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First Atlanta Measures Faith With \$2.7 Million Yardstick

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (BP)--Members of Atlanta's First Baptist Church gave more than \$2.7 million in 11 days as a "test of faith and obedience to God."

Pastor Charles Stanley urged them not to borrow "one copper penny" of the money to buy downtown property and buildings adjacent to church facilities. He told them to trust God and forget all possibility of failure.

They responded by reaching for their checkbooks. And when that wasn't enough, they walked the aisles and gave wedding bands, antiques, automobile titles, coin collections and stock certificates to be sold for cash.

Donation of material gifts began spontaneously during a Sunday morning invitation and continued throughout the week, the next Sunday and beyond, according to Sid Hopkins, associate pastor responsible for staff and program coordination.

"They gave things very precious to them," said Hopkins, who compared this offering to the one conducted by Moses when the Children of Israel built the Tabernacle.

He said the gifts were given above and beyond the church's regular budget offering. The \$2.7 million offering was part of a \$2.85 million pricetag for the property. The total amount was raised during a two-month period.

The property, two city blocks formerly used by an automobile dealership, is only the most recent acquisition the church has made without borrowing money. During the last quarter of 1980, the church paid \$500,000 cash for three parking lots and a building which now houses its singles ministry. Earlier in the year, it renovated another building for \$600,000 cash.

The reason the church felt it needed to expand is simple: It's growing.

In the past couple of years, the church has stepped up its Sunday School program to catch up with a "pulpit oriented ministry," Hopkins explained. More than 1,100 persons joined the church last year, and Sunday School attendance on a recent Sunday was 2,693, up nearly 900 from two years ago.

More church education space was made available by moving the singles ministry to the new quarters, he said. And when the church's TV and tape ministry moves into the auto dealership buildings, even more space in the church's main building will be available for new classes.

Expansion through the purchases was the only solution to "running out of space," Hopkins said.

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The church felt it doubly important it should expand without borrowing money because the interest on large loans is exorbitant. A 10-year loan for the amount of the last purchase "would have cost us \$8 million," Stanley said.

Hopkins labeled such a practice "poor stewardship of the Lord's money." Stanley expanded on that theme: "The banks in America own most of the churches," he said, "and I don't believe that's of God."

But Stanley feels the principle of increasing the faith of the church is even more important than good stewardship.

Members of the church have made a "commitment to obey God, whatever the consequences," he said. "I see all this as a spiritual school to teach our people obedience and faith. We could go to the bank and borrow money, (but) that wouldn't take any faith. Far more (important) to me than the land... is the faith that God is building in our fellowship."

Stanley said if someone had given the church \$3 million to purchase the latest property and buildings, the action "would have ruined the opportunity for God to bless many of our people."

However, the pressure of raising the money before the property deal was to be closed and of not turning to a bank for a loan placed the church's obedience to God "on the line," he said, adding that God worked a "miracle" by helping members give the money and leading them to deeper faith.

"I told the people months and months ago that God is up to something big," Stanley said. "This (experience) was just a track for his blessing."

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Crusade Brings Exposure
To Evangelicals in Mexico

By Susan Cahen

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MEXICO CITY (BP)--Evangelist Billy Graham concluded eight days in Mexico City by visiting privately with President Jose Lopez Portillo.

Graham had just finished a five-day evangelistic crusade fraught with problems because of Mexico's constitutional law regarding separation of church and state. Despite last-minute negotiations and public confusion about meeting place and time, more than 95,000 persons attended during the five nights. The 16,000-seat Arena Mexico was filled to overflowing four of the five.

Some 6,524 persons inquired about the gospel in response to Graham's messages. Of those, 3,522 accepted Christ as their personal Savior and made a life commitment. Most were between 13 and 25 or over 36 years of age, according to Graham organization reports.

"People were getting there as early as 4 p.m.; the services were lasting for five hours and nobody wanted to leave," reported Southern Baptist press representative David Daniell. The closing night of the crusade was "just a euphoric close," Daniell remarked, with 20,000 persons attending.

At this service a woman carrying a pistol was seized by security men. She reportedly had planned to kill Graham. No information was available on whether the woman was arrested. Daniell said most persons crowding the arena were unaware of the incident.

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That there was a crusade at all had amazed the local organizing committee. When Graham arrived in Mexico City four days before it was to begin, no decision had been made regarding meeting place. The government withdrew its offer of the 42,000-seat INDE Stadium shortly before the meetings were to start.

Little commercial advertising was done but the media invited Graham to appear on several newscasts and talk shows. Almost all 14 newspapers in Mexico City carried stories about the crusade. Several published the content of the nightly sermons. Some mentioned Graham in editorials and quoted Bible verses.

"No one has ever spoken the word of God on television before," said Mexican evangelist Guillermo Villanueva. "No one has ever drawn such crowds. These are the largest evangelical meetings in our history. This is very special for Mexico; this is tremendous."

"For evangelicals this was a new experience," said Librado Ramos, pastor of First Baptist Church, Mexico City and president of the National Baptist Convention of Mexico. "For many years we have wanted to express our faith more publicly. Now our country is becoming aware of the existence of evangelicals. We hope the crusade will permit us many rights we have not enjoyed before."

The interdenominational crusade was part of a major city evangelism emphasis by Mexican Baptists. They are also helping in a three-day Graham crusade in Villahermosa, Tabasco, March 13-15.

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Evangelists' Conference
Focuses on Inspiration

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LOS ANGELES (BP)--Preaching, singing and inspiration will be featured in the annual meeting of the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists at the Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles June 10.

The meeting is one of several scheduled in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention June 9-11 at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

"Our program is geared for singing and preaching; really inspirational in nature," said Don Womack, conference executive director and an evangelist from Memphis, Tenn.

The meeting will be from 1 to 4 p.m., in the 4,000-seat church, at 550 South Hope Street in downtown Los Angeles.

The evangelists also will hold a banquet and business session, in which the main business will be electing officers for the coming year. That meeting will be from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 9, in First Baptist Church, 706 S. Westmoreland.

Officers of the conference are Clyde Chiles, St. Louis, president; Leon Westerhouse, Birmingham, Ala., vice president; Bill Sky-Eagle, Dallas, music director; Chuck Kennedy, St. Louis, assistant music director; and Lonnie Parsons, San Antonio, parliamentarian.

The Wednesday afternoon session will feature a message by Jack Taylor, an evangelist from Fort Worth, Texas, and first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Others scheduled to bring messages are Chiles and Jack Stanton, an evangelist from Bolivar, Mo.

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Music will be presented by the Cruse Family, Jacksonville, Texas; Kennedy; R.L. and Beth Sigrest of Yazoo City, Miss.; Steve Taylor of Greenville, S.C.; Westerhouse; Connie and Allison Ware of Plano, Texas;

Also, Price Harris of Shreveport, La.; Ellen Roweton of Bolivar, Mo.; Vernard Johnson of Fort Worth, Texas; Pat Roper of Greenville, S.C.; Margaret Allen of Midwest City, Okla.; Bill and Ivy Jean Sky-Eagle.

Others participating on the program will be Claude Spearman of Shreveport, La., and Bob Kendig of Memphis. Musicians will be Becky Cruse of Jacksonville, Texas, piano; and Jon Bos of Orlando, Fla., organ.

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Catholic Leader Urges
Support For Soviet Jews

By Jim Newton

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ATLANTA (BP)--"Modern-day Pharaohs" exist in Russia today, and life for many Jews there is "intolerable," a Roman Catholic priest and former congressman told participants at a human rights conference at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

Robert Drinan, professor of international law and human relations at Georgetown University, was the keynote speaker at the conference, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee in celebration of its 75th anniversary.

The Home Mission Board was a co-sponsor of the event, attended by about 55 persons representing a cross section of religious leadership in the Atlanta area.

During the meeting, a petition signed by more than 5,000 Atlanta area residents was presented. It called on Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to release persons in Russian prisons being held for their religious convictions.

"We are deeply concerned with the inhuman and life-threatening treatment endured by all prisoners of conscience," said the petition, presented by Doris Goldstein, chairperson of the Worldwide Jewry Committee of the Atlanta Jewish Federation. "We urge their immediate release," it stated.

In the keynote address, Drinan, a former Democrat congressman from Massachusetts, was critical of the Reagan administration's approach to human rights.

He said it would be a "tragedy" for the Reagan administration to abandon the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights and substitute instead an emphasis of cracking down on terrorists.

Drinan said it is inappropriate for President Reagan to say that Russians lie and cheat and don't believe in an afterlife and lamented the feeling that "the chilling cold war" between the United States and the Soviet Union is being revived. "I don't want to go back to the days of the cold war again," he said.

While he was critical of the Reagan administration's stand on human rights, he was even more critical of the Soviet Union's record of human rights violations, despite pledges to uphold human rights outlined in the 1975 Helsinki Accords.

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Calling for Christians in America to come to the aid of Jews in the Soviet Union, Drinan claimed that at least two million of the three million Jews in Russia find their lives so intolerable they want to emigrate to Israel or the United States.

"The Jews in Russia today are crying out like Moses in Egypt, 'Let my people go.' There are modern-day Pharaohs in Russia today," he said.

He urged Christians in America to write letters to congressmen and Russian leaders protesting the religious persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union. Such letters and pressure helped get permission for 240,000 Jews to leave Russia in the last nine years, he said.

"Something profound unites Christians and Jews," the Catholic leader observed. "Christians and Jews have the same Bible, the same God, the same heritage, the same faith."

In a brief reference to Southern Baptist Convention President Bailey Smith, Drinan lamented that "one or more religious leaders in America has said he does not believe God hears the prayers of Jews."

Christians and Jews, he added, are united because both believe that God has spoken to man, and "we both say we need redemption, even though we may differ on the method of redemption."

Other speakers at the two-day meeting included Sister Ann Gillen, executive director of the National Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry; Tom Remington, political science professor at Emory University; Rep. Wyche Fowler, D-Ga.; Rabbi James Rudin, national assistant director of the interreligious affairs department of the American Jewish Committee; and William Grainick, southeast regional director of the American Jewish Committee.

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Two Baptists Reported
Slain in El Salvador

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RICHMOND, Va. (BP)—Reports of the killings of a Baptist pastor and one of his church members in El Salvador and the withdrawal of American Baptist Convention missionaries have been confirmed by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

The reports indicated Pastor Salvador Rodriguez of Chapeltique Baptist Church and an unidentified woman member of his congregation were slain by a paramilitary-type rightist group, reportedly about Feb. 27 in the rural area where the church is located.

The two victims were reported to have been among four who received letters warning they would be killed. The two other Baptists named have fled.

No other information was available on the withdrawal of ABC missionaries. Don R. Kammerdiener, Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board director for Middle America and the Caribbean, said he confirmed the information in a phone conversation with Victor Mercado, an official of the American Baptist Convention, in Valley Forge, Pa. American Baptists are the primary sponsors of Baptist-related work in El Salvador.

Southern Baptists have had three missionary couples assigned to El Salvador. One of the couples, the Hoyt Eudalys, have just returned to the United States after completing their term of service. Those remaining are Bill and Libby Stennett, of Virginia and the District of Columbia, respectively, and Ernie and Lee Ann McAninch of Alabama.

The two Southern Baptist couples are working mainly in the capital city of San Salvador now, Kammerdiener reported, and do not feel it is necessary for them to leave the country. They are doing bookstore and literature type work.

Kammerdiener said churches are reported packed for services and there is great demand for Bibles and other literature.

El Salvador's ruling junta has been under severe attack from both leftist guerrillas and rightist forces with more than 20,000 reported killed in fighting within the past year.