

In New England Bobby  
Barnett Has Found A Way

By Larry Jerden

BRADFORD, R.I. (BP)--Bobby Barnett stood at the New England family's door here on a church visit one evening.

"Who is it?" the husband asked his wife, who had answered the door.

"Some man in overalls," she told him.

"Tell him we've sold all the hogs we're gonna sell," he yelled back.

Undaunted Barnett, pastor of Charlho Southern Baptist Church in southwestern Rhode Island, explained his purpose for visiting was not to buy hogs--which he later learned the family had advertised in the paper.

Such misunderstandings are not uncommon for Southern Baptists beginning churches in New England, whether the pastor or missionary wears a business suit or, like Barnett, wears overalls to work in as well as visit.

But Barnett, who left a rural pastorate in Mississippi three years ago to begin a church in rural Rhode Island "from scratch," has found an approach that has overcome much of the Southern Baptist "identity crisis" in New England--person-to-person caring.

"When we first moved here, we just set out to meet people door-to-door," Barnett explained. "I believe in caring about people, meeting them, helping them, sharing the good news of salvation."

The approach is working well, for in the three years Barnett has been in Rhode Island, the church has grown from just his family to 116 members. And the majority of them are there because of personal contact with Barnett.

Barnett was not sent to New England by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Home Mission Board as a missionary. In fact, while he gladly shares his personal call, he emphasizes its not the "usual" way for a Mississippi pastor to go north.

"David Candlewood, a friend of mine at seminary, asked me to come preach his ordination sermon in Pittsfield, Mass., in the fall of 1972," Barnett remembered. "I knew shortly after that what the Lord wanted me to do.

"I was at Mt. Moriah Church in Calhoun County, Miss., with 15,000 people and about 50 SBC churches. It must be the most Baptist spot on earth. And there was Rhode Island with 950,000 people and only three SBC churches. It didn't seem fair that in the South we had all those preachers and here there were all these people."

So, without appointment or invitation, Barnett packed up and moved to New England.

"I came, started the church, then applied for church pastoral aid from the Home Mission Board," he explained. "I don't recommend everyone come that way, but the Lord just laid it on my heart to do it. The Home Mission Board didn't help us until we constituted as a church--in other words, the gravy got thin.

"A lot of people say you can't do it this way," he emphasized, "They say you gotta start with the Home Mission Board, run surveys, etc. And I would recommend that--and believe that should be done most of the time--but what I did here can be done anywhere" if the Lord leads.

What Barnett did was just apply the same methods he used in rural Mississippi to Rhode Island. The area around his church, while containing about 20,000 in a six-mile radius of the church, includes three small towns and people living in a rural setting.

Other New England pastors, some of whom came to New England in a more "accepted" manner, have nothing but praise for the Mississippian in his overalls.

"The accents are different," noted one fellow pastor, "but Bobby has a way of relating to those people one-to-one. They're from New England and he's from Mississippi, but he's come in here and is one of 'em."

Getting to be "one of 'em" didn't come quickly. "Folks at first thought we were fly-by-night or something," Barnett remembered. "They didn't know the difference between Southern Baptists and Mormons. Before they slammed the door in our face, we'd emphasize Billy Graham is a Southern Baptist--and now we tell them Jimmy Carter is a Southern Baptist."

The first thing the young congregation did, even before it constituted as a church in March of 1974, was buy a used school bus to pick up children and bring them to the meeting places.

Like many other "pioneer area" pastors, Barnett started with home Bible fellowships. Later, they got the use of the American Legion Hall. Then they moved into a school, where they will stay until their building is completed.

When Barnett speaks of building, he means it personally and literally.

"We've got more muscle than we have money, so we're using free labor," he said one day while hammering a beam in place. "We're going to build this building as nice as we can."

Tom Biles, director of associational missions for the Southern New England Association, notes that nine acres of land was given to the church by a New England woman, and that the church plans to enter its building debt free in 1977.

"We started with \$28,000 cash," explained Barnett, noting that \$17,539.44 was an anonymous gift. "I never have figured out who it was, or why the odd number of pennies."

Don Lilly, chairman of the church's building committee, noted that the building would cost about \$100,000 if fully contracted, but by using church labor, the cost should end up about \$60,000.

"One thing I've learned up here," Barnett said as he continued to work in the cold dusk, "is that a building is not near as important as I thought it was. If I went back to Mississippi today, I'd start with a home Bible fellowship."

Barnett comes across as "country" on first impression. It's the word most used to describe him. But spending any time at all around him reveals a multi-talented individual, and there is no surprise when someone noted he was tops in his class at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Arkansas State University.

"Well," he said, brushing aside such references, "If I have any talent, it's in winning people to the Lord. I'm not a powerful preacher from the pulpit. But the most effective way of making soul winners is not preaching a sermon or soul winning--it's taking someone with you when you witness. David Kenyon, one of our members who works on the building a lot, heard the Roman Road (method of using the book of Romans to witness) nine times in three days, because he went with me soul winning."

Barnett said witnessing is actually easier in New England than in Mississippi.

"You can witness to a person in Mississippi and he'll argue with you," Barnett declared. "Here, they may not agree with you, but they won't argue."

"And we've won a whole lot who've never joined our church. But I believe it's more important to lead them to the Lord than it is to lead them to my church."

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December Giving Buoy  
SBC Cooperative Program

NASHVILLE (BP)--Strong giving in December increased the Southern Baptist Convention's national Cooperative Program unified budget to more than \$11.9 million after the first three months of the 1976-77 fiscal, 12.49 percent ahead of the same point last year.

National Cooperative Program receipts in December alone totaled \$4,117,544, an 18.83 percent increase over \$3,465,179 given last December, according to a report from Billy D. Malesovas, director of financial planning and assistant to the treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee.

Executive Secretary-Treasurer Porter Routh, expressing gratitude for the strong giving in December, said the 12.49 percent pace during the first quarter of the fiscal year would leave the SBC "about \$2.5 million short of its bold mission goal at the end of the year, but will take care of the basic operating and capital needs budgets."

Including the \$11.9 million Cooperative Program figure and over \$1.27 million more in contributions designated to specific causes, Southern Baptists have given over \$13.2 million to SBC national causes during the first three months of the fiscal year. That's an 11.44 percent increase over the same point last year.

National Cooperative Program receipts represent about one third of the receipts received by SBC state and multi-state conventions from SBC churches. The amount received by the states represent about one-tenth of the contributions in the churches.

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Election's Religious Dimension  
Tops Christian Century Poll

Baptist Press  
1/5/77

CHICAGO (BP)--The presidential campaign's religious issues and the awakened public interest in evangelicalism constituted the top 1976 religious news story, according to The Christian Century's year-end ranking.

The ecumenical weekly noted that the candid declaration of Southern Baptist deacon Jimmy Carter that he is a born-again Christian suddenly made the American public aware of the vast evangelical movement.

Religious dimensions of the Carter election had earlier received top rankings in year-end polls of Religious News Service, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention news service. It was rated in second spot by the Religious Newswriters Association.

Other news events in Christian Century's top 10, listed in its Dec. 29 issue, were:

2. The internal struggle in the Episcopal Church over whether to ordain women to the priesthood culminating in the decision by the Episcopal General Convention to approve women priests.
3. Liberation struggles in southern Africa accelerated.
4. The torture and imprisonment of church workers in South Korea, Argentina, Brazil, the Philippines and other countries was renewed evidence that totalitarian regimes fear the church's concern for the poor and oppressed.

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5. The continuation of Northern Ireland's tragic civil war and the hopes raised by a peace movement organized by two Roman Catholic women, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, underlined the suffering of Protestants and Catholics alike in that troubled nation.

6. Human sexuality received major attention in some Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

7. Lebanon's two-year-old civil war seemed at an end when Syrian forces entered the country and were greeted by warring Christian and Moslem factions.

8. The issuance of the complete Good News Bible was a major event in religious publishing.

9. The formation of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, comprising five regional synods, marked a definitive split from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod by some 150 congregations, with more expected to join in 1977.

10. "Death" issues still were of concern to the public.