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'Our Man' in Eastern Europe
Aids Baptists in 8 Countries

By Martha Skelton

EASTERN EUROPE (BP)—In the early dusk, indistinct figures hurry along the streets to their homes, working and shopping done for the day. Closing shops disappear in the darkness; there is little in their windows to justify lighting them.

Around the corner, some persons enter a small Orthodox church, light a candle and pray. The sidewalk in this east European city is illuminated only by car headlights, passing buses lurching with rush-hour capacity crowds, and a glow from the church windows.

In the middle of the rush, three persons walk slowly, talking earnestly. A tall man hunches over to listen more closely. He asks questions of the man and woman beside him. He is John David Hopper, Southern Baptist fraternal representative to Baptists in Eastern Europe. The husband and wife with whom he is talking want to emigrate to the West.

They want Hopper's sanction. Instead, he probes their motives, counsels on the difficulties of life either in the East or West, and promises to help them pray the matter through.

A few days later, Hopper sits in a pastor's study. The two men review the local church's situation. The pastor shares his discouragements—an inadequate building, the need for a sound system to project the worship services outside to the 200-300 people who attend but cannot get into the building. And he excitedly tells of how God is working in his congregation—the baptisms and signs of growth in the believers.

The pastor leans across his desk and, with fervor in his voice and fire in his eyes, says to Hopper, "Here is the challenge. Here is my place."

For the fraternal representative, such extremes and contrasts come with his territory—eight of the countries in Eastern Europe. Since 1976, he has traveled in the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany, Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, meeting with pastors, preaching, leading conferences, counseling, teaching.

Hopper spends a lot of time traveling to, through and from the countries to which he relates. Often these times are spent in language study. Fluent in French, German, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian and English, he is studying Russian, Romanian and Hungarian.

For Hopper, the routine of visa and passport procedures, conversion of currencies, and how they differ country by country is an everyday reality. He carries a passport and identification papers as routinely as Americans carry credit cards.

Also routine is the security procedure every time a train passes from one Eastern Europe country to another. An official studiously checks each passport while another man drops to his knees, probing under the seats with a flashlight beam.

The space between compartment ceilings and the train roof is checked and a beam of light is directed over the top of the train cars to detect anything—or anyone—hidden. Once the train crosses the border, the procedure is repeated. It is a time-consuming inconvenience, but part of life in Eastern Europe.

Hopper's practice, and the policy of the Foreign Mission Board, is to work with recognized Baptist groups. He does not, however, denounce the ministries of those who take a different approach.

"Christianity can survive under any system of government and will do so until the Lord comes," he remarks. "Communism is a pressure, but the Western church also faces pressure—from the mass media, secularism, and materialism. They (in the East) have done a better job of coping with the situation under which they live than the Western church has."

There really isn't a monolithic "Eastern Europe," but a number of countries with varying degrees of restriction on printing Christian materials, importing Bibles and expressing religion.

"Our problem is to respect the laws," explains Hopper. "Ours is a ministry of reconciliation, creating trust. It is not my place to be subversive." At various times, he has been accused of being a member of the CIA and the KGB.

"I don't want anything to do with either of them," he says.

These ameliorating influences are also not the whole story. Within a three-hour period in an East European country recently, he was confronted with an illustrative dilemma on a continuing concern—the access of people to the Bible.

An Orthodox official visiting with him gave him a Bible and said they were printed and available locally. Not long afterward, at a Baptist church meeting, a woman came up to him begging for a Bible; she said she had been praying seven years for one.

It is experiences like this that have Hopper see a place of ministry for both the so-called underground and registered churches.

"The church in Eastern Europe is like a ship," he says, "Part of it is above water and part of it is below. But both take the ship into the harbor."

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Baptists, Jews Draft Plans
To Improve Relationships

By Jim Newton

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ATLANTA (BP)--Following up discussions initiated by Southern Baptist Convention President Bailey Smith, representatives of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith outlined plans to implement efforts to improve relations between Southern Baptists and Jews.

The meeting was chaired jointly by Glenn Igleheart, director of the board's interfaith witness department, and Theodore Freeman, national program director for the ADL.

The implementation meeting followed two meetings Smith, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Del City, Okla., had with representatives of the ADL. The first meeting, Dec. 18, was held at Smith's request in the wake of controversy over Smith's widely reported comments that God does not hear the prayers of Jews and that Jews have funny looking noses.

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It resulted in a joint statement condemning anti-Semitism, reaffirming the individual theology of each group and agreeing to establish a joint working relationship between the groups.

The second meeting, in February, established a work group to begin implementation of the agreement.

The HMB-ADL meeting was spent brainstorming ways Southern Baptists and Jews can work cooperatively and ways in which understanding between the two groups can be improved.

Among the ideas proposed were a three-day dialogue-institute at one of the six Southern Baptist seminaries; a series of articles for Baptist and Jewish publications designed to bring about mutual understandings; promotion of Jewish Fellowship Week which this year falls on both Easter Sunday and Passover festival; joint social action projects on human rights and religious liberty; development and use of television and video programs of mutual interest and concern; participation in summer camp programs sponsored by Baptists and Jews; development of personal and professional relationships between regional directors of the two organizations; and possible weekend retreats for Baptist and Jewish couples.

Both Igleheart and Freedman sought to clarify the distinctive roles of the group that met in Atlanta and the work group announced by Smith in February.

The task force appointed by Smith includes the presidents of four Baptist agencies, the SBC president and second vice president, plus a group to be named by Rabbi Ronald B. Sobel of New York, chairman of the national program committee of the ADL.

Freedman explained the group appointed by Smith and Sobel will not deal so much with implementation as with discussion of larger issues concerning Baptist-Jewish relationships.

Igleheart pointed out that the interfaith witness department has been assigned by the SBC as the "lead program" in Baptist-Jewish relationships and that the work group which met in Atlanta will deal with the details of implementation.

"We don't want just to meet and talk today," Igleheart said. "We want to do something to carry out specific projects that will help Baptists and Jews better understand each other."

He not only called for dialogue between SBC leaders and pastors with Jewish leaders and rabbis, but also for the involvement of Baptist and Jewish lay people.

"We are a lay-oriented denomination with strong emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, and we need for not only the leaders to get together but for the lay people to do so."

Igleheart added that while Baptists may have certain stereotypes about Jews, there also are stereotypes Jews may have about Baptists. In order for relations to improve, stereotypes of each group toward the other must be shattered, he said.

The group agreed to draft specific proposals for implementation of the ideas they discussed and to present their priorities and proposals in another meeting to be scheduled before May 28 when the ADL has its annual commission meeting.

Those attending the meeting representing the interfaith witness department were Igleheart, Peter Chen, the department's assistant director for world religions; and Bob Adams, ethics professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth.

Representing the ADL were Freedman, Stuart Lewenbrub, ADL southeast regional director in Atlanta; and Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, midwest regional director from Chicago.

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Baptist Tells Jews
Jesus A Boundary

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. (BP)--Jesus Christ marks a boundary between the Christian and Jewish faiths, but should never be set up as a barrier, a Baptist pastor told a synagogue audience in Champaign, Ill.

"Any Christian worth his salt is obliged to say that Christ defines the boundary between a Christian and a Jew," John Thomason, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Champaign, told the congregation at Sinai Temple. "We believe that God's act in Jesus is his supreme revelation. For us, Christ is unique. But to transform Christ from a boundary into a barrier is an unwarranted move."

Thomason was invited to address the Jewish audience after he wrote a letter to their rabbi, Isaac Newman, expressing dismay over remarks by SBC President Bailey Smith last summer that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew."

Four years ago, as a part of January Bible study, Temple Baptist Church invited Rabbi Newman to teach the book of Exodus on two Sunday nights.

In his message, Thomason made clear his faith in Christ as the Messiah, but stated his position that no one should be disenfranchised from approaching God in prayer.

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Dinner Honors Founder
Of Long Running Show

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HARRISBURG, Ill. (BP)--Retired Baptist minister A.L. Cox, 79, was honored at a dinner meeting marking the 50th anniversary of a church radio program he founded on March 1, 1931.

"The Baptist Hour," which had then continued uninterrupted for 18,263 days is still heard daily at 7 a.m. on radio station WEBQ in Harrisburg, the same station where it originated.

Robert J. Hastings, editor of the Illinois Baptist, said his research shows it is the oldest continuous Southern Baptist radio program in the nation.

Cox said when he started in 1931, he thought he could preach every day, but soon learned he needed more help. So he enlisted other pastors in the area who took a certain day each month, a practice that continues.

During the flood of 1937, when the Ohio River engulfed Harrisburg, Cox was unable to reach the station. By then he was a pastor in Benton, Ill., about 35 miles away. He improvised by using telephone lines to broadcast remote control, through the Harrisburg station.

Cox, now retired, lives in Dix, Ill. He still keeps a hand in radio and has enlisted four Illinois stations to carry live segments of the Illinois state evangelism conference.

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