he said.

"When these young singles come to a big city, their first reaction is, 'Wow, I can do anything I want and nobody is going to check on me,'" Yearly observed. "But sooner or later that first exhilaration of freedom turns to the realization that 'Yes, you can do anything you want, and nobody cares...nobody cares at all.'"

With that realization, Yearly said, loneliness sets in and with it the frightening anonymity of the big city.

Loneliness and anonymity probably keep many of the singles in the "swinging" apartment complexes, where promiscuity is an accepted lifestyle, long after the initial "thrill" is gone and despair sets in, Yearly noted. With all the mingling and sleeping around there's an almost total lack of warm, personal relationships, he continued.

The Main Point hopes to offer an atmosphere where such wholesome relationships can flourish, he added.

The Main Point "game" plan is to train Christian students and singles for penetration into the singles sub-culture, there to cultivate relationships, plus offer an option to new friends and a self-fulfilling lifestyle.

As preparation for this penetration, a large part of the early Main Point programming includes training in counseling, Christian encounter groups and Bible study.

"We hope to provide a lab situation where our people can gain experience before we send them out," Yearly said.

The initial schedules featured Bible study on Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesday evenings. Outreach meetings are held Monday evenings.

Bible study is the point at which many of the top laymen in the church key in. Located in an education and business center, South Main has an unusually high educational level among its membership. All of the Bible teachers in the Main Point have at least master's degrees, several have doctorates and some are working on second doctorates, Yearly said.

The same level of competence exists among other church members in business, medical and legal communities, who teach classes, serve on committees and function as deacons.

"These people think big in their businesses," Yearly notes, "and they will settle for nothing less in their church roles. Ken (Chafin) is the catalyst and this is one aggressive church."

The full range of Main Point programs include the South Main Free University, a Christian entertainment center, a little theater, an 1890s ice cream parlor and opportunities for Bible study.

Rooms are also available for private study, for listening to music and for just talk.

The free university was to begin with a Wednesday night schedule offering such benefits as English conversation for international graduate students. Courses were to include typing, sewing, auto maintenance for women, Bible courses, and, for those contemplating such a step, preparation for marriage.

The Christian entertainment center booked a full schedule for the 1973-74 school year, including entertainers Cynthia Clawson, Ken Medema, Gene Cotton, Jester Hairston, Buddy Griffin, the Richard Puckett Fiddlers, Grady Nutt, Jerry Clower and Three Way Glass.

Many entertainers scheduled for the Main Point have appeared as Chafin's guests on the Home Mission Board's nationally televised evangelistic program, Spring Street USA. Chafin hosts the program which features guest stars and music by the Spring Street Singers.

The Main Point Theater scheduled a talent show on opening night and will stage drama throughout the season. A series of major films will be a launching pad for discussion.

Before The Main Point was opened, the number of students coming to South Main had increased from 75 to 160 in four months, and the out-of-school singles attendance had jumped from 123 to 270.

The potential is there. The need is great. Hopefully, it will work, and the singles of Houston will have an option. . . That's the "main point."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is adapted from the November issue of World Mission Journal (formerly Baptist Men's Journal), published by the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission.

BP PHOTO mailed to state Baptist paper editors.

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Christian Doctor Delivers
Lectures in South America

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RICHMOND (BP)--A sustained concern for Southern Baptist medical missions has prompted a North Carolina physician to continue sharing his medical knowledge and Christian outlook with South Americans.

Dr. Timothy C. Pennell, a resident physician at Baptist Medical Center and associate professor of surgery at Bowman Gray School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, embarked on his second series of medical "lectureship tour" presentations designed to attract medical professionals to the gospel.

Pennell, speaking to Latin American medical school students, societies and hospital staffs, will be accompanied by Dr. Franklin T. Fowler, medical consultant for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board here.

A Dallas dermatologist, Dr. James B. Howell, an active Baptist layman who made funds available so that physicians could lecture overseas, instigated the lectureship tour--a combination of professional merit and Christian witness.

"The whole idea is that these people (lecturers like Pennell) are well-qualified to visit medical institutions and lecture. Then in the evenings they give their testimonies in churches," explained Fowler.

With the completion of the South American tour, all funds for the lecture series will be exhausted.

Fowler said previous tours have been a "morale booster for medical personnel and have opened many doors in missions. They have also increased interest in Baptist work with missions."

The lecture series was first launched in 1968, with Pennell touring the Middle East and Africa. The current two-week tour, the third since 1968, will take the physicians to Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Brazil and Paraguay.

Before each lecture, the medical organization sponsoring the program chooses, from a syllabus of suggested topics, the lecture best suited for the organization. Pennell then delivers a prepared lecture ranging from Management of Liver Trauma to Use and Abuse of Drugs.

During the Latin tour, Fowler, a former Southern Baptist medical missionary to Paraguay for nearly 11 years, will interpret for and guide Pennell.

Besides his professional pursuits, which include medical honors, Pennell has also participated in medical missions conferences and symposiums at Glorieta (N.M.) and Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Centers. "He is extremely active in this whole realm," said Fowler.

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Pennell, born in Asheville, N.C., has served as deacon chairman and high school department superintendent at Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem and has sponsored the Bowman Gray School of Medicine's chapter of the Christian Medical Society.

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West German Baptists
Adopt "Open-Air" Baptisms

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LANGESUND, Norway (BP)--When the churches in West Germany's Ruhr area had their first simultaneous evangelistic crusade five years ago, public "open-air" baptisms were almost "unthinkable," according to Gunter Wieske, chairman of the European Baptist Evangelism Committee here.

West German congregations, however, are becoming more open in professing their faith in Christ, Wieske said in a report in European Baptist Press Service.

When a Baptist layman offered facilities near a small artificial lake as a site for a youth rally, 800 to 1,000 young people came. Six young Christians gave testimonies before being baptized in the lake.

The change in the traditional German Baptist approach continued when nine young converts applied for baptism at a youth camp.

Two churches, one known for reservations regarding the necessity and meaning of baptism, Wieske reported, met on the shores of a lake for public baptism of members of their congregations. Many had the impression that the "good, fresh wind blowing over them" was "a symbol of the renewing spirit of God," Wieske said.

"Today public demonstrations of our faith are becoming more and more normal," says Wieske. "God is changing the churches. Pray with us that this may continue!"

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