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Pastor's Refugee Support  
Grows Romanian Church

By Jim Newton

LOS ANGELES (BP)--Petru Popovici knows almost every corridor and gate at Los Angeles International Airport by heart.

Whenever a plane lands bringing a refugee or immigrant family from Romania, Popovici, pastor of the Romanian Baptist Church in Los Angeles, is almost sure to be there to greet them.

Chances are good he'll take them to his home in the Bellflower section of Los Angeles, or to an apartment he has rented for them. He'll also stock their pantry with food, their home with furniture, and help the husband find a job.

Popovici has sponsored hundreds of refugees and immigrants from Romania--so many that he's lost count of the number. Pressed for an estimate, he replies modestly that of the 120 members of his church, all but six families are immigrants or refugees he has sponsored.

Indeed, sponsorship of refugee and immigrant families has been one of the major methods of evangelism used by Popovici, and by his brother, Alexa, who is pastor of the Romanian Baptist Church in Chicago.

Twelve years ago, the Popovici brothers fled from Romania where both had been "dismissed" as pastors because they opposed a regulation restricting the times Baptist churches could meet for worship. They went first to Chicago. Four years later, Petru went to Los Angeles where he suffered less from his chronic bronchitis.

Within a few months, he had started a Bible study that eventually grew into the city's only Romanian Baptist Church. Until last summer, they met at the First Baptist Church of Maywood, but overcrowded conditions forced them to find their own building. Popovici mortgaged his own house to help raise the \$30,000 down payment.

With loan payments of \$840 a month for the building, there is barely enough offerings to pay Popovici's meager salary and the cost of three weekly radio programs, broadcast not only in Los Angeles, but beamed into Romania via Trans World Radio and Radio Free Europe.

"We are a poor church, but we are a missionary church," Popovici said.

When in Romania two summers ago for a visit, he discovered that at least 12 Baptist churches had been organized by new converts who became Christians as a result of listening to the radio broadcasts he produces.

He said while there is more religious freedom there now than in 1967, many of the meetings of Baptists in Romania are unauthorized. But the people "are on fire, praise God," Popovici said. Most of the applications from new congregations are not approved, because the government wants to close churches, not open new ones, he said.

Sponsoring refugees and immigrants, Popovici has discovered, is the most effective evangelistic method.

"Just today, someone called and asked if I could sponsor a woman from Romania who has 10 children," he said. "It's a difficult thing, but we will try."

Popovici is the only member of the church who has been a sponsor and he uses his own money. "It isn't easy to be a sponsor," he observed. "You have to get them a place to live, a job, a Social Security number, food."

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He is convinced, however, that if he is able financially to sponsor more immigrants and refugees, he will be able to win more to Christ and increase membership in the church.

"They know I am willing to be a sponsor because I am a Christian, and because I love God," he said. "I love them, they love me and they see the love of God in our church.

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Adapted from the March 1979 World Mission Journal.

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#### Woman's Savings Bring Prisoners Bible Courses

ATLANTA (BP)--Cornelia Vann traded a 14-room home in North Carolina's mountains for a one-room apartment in an Atlanta retirement home.

She also traded \$2,000 in hard-earned cash for correspondence Bible courses for prisoners.

Five years ago--at age 85--Mrs. Vann talked with Carl Hart, director of the chaplaincy division of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta about her desire to share some savings.

Somehow, prisoners and prison ministries kept creeping into the conversation. Mrs. Vann saw prisoners for the first time as a young girl in Texas.

Then in North Carolina, while married, teaching school and rearing a daughter, Mrs. Vann employed a household helper with a young son, John.

John often was picked on by other boys. One day the boys jumped on John. But it was another boy who got hurt. He died the next day.

"John didn't have a lawyer. They sent him to the penitentiary," Mrs. Vann explained. She visited John in prison and finally secured his release. She still keeps in touch with the family.

Their names are among the many listed in the spiral notebook that contains her prayer list...right down the page from Billy Graham and Carl Hart.

Mrs. Vann, who taught at Mars Hill College in North Carolina for 40 years until she retired in 1961 as head of the modern languages department, decided prison ministries--especially scholarships for correspondence Bible courses--was the place to designate her gift.

She put her \$2,000 into a long term investment trust fund. The interest--about \$150 a year--provides courses through Seminary Extension for prisoners recommended by a Southern Baptist chaplain, who cannot otherwise afford them. Courses are \$15 to \$25 each.

Seminary Extension, a department of the six Southern Baptist seminaries, is one of only three religious institutional programs accepted by the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council. It offers courses in numerous subjects on simplified and college levels. Some courses are available in Spanish.

Mrs. Vann admitted the needs of prisoners seem overwhelming. "I only wish my gift was more," she said. "People don't usually care anything about prisoners. Mighty few have any love for them at all."

But with her gift, Mrs. Vann proved her love.

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(BP) photos mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta Bureau of Baptist Press.

Radio-TV Commission  
Leader Stevens Retires

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--Paul M. Stevens confirmed reports that he would leave the presidency of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission by publicly announcing his early retirement following several executive sessions of the agency's trustees.

Stevens, commission president and chief executive officer since 1953, will retire Oct. 31, 1979, shortly after his 64th birthday. But, effective immediately, Harold E. Martin, executive vice president, will assume complete administrative and operational authority over the commission. He joined the commission in October 1978 and is former trustee chairman of the agency.

Stevens, who will remain on salary until his retirement, said he will devote the remainder of his time with the Radio and Television Commission "in the critical area of development."

Trustee Chairman Ray Scroggins of Houston said a search committee, headed by Frederick W. Isaacs Jr. of Knoxville, Tenn., is seeking suggestions from Southern Baptists about who the successor should be.

Scroggins, who praised Stevens' work in making the commission into a broadcast leader, said, "Some years ago trustees initiated plans toward providing a retirement policy of approximately 60 percent of his salary at retirement. This retirement policy is still under study because of his early retirement and will possibly be announced following the October trustees meeting." Stevens salary is \$45,234.

Scroggins told the "Baptist Standard," Texas Baptist newspaper, in an interview following the series of executive sessions by the trustees, that the trustees are opening themselves to "introspective questioning" about the commission's direction. He said the trustees have come "to a new realization of the magnitude of the responsibility of being trustees for an agency of the Southern Baptist Convention and the realization that the trustees must fulfill their responsibility in trust for people who elected them--Southern Baptists, the Southern Baptist Convention, the rank and file membership of various states in our convention."

He said the trustees are dealing with criticisms of the agency and its leadership to explore ways the commission may serve the denomination.

The search committee, besides Isaacs, consists of John E. Hughes, pastor, First Baptist Church, Independence, Mo.; George Miller, member, Miller and Spencer Law Firm, Oklahoma City, Okla.; Jess P. Odom, president, Jess Odom Enterprises Incorporated, North Little Rock, Ark.; and Franklin A. Perry, pastor, First Baptist Church, Laurel, Md. Isaacs is president of Athletic Association Incorporated and sports consultant for Colgate/Palmolive Company, Knoxville.

A search committee had functioned for a period after Stevens told the trustees two years ago that he anticipated retirement. It was reactivated last October at Stevens' encouragement, Scroggins said.

Stevens, who said he had been suffering considerable back pain growing out of a World War II injury, said his future activities will "certainly include a continued deep interest in the public affairs of Fort Worth, which has been so good to me and to the Radio and Television Commission." He held out the possibility that he might seek public office in Fort Worth and would seek to organize a coalition of denominational communications leaders to bring pressure against persons and organizations abusing the field of religious broadcasting.

He became chief executive of the then tiny agency in Atlanta in 1953, after the death of its first director, Samuel Lowe. The agency moved to Fort Worth in 1955.

Today the commission staff numbers 125. The Radio and Television Commission building has been built and a new addition--the Paul M. Stevens International Communications Center--was dedicated in 1977.

The commission produces 32 radio and television programs in 10 languages, heard 4,357 times every week on 3,275 stations across the country. In addition, Baptists are represented regularly on ABC, NBC, and CBS television networks.

The annual Abe Lincoln Awards, created by Stevens, has attracted countless broadcast leaders to Fort Worth and has made the Baptist name prominent in the industry. Stevens has created such commission radio programs as MasterControl, Country Crossroads, and Powerline. Powerline, for teenagers, is on 1,048 stations across the country. The commission believes it is the largest syndicated show in the world.

Stevens has served as pastor of churches in Ada, Okla.; Wharton, Texas; and Bolivar, Texas; associate pastor of churches in Texas and Kentucky; and U. S. Air Force chaplain.

Winner of many civic, religious and broadcast awards, he is a graduate of Baylor University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and attended Mississippi College and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Baylor University, William Jewell College and Mississippi College have all granted him honorary doctorates.

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Illinois Baptist Works  
Share Large Bequest

Baptist Press  
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DONGOLA, Ill. (BP)--Mrs. Homer M. (Verna) Hinkle has left a bequest of about \$825,000 to be divided equally between the Union County Hospital in Anna, Ill., and the Baptist Children's Home in Carmi, Ill.

Mrs. Hinkle was the former Verna Ausbrook who died Feb. 26, 1978 in Taylorville, Ill., at age 89. Her father was a doctor in the Dongola, Ill., area and her deceased husband owned an insurance firm.

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Wood Denounces Government  
Intrusion In Church Affairs

WASHINGTON (BP)--Calling government intervention in religion "the dominant trend" in U. S. church-state relations, James E. Wood Jr., executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, denounced government attempts to control the churches.

Wood told participants at the Lutheran Consultation on the Nature of the Church and its Relationship with Government that government intervention in church affairs is "a serious threat both to the prophetic role of religion and to the constitutional guarantee of the free exercise of religion."

He noted that current efforts to regulate the lobbying activities of religious groups, to provide a tuition tax credit for students at parochial schools, to investigate religious "cults," and to impose Internal Revenue Service regulations on tax exemption of schools and other church agencies violate the "right of the church to be free of accountability to and control by the state."

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