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What A Difference
Involvement Makes

By Phyllis A. Desbrien

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--In 1968, Swope Park Baptist Church here took 15 young people to work a week long religious crusade in Colorado.

Today, nine years later, baptisms have doubled. Budget gifts have almost doubled, going over the budget for nine straight years. Mission gifts have increased over 500 percent, in addition to contributions to Southern Baptist's Cooperative Program budget for worldwide missions and other gifts.

Thirty persons have made serious commitments to home and foreign missions where fewer than half a dozen had been recorded in the 60-year history of the church.

That's what happens when lay people get involved in missions efforts, says Olan Runnels, pastor of the urban congregation.

"Thousands of laymen want to get out and do something," Runnels expounds. "They've been preached at but never given the opportunity for experience, the opportunity to plug into meaningful training or meaningful involvement."

Runnels feels lay involvement has to begin with the minister. "The clergyman can be a bottleneck," he protests, "or he can pull the cork out and let the people function."

Nine years ago, Runnels "pulled the cork out." Every summer since, the church has sent teams to do a variety of missions work within the United States. Last year they began to branch out into foreign missions, providing a dental/medical clinic team to Antigua, West Indies.

Runnels sees the major turning point in the church's ministry coming the second year of the missions involvement.

Over 40 young people and their sponsors traveled to Corpus Christi, Tex., to participate in a 10-day beach ministry. Just as they settled into their lodgings, Hurricane Camille struck, causing some of the worst damage the coast had ever experienced.

The group suddenly found itself asked to distribute relief materials from the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The youth had to learn quickly not only how to minister to the storm victims but how to get along with each other under tense pressure and uncomfortable living arrangements.

When the kids, "obviously touched and matured," related their experiences to the church, Runnels says, over 250 people made spiritual decisions in a single service.

"We were launched into seeing what strategic missions involvement can do for the people involved and how that impact becomes meshed into the local congregation," Runnels affirms.

On its most recent missions tour, a Swope Park team spent two weeks in Grenada, where Southern Baptist work began a few years ago when a single prisoner accepted Christ while listening to a broadcast of the Radio and Television Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The group saw that first prisoner's close friend and former inmate, Gregory Warde, make a commitment to the ministry.

Grenadians "came by the hundreds" to the teams' services. Runnels tells how they would come up to the team members and initiate questions, asking how to become a Christian.

"You give a layman--anybody--that kind of experience and he's never the same," Runnels declares.

He senses a complete turn-around in the "spirit" of Swope Park and credits much of it to the congregation's direct missions involvement.

"Not only does it (missions involvement) accomplish its task, but look what it does for the folks back home. It's exciting to watch these people function when they come back. They seem to develop a 'missions-as-you-go' lifestyle."

Runnels describes the impact on the church as a growing process. "Each effort builds on the one before," he says. "Once a person has broken the barrier, he's never content with mediocrity again. Once a church experiences the excitement of birthing a new congregation, they're no longer content to be a morgue."

Elected first vice-president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) during the 1977 annual meeting in Kansas City, Runnels is also a member of the special committee studying the formation of the Mission Service Corps (MSC). The MSC, implemented at the annual SBC meeting in Kansas City in June, is a plan to enlist and utilize 5,000 volunteers for one to two years of home or foreign missions service by 1982.

Why does Runnels work so hard in seeing that his congregation at Swope Park and, indeed, Christians throughout the SBC have opportunity for direct missions involvement?

"Each individual person is commissioned by God to be a missionary," the energetic Runnels demands. "'Am I going to be?' is not an option. The question is, 'What kind of missionary am I going to be?'"

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(BP) Photo mailed to Baptist state papers by Midwestern Seminary.

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Religious Heritage Honors
Rupe, 'Country Crossroads'

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NASHVILLE (BP)--Jim Rupe of Fort Worth, producer of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission's "Country Crossroads" radio show will receive the 1977 Religious Heritage of America Faith and Freedom Award at the organization's annual national awards program here.

Rupe will be cited, Oct. 31, for his efforts in combining the best in country music with strong spiritual emphasis on "the first religious country music program," which airs on 675 stations across the country and worldwide on the American Forces Network.

The Religious Heritage of America is a national interfaith religious-educational organization dedicated to preserving America's Judeo-Christian heritage, working to instill its ethics and principles into all areas of American life. It has honored the Radio and Television Commission four times in the past six years.

Paul M. Stevens, commission president, received a special award from the Religious Heritage of America in 1972; Claude C. Cox, producer of "Powerline," the Commission's radio show for young people, was honored in 1973, and Edwin Malone, vice president, radio services, was honored in 1975.

Awards are made to those who have made major contributions in furthering religious tolerance and understanding and who have communicated the principles of the nation's religious heritage through outstanding achievements and creative excellence in their crafts.

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"Country Crossroads," which Rupe, a St. Joseph, Mo., native, originated for the commission and which he writes and produces, is a weekly half-hour show syndicated and released nationally by the Radio and Television Commission since 1969. It has also received the Gabriel Award from UNDA-USA, and several Freedoms Foundation Awards.

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(BP) Photo mailed to Baptist state papers by Radio and Television Commission.

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Seminary Establishes
Evangelism Doctorate

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LOUISVILLE (BP)--The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary here has announced it will become the first Southern Baptist Convention seminary, and perhaps the first accredited seminary in the nation, to offer the doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in evangelism.

"I believe ours to be the only Ph.D. available with the entire curriculum centering in a full evangelism department," says Lewis Drummond, Billy Graham professor of evangelism at the seminary and national vice president of the Academy of Professors of Evangelism.

In addition to the Ph.D. degree, Southern Seminary also offers master of theology and doctor of ministry degrees in evangelism.

The Billy Graham Chair of Evangelism, which Drummond has held since coming to Southern Seminary from Spurgeon's College in 1973, is part of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at the seminary. The Graham Center also includes a collection of records of the Graham ministry, resources for research on other famous evangelists, and a program of student evangelism teams which provide assistance to local churches.

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Nortons' Stepfather
Dies at Age 85

Baptist Press
10/11/77

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (BP)--Funeral services were held here Oct. 11 for Fred Parker, 85, stepfather of two Tennessee Baptist leaders, who died Oct. 9 in Hixson, Tenn., after an extended illness.

Besides his widow, Grace Elizabeth Norton Parker, two stepsons, Ralph L. Norton, executive secretary-treasurer of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, and Charles Norton, who served as church training director for the Tennessee Convention for 33 years before his retirement in 1975, are among survivors.

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