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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Plains Confrontation: A  
Study In Church Autonomy

By Robert O'Brien

NASHVILLE (BP)--As the nation--including members of 34,901 other Southern Baptist churches--watch this Sunday, the tiny Plains (Ga.) Baptist Church will struggle through a situation which underlines a distinctive of Southern Baptists.

The autonomy of the local church.

No individual, board or agency of the nation's largest Protestant denomination can dictate to that rural Georgia congregation, made up of some 400 members, whether or not to fire its pastor, rescind its 1965 resolution barring blacks, or admit Clennon King to its worship services.

Southern Baptist leaders across the nation--while recognizing the political and perhaps manipulative aspects of the bizarre King episode on Halloween in Plains two days before the presidential election--have expressed dismay over the racial implications of the 1965 resolution. They are chagrined by the refusal of the church's deacons to let the black minister walk through the door of the church.

But, wring their hands as they may and quote national Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) resolutions against racism as they may--all they can do Sunday is what everyone else, including President-elect Jimmy Carter, can do.

Watch to see what happens.

At least Carter, a longstanding member of the Plains congregation, will have a vote. But the farflung structure of the SBC--with its 19 national agencies, 12.7 million members, worldwide missions enterprise, large numbers of educational institutions and large revenues--has no vote in the matter.

Some could consider that a weakness in SBC structure. But it's democracy--a system which produces blemishes as well as strokes of genius.

It's a system which has been the cornerstone of life in the SBC while it has grown from a small, rural body--launched in 1845 in Augusta, Ga.--to a large, diverse, pluralistic body which encompasses more than 30 ethnic groups and has members in all 50 states.

Church autonomy, a distinctive of the Southern Baptist style of democracy, became a focal point on Sunday, Oct. 31, when King, a pastor of an interdenominational church some 45 miles from Plains, showed up at the church, with three other blacks, to apply for membership.

That move, pre-announced, came just two days before the church's most well-known member, Jimmy Carter, would run against Gerald Ford for the U. S. presidency. The church's 12 deacons overrode the pastor, revived the 1965 resolution and voted to shut down services.

News media reports of King's somewhat checkered career raised eyebrows of Baptists and non-Baptists alike, who suspected his motivations. King was a non-Baptist pastor, a former Republican office seeker, a person with a prison record and a history of mental problems asking to join a church of a different faith in a place where he did not reside.

He had refused to wait when Bruce Edwards, pastor of the Plains Church, told him he would do "everything in my power" to help him gain acceptance by the church if he would wait one week beyond the election to appear.

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Then, after failing on Oct. 31 to gain entrance because of the closed down services, King showed up on Sunday, Nov. 7. This time he attended the men's Sunday School class but was locked out of the worship service.

In the interim, the deacons asked for Edwards resignation. Edwards, who says he will leave the church no matter what decision is made on Sunday (Nov. 14), refused to resign, saying the church, not the deacons, should decide that. The vote on his tenure will come Sunday, along with the probability of another visit by King, the discussion of the 1965 resolution, and the attendance of Carter.

Admittedly, the decision by the deacons, given the bizarre elements of King's maneuverings, has more than racial connotations. Although no deacons will be quoted, reports indicate they feel bombarded, manipulated, threatened. One deacon's wife nervously told Baptist Press, "We don't know what's happening. Please pray for us."

The controversy is cutting through the small congregation like a searing pain--the kind of searing pain one feels when his family is crumbling. Baptists are very conscious of the church as a "family" of believers--with "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ.

The pain they feel powerfully revealed itself last Sunday, when a member of the church collapsed in tears and had to be helped out of the church.

"I don't feel welcome in my own church anymore," she sobbed.

But, mitigating factors aside, the reality of the 1965 resolution remains--a resolution which specifically bars "Negroes and civil rights agitators," a resolution which Carter and his family opposed in 1965.

Southern Baptist leaders, faced on all sides by questioning news media, recognize the resolution is a reality which won't go away--unless the church votes to rescind it.

"The Southern Baptist Convention can't tell that church what to do," says SBC President James L. Sullivan of Nashville, "but, if we did have that form of church government, I have no doubt in my mind that racial exclusiveness would be forbidden. We have passed too many resolutions over the years which oppose racism.

"The SBC encourages the churches making up its body to be universal in witness and ministries. Racism, which would exclude certain segments of humanity from worship services, black or otherwise, is not only frowned upon but condemned by the convention," Sullivan declared.

"While some churches regrettably follow a closed-door policy and are reluctant to allow anyone who might wish to do so to worship with them, many, many other churches in the SBC are completely integrated and have been so for years. They find no problem in their open-door policy.

"Church membership, however, is quite another matter in our Baptist way of doing things. No person--white, black or of any other race--should be accepted into membership until the church is convinced of his or her sincerity and readiness to participate fully in its spiritual fellowship and cooperate with the purposes for which the church exists.

"A church which accepts members otherwise, reacting only to surface factors, has abdicated its responsibility," Sullivan declared.

"The church should be fully persuaded that the candidate has had a personal experience of faith and forgiveness, which we refer to as the 'new birth,'" Sullivan continued. "We feel that no one can practice the principles of Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount if he or she does not know, in an intimate way, the preacher who preached it.

"No one can coerce his way into membership in a Baptist church, anymore than he can coerce his way into Heaven," Sullivan declared.

"It is just not done that way. He must come by faith, and in humility, or he will be rejected for membership, whoever he might be and to whatever race he might belong.

"The candidate must be a true convert, and must submit himself as a candidate for baptism by immersion in a public service as a testimony of his death to an old life of sin, and his resurrection to a new life in Christ," Sullivan said. "That is the meaning of baptism to us.

"Putting the dilemma before any Southern Baptist church, which is now faced by the Plains Baptist Church, would present tremendous problems even to the most integrated of our congregations," he said.

"Most Southern Baptist churches would admit Rev. King to attend any and all of its public worship service," Sullivan continued. "It is doubtful, however, that even the most integrated of our churches would be willing to accept him for membership without thorough investigation, or at least until a period of time had elapsed, in which he had proved himself and his sincerity in the request he has made. -more-

"Furthermore, it is doubtful that any church of any denomination would like to make such a decision of importance before the staring eyes of the world, especially when so many observers are looking on scornfully and accusingly, rather than prayerfully," he said.

"The Plains Baptist Church now faces a real dilemma anyway it goes. They have both my sympathy and my prayers, although I cannot personally agree with the wording of the 1965 resolution, which bars blacks," Sullivan concluded.

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Arab Baptist Seminary closed  
By Civil War in Lebanon

Baptist Press  
11/10/76

BEIRUT, Lebanon (BP)--For the first time in its 16-year history, the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon is closed. It failed to open for the Fall semester as a result of the Lebanese civil war.

Located in Monsouriyeh, a suburb of Beirut, the seminary functioned throughout the 1975-76 school year, beginning the Fall semester with nine students, two of whom left during the year. One student was graduated in the Spring.

During the Spring, the location of the seminary became increasingly dangerous, according to Frances (Mrs. J. Wayne) Fuller, Southern Baptist missionary press representative in Lebanon. Students, faculty and neighbors sometimes huddled in the semi-basement of the main building for partial protection from falling shells, Mrs. Fuller said. Two rooms of the building were damaged during the summer.

A shortage of faculty and the difficulty of bringing students to Lebanon from other countries were factors in the decision not to open this Fall. Some former faculty members will now spend their time in the preparation of programmed materials for an extension program.

Finlay M. Graham, Southern Baptist missionary and former president of the seminary, hopes that the institution can open again and continue classroom instruction until those who have started their course of study have graduated. Graham is now field representative for the Middle East for the Foreign Mission Board.

Southern Baptist missionaries currently in Lebanon are the David W. Kings, James K. Raglands, Emma Cooke and Mabel Summers. The Kings are in the seminary area and the other missionaries are at the Beirut Baptist School which is still having classes.

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Orvil Reid: He Puts His  
Money Where His Mouth Is

Baptist Press  
11/10/76

By Walker Knight

ATLANTA (BP)--Orvil Reid, a 68-year old retired foreign missionary famed for his physical fitness exploits, backs his concern for world relief with hard cash.

He has presented Paul Adkins, director of disaster relief for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, a personal check for \$1,200 to be used for aid in the United States. He also gave \$1,800 to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board for world relief.

Reid said the funds were earnings from his writing and from severance pay after serving as a missionary in Mexico.

In a recent exploit, Reid jogged 600 miles from the Home Mission Board in Atlanta to the Foreign Mission Board in Richmond. He made the trip in a month, averaging 20 miles per day, pausing to speak to raise people's awareness of the need for world relief.

He set a goal of raising \$60,000 through these engagements, asking that the funds be channeled through state Baptist convention offices to the mission agencies.

Adkins announced that he had asked Reid to work with his department when he returns from a projected world tour, which may take him to Africa, Central and South America and the Orient.

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"Reid will be especially effective with people at resort areas and seaports, where his ability to speak Spanish will help, and in conferences with senior citizens," Adkins said.

In addition to his ability to jog extreme distances, Reid allows cars and trucks to run over his stomach, lets strong men hit him in the stomach, permits groups to pull on ropes around his neck while he sings, and in other ways proves his physical fitness.

Reid said he has attempted to dramatize to Baptists and to others the waste in American society and the needs of the world's hungry.

"There's something sick about a society which gives millions to one athlete and neglects the dying in the world," Reid said.

"If Southern Baptists alone gave just the price of a football ticket to world relief, it would exceed all we have given in recent years."

Adkins commented that while we can commend efforts to miss a meal and other dramatic ways to share, "We need a change in lifestyle that can only be achieved through a learned discipline and a forced discipline. The gospel has something to say about sharing and we need to learn it."

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(BP) Photo mailed to state Baptist papers.

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Former Woman Missionary  
Voices Hotline This Year

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RICHMOND (BP)-- The voice of Southern Baptists' Foreign Missions Hotline for the first time, a woman and a former missionary.

Martha Belote, former missionary to China, Hawaii and Hong Kong helps to provide the latest news of Baptist work in more than 80 countries around the world, and also gives everyday thoughts and prayer requests of Southern Baptist missionaries on the field.

Mrs. Belote is deputation coordinator for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and is in charge of scheduling missionary speakers for conferences and camps. Her husband, James D. Belote served as the board's secretary for East Asia from 1968 until his death in March 1975.

The Missions Hotline began its sixth consecutive year on Nov. 15 and will run through Dec. 15. The prerecorded message, which will be changed each Thursday, will be available for the price of a three-minute station-to-station call to Richmond, Va., to (804) 355-6581. If a crisis occurs between recordings, the current tape will be re-recorded to include updated information.

Information for the Missions Hotline comes from the board's eight area secretaries and other staff members; from field representatives stationed in each mission area; and from the missionaries themselves.

William R. O'Brien, secretary for the department of denominational coordination, is in charge of the project this year. He said the underlying purpose of Foreign Missions Hotline is to build a broader awareness of missions and a greater desire to be specifically involved in prayer support.

"It's a direct way to share with concerned Southern Baptists urgent needs that demand prayer support," O'Brien said. "It's also a means for sharing responses to prayer that are a cause for rejoicing."

During 1971, the project's initial year, just over 4,000 calls were registered in a two-month period. According to O'Brien, last year approximately 1,800 calls were recorded in a month's time.

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