



May 29, 1979

79-87

Conventions Spotlight
Porter Routh's Career

By Norman Jameson

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Porter Routh runs his finger down a list of Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting locations like an electronic scanner reading computer tape.

His finger, programmed to stimulate recall of what Routh considered the most significant events at the annual meetings, stops at 1939, Oklahoma City, the beginning of his incredible string of attendance at 40 consecutive Southern Baptist Convention annual meetings. He covered that one as a newspaper reporter for the local Daily Oklahoman.

In the succeeding 39 years, Routh attended the meetings as a denominational employee. Houston marks his 28th and last as executive secretary-treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee.

Now Routh, who has been executive secretary-treasurer longer than both the previous office holders combined, stops at 1949, again Oklahoma City. R. G. Lee, SBC president, surrenders the gavel to oppose a motion that would prevent anyone related to a city, state or national council of churches from serving on any SBC board. The convention sustains him, defeating the motion.

"That was a very dramatic moment," Routh recalls, "because certainly Dr. Lee was known to be very conservative theologically, but he did not feel that Baptists should not have anything to do with any others. There were many areas where they could have common concern. This did not mean, of course, we were going into the National Council of Churches or anything like that, but it did mean a man could not be disenfranchised because of his relationship to a local pastors' conference."

--1954, St. Louis. The convention, at the urging of J. B. Weatherspoon, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, goes on record in support of the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation.

--1963, Kansas City. Messengers affirm seminaries and adopt the statement of Baptist Faith and Message.

--1964, Atlantic City. Southern and American Baptists meet at same time, then with National Baptists and others in Baptist Jubilee Advance, 150 years after the Triennial Convention in 1814.

--1968, Houston. Messengers adopt statement on the racial crisis in the nation. It leaves race relations to individual churches, but states the convention would not deny fellowship with churches because of race.

--1976, Norfolk. Bold Mission Thrust is launched in what Routh calls the "high hour in the life of the convention."

Annual meetings are a significant part of the life of Southern Baptist Convention employees, especially for those on the staff of the Executive Committee which is charged with carrying out the mandate of the messengers between sessions. Routh expresses confidence in the annual sit-down business meeting. But he is concerned that as the volume of business increases and the number of messengers grows, time is not taken to get full information and a decision may be made without everyone getting a chance to be heard on an issue.

"One of the concerns I have is that you have fewer than a third, perhaps, of the SBC pastors at the convention," Routh says. "You have only an infinitesimal representation of lay persons. So whether or not the action of the convention really represents the total Baptist fellowship is always a real concern."

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"I think most of the time it does, it's usually a fair sample. The majority vote in the convention doesn't necessarily mean that it's the will of God. It's the only way we have to make decisions, but we ought to always take time to listen to the voice of the minorities."

Routh has seen the convention vote strongly on one side of an issue, then reverse itself shortly thereafter. For example, in 1953 messengers resolved that ministers should have the option to participate in Social Security, when in 1950 they said participation violated traditional tenets of separation of church and state.

Routh is sure that Southern Baptists' confidence in the structure, mission and leadership of the SBC remains strong. He cited as an example a man who willed his entire estate to the SBC, saying "I have confidence that the SBC will know better how to use these resources to the glory of God than any other organization to which I could leave them."

"This gives me cause for concern because you can't help but pray, O God, we must never do anything to destroy this kind of confidence," Routh says. "We must never do anything to make Southern Baptists feel this confidence is misplaced."

He states unhesitatingly that apathy is the greatest obstacle to the Bold Mission Thrust goal of presenting the gospel to everyone in the world by the year 2000 and to the continued growth of the SBC.

"I'm concerned in terms of stewardship, but the big problem is in terms of our willingness to give the time and the compassionate, caring concern necessary to show people that we really care for them," he says. "The most meaningful kind of evangelism today is evangelism through what someone has called the caring community. My concern is not just for others, but for myself, that I'll be willing to give the time it takes to demonstrate this kind of compassion and concern."

Routh has several concerns from the perspective of a second generation Baptist leader, among them the drop in baptisms, the slowing growth rate and the growing percentage of non-resident membership, what he calls a good Baptist term for the non-involved.

"Someone jokingly made the observation several years ago, when our growth rate was higher, that before long there would be more Southern Baptists than there were people," Routh says. Now, he says, that's no longer true. "We need to find new, innovative ways of discovering through self giving, how to reflect the spirit of Christ in our lives."

Routh has not just seen Southern Baptists grow up, he has been in position during the boom years to help facilitate that growth. When he became executive secretary in 1951, Southern Baptists had 7.3 million members in 28,289 churches who gave \$37.2 million to missions.

Today there are 13.1 million members in 35,400 churches in all 50 states. Last year they gave \$105.3 million to world missions.

Routh and his wife, Ruth, have scheduled teaching semesters at four Southern Baptist seminaries in the next two years. He will teach courses in denominational heritage, administration, and crises and controversy.

Routh, a man not given to self-acclaim, comes by his humility honestly. He remembers that as a child attending the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meetings with his father, E. C. Routh, editor of the Texas Baptist Standard, people would argue about who was the ugliest preacher in the state, E. C. Routh, or preacher T. V. Neal.

The dubious title probably never was resolved, but it sure made Routh wonder when folks would pat him on the head and say, "Yup, you look just like your father."

He credits his wife and children with helping make his work and frequent separations easier. Where some marriages disintegrate because of the demands of denominational work, the Rouths celebrate their 43rd wedding anniversary June 7.

Let's see, that means they were married the year the convention was in St. Louis...



BAPTIST PRESS

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Escapee Helped By Church Finally Gains Freedom

By Judy Touchton

ATLANTA (BP)--A 65-year-old prison escapee, befriended by Oakhurst Baptist Church last fall, is now officially free.

Mosie Alfred Harriell, convicted of killing a policeman in Wabash, Ind., in 1943, escaped 10 years ago from an Indiana prison work detail. He was discovered through routine Social Security paperwork in Atlanta, where he had lived for 10 years under the name of Charles Harris. He worked as a carpenter and was married to an Atlanta woman.

Harriell, described by doctors as "living on borrowed time" because of a heart condition, asthma and diabetes, received formal notification in May that the extradition request from Indiana has been withdrawn.

Oakhurst's 250-member congregation voted last August, after reading of Harris' plight in local papers, to offer their church building in Decatur, an Atlanta suburb, as security for a \$30,000 bond for his freedom--even though he is not Baptist and does not consider himself a Christian.

The congregation felt the 10 years he lived with a clean record proved him at least somewhat a changed man.

The building was never officially used as security. A bail bondsman offered to accept half the normal fee for the bond and church members made up the difference--a little more than \$400--between the needed \$750 and the amount collected by friends and neighbors of the Harrises.

Oakhurst's former associate pastor, Mike Weaver, visited Harris in jail several times. John Nichol, former Oakhurst pastor, was with Harris the day bond was made, freeing him until his extradition hearing.

Weaver explained the church probably had no direct impact on the recent decision by Indiana's governor to withdraw the request for extradition.

However, the church membership and others in the Christian Council of Metro Atlanta, an ecumenical group, gathered hundreds of names on petitions asking extradition be waived.

Through a Baptist doctor, Harris was provided six days free medical attention at Georgia Baptist Hospital and through the work of Oakhurst members, Decatur Mayor Ann Crichton became involved in the fight for Harris' freedom, lending her political support.

Weaver admitted he could not tell if the efforts made a difference to government officials.

"In fact, the petitions were never delivered to Indiana," he said. "But I think the fact that in August or September we didn't just roll over and say, 'Gee, it would have been nice to help him,' but instead we got involved...made a difference..."

"One of the lessons for me was clear," Weaver said. "Just when I'm ready to get down on big unwieldy governments and politicians, when I think the world is going to pieces and nobody's caring, you find one or two people here and there...a sympathetic ear at the political scene or a government office...I learned you never give up."

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"Even though Oakhurst offered to put up its building and had 200 people behind it (helping Harris), it couldn't have happened if we had closed our minds to ecumenism and the value of cooperation and perserverance in the political arena," he said.

"Those two things belong in the kingdom, and in this case, those two things (ecumenism and political involvement,) have prospered us, and fortunately, prospered the Harrises."

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Law May Cost Missionaries
\$1 Million a Year in Tax

Baptist Press
5/29/79

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--A 1978 Congressional act that may cost Southern Baptist missionaries as much as \$1 million annually in federal income taxes is causing concern at the Foreign Mission Board.

The Foreign Earned Income Act of 1978 eliminates a provision which previously excluded income up to \$20,000 for U.S. citizens working for charitable and religious organizations and living in foreign countries. The provision had covered all missionaries under appointment by the board who qualified as bona fide residents of foreign countries.

But starting with the 1979 taxable year, missionaries' income will be subject to taxation, according to Sidney C. Reber, director of the board's management services division. Even with new deductions which would be allowed under the act, Reber estimates that several hundred thousand dollars (perhaps approaching \$1 million) in additional tax will be imposed on the missionaries' 1979 income.

"We believe that Congress did not intend for this act to present a hardship for public charities and religious organizations," said Reber. "We believe it must have been an oversight."

Because missionary salaries are based on a minimum support figure, the board has appointed a special subcommittee to study the situation and determine if the board can help missionaries with the taxes. But with budget figures already tight, additional expenses of this possible magnitude could force some overseas programs to be reduced or eliminated.

The board committee has urged Southern Baptists to ask their congressmen to support legislation that would restore the previous income exclusion provisions for employees of public charities and religious organizations.

Members of the board's committee are: Joe N. McKeever of Mississippi, chairman; Mrs. Lucile S. Alexander of Florida; and John W. Patterson, Robert B. Bass, J. Roy Clifford and V. Allen Gaines, all of Virginia.

Another group working on the problem is the American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service, Inc., an association of major charitable organizations. Lawyers for the group have prepared a presentation in support of a proposed amendment to the new tax law.

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Grand Canyon Players
Lose Court Bid To Play

Baptist Press
5/29/79

PHOENIX, Ariz. (BP)--Grand Canyon College baseball players, kept home because of a rule violation, failed in their attempt to get a state court to force the school to send them to the NAIA world series.

The school, owned and operated by the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention, refused to send its top-ranked team to the tournament in Nashville after a picture appeared in local newspapers of the players celebrating their last victory by pouring champagne over their heads. Rules in the Grand Canyon student handbook prohibit the possession or use of alcoholic beverages by students.

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The National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics quickly chose David Lipscomb College, Nashville, Tenn., to replace Grand Canyon in the eight-team tournament. Lipscomb was the 1977 NAIA champion and this year's Area 5 runner-up.

The court ruled the case moot because the tournament field was full when the players brought suit.

Negative reaction to Grand Canyon's withdrawal was so threatening that school president Bill Williams lived away from his home several days as a precautionary measure. The student body president, who sided with the administration's decision, was blocked in his car and threatened with injury to himself and damage to his car.

Williams said comment now has swung in support of the school, with major daily newspapers in Arizona editorializing in favor, Arizona Baptist churches overwhelmingly supportive and Jack Johnson, incoming executive secretary of the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention, also supportive.

The NAIA must review possible sanctions against the school at its next executive committee session in June, but it's unlikely action will be taken since its published guidelines commit it to support member bodies' administrative policies.

Williams said seven of the leading lawyers in Phoenix represented players in court. On a local talk show, one of the lawyers indicated he was contacted by a player's mother and after discussion with Grand Canyon baseball coach Dave Brazell, decided to represent the players.

Brazell, coach at Grand Canyon for 28 years, told a newspaper reporter in Nashville, where he went as a member of the NAIA baseball rules committee and of the national tournament committee, that the punishment was too harsh.

He insisted that none of the players actually drank the champagne, but only poured it over their heads in a show for the photographer. "I have taken the side of the players because it (the celebration) was done so innocently," he said.

Williams said after much discussion, he and his advisors felt, on the basis of past behavior, they could not be sure the players' conduct in Nashville would be any more consistent with school policy than it was following their win that earned a berth in the world series.

One-third of the pastors in Arizona Southern Baptist churches are graduates of Grand Canyon, according to Williams. He said they are familiar with the strong athletic emphasis at the school and are "glad action has finally been taken to put the athletic emphasis in proper perspective with the total school objectives."

Earlier, athletic administrator Bill Estes said the players' action "damages us as a Christian institution and hurts our witness as athletes."

Grand Canyon has won their district in baseball seven of the last 11 years and their area four years, earning berths in the NAIA world series. They were national champions in basketball twice in the past four years.

This year's baseball team was ranked No. 1 all year and finished the season 58-10. Grand Canyon, competing in the framework of the NAIA, governing body for small college athletics, schedules and frequently defeats national powerhouses like Arizona, Arizona State and Oklahoma which annually make the NCAA world series a family affair.

On a brighter note, Williams said a faculty member and a student reported they each won a stranger to the Christian faith as a direct result of discussions stemming from the news around Grand Canyon's decision. Many others reported witness opportunities.

Grandmother Enters College To Prepare For Mission Field

JACKSON, Tenn. (BP)--Irene Morris, a 59-year-old grandmother, is earning a college degree so she can support herself as a volunteer missionary.

Mrs. Morris's life-long dream to be a missionary was hindered by the Great Depression more than 40 years ago. But when she graduates in two years from Union University, she'll take an active part in Bold Mission Thrust, the Southern Baptist Convention goal to present the gospel to everyone by the year 2000.

"I would have studied to be a missionary when I was 18 if I could have afforded the education but I couldn't because of the depression," she says. "There was no spare money around our family and not much to be borrowed in 1937. But I didn't let the times hinder my service to the Lord--I just served where I was and became active in the Woman's Missionary Union and began teaching Sunday School classes in my home church."

Following her husband's death in 1973, Mrs. Morris's youngest brother encouraged her to enter college to pursue the dream of her youth. She enrolled at Union in 1977.

"The first two weeks in college, students thought I was an instructor so they were rather quiet around me," she says. "But after I began to show up in their religion, English and math classes, they began to get curious and ask questions. When they found out why I was here they all seemed to respond with the same expression: 'Hey, that's neat.'"

Determined not to miss classes even in winter, Mrs. Morris shoveled knee-deep snow last year to get her car out of the garage. After that strenuous workout she would begin the 28-mile trip from her home in Atwood to the Baptist college in Jackson. "I've been lucky this year, though, and only had to dig my car out once due to the mild winter," she adds.

Originally, she wanted to serve overseas but did not qualify under the guidelines set by the Foreign Mission Board. Then she offered herself to the Home Mission Board, which was happy to consider her for the recently-organized Mission Service Corps, a plan to put 5,000 volunteers beside career missionaries by 1982.

"I was not disappointed in being unable to serve overseas after a home missionary showed me, first hand, the great influence foreign religions are having on American society today," Mrs. Morris explains. "What is the benefit of helping win the world's lost if we lose our own homefront?"

She spent the summer of 1977 in Idaho teaching Vacation Bible School classes and adult study courses. There home missionary Leo Sullivan showed her the Buddhist and other pagan temples slowly appearing in the community. "I was suddenly convinced for the clear need for Mission Service Corps volunteers," she says.

The following summer she taught Vacation Bible School and adult classes at Osage Indian Baptist Church in Pawhuska, Okla. Under the leadership of pastor Raymond Redcorn, a full-blooded Osage Indian, she was Vacation Bible School principal on an eight-member team.

Because of her age, the Home Mission Board cannot support her as a full-time missionary so she is seeking a college degree to help her earn a livelihood. She plans on teaching school for a vocation and using her private hours and summers entirely for mission work.

"This way the Home Mission Board can assign me to an area where my talents are needed, yet I'll be entirely self-supporting," she explains.

She has a strong desire to train leaders in new work associations, teaching methods and Bible study courses.

"This is how I can best serve the Lord with the talent he has given me," she says. I would encourage anyone who is in a similar situation to strongly consider offering themselves to the Mission Service Corps. There is a tremendous need for volunteers to reach our nation for Christ."