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Wyoming Baptists Vote To Seek Convention Status

CASPER MOUNTAIN, Wyo. (BP)--Eighty-three messengers to the annual meeting of the Wyoming Southern Baptist Area Fellowship unanimously have adopted a proposal to seek state convention status by Jan. 1, 1984.

The proposal was presented by the fellowship's interim operating committee at Mountaintop Baptist Encampment. A fact-finding committee appointed in May reported on the feasibility and implications of attaining convention status.

Since 1967, Wyoming has been part of the Northern Plains Baptist Convention which also includes Montana and North and South Dakota. Wyoming Baptists have experienced "phenomenal growth in the past few years in the heart of the nation's energy corridor," said Roy Owen, convention executive director. "It's been moving toward this for a long time."

John Herrington, chairman of the fact-finding committee and pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Riverton, Wyo., said, "If growth of churches and membership continues as it has for the past four years, Wyoming will more than meet Southern Baptist Convention requirements for becoming a state convention."

The denomination currently has 34 state conventions, some which encompass several states, to cover work in all 50 states. It requires new state conventions to have a minimum of 70 constituted churches and 10,000 members, 60 constituted churches and 11,250 members, or 50 constituted churches and 12,500 members.

Wyoming Baptists, who contribute 48 percent of the Northern Plains Convention budget, increased total giving from \$1.1 million in 1976 to \$2.4 million in 1980, according to the fact-finding committee's report.

Herbert Whitten, interim operating committee chairman and pastor of Mountain View Baptist Church in Casper, Wyo., said, "We've had 12 new churches constituted in that time and we're projecting 60 churches and 13,722 members by 1984."

Following approval by the Wyoming fellowship, the proposal was to be presented to the Northern Plains Baptist Convention's administrative committee and then to the convention's executive board for approval in September, Owen reported. The board also will be asked to recognize the Wyoming organization as an official fellowship seeking full convention status, an act necessary to become eligible for Home Mission Board financial aid.

An interim steering committee led by Herrington will guide the fellowship until it becomes a convention, Whitten explained.

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Messengers at the Casper Mountain meeting also named Casper as the new convention headquarters site and accepted the offer of Mountain View Baptist Church's mobile chapel for temporary office until property can be purchased.

Owen described the step taken by Wyoming Baptists as "normal and healthy development for a growing state." According to Herrington, the spirit of the meeting was "very enthusiastic and unified, even electric."

The adopted budget of \$70,410 for operating reserves "will require sacrifice from Wyoming churches," Whitten noted. He added that the fellowship's unanimous vote to move toward becoming a state convention "reflects the people of Wyoming have sought God's will and are moving with the conviction that he is leading."

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Watson, Winner
Who Won't Quit

By Beth Sayers Wildes

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RIDGECREST, N. C. (BP)--Joanne Watson has tried hard to quit her seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day job.

"I can't," says the director of Oklahoma City's Baptist Women's Center. "God won't let me."

Although her hours are consumed with being chauffeur, counselor, bookkeeper and telephone answerer, Watson told participants in the Woman's Missionary Union leadership conference she wouldn't trade places with anyone.

The center, sponsored by the Capital Baptist Association, has sheltered thousands of physically and emotionally abused women and children since it opened almost three years ago.

"It's in the middle of wino country, pimps and ladies of the night," says the plainspoken Watson.

The majority of women who seek shelter come from middle class homes, Watson says. "The average woman is in her late twenties. She married at 16 or 17 and had a house full of kids. She doesn't have education or skills.

"Ninety-seven percent of the women were abused children. They figured it was better to marry than to stay home and watch it."

Watson admits that at one time she also was an abused child and a battered wife. She is adamant that God has used her past to help her handle this job.

Although she empathizes with the women, she takes a no nonsense approach in dealing with them. "I tell them they can't come here unless they're serious about getting their lives together," she says.

Rules are strict. No dating. All women must either work outside the center or enlist in job training unless they are physically unable to do so.

Women must also sign a contract saying they will attend Sunday and Wednesday church services and daily Bible studies. To date, there have been 160 professions of faith and 98 baptisms, Watson says.

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Length of stay at the center depends on the individual's need and her condition. "I try to give everybody a chance unless I have a repeater who didn't respect the place," she says.

"Some women will try to take advantage of you. The hardest thing I have to do is to love unconditionally."

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**Scripture Study Leads Church
To Ordain Four Women**

By Ida M. Clark

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MIAMI (BP) — Ordaining women deacons, while not unheard of in Southern Baptist churches, is still uncommon.

But after Miami's Northeast Baptist Church completed a scripture study on the role of women in the church, it ordained four female deacons—ages 50 to 72—to its five-member deacon board.

The pastor, Dale D. Burton, was ordained to the ministry at Northeast in 1950 and returned as pastor 19 years later. Out of his study grew a doctoral thesis and degree in pastoral ministries.

"In a world where individuals make distinctions of worth or lack of worth, creating hurt and loneliness, the church of Jesus Christ should be the one place where any man or woman can find total acceptance and love. To retain a worldly standard of inequality of the sexes is to reflect an imperfect image of God's love to the world," Burton wrote in his thesis.

He enlisted church members to participate in questionnaires and group discussions designed to assist them in developing a clear understanding of the scriptural teachings concerning women. He preached a series of sermons leading to the church's decision to ordain the women.

Ten members of another church in Miami participated as a control group, taking the same preproject and postproject questionnaires, but without exposure to the sermons and studies. In the beginning, their attitudes were similar. After the sermons and studies, Northeast showed a change; the control group, none.

Burton, a bachelor, admitted that his having never been married might affect his attitude towards women in church leadership.

"I have never experienced the tensions that often develop between husband and wife, and lead to competitiveness," said Burton. "I can accept a woman on an equal basis in everything except manual labor." He also indicated that women may be more suited than men in ministry and caring.

Burton's experience as an Army chaplain in a M.A.S.H. unit in Vietnam convinced him that women can work beside men in the field and pull their load.

The four women deacons in Burton's church have a long history of service. When asked if they felt their ordination was a milestone, only two said yes, but all agreed they would just continue doing what they had been doing.

Miami's Director of Missions Dottson L. Mills says, "The ordaining of women deacons is a local church decision. Everything must be related to that."

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A church should recognize worthiness, Mills said, rather than simply attempt to break barriers. "However," he added, "there are many churches with diminishing congregations who would be in serious trouble if it were not for dedicated women who are willing to do what is needed."

Burton began his study of women in the church with the Genesis account of the creation. He thought that God's making Eve from one of Adam's ribs was a fanciful story until a few years ago, as he says in his thesis, "Scientists began to talk about cloning; producing frogs from a single cell. God's cloning was not from a single cell, but a rib which produced woman."

Burton traces the thread of women's equality and selection for special service through both the Old Testament and the New.

"Although the Old Testament is prevaillingly male-oriented, this never becomes absolute," he wrote. "Recurrently it is a woman who emerges in a time of crisis to lead and preserve Israel."

Burton pointed out that women played an important part in Jesus' ministry as well as in the Apostolic times. He dealt with Paul's attitude and the seeming conflict that tends to confuse some Bible students.

Finally, Burton reminded his church members that they are Christians, not Jews. Their standard is Christ. He challenged them to go beyond their feelings and cultural influence to determine what the Holy Spirit tells them.

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Clark is a Miami writer.

Union Receives
Kresge Grant

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JACKSON, Tenn. (BP)--Union University has received a \$200,000 challenge grant from the Kresge Foundation of Troy, Mich., toward the expansion of the Penick Academic Complex and student housing facilities.

The grant will be applied toward a \$1.75 million expansion program fund drive launched in April to keep up with the demand on classrooms and living quarters as the result of a 40 percent enrollment growth since 1975.

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