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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Evangelism Directors Concerned
Over Baptism Decline

By Dan Martin

NEW YORK (BP)--A projected decline in baptisms by Southern Baptists, which will reach the lowest ebb in 28 years, was the center of discussion at the annual meeting of state Baptist directors of evangelism, sponsored here by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board (HMB).

The projections by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board indicate that baptisms, the traditional indicator of health and growth in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), will dip to 342,201

It represents the second year in a row in which baptism will decline and is an 11 percent drop from the baptism rate of the 1976 church year, in which 384,496 were baptized. It's 103,524 less than 1972, the peak year for the board.

Preliminary speculation on why baptisms declined centered on changes in age of the population, influence of para-church groups, misplaced emphases, the decline of the Jesus Movement and population movement.

According to a survey of state conventions conducted by the HMB's evangelism section, only nine of the 33 state or multi-state Baptist conventions recorded increases in baptisms. The gains, made primarily in the newer and smaller state organizations, were offset by large declines in many of the established conventions.

Some--such as Virginia and South Carolina--recorded large declines which occurred despite massive denominational evangelistic emphases.

In Texas, where "Good News Texas" featured a media blitz and statewide revivals, a decline of some 2,500 was recorded from the 54,225 in 1976. "The figures are incomplete, and we expect to have about 52,000 baptisms by the time all the churches report," said L. L. Morriss, director of evangelism for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, who was dismayed by the decline. "If we hadn't pulled out all the stops, there's no telling where we would have come out," he said.

South Carolina's director of evangelism, Earl Crumpler, commented: "I wish I could give you an answer to why they declined. I have no concrete answer." South Carolina's baptisms slumped 1,500.

Crumpler continued: "People with strong influence in evangelism say we are in the midst of a spiritual awakening. It seems to me that if this is occurring, results would be more concrete...What we are seeing doesn't substantiate the statement...It's very disheartening to see the number of baptisms decline."

But C. B. Hogue, the Home Mission Board's evangelism section director, said, "I think God is trying to say something to us, but we are like Rip Van Winkle and are sleeping through it. Maybe God is trying to bring spiritual renewal, but we are not involved in it."

Hogue claimed, "God is moving in the United States in ways never seen before... but somehow we have not reached out to become highly involved in it." He noted renewal is occurring in many denominations, and admitted much of the renewal has followed the charismatic movement. However, he said the renewal now is moving in church growth lines.

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"The old line denominations, which have been going down, are coming to an awareness that God is wanting to do something in our time. Southern Baptists seem to be lying under the tree asleep while things are happening out there," he said.

Hogue told the state directors that 1976 statistics reveal 12.5 percent of the SBC churches had no baptisms that year. "Can you imagine that? And not all of them were country churches," he said.

He also noted Sunday School Board estimates for 1977 show declines in resident membership, Sunday School enrollment and church training attendance. Giving, however, increased. "That tells us a great deal about where our emphasis is," he said, adding that declines in resident membership show "a lack of serious church development. What we have is not a generation of New Testament believers but a generation of people who don't know what they really believe."

"There may be a lot of reasons," Hogue continued, "but trying to pinpoint them now would be pure speculation. We will be studying the age statistics when they are available as well as looking at other factors."

Some experts, such as Sunday School Board statistician Jim Lowry, say the reason for the decline may be that "the birth rate decline in the mid-1960s is starting to catch up with us." The number of children ages 6-11 has been steadily declining, and Sunday School enrollment among that age group declined 100,000 from 1973 to 1976, he said.

Hogue added: "A significant part of Baptist life is that we have always baptized children when they reach the age of ability to make decisions about Jesus Christ." He said that in the peak baptism year of 1972, "the bus ministry emphasis was at its highest peak, with a lot of kids being baptized. Children are not as populous as before."

William Pinson, president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Mill Valley, Calif., said: "Part of the reason for the decline in baptisms is demographics. Those who follow demographics know that unless there was a 'humongous' revival, there would be a downturn in baptisms."

Pinson noted that population movement probably affects baptismal numbers. People who moved to traditional Southern Baptist cities in the past were people "with their roots in church," he said. Now, people are moving to the Sunbelt areas from areas which do not have strong church emphases.

"Also, many times when people move from traditional Southern Baptist areas to new areas, they tend to lose their church membership," he said, adding: "We have just got to do a better job than we have ever done before. The days when Baptists had a lot of kids and when the church was the best show in town are gone. We don't have that now."

One evangelism leader, John Havlik of the Home Mission Board's evangelism development department, took issue with the heavy emphasis of baptisms as the "indicator of health and growth" in the convention. "We have made baptisms the only indicator," he charged, proposing that total membership is actually a better indicator than baptisms.

Sunday School Board projections indicate total membership will grow 1.1 percent, recording 13,064,754 in 1977 as compared in 12,922,605 in the previous year. "Baptisms reflect evangelistic zeal. Total membership is like sales and baptisms are like profits," said Havlik.

Hogue noted there are many prospects in the nation for evangelistic outreach, estimating 136 million Americans profess no faith in Jesus Christ. "The key to baptism levels is at the feet of the pastor. He must be challenged, motivated and equipped to do the job. More, he must do it if he expects his people to do it."

The evangelism leader speculated that if the 32,000 pastors would baptize just one person per week, the baptism rate would be 1,664,000 for the coming year. Also, he said: "There are approximately 750,000 Sunday School workers in 34,164 Sunday Schools. If they were responsible for just one baptism per week, that would result in 39 million conversions per year."

Southern Baptists, he said, need to be shocked by the decline in baptisms, and begin to see that responsibility lies within the local church. To stop the decline, Hogue called on the "pastors to practice what they preach...to get off issues and onto their call to win the lost."

He also called on the "laity to be the people of God," and said Mission Service Corps volunteers are not needed to paint churches and more outhouses, but are needed to witness to lost people."

The evangelism leader also called for cooperation on a "national level...working together as team members to get the job done. The need today is for us to get serious about witnessing and winning. But it must be a groundswell from our churches," he said.

**Carter's Pastor Is
Sued For Divorce**

WASHINGTON (BP)--Charles A. Trentham, the pastor of the First Baptist Church here, is being sued for divorce by his wife Nancy.

This will be the second divorce for Trentham, pastor of President Jimmy Carter and his family, and the third for Mrs. Trentham. He was divorced by his first wife after 31 years of marriage while he was pastor of the First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tenn. He has been married to his present wife three and a half years.

Trentham said that he was served the divorce papers on Tuesday, Dec. 13. He conferred immediately with officials in the church. The following evening at the Wednesday prayer meeting, he made the announcement to the church.

When asked about the grounds on which he was being sued for divorce, Trentham said that he had been advised by his attorneys not to discuss the details of the suit.

The pastor was asked about the response of the church. "This church does not shoot its wounded soldiers," Trentham replied. "The members who have talked to me have expressed grief and Christian compassion," he said.

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**Anita Bryant Out
Of Orange Bowl**

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NEW YORK (BP)--Entertainer Anita Bryant, the most familiar face among the hosts and hostesses of holiday parades, will not be hostess of the Miami Orange Bowl Parade, Jan. 1.

Miss Bryant, who has hosted the parade for about eight of the past 10 years, including 1975 and 1976, will be replaced by actress Rita Moreno, recent winner of an Emmy award for her performances with the "Muppets" in children's educational television.

A statement from NBC-TV, the network televising the parade, said, "The choice of a co-host for the Orange Bowl Jamboree is one of many production decisions made each year. The selection of Rita Moreno to fill that role is unrelated to any publicity or controversy about Anita Bryant." Joe Gargiola will co-host the parade along with Moreno.

In another development concerning the Southern Baptist singer who gained national notoriety for her anti-homosexual rights campaign, the Florida Citrus Commission decided that Bryant would be their sole advertising personality during daytime programming. She will command half the Florida citrus commercials during news time and 80 percent of prime time.

The commission, which recently extended Bryant's contract through August 1979, sent her a letter of congratulations for being named the "Most Admired Woman in America" in a poll conducted by Good Housekeeping magazine.

-30-

**Raymond Brown Dies
In Wake Forest**

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WAKE FOREST, N. C. (BP)--Raymond Bryan Brown, distinguished professor of New Testament interpretation at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary here, died Dec. 16 at his home in nearby Raleigh. His only illness had been a slight flu two days before his death.

Brown, 54, was born in Winfield, La. He held the bachelor of arts degree from Louisiana State University, the bachelor of divinity and master of theology degrees from Yale University Divinity School, and the doctor of philosophy degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was a post-doctoral scholar at the University of Tubingen, Germany.

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Previously, Brown taught at the University of Richmond and at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and was a pastor in Virginia before coming to Southeastern Seminary in 1964.

From 1966 to 1974 he served as the seminary's academic dean. After returning to full-time teaching, he was designated by the seminary and his colleagues as distinguished professor of New Testament interpretation, a post he held up to his death.

Brown is survived by his wife, Caralie Nelson Brown, and two daughters, Mrs. Nancye Gay and Helen Anne both of Raleigh, N. C. Funeral services were held at First Baptist Church, Raleigh, N. C., with burial in Richmond, Va.

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Spencer B. King
Died in Atlanta

Baptist Press
12/19/77

ATLANTA (BP)--Spencer B. King Jr., retired chairman of the history department at Mercer University died here, after a long illness. He was 73 years old.

Funeral services were held at Ingleside Baptist Church, Macon, Ga., within interment at Oak Grove Cemetery, Americus, Ga.

King retired in 1973 after a 40 year teaching career--23 of those years as history chairman at Mercer. Early in his career he taught at Mars Hill (N.C.) College and was principal of Fruitland Bible Institute in North Carolina.

Long recognized as one of the leading experts on Civil War history, King wrote five books and numerous articles on Southern history. He received many awards for his writing and research. King had been president of the Southern Baptist Historical Society and several other historical groups.

His father was office manager and later state missions superintendent for the Georgia Baptist Convention. His brother, Bernard D. King, is now administrative assistant to Searcy S. Garrison, executive secretary-treasurer of the Georgia convention.

Other survivors include his widow, Mrs. Carolyn Hall King of Macon, three daughters, one son, four sisters and four grandchildren.

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