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Baptism Gains Proof
Of Bold Mission Thrust

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (BP)--Bold Mission Thrust is "finally catching on," Southern Baptist evangelism leaders claim, pointing to projections of a sharp increase in baptisms in 1979-80 as proof.

Estimates based on Uniform Church Letters show baptisms in Southern Baptist churches will be 429,580, a 16.5 percent increase over 1978-79.

"This increase couldn't have happened without Bold Mission Thrust (BMT)," said C.B. Hogue, Home Mission Board vice president for evangelism. Bold Mission Thrust is the SBC goal of presenting the gospel to every person in the United States by the year 2000.

Board President William G. Tanner agreed, saying the baptism increase "verifies the expanding cooperation among convention agencies, growing out of Bold Mission Thrust.

"The increase indicates what can happen when we get serious about equipping Christians to reach others," Tanner said. "And it tells us Bold Mission Thrust is a challenging, workable approach to reaching America."

Tanner said Southern Baptists shouldn't take all the credit for the increase. "The Lord is blessing us," he asserted. "This is not of our doing, but of his, through us."

The 1979-80 baptism increase follows a 9.7 percent increase in 1978-79, preceded by three years of decline.

Aggressive leadership from state conventions has helped turn those declines into gains, Hogue said. But state evangelism directors, meeting in Atlanta, noted several factors which have spurred the baptism increase.

"In the middle of the '70s, many of our people were intimidated...They didn't concentrate on the word of God," said Malcolm McDow, evangelism director in Tennessee. "Now, people seem to be no longer intimidated, and baptism increases are the result."

The Northern Plains Baptist Convention's evangelism conference last February touched off a "real spiritual awakening" which led the convention to lead the SBC with a 45.7 percent baptism increase, said Don Harms, state evangelism director.

Bailey Smith, current SBC president and pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Okla., was a key speaker at the conference, and "God used him to lead our people to a stronger dedication to evangelism," Harms added. "We've been excited about evangelism before, but this year we got committed."

Such commitment showed up in Arizona and Virginia, where tent revivals and simultaneous crusades led to increases of 17.6 and more than 11 percent. It also surfaced in New England, where Baptists participated in lay evangelism schools and TELL witness training and brought their baptisms up 41 percent.

In California, churches involved in evangelism emphasis programs increased their baptisms 18 percent, compared to a 1.5 percent increase for churches which did not promote evangelism, said Monty McWhorter, associate evangelism director.

And some states experienced gains because of close cooperation with Bible teaching programs.

"Oklahoma enjoyed a record year in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School and our camping program, and we set a record for baptisms," noted Clyde Cain, associate evangelism director.

"Sunday School is our biggest ally," added James Ponder, evangelism director for the Florida Baptist Convention, which recorded its second-highest baptism total in 1979-80.

"These things are not super-fancy or new; we're just getting down to basics," said Leonard Hinton, evangelism researcher for the board. "We're also seeing that what works best varies from state to state."

Within that variation, Hinton said there are nine characteristics common to strong evangelistic churches which are less common in churches which have not experienced significant baptism gains.

The characteristics include implementation of witness training, strong biblical preaching, highly involved laity, evangelistic music, pastoral counseling during invitations, conservative theology, significant numbers of soul winners, ability to reach out beyond families of church members and regular revival meetings.

Rather than enjoy the increase in churches with these characteristics and increases in baptisms, Hogue encouraged Southern Baptists to work harder in 1981.

"We have to take this upward trend and Bold Mission Thrust a year at a time," he said. "Every person, every pastor, must think this year is the year he must do his best. We can't look to the future and forsake the present."

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Tanner Urges Emphasis
On Winning the Cities

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ATLANTA (BP)--If Christians cannot win the masses of people in America's cities, they will never win the entire nation to Christ, Southern Baptist Home Mission Board President William G. Tanner said.

Speaking to a joint meeting of state Baptist evangelism and missions directors, Tanner pointed out the masses of people in America now living in the major cities of the nation.

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More than 35 percent of the people live in 22 major cities with more than one million population, but only 12 percent of Southern Baptists and nine percent of the churches are in these 22 big cities, Tanner said.

To reach the cities, Southern Baptists will have to be willing to change from a predominantly rural denomination to an urban-oriented denomination, Tanner predicted.

He further pointed out that 48 percent of Southern Baptists now live in non-metropolitan areas, where 62 percent of the 35,600 Southern Baptist churches are located.

"If we are serious about Bold Mission Thrust's challenge to proclaim the gospel to every person on earth by the year 2000, we have got to become convinced that we must reach the cities," Tanner said.

It will require change and flexibility, he cautioned. "We'll have to do some things we've never done before, think some things we've never thought before, try some things we've never tried before, and even fail miserably in some things we've never failed in before because we've never even comprehended them," Tanner said.

He warned state and national Baptist denominational leaders not to become cynical and bored with the Bold Mission Thrust emphasis.

"As I travel, I really feel the pastoral leadership in the denomination is beginning to understand the challenge of Bold Mission Thrust," Tanner said. "About the time we denominational workers get bored with the slogans, our people get turned on about the challenge."

"Bold Mission Thrust cannot operate effectively unless we keep telling the people on the grassroots level about the challenge," he said.

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Iowa Fellowship Leader
Sets Early Retirement

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DES MOINES, Iowa (BP)--Wilson Parker, executive director of the Iowa Southern Baptist Fellowship, has announced his retirement Jan. 1.

Parker, a veteran of nearly 20 years of pioneer missions work, has been executive of the fellowship for two years.

Parker said he decided to take early retirement. "I'm pretty close to the regular retirement age and this seemed to be the time to do it." Parker will be 64 next July.

His retirement, he said, will not slow down Iowa's plan to become a state convention Jan. 1, 1983. "We are approaching the guideline," he said. "We are on target."

Iowa, under Parker's leadership, has grown from 53 congregations to 69, and 8,679 members were reported at the end of the church year. Southern Baptist Convention guidelines for conventions specify 70 congregations and 10,000 members or 50 congregations and 12,500 members.

Mike McKinney, president of the fellowship and pastor of Ashworth Road Baptist Church in Des Moines, will be interim executive director, at least until the 45-member executive board meets Feb. 7.

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Parker became Iowa executive Jan. 1, 1979, coming from director of missions for the Penn-South Jersey Southern Baptist Convention. Previously, he was director of associational missions for the New York Baptist Convention, on the staff of the Northern Plains Baptist Convention, an area missionary in Montana and South Dakota and pastor of churches in Illinois, Nebraska, Tennessee and Montana.

Parker and his wife, Lucy, will retire to his hometown of Jamestown, Tenn.

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'Typical' Baptist Starts
Scottish 'Home' Church

By Larry Jerden

Baptist Press
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ABERDEEN, Scotland (BP)—In many ways, J. P. "Pat" Lester is a typical Southern Baptist.

He was born in the South, went to college in the South, married a Southern girl, and spent 18 years as an active Baptist in a suburb of New Orleans.

But now, when Lester leaves his suburban home to go to work for Chevron Oil Corp., he either drives to his office in downtown Aberdeen, Scotland, or catches a plane and helicopter to the Ninian oil field 100 miles off shore in the icy, storm-swept North Sea.

Lester is director of production for Chevron's North Sea oil project. He and his family have been in this northeast Scottish coastal city since 1975. Though they found ice cream parlors and hamburger joints, they couldn't find an evangelical church that satisfied them.

So, with the help of Southern Baptist missionaries Jim and Barbara Spaulding, the Lesters helped organize International Baptist Church in January 1978. Spaulding is pastor of the church, composed of Americans, Canadians, Nigerians, Englishmen, Welshmen—and a few Scots. Almost all the members are in some way related to the oil industry.

Lester and his wife, George Ann, a kindergarten director when they lived in Metairie, La., teach the three-to-five-year-olds. "She teaches them, I play," Lester relates with a grin.

George Ann is also involved in a "Friendship Circle" program which helps elderly Scots. Through that and other programs, she has opportunities to interact as an unofficial missionary with the Scots.

For Lester, such expressions of his faith must come amid efforts to bring the oil under the sea into Britain's engines. In fact, if a man's witness makes him a missionary, Lester must be considered a true international missionary. Only 29 of about 400 men employed by Chevron there are Americans.

So far, Baptist ministry to these men and their families has been to try to give them a "home like" Baptist church when they are on shore. For Spaulding, this has involved a strong emphasis on chaplain-style counseling.

"In the oil industry here, there are far more stresses on family life than, say, in a military situation," he explains. "Barbara and I do a lot of marriage counseling, and we could do a lot more. Scotland has the worst alcoholism problem in the world, so we get all the problems that spin off from that."

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The drinking problem is accentuated, Spaulding notes, because as a safety measure there is no drinking allowed on the rigs at all. "Those with drinking problems begin 'tanking up' the minute they hit shore," he says. "If they have very far to go to get home, they've stopped at several pubs."

Another problem, Spaulding indicates, is the oil worker's prosperity.

"A lot of people don't think of it as a problem, but all of a sudden some of these men are making a lot more money than they've ever made in their lives," he explains. "Some of them know how to handle it, how to save. But a lot begin to spend very unwisely. Then the contract is over and they haven't saved anything. They are right back where they began."

In order to better minister to the oil families, George Ann's women's group is trying to meet families as they move in. The oil companies are hesitant to give out information about incoming personnel, so locating the newcomers is difficult. High turnover also makes contacts difficult.

Thus far, the response of International Baptist as a caring, ministering church is proving effective. But those familiar with the oil boom in Scotland know that not all the oil workers can be ministered to through a traditional approach in the "headquarters" city.

"There are whole cities built for the oil workers where nothing at all is being done," declares Loren Turnage, the SBC missionary who heads the Baptist Team Ministry in Aberdeen.

The Scottish Baptist Union, with 155 scattered congregations, has asked Southern Baptists for help. If the only way Southern Baptists could respond were to send a handful of missionaries, the task would be too great. But with families like the Lesters, and other Christians out on the platforms and in the cities, those brash Americans may yet make a positive contribution in the land of the kilts.

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Adapted from the January issue of World Mission Journal.