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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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78-167

Allen Calls for Prayer  
 As Mideast Talks Resume

By Stan Haste

WASHINGTON (BP)--Jimmy R. Allen, summoned to the White House to witness the ceremonial opening to the new phase of Israeli-Egyptian peace talks, called on Southern Baptists to redouble their prayer efforts for peace in the Middle East.

The Southern Baptist Convention president said President Jimmy Carter wrote him, following his recent appeal for Southern Baptists to pray for the success of the Camp David summit, thanking him for the support. President Carter asked for continued prayer as the implementation of the proposed peace settlement progresses.

Recalling the widespread sense among many Americans of all religious faiths that prayers were answered in the dramatic announcement following Camp David, Allen declared, "The most crucial time...for that prayer intercession is now."

"People of faith with a yearning for peace need to pray for a moving of God to bring about the day of 'swords into plowshares' in the Middle East," the San Antonio pastor continued.

Carter alluded to the role of prayer in his remarks opening the new talks in the East Room of the White House. Representatives of the Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths were present, along with the official diplomatic delegations from the summit meeting nations--Egypt, Israel and the United States.

Washington observers consider the new talks as a major challenge to the eventual implementation of the broad peace plan announced dramatically at the conclusion of the Camp David meetings.

Although Carter made the opening statement on behalf of the United States, the new peace talks will be conducted not by the chiefs of state of the three parties as before, but by foreign affairs specialists from Israel, Egypt, and the United States. The U.S. will participate as a full partner in the conversations, as at Camp David.

U. S. Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and Egyptian Gen. Kamal Hassan Ali, the new defense minister, will head their respective delegations. Other key persons in the day-to-day talks, expected to last at least three weeks, include Alfred L. Atherton Jr., the U. S. State Department's special Middle East envoy, Israel Defense Minister Ezer Weizman, and Egyptian acting Foreign Minister Butros Ghali.

Allen told Baptist Press that the White House ceremony opening the new talks called to memory his first visit to the East Room at the invitation of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 to discuss the issue of racial justice. He recalled that Kennedy shared with the group of religious leaders his conviction that while important legal victories had been won in the struggle for racial equality, the real challenge to the country was to want justice from the heart.

The SBC president expressed the view that now, as then, "the basic battlefield for war or peace lies within the heart." He described as "unique in human history" the "spiritual dimension" of the Camp David peace talks.

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"There's . . . an awareness that the ultimate problem is to see hatred displaced, distrust evaporate, and justice realized," Allen said.

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SBC Will Dedicate 1,000  
Missionaries in Astrodome

Baptist Press  
10/13/78

HOUSTON (BP)--Plans call for some 250,000 persons to witness a service in Houston's Astrodome dedicating some 1,000 missionaries during the Wednesday night program of the 1979 national meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, June 12-14.

Convention planners hope 50,000 persons will come to the Astrodome to participate in the service featuring Evangelist Billy Graham, while another 200,000 view the proceedings by satellite transmissions to a number of U. S. cities.

Negotiations are underway, according to James L. Pleitz, chairman of the SBC Committee on Order of Business, to telecast the program on large screens in at least 10 cities.

Pleitz, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, said such a program would cost Baptists in those localities \$6,500 for the telecast. The cost of beaming the telecast up to the satellite is \$9,000, he added.

The SBC Foreign and Home Mission Boards, joint sponsors of the dedication service of the 1,000 persons entering mission work for one or more years, will underwrite the \$9,000.

The Foreign Mission Board voted in its October meeting to appropriate \$4,500 for that purpose. The Home Mission Board's directors will vote on a similar proposal its October meeting, according to William Tanner, the board's executive director, who said the project has his enthusiastic support. Both agencies will make reports during the service.

The SBC Radio and Television Commission will do the technical work to implement the broadcast, according to SBC President Jimmy R. Allen.

The service will emphasize the SBC's Bold Mission Thrust effort to proclaim the message of Christ to the entire world in this century and dramatically escalate missionary appointees through regular channels of the Home and Foreign Mission Boards, as well as through the SBC's newly formed Mission Service Corps.

The overall theme of the 1979 convention, Pleitz said, will be "Bold Mission--While it is Yet Day." All convention sessions but the one on Wednesday night, June 13, will take place in the Summit in Houston.

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High Court Takes Georgia  
Church Property Conflict

By Stan Hastey

Baptist Press  
10/13/78

WASHINGTON (BP)--The question of whether civil courts may decide local church property disputes is once again before the U. S. Supreme Court.

The court announced that it will decide a case involving disputing factions of a Presbyterian church in Macon, Ga. It is the latest in a series of cases dating to 1872 dealing with church property squabbles.

The specific question facing the high court is whether the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution requires civil courts to defer to the decision of a hierarchical church court concerning which of two competing factions is the "true congregation," and thus entitled to the use and control of the church property.

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The dispute arose in the Vineville Presbyterian Church in May 1973, when the congregation voted 165-94 to withdraw from the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. (southern Presbyterian). Those who voted to withdraw then struck the minority from the church rolls.

In Presbyterian Church polity, each local congregation is governed by its session, which consists generally of the pastor and elected ruling elders. Each session is governed by a presbytery with jurisdiction over several local congregations in a geographic area. The presbytery is governed by a state synod and the synods are governed by the denomination's General Assembly.

According to the denominational "loyalists" in the Vineville congregation, the power to dissolve a church rests with the presbytery, not with the local congregation.

The denomination's Book of Church Order provides for a system of church courts. In the Vineville case, after the congregation voted to withdraw from the denomination, the Augusta-Macon Presbytery appointed a commission to consider the dispute, as provided in the Book of Church Order. The commission issued a written ruling that the minority of 94 constituted the "true congregation."

The majority refused, however, to acknowledge the finding of the commission and turn over access to and control of the church property. The minority then took the majority to court.

In September 1977, the Superior Court of Bibb County ruled that the local congregation, not the denomination, holds legal title to church property, thus ruling for the majority in the Vineville church. The Georgia Supreme Court affirmed the lower court in April of this year.

In appealing to the nation's high court, the Vineville minority argued that a series of decisions since 1872 upholds their position that civil courts must defer to the judgments of church courts in such cases. The other side argues that church property disputes must be seen a different light than disputes involving doctrinal matters.

Two years ago, the high court ruled that a dissident Serbian Eastern Orthodox bishop, defrocked by his denomination, could not sue in the civil courts to retain control of church property in his diocese. Both sides in the Macon dispute cite that case to support their positions, the minority arguing that their denomination controls the Vineville property, while the majority holds that since no doctrinal issue is directly involved the property dispute is subject to state laws.

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Seminary Extension  
Enrollments Double

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--More than 10,000 persons studied Southern Baptist Seminary Extension curriculum during 1977-78, a jump of almost 20 percent over the previous year and a 100 percent increase since 1972-73.

Record high statistics, reflected in all categories in the year-end report just released by the Nashville-based Seminary Extension Department, showed 10,477 students enrolled in one or more of the theologically oriented courses offered by the department, compared to 8,777 the year before and 4,933 five years earlier. The number of Seminary Extension centers reported reached 340, exceeding the previous record of 328.

Operated as an arm of the six Southern Baptist theological seminaries, Seminary Extension provides pastors and lay church leaders with opportunities to continue their education for ministry. Students may choose from more than 40 college-level courses, 15 simplified courses, and a variety of informal personal study programs.

In 1977-78, the department, working with Baptist associations and other local groups to provide theological education, enrolled 8,352 persons in centers and 2,125 through its Home Study Institute. Seminary Extension operated centers in 39 states last year and enrolled home study students from 48 states. Additional enrollments came from the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and 21 foreign countries.

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North Carolina continued to lead all other state Baptist conventions during 1977-78 in its number of centers and students. Sixty-one centers operated in the state last year, with 1,944 students, and another 129 enrolled in home study.

Florida experienced the most dramatic growth of any state in its Seminary Extension work. The number of centers in Florida doubled, going from 13 to 26. The number of students jumped from 378 to 941.

Strong growth also was reported in several "pioneer" states where Baptist work is relatively young. Michigan reported 10 Seminary Extension centers, compared to 4 the year before, with a better than 60 percent increase in number of students. Indiana had 50 percent more centers and students. West Virginia's students went from 116 in 1976-77 to 167 last year.

Raymond M. Rigdon, department director, noted that the growth in Seminary Extension enrollment corresponds with an upward trend in all of Southern Baptists' theological institutions. "It also is in line with the spiraling interest in adult continuing education in all fields throughout the United States," he added.

"Many of our students have never been able to participate in a resident program at one of our seminaries," Rigdon said, "but Seminary Extension's learning resources help them to better equip themselves for a more effective ministry."

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SBC Hotels 40  
Percent Full

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Over 40 percent of about 6,500 rooms available in 34 hotels under contract for the 1979 Southern Baptist Convention in Houston are already full, according to convention manager, Tim Hedquist.

Hedquist, assistant to the treasurer and director of financial planning for the SBC Executive Committee, said nine of the 34 are already completely full. Most reservations have been made by individuals, he added, noting that no more block reservations are available in the hotels.

He said four hotels near The Summit, where convention sessions will be held, June 12-14, have plenty of room. They are the Astro Village Hotel, the Downtown Holiday Inn, the Shamrock Hilton, and the headquarters hotel, the Hyatt Regency.

The full hotels are the Allen Park Inn, Albert Pick Motor Inn, Executive Red Carpet Inn, Holiday Inn--Central, La Quinta Inn--Greenway Plaza, Ramada Inn--Greenway Plaza, Stouffer's--Greenway Plaza, Travelodge Tower, and Holiday Inn--West Loop.

The local arrangements committee, Hedquist said, is making arrangements for adequate bus transportation to the hotels, all within four miles of The Summit.

He urged Southern Baptists wishing adequate accommodations to contact their state Baptist executive secretary or the housing information office at the Executive Committee for the computer forms necessary to process room applications. Forms will also be available in the Nov., 1978, issue of "The Baptist Program."

The Houston Housing Bureau, he said, will not take reservations by telephone.

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**NEWS SERVICE OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION**