



News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

---FEATURES

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Joe Coffey

He Goes to Jail
Every Sunday

74-79

By Bonita Sparrow

FORT WORTH (BP)--Joe Coffey goes to jail every Sunday morning. He does not "pass go." He does not "collect \$200."

Instead, the Baptist layman joins an interdenominational Christian group at Fort Worth's Tarrant County Jail, trying to let the prisoners know somebody cares.

"I've done this every Sunday morning for the past two years, and I still get an eerie feeling that crawls all over me when the jail door clangs shut behind me," Coffey said. "It rings in your heart."

The Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, where Coffey has worked for 4 years has long ministered to persons in prison through broadcasting. But Coffey, who supervises the commission's mailroom, has added an additional facet to that ministry on his own time.

He became involved in the jail ministry because "I wanted to share what had happened to me as a Christian. I really could have ended up where those men are."

"I was a smart aleck kid, and I had to learn to face problems and discouragement. A lot of people offered to help me, but I never took them seriously because I didn't have Christ and I couldn't love people."

Six years ago, Coffey said, "I didn't believe in anything--not even the work I was doing," he said. "My wife's background is Buddhist so when people invited us to church I told her to tell them she had her own religion so they'd leave us alone."

"Actually, she was no more Buddhist than I was Christian. But she was interested in going to church so finally, after three years, we decided to visit the church of the next person who invited us."

"I tried really hard to spot any signs of phoniness, but I went to the wrong church for that. One night at fellowship in a Christian home I saw some sincere people with something I wanted. During a revival two or three weeks later my wife and I both made commitments to the Lord."

Coffey doesn't believe everyone should be involved in a jail ministry-- "different people have different jobs to do but I do think Christians don't do a lot of good, sitting in an easy chair."

He definitely felt the jail ministry was "what he should do" long before he knew there was such a thing.

"I just got my Bible one day and went down to the jail. I told one of the guards I wanted to tell the men how the Bible could change their lives. Naturally, he discouraged that."

But he didn't quit. When Bob M. Cox, chaplain at the Tarrant County Jail, discussed his work at Bethel Baptist Church in White Settlement where the Coffey family worships, Coffey was waiting for him at the end of the service.

Each Sunday morning Coffey stands on a catwalk separating him from the dayroom of a tank of men 17-21 years old. He peers through the bars--"but you soon forget the bars are there"--to talk.

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"When I go in, I tell what the lesson will cover, have prayer requests, and prayer, then we discuss the Scripture. If it's suitable, I invite the men to consider becoming Christians. Those who want to make a decision can come to the bars and talk with me privately. We get down on our knees, go over the plan of salvation and have prayer. About this time the guard rings a bell and it's time for me to go."

He warns newcomers against expecting a structured Sunday worship service in a jail situation. "There are other conversations in the cell block from people who aren't participating in the service. There are showers going, toilets flushing, someone getting up and walking away."

Coffey has an ability to also "just sit and listen sometimes." That's one of the secrets of a successful jail ministry, he noted.

"There are many people who have no one to talk to. They may not have the strong personality to voice an opinion in a crowded jail environment and there's nobody to vent their hostility to. Then a Christian person walks in and if he will listen, this person will sometimes just unload on him. In return, there's the chance to tell the prisoner that Christ always hears him."

He never tries to learn what his listeners are charged with "because it might affect my attitude. I'm like anybody else. I form opinions and prejudices really quickly."

Coffey admits to some painful learning experiences. "I used to mentally question the sincerity of those people who would seem to accept Christ as a result of those sessions," he said.

"One day, a man accepted Christ and I was excited for him but I didn't take him seriously. But when I got ready to go, he pulled me aside where no one could hear what he said and gave me a quarter, all he had. He said, 'Here, Joe, put this in your church offering.'

"Now that man could have used that money to buy a candy bar or a soft drink and that's important when you're in jail. I stopped doubting anybody's sincerity right then and there. Sincere or not, that's between them and God and I won't trespass on it."

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Bluefield College Will
Move to Four-Year Status

11/12/74

BLUEFIELD, Va. (BP)--Bluefield College, a two-year Baptist school here, will begin offering a four-year program during the 1975-76 academic year.

Baccalaureate degrees will be granted in English, history, general science education, psychology and philosophy of religion, but the college will continue to offer all present associate, two-year degrees in the field of engineering, commerce and business and music, a college spokesman said.

The college is affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia, one of 33 state Baptist conventions covering 50 states, affiliated with the 12.3-million-member Southern Baptist Convention.

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November 12, 1974

**Baptist Body Elects Black
To Board; Urges Name Change**

ELGIN, Ill. (BP)--The Illinois Baptist State Association elected the first black in its history to its board of directors, took actions on recent misappropriations at the convention's Baptist Children's Home, called for a name change for the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), and opposed abortion, except for severe health reasons.

The 68th annual session of the state organization of Illinois Baptists, attended by 1,345 persons, twice last year's total, also adopted a record budget and received 10 new churches for affiliation (including the Roumanian Baptist Church in Chicago and three black congregations).

Registered "messengers" elected Wendell Garrison, pastor of Winstanley Baptist Church, Fairview Heights as president. Under convention regulations, Garrison automatically assumes the chairmanship of Illinois Baptists' board of directors. Donald Sharp, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church, Chicago, became the first black person to serve on the board.

Recent misappropriation of funds at the Baptist Children's Home in Carmi, Ill., resulted in actions in which the administrative committee of the convention's board was asked to review the auditing practices of Illinois state Baptist funds and report back to the board. The convention instructed the board, in the same motion, to take whatever action necessary after the committee's investigation and report to the 1975 annual meeting in Springfield, Ill., Oct. 28-30.

In other action related to the misappropriated funds, the convention affirmed as its first and primary concern in the matter, the "redemption" of James A. Paynter, the home's business and development director, who, state convention spokesmen said, had transferred \$32,000 in children's home funds to a bank account in his name.

It was revealed in October that Paynter, who has been missing since Aug. 31, had opened a checking account under the name of the Baptist Children's Home Association and deposited two checks from an estate totaling \$4,000 and \$32,721.

Later he wrote a \$32,000 check on the account, according to a statement in the Illinois Baptist, the convention's state newspaper, and deposited it in another account he had opened in his own name. Incomplete auditors' reports showed, at last report, at least \$86,000 missing over a three-year period.

Illinois Baptists have brought no formal charges against Paynter. Executive Secretary James H. Smith said in September that a "\$100,000 blanket bond" covered the home and any charges would be the responsibility of the bonding company.

Harold Garrett of Harrisburg, Ill., who brought the "redemption" motion before the convention, told the Illinois Baptist he did not intend to minimize the seriousness of the loss but to put on record that the "redemption of a brother in Christ" is more important than the recouping of funds or the fixing of blame.

Evoking the most debate from the convention floor was the proposed 1975 statewide budget. The total budget for 1975 is \$3.2 million. It includes projected Cooperative Program (unified budget) receipts of \$1.8 million from Illinois Baptist churches.

In 1975, 40 per cent of all Cooperative Program receipts in Illinois will go for world missions through the national Southern Baptist Cooperative Program, with 60 per cent to go for state causes.

The SBC portion of Cooperative Program represents a one per cent increase over last year for national causes from Illinois and is the third year that Illinois Baptists have increased giving to national causes by one per cent. The 40 per cent was set to coincide with the Cooperative Program's 50th anniversary in 1975.

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On the question of a name change for the Southern Baptist Convention, messengers approved a resolution which declared the SBC's name is "a source of misunderstanding and limitation, particularly to many of our churches in northern areas."

Noting that "great growth and denominational emphasis will center in some of those northern areas in coming years," the resolution encouraged the SBC-appointed committee, now studying a possible name change, to seek "an appropriate new name for our denomination." The SBC has 33 state conventions covering all 50 states. Membership totals 12.3 million in 34,665 churches.

The Illinois convention also resolved to "reaffirm our faith in the doctrine of separation of church and state" and encouraged "our people to resist all efforts to damage and destroy this wall," and encourage "our churches to support . . . (Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State) in its efforts to preserve religious freedom."

The convention's committee on order of business was instructed to select a site other than the Holiday Inn East for the 1975 meeting in Springfield because of the feeling on the part of some that the convention should not meet in facilities where alcoholic beverages are sold.

Robert Hastings, editor of the Illinois Baptist, said a highlight of the convention was music by the Roumanian Baptist Church choir, which received a standing ovation. One of the choir members was an immigrant who had arrived from overseas the previous evening.