



# BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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## Death Can Bring New Life In Transitional Areas

By Judy Touchton

ATLANTA (BP)--Many inner-city churches will die a natural death--and many should be allowed to do so--an authority on the urban church said here.

"If it were possible for us to see that communities in transition are really newly developing communities in disguise, we would begin to develop new congregations for new residents, rather than merely try to save the institutions of the group which has moved away," Ezra Earl Jones told 200 Baptist leaders.

Viewing such communities as opportunities for new approaches, rather than as problems, would lead to less discomfort and greater chance of successful change, Jones declared.

Jones, associate secretary for the General Council on Ministries of the United Methodist Church, addressed pastors and church, state and associational staffers at the first National Leadership Conference on Churches in Racially Changing Communities sponsored by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's department of cooperative ministries with National Baptists.

"We really have no reason to believe that a congregation should last forever. A church that has served its community well from the beginning . . . may have done its job and have no reason to expect further life," said Jones, author of several books related to churches in changing communities, including "What's Ahead for Old First Church."

"Churches exist in and reflect the character of their communities," Jones said. "A church cannot exist apart from a community. Churches develop as communities develop. Churches are their communities. A church that loses its community loses its life," he declared.

"How a church defines its community will determine how it will act or react when the community begins to change," Jones said. "As communities go through the transitional process, churches often have only a brief time in which to make an appropriate response. If the opportunity is missed, it is gone forever," he noted.

Jones said all major mainline (white, middle-class) denominations in America are faced with large numbers of congregations in changing communities.

"It would not be stretching the statistics to estimate that up to one-third of the congregations of some denominations are now in communities experiencing significant and rapid transition," he said.

According to the Home Mission Board's cooperative ministries department, an estimated 2,000 of the 35,073 Southern Baptist congregations are located in transitional communities and 1,045 of those are in "hard-core racial change."

In defining what he meant by "churches in transition," Jones described them as "those congregations located in geographical areas--whether urban, suburban or rural--where change is basic to the character of the community . . . where change is wide-spread (and) where . . . the changes occur over a relatively short period of time."

Transitional communities, he added, are those in which change occurs "quickly, permanently, pervasively--even overwhelmingly."

Residents of a changing community often set up a "self-fulfilling prophecy," he said: "People think an area will change; they act as if it will change, and behold--it does."

Church leaders dare not predict future movements of populations, however, on patterns which existed 10 or 20 years ago, Jones said. "Patterns of mobility are changing. The 30-year wave of migration of blacks out of the South has ended," he said, "and black urbanization in the future cannot continue at the former pace. There aren't enough blacks left in the rural South to provide a continuing large flow into the cities."

Although many people believe blacks are going to "take over" all the cities of America, Jones said, it will not happen.

A minority group, outnumbered 7 to 1, cannot take over all the central cities," he continued.

Three cities do have a majority of minority persons, he said. According to the 1970 census they are Washington, D. C., Newark, N. J., and Atlanta, Ga.

Jones said he expects the 1980's will include nine more: Detroit, Baltimore, St. Louis, New Orleans, Richmond, Va., Savannah, Ga., Wilmington, Del., Augusta, Ga., and Atlantic City, N. J.

In all the communities, Jones insisted, the major concern should be to identify the racially changing community before the process has gone too far for churches to adapt to change:

"If a church waits until the evidence of racial change in its community is clear, it usually has missed the opportunity to serve the new population, and in most cases will eventually die unless it relocates to become a new church for a different community.

A pre-transitional neighborhood is one where the conditions for change are present, but minorities, or people with basically different characteristics than the original residents, have not yet entered or are not in sufficient numbers to disturb the balance of the housing market," Jones explained.

He said the characteristics of a pre-transitional community are recognizable, but must be observed carefully: "It is for this reason that few people are aware that a community is about to change until that change is well along."

Jones gave a rule of thumb, or "tipping point," for the transitional community--"a neighborhood which becomes 25 percent minority and has a neighborhood school which has become roughly 40 percent minority."

He cited some internal signs that identify a church in a pre-transitional community: The leadership is increasingly living outside the community; most Sunday School members also are from outside the community; the women's group in the church includes primarily older women; total membership is declining; huge jumps in the cost of maintaining the church; neighboring churches already are in serious trouble; members move and transfer membership to more stable churches; the church begins to lock its doors during daylight hours.

"Any church that already has experienced most of these tell-tale signs is probably beyond the pre-transitional stage," Jones said.

Although Jones gave some alternatives for churches in the transitional state, he insisted none were ideal. The most effective way, he said, to handle the transitional community situation is to identify it early and choose a strategy for the church.

"Remember," Jones said, "all communities and churches are changing. Rapid and basic change is the most difficult with which to deal. And the more rapid and more basic the change, the more difficult it is for the citizens of the community to adjust to it."

The ones most hurt by this kind of change are the ones least able to do anything about it, Jones said,--the poor, the elderly, the under-educated.

He added: "Churches are part of and serve the communities in which they exist. The problem is that social institutions tend to take on lives of their own apart from their communities, particularly by the time the community is in transition. People who are different . . . become threats, and long-time residents begin to escape or draw into their circle, lock their doors and shut out the new people.

"The church is the one institution in a community that can help people understand what they are doing and open up all of their relationships.

"When the church itself becomes exclusive, refuses to reach out to the new people and begins as a social institution to think of its life apart from the community itself, there is no longer that caring, life-giving institution which can help the whole community adjust, he noted:

"There is then no possibility for the church to make its primary contribution to the community at the time it is needed the most."

Jones said he is "not confident that all churches in racially changing communities . . . have either the will or the energy to make the changes necessary to continue their ministries."

His "primary concern for the church," Jones concluded, "is that it be faithful to its Lord, to the purposes for which our Lord calls it into being, and faithful to the people who live in the community which it serves.

"Our task is to be alert, sensitive and listening to the call of God in the voices of the people we serve. That's all."

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New Media--Even Comics--  
For Bible Translators

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NEW YORK (BP)--Traditional conceptions of Bible translation must expand to include work in new media such as comic books for newly literate readers and sign language for the deaf, five translators told the audience attending the American Bible Society's annual meeting here.

"Scripture cartoons are certainly an effective means to communicate to the millions of new readers in the world," Eugene A. Nida, ABS executive secretary for translations, said. "Some estimate that nearly 50 percent of the readers in Latin America learned to read through comics."

He also added that the deaf often do not read much, because written English is different from the sign language which is their "native tongue." Recent Bible Society Scripture publications in signed English make the Good News available to them in a form they can easily understand.

Nida also reported that the United Bible Societies provided assistance to translations projects in 560 languages in 1976. These languages comprise tongues spoken by approximately 80 percent of the world's population.

He also told the meeting that there has been a dramatic growth in Bible translations work in the 35 years he has worked for the ABS. One growth sign is the Bible Society's expanding translations budget. When he first began work, it totaled \$100,000. Today the world translations budget reaches almost \$2 million.

Another notable trend in those 35 years, he said, is the growing number of Bible Society translation teams that include Roman Catholic and Orthodox members as well as Protestants.

The translators cited a rising ethnic consciousness throughout the world as one cause of this dramatic growth. As churches take greater pride in their own ethnic identities, they ask the Bible Societies to translate the Bible into their own tongues, they maintained. "The Bible Societies are not drumming up interest," Nida added, but rather are responding to genuine demand.

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Caribbeans 'Hungry' For  
"Soul Food" New Testament

By Elaine Herrin

GRENADA (BP)--Prisoners' lives are changed. A housekeeper finds Christ. Men and women in government positions are "feeding" on printed "Soul Food."

The diet readily consumed by peoples of the Caribbean is "Soul Food," the Living New Testament pictorial edition which features black persons in the illustrations. Young people are asking for it. Men have walked several blocks with the missionaries to pick up copies of "the Bible with the black pictures in it."

Missionaries in the Windward Islands say they are enthusiastic about the "overwhelming response of the local people" to the publication, published by Tyndale.

"We can't keep enough of them to satisfy the demand," said Southern Baptist missionary Donald G. Overstreet. The girl who helps in his home found Christ through reading the words of "Soul Food" and talking with the new missionary couple.

More than 400 copies of the illustrated edition were presented to Caribbean athletes at a recent banquet in Barbados. Missionary Jerry Harris arranged for a copy of "Soul Food" to be "served" beside each plate.

"Soul Food" is also included in the spiritual diets of the people of Dominica. Southern Baptist missionary Fred Walker said he has no problem interesting people in the word of God when they see copies of "Soul Food."

The first persons in the Windward Islands to receive the New Testament edition were prisoners on the Island of Grenada. J. P. Allen of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth sent copies to the Richmond Hill Prison and "hardened criminals" were "softened" by the Scriptures.

Missionary Manget Herrin shares copies of "Soul Food" among the prisoners and in the local chapel. Government authorities have asked for copies. After seeing the response, Charles W. Bryan, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's area secretary for Middle America and the Caribbean, arranged for copies to be sent to other area islands.

People from all walks of life in the islands are crossing lines of racial division and political schism and reaching out for "Soul Food." They are "eating it up."

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Elaine Herrin is Southern Baptist missionary press representative for Grenada.