



BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Migrant Workers Labor In 'Virtual Slavery'

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--More than one million migrant and seasonal farmworkers who scratch out a sub-poverty level living in America's fields are a "minority of minorities," many of whom suffer under "virtual slavery."

That's the evaluation of David R. Currie, special projects coordinator for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the Christian Life Commission, after an extensive study of farmworkers which included a recent fact-finding tour of migrant camps in North Carolina.

The migrant workers' plight has been largely overlooked by the religious community, said Currie, who is working for the two agencies in a special two-year program to help coordinate Christian social action and ministries.

Southern Baptists, he said, possess the resources to ease the economic, social and spiritual burdens of the farmworkers who migrate near their communities every year. But to transform potential into ministry, Southern Baptists must first become aware of the farmworkers' unique problems, Currie said.

"The facts about farmworkers," he stressed, "speak for themselves":

--The "average" seasonal and migrant farmworker is less than 25 years old and has a sixth grade education.

--The average annual income from all sources for a farmworker is less than \$4000, far below the federally-established "poverty line." The 1979 "poverty line" is \$7,160 for a family of four, according to U.S. government calculations.

--Furthermore, under a "crewleader" system, a farmworker often takes home less than \$25 a week after the crewleader takes money "off the top" of his wages and makes deductions for food and housing.

--Housing, often provided by the farm owner or the "grower" on or near the property being farmed, is "usually substandard and sometimes deplorable."

--Studies have ranked farm work as the third most dangerous occupation in the United States. Although statistics are difficult to document, a federal Food and Drug Administration report estimated that approximately 800 to 1,000 field workers die and another 80,000 are injured annually as a result of pesticide poisoning.

--According to a government study, farmworkers have the poorest physical and mental health of any group in the U.S. Their average life expectancy is 49 years, compared to a national average of 72 years.

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Once such facts are understood, Currie said, the local church must "do some soul-searching" about its purpose and priorities.

"If a church's primary goals are rapid growth in membership and budget, then migrant ministry is not an option," Currie explained. "The standard criteria for evaluating 'success' won't apply to migrant ministries. The church must understand its role as servant to minister effectively to these people."

Secondly, he added, the church must overcome the barriers of racial and social prejudice which "limit our ministry to 'helping our own kind.'"

After the church has dealt honestly with these issues, the possibilities for effective ministry to migrant and seasonal farmworkers are "practically endless," Currie believes. An abbreviated list of needed programs includes worship, recreation, Bible schools, health services, transportation, literacy classes and halfway houses for workers who want to "settle down."

Finally, Currie urged Southern Baptists to press for better and fairer laws to protect farmworkers, to call for existing laws to be strictly enforced, and to "work to see that farmworkers enjoy the same rights as other American workers."

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Ohio Baptists
Elect Tal Bonham

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (BP)--Tal D. Bonham, director of evangelism for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma since 1973, will succeed Ray E. Roberts as executive secretary-treasurer of the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio.

Bonham, 45, will join the Ohio convention staff, Jan. 2, 1980, as executive secretary-elect. He will assume Roberts's duties on April 1, and Roberts, who will reach age 65 in June, will serve as a consultant to the convention until his retirement on June 30.

Roberts, Ohio's first and only executive secretary since its formation as a state convention in January 1954, volunteered to relinquish his duties three months ahead of his retirement date in view of the early selection of Bonham by the Ohio executive board.

Roberts, who first came to Ohio in 1952 from a pastorate in Danville, Ky., to organize mission work, was given a standing tribute by the board.

A native of Cordell, Okla., Bonham is a graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, and earned bachelor of divinity and doctor of theology degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

During college and seminary years, Bonham was pastor of several churches in Oklahoma. Then he was pastor of First Baptist Church, Marlow, Okla., 1960-64, and of South Side Baptist Church, Pine Bluff, Ark., 1964-73.

While in Arkansas he served as both president of the state Baptist executive board and president of the state convention. In 1973, he served on the resolutions committee at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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(BP) photo will be mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Oklahoma Baptist Messenger.

Registration Irregularity
Investigation Due. Sept. 17

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee will receive a report on Sept. 17 of the investigation of alleged registration irregularities at the 1979 annual meeting of the SBC in Houston.

SBC Registration Secretary Lee Porter, instructed by a vote of SBC messengers to conduct the investigation, said he will suggest that the Executive Committee hear the report at its September 1979 meeting in Nashville, study it, and take any action it deems necessary at its February 1980 meeting.

Asked about the progress of the investigation, Porter said, "I'm trying to conduct it with the highest integrity and not release information piecemeal. It would be extremely premature at this time to report any findings or draw any conclusions."

He said he has received letters from Southern Baptists since the Houston meeting with information about irregularities, and he urged other Southern Baptists to communicate similar information.

"If any one has information of registration or voting irregularities," Porter said, "they may write me so that I can use that information in compiling my report." His address is MSN 175, Baptist Sunday School Board, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn., 37234.

Thus far, he said, he has been conducting a state by state check of all registration cards, specifically watching for double registrations and churches registering more messengers than constitutionally allowable.

"I am also spot checking with some churches to verify the election of their messengers in keeping with constitutional provisions," he said.

Porter said earlier during the SBC meeting in June that he had planned to make an exhaustive study of registration even before the convention passed a motion requesting the study.

"I feel that a quick preliminary survey (of registration) raised enough questions in my mind that I felt that I must make a detailed study," he said then.

James Varner, local registration chairman for the Houston SBC and pastor of Houston's Woodhaven Baptist Church, made the motion for the investigation.

Porter said some messengers turned in handwritten notes with their ballots at the SBC warning convention leaders of irregularities.

During the convention there were allegations of churches with more messengers than allowed, some double registration, multiple voting of ballots by individuals, and individuals registering for groups of people.

At the present time, the SBC constitution and bylaws are unclear as to whether messengers may register or cast ballots for other legally constituted messengers. But it is clear that only legally elected messengers, who are members of the church by which they are elected, may register and vote. No provision exists for alternate messengers to either register or vote.

SBC Should Have Woman
President Sullivan Says

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--"The Southern Baptist Convention ought to have some women presidents," declared James L. Sullivan at a Baptist Heritage Conference at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

Sullivan's comment came during a discussion of "balancing efficiency and freedom in the SBC" at the conference sponsored by the SBC Historical Commission.

The former SBC president and retired president of the SBC Sunday School Board also proposed a voluntary one-year term for convention presidents and called for the election of ordained ministers and laypersons on an alternating basis. Sullivan served only one term as SBC president in 1977, deciding not to be renominated for a traditional second term.

Observing that the Southern Baptist Convention is not a church, Sullivan indicated that the issue of women pastors, opposed by many Southern Baptists, is not involved in the issue of women serving as presidents of the SBC.

Reflecting on checks and balances in convention life, Sullivan said the office of SBC president "is not a position of power. If a man gets elected president, thinking he has power to straighten things out in the convention, he is mistaken...Southern Baptists have never given any individual a position of power," he said, "and they are not going to... In our processes we have to keep the power spread out in the masses."

He further stated that the presidency "is a position of influence, but it is not a position of authority...The one place where he might express himself authoritatively is in the appointment of committees, but he can't control the decisions of the committees when they meet."

Convention bylaws are designed "to protect us from ourselves," he said. He emphasized the need to maintain balance between efficiency and freedom in the operation of the convention.

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Lamb Joins Faculty
At Gardner-Webb

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7/31/79

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. (BP)--Robert E. Lamb, associate director for home study of the Southern Baptist Seminary Extension Department since December 1976, will join Gardner-Webb College here, Aug. 15, as professor of religion and religious education.

Lamb, 48, served in the same position at Gardner-Webb, a Southern Baptist college, for 14 1/2 years before coming to the Seminary Extension Department.

"I have enjoyed my work with Seminary Extension," he said, "but I have missed classroom teaching and the opportunity to work directly with students."

Before coming to Gardner-Webb for his first period of employment, Lamb, a native Missourian, was a public school teacher, a minister of music and education for a church in Texas, and director of Christian education for an Army chapel in Germany.

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Most Crash Survivors
Welcomed Home in Texas

By Debbie Stewart

DALLAS (BP)--West Texas Baptists welcomed survivors home with tears of joy and bouquets of roses, and buried five victims within a week after a plane crash in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Four members and a former member of First Baptist Church of Clyde, Texas, were killed and seven others injured, July 24 when an inter-island commuter plane crashed shortly after take-off from an airport in St. Croix. The 12 Baptists were on their way to a week of missions work with Antioch Baptist Church of St. Kitts in the Leeward Islands.

"Most of us never open ourselves to the opportunity of getting hurt in the service of the Lord. I sometimes wonder, have I given my best to Jesus who gave his life for me," said Dick Williams, pastor of First Baptist Church of Rising Star, at the funeral of Sharon Geye.

Mrs. Geye, 32, was the first of the five victims to be buried. She was a former member of the Clyde Church. About 500 people filled the sanctuary and balcony, and stood in the hallways of the Rising Star Church, near Abilene. Mrs. Geye's father, Air Force Capt. R. D. Donham, was killed in a plane crash shortly after take-off in 1953, almost on the same day as his daughter. Her 14th wedding anniversary would have been three days after the funeral.

The other four fatalities were members of First Baptist Church of Clyde. Jack Rosinbaum, 49, a deacon, and Stephen Sapaugh, 15, were buried Sunday afternoon, July 29. Mr. and Mrs. J. O. Connel, 52 and 49, a deacon and church secretary, were buried the next morning. Riley Fugitt, pastor of First Baptist Church, Clyde, remained in critical condition in the U.S. Navy hospital in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The other six survivors from the Clyde Church were transferred from Charles Harwood Memorial Hospital near St. Croix to Hendrick Memorial Medical Center in Abilene.

An air ambulance transported five survivors home to Texas, including Mrs. Riley (Voncell) Fugitt, the pastor's wife; Mickey Fugitt, their son, an evangelist; Mrs. Preston (Murlene Porter), church secretary at Elmcrest Baptist Church; Pam Patton, a college student in the Elmcrest congregation; and Caleb Watson, a teenager in the Clyde Church.

"All of the survivors are in good spirits. They are thankful to be home," said Norma Lutgen, a member of the board of the Mickey Fugitt Evangelistic Association.

Fugitt was determined to walk down the ramp of the air ambulance in Abilene, which he did before laying down onto a stretcher. Other survivors were carried down on stretchers. Lisa Melton got off the plane with the aid of crutches and her father who had flown to St. Croix to remain by her side since the day of the crash.