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Energy Crisis: Can Churches
Be Part of the Solution?

By Robert O'Brien & David Wilkinson

NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptist leaders spent two days here surveying how Christians can become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem, in a world in which a runaway appetite for energy forewarns a crisis affecting all aspects of life.

Speakers at the consultation on "The Energy Crisis and the Churches," sponsored by the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), approached the problem from technological, economic and ethical points of view.

"The energy crisis is real and time is short," declared Frances Gulick, analyst in environment and natural resources policy for the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress.

"Your concern and your point of concern," she told the SBC leaders, "should be moved way ahead of Armageddon, way ahead of the year 2000 and focused on a year, perhaps only seven years ahead of us in the 1980s."

Debate over the energy crisis--which some declare acute, others not so immediate and others doubt exists--could be likened to a secular version of what the Bible says about Armageddon's end times conflict. Many experts project the collapse of world peace and economics if the crisis goes unchecked.

While scientists search for alternatives to rapidly depleting hydrogen carbon based energy and world leaders scramble to confront the problem, it remains for churches and denominations to face up to the ethics of what Christians must do to become part of the solution, speakers declared.

Suggested alternatives involved sobering changes in lifestyle, programs, institutional structures and use of resources which, for years, have been predicated on the secular, societal value that "biggest is best."

But speakers suggesting those alternatives were not doomsdayers.

"The potential of the energy crisis is the emerging of a better church," declared Cecil A. Ray of Raleigh, general secretary-treasurer of the North Carolina Baptist Convention. "It does not spell doom for the church but presents it with opportunities to rise to our greatest hour. Crisis times have always been good times for churches because they have been times of testing. Crisis presents danger-filled opportunities."

Ray, Albert McClellan of the SBC Executive Committee, Carlyle Marney of Lake Junaluska, N. C., Gulick, Wes Michaelson of Sojourner's magazine in Chicago, and others urged a renewed application of the principles of Christian stewardship of resources.

"This crisis time," said Ray, "offers the church with the special occasion to tell believers and non-believers that there is a special Christian view of material things... Christ's followers cannot be indifferent to acts of abuse of God's creation any more than we can turn deaf ears to the needs and hurting of God's people."

Ray and McClellan, although emphasizing they offered suggestions--not final answers, did get specific.

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Diminishing mobility, brought on by diminishing energy, McClellan said, presents definite problems.

"Many of our present day-churches," he said, "are built on private wheels and many may not be able to exist without them." He noted that they are not on viable public transportation lines, not within walking distances, often depend on a network of buses, organize programming to require numerous trips to church each week and necessitate two-car families, and have far-flung youth programs which demand high mobility.

The energy crisis, Ray and McClellan said, will call for careful attention to frequency, time and location of church meetings, and definite steps to alter church architecture which exceeds space requirements and has evolved away from structures which take advantage of nature for cooling, heating and lighting.

From a denomination wide point of view, McClellan noted that Southern Baptists have thrived on promotion of work which requires a lot of people to travel a lot of miles, on widely scattered group meetings on associational, state and national levels, and on summers full of meetings at Baptist conference centers.

"This summer," he recalled, "I walked the grounds of Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center for days searching for an answer to the question: 'What will happen to this \$10 million property if private wheels are no longer available?'"

Both Ray and McClellan spoke of theological obligation of church people based on the doctrine of responsibility--that God's command to subdue and dominate the earth is not license to exploit and ravage it but a mandate to conserve it.

They called for further study to think through the problems of how the denomination and churches can get together to study the problem. The consultation in Nashville, said W. David Sapp of the Christian Life Commission staff, was "a watershed consultation" designed to launch exploration of ways the churches can find theologically-sound alternatives in playing their role as world citizens and not as isolated contributors to the problem.

In continuing dialogue, McClellan said, church and denominational leaders must provide more real services to churches and agencies to help them solve space and mobility problems, learn to accept that more is not necessarily good, learn to do promotional work with fewer miles traveled and less people used, make group meetings more meaningful so some can be discontinued, and accept that moderate lifestyle changes are needed to lessen consumption of energy.

He projected that the world may have to enter a "post industrial age" in which priorities are established, goods are produced for permanence and not obsolescence, patterns of living are reduced to criteria not based on extravagance and people assess the values of a society in which attitudes have been "totally conditioned by energy."

Ray urged Baptists to use God's creation responsibly, adopt distinctly Christian lifestyles and chart courses of energy conservation in church activities, with check points programmed in to determine progress.

Tentative courses of action, he said, include teaching and preaching of Christian lifestyle. Most Christians, he added, have adopted with little or no reservation the secular, American ideal of a lifestyle based on materialism as the absolute sign of success.

"While it may be barely understood," he said, "the greatest crisis today is the crisis growing out of Christians' acceptance of secular values. We have thus become part of the problem--instead of being part of the answer."