

April 18, 1974

Baptist Congregation
Sings in Silent Voice

By Dan Martin

DALLAS (BP)--Members of Silent Friends Chapel at First Baptist Church here sang Love Lifted Me, an old favorite hymn of Baptists, but they sang in silence.

Hands rippled across the congregation. First was a movement of an embrace, arms folded in against the chest, then a lifting movement. Next was a broad gesture of the hands touching each singers' heart.

More than 150 deaf people in Dallas are members of Silent Friends Chapel, a mission of the 13,000-member First Baptist Church here, which Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board officials describe as the strongest and most comprehensive deaf ministry in the denomination.

The church has a total ministry to the deaf, including five Sunday School classes, Woman's Missionary Union (for women and girls), Brotherhood, (for men and boys), special activities, a choir and a full-time pastor and associate minister.

The Silent Friends' pastor, Joe Johnson, is assisted in his ministry by Jack Earwood, who works part time for the church and is a student at Dallas Baptist College.

Johnson is not deaf, but Earwood is, hearing slightly with the help of a hearing aid. Earwood is also president of the Southern Baptist Conference for the Deaf.

The church's deaf ministry started in 1919 when Mrs. George R. Truett, wife of the famed Dallas pastor, began a Sunday School class for the deaf .

In those days, Training Union for deaf people was much more popular than Sunday School, Johnson said. "Deaf people from all over the area would come to the church on Sunday night just to get together for a little while...They just loved the fellowship."

While involvement in deaf work has progressed across the years at the church, membership in Silent Friends Chapel held steady at about 50-60 until a few years ago. Now average attendance has jumped to almost 100, Johnson said.

The turning point came when the church called a full time pastor to the deaf in 1955. Johnson has been pastor to the deaf since 1968.

First Baptist Church, which pays his salary, ratified the chapel's action, but the calling was done by the deaf people.

"My parents were deaf, and that gave me an advantage, not just that I learned to talk with my folks, but that I grew up among deaf people. I got to know them...their thoughts... their ways of life...their needs."

Johnson, who was a successful tooling engineer, felt God's call to the ministry as a result of church visitation. One night when he was visiting in Little Rock, he knocked on a door but received no response.

"We knew somebody was home because we saw the lights on and knew the television set was going although there was no sound," he said.

"As we left they must have felt the vibration of our feet on the porch and came to the door. The lady gave the universal sign for deafness. She pointed to her ear, made an inarticulate sound and shook her head," Johnson explained.

Later, a Sunday School was started at the First Baptist Church of Sylvan Hills where he was then a member. Johnson became the teacher.

He later moved on to First Baptist Church of Little Rock which had a full deaf ministry and actually has the oldest deaf ministry in the Southern Baptist Convention. He taught there for several years before becoming a missionary to the deaf for the Arkansas Baptist Convention.

Silent Friends Baptist Chapel heard him preach during a revival and called him as pastor, Johnson recalled. "They hear with their eyes, you know," he said after noticing the incongruity of what he had said.

The only time Silent Friends meets with the whole church is when the Lord's Supper is served once a month. Otherwise, the program is separate and uniquely tailored for the needs of the deaf.

Because of the inherent problem of communication, Silent Friends uses simplified Sunday School material, produced by the Baptist Sunday School Board, Nashville.

"The simplified material is used because, in many cases, the education of deaf people is very different from that of hearing people. Generally, the education level is four years behind that of those who hear," Johnson said.

"However, some of our people think simplified material is too simple and want more in-depth Bible study," he added.

"The preaching is done on their level and is done both in language and sign. The people need the responsibility of having their own church, they believe.

"The deaf feel that separate activities give them a chance to do things their own way and on their own level," he added. "We have retreats, revivals, Bible studies, a regular visitation, and even our own budget," Johnson said.

Because he hears and interprets, Johnson is called on far more often than a regular pastor would be.

"My ministry is different because I can hear and most of my people can't," he said.

"I am called on to interpret in court and lawyers' offices and in doctors' offices and hospitals. If one of my members has surgery, I am called in to help the doctor explain it. If someone is hurt, I go to the hospital to help explain to them what has happened."

He ministers by helping with car purchases, finding homes, helping arrange loans, and buying things. "There are lots of little things that the deaf need assistance on in a hearing world, things the pastor would not normally be called on to help with," he explained.

Silent Friends Chapel has three primary goals--evangelism, ministry and community.

There is also the aim of touching every deaf person in the city of Dallas with the message of hope in Jesus Christ.

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(BP) Photo mailed to Baptist state paper editors
Adapted from May, 1974 issue of World Mission Journal.

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Church Lays 'All on Altar'
For Alabama Tornado Relief

4/18/ 74

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (BP)--Easter Sunday is always a special time in Southern Baptist churches, but this year the observance was different for Alabama Baptist churches.

Tornadoes had devastated the northern part of the state only 10 days before, and the aftermath was still being felt.

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The Alabama Baptist State Convention declared Easter Sunday as Disaster Relief Day and asked cooperating churches to take a special offering for the cause, urging generosity because the "needs are so great."

At Friendship Baptist Church, a small rural church 30 miles from the city of Montgomery, 38 persons met as usual for Sunday School. The worship service followed with about 50 in attendance. Mac Johnson, director of the state Brotherhood (mission organization for men and boys) department of the Alabama Baptist State Convention was the preacher for the second consecutive Sunday.

The previous Sunday, the church members had expressed genuine concern for victims of the tornadoes and had asked what they could do in the relief efforts.

Johnson told them of the special designated offering that was to be taken the following Sunday to meet the physical needs of families. He told also of the household items and non-perishable food that were being collected at the Baptist Convention Building in Montgomery.

The Easter morning service began with the usual announcements and traditional Easter hymns. When time came to gather an offering, W.F. Mills, Sunday School director, rose and reminded the congregation that this was the day for the special Disaster Relief Offering.

With the informality that is still a real part of small country churches, a member asked why the entire offering for that day couldn't be given to disaster relief. Another member of the congregation immediately made a motion to that effect...a unanimous "yes" vote followed--and all during the morning worship service.

After the service, the church treasurer, W.B. Collier, followed Johnson to his car and made out a check from the church for \$269.77, the total offering given by Friendship Baptist Church on Easter Sunday, saying, "Oh, our people gave a little extra today."

The attitude and Christian concern of Friendship Baptist Church seems typical of churches across Alabama, an observer noted, as mail deliveries to the Alabama Baptist State Executive Board have brought an abundance of envelopes marked, "Disaster Relief Fund." Within three days over \$30,000 was given by churches for disaster relief.

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Nominations for SBC Annual
Sermon Preacher Requested

4/18/74

LITTLE ROCK (BP)--Nominations for persons to preach the annual convention sermon at the 1975 Southern Baptist Convention session in Miami Beach, Fla., are being accepted by the SBC Committee on Order of Business, the committee's chairman said here.

W.O. Vaught, committee chairman and the pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church here, said the committee would consider every name submitted before giving its recommendations to the convention in Dallas, June 11-13.

Vaught asked that suggestions be sent to the committee in care of the chairman by writing to him at the church address, 1000 Bishop Street, Little Rock, Ark., 72203

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