

Gideons--67,000 Pastors  
Gave Them Sermon Time

*State Editors Only*  
By James Lee Young

NASHVILLE (BP)--It's a big thing for a pastor to give his Sunday morning sermon time to a layman, but that's what about 67,000 Protestant ministers did for The Gideons this past year.

The Gideons is an international group of select volunteer business and professional laymen who have given away more than 150 million copies of the Scriptures since their founding in 1898. More than 45,000 Gideons worldwide this past year distributed 13.5 million Bibles and New Testaments in 43 languages and 107 countries. Ministers regularly open their pulpits for a report on The Gideons work. The lay organization relies heavily on local church support.

Distribution of Scriptures by The Gideons--far from haphazard--is to hotels, motels, institutions such as prisons, colleges and other schools, to the military--anywhere it is permitted.

The Gideons annual goal is 15 million scriptures for distribution. Their biggest problem today is the same as other organizations and persons--rising costs and inflation, says M.A. Henderson, executive director of The Gideons International. Still the organization is solvent and they aren't expecting any future financial woes, he stresses.

Offerings and donations, primarily from local churches, take care of printing costs and distribution, including freight, insurance and some administrative costs. It helped that The Gideons were able to raise 8.5 percent more money over the previous budget year, but inflation and costs took their toll, Henderson says.

The Gideons distribute nothing less than the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs. Last year, Henderson notes, the average cost of Bibles and New Testaments outside North America rose to 85 cents per copy, or 29.5 percent over the previous year.

The association's "nerve center" is in Nashville, where they have a modern administrative and distribution center. The facility--built in 1963--still looks new and was paid for entirely by Gideons' donations, not from church gifts, stresses Wendell McClinton, a Southern Baptist and promotion manager for The Gideons International.

But The Gideons couldn't survive without local church support, says McClinton, a graduate of Baylor University, Waco, Tex. "We stress giving above regular tithes and offerings," he explains.

Offerings per church to the non-profit, tax exempt laymen's organization generally run about \$65.00 per special "Gideon service." Salaries for the Nashville staff, for international representatives in Belen, Brazil, in Stockholm and Singapore are paid for entirely by Gideons' dues, presently \$20 per year, McClinton says.

Gideon reliance on local churches is extensive. Membership comes entirely from local churches, on the pastor's recommendation. Prayer, financial and other means of support are vital to the organization's success.

The need for church support is why so much emphasis is given to communicating with congregations and pastors in local settings. Rapport with local churches is so important that Gideon camps throughout the world conduct, where possible, special training sessions on how to effectively communicate the work and its purpose.

"What we don't want is for some man to get into a pulpit and preach some personal doctrine contrary to a particular church's doctrine," McClinton says, "Pastors know us and trust us. That's why some 67,000 pastors gave us sermon time over the last year."

The emphasis in church speaking engagements is to illustrate how God "has blessed" The Gideon work and the local church's support. The Gideons, McClinton says, provide a "strengthening" ministry in areas where there are good, strong mission efforts, in countries where Southern Baptists and other strong denominations have missionaries.

In Angola, for example, before developments forced a halt to Southern Baptist mission work there, Gideon nationals distributed Bibles to 900 inmates in a men's prison. Missionary A. Harrison Pike helped open this door.

The warden wasn't a Christian, but when he saw the Testaments he opened the doors to The Gideons and to Pike. This wouldn't have been possible, however, without the work of local Gideons--all Angolan nationals, says McClinton.

Pike was subsequently given permission to preach over the prison's loudspeaker and also spoke at the women's prison, where Gideons distributed more Scriptures.

Gideons in South Korea are playing a key role, McClinton notes, in distributing Scriptures to soldiers in a country where mass evangelism among the military has been reportedly encouraged and successful.

Gideon membership unapologetically consists solely of men. For Gideon wives only, there is The Gideons Auxiliary which lends prayer support and engages in Scripture distribution to nurses and other professional women.

Henderson and McClinton say the organization has never had problems with its male-oriented concept. Nor have they had problems, they say, with limiting membership from a denominational standpoint. Also, there are no ordained clergy on Gideon rolls. Membership includes a wide spectrum of Protestant laymen from the various major denominations and/or conventions--including Baptists.

The present executive director came to The Gideons as field representative in 1954, became promotion manager a few months later, and in 1955 was named to his present assignment.

A former sales manager for Coca-Cola Bottling Co., in Macon, Ga., Henderson became a professing Christian in 1949. A World War II veteran and officer, he served in the Army Air Force in Europe and served in the Air Force during the Korean conflict.

Henderson stresses that The Gideons is a "mission arm of the local church and are not competing." Generally, he noted, "Gideons are leaders in their own congregations.

"We are not looking for oddballs or persons fighting with the local church. And a man must have a personal testimony for Christ. He must, as we do, believe the Bible to be the Word of God from A to Z."

Gideons, Henderson continued, "do not go door-to-door asking for support, although I would not condemn those who do. . .our ministry starts and ends in the local church."

So, next time you see a Gideon Bible or Testament in a motel, doctor's office, school--wherever--it just may be you or your church had a part in placing it. For sure, someone in some church helped to make it possible.