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Buses Roll Through SBC  
But Enthusiasts Dwindle

By Norman Jameson

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--When a big church bus rolled into Southern Baptists' neighborhood 15 years ago, it seemed like everybody in town got on.

Lured by the glittering example of huge and independent First Baptist Church, Hammond, Ind., Southern Baptist churches by the droves tried busing as a quick and easy way to build a church.

Today, First Baptist Hammond, still brings 8,000 people to six Sunday Schools on 160 leased buses, but the 7,200 Southern Baptist churches that were in busing at its peak in 1975 has dropped to about 5,000. The estimated 250,000 persons they brought in has dropped correspondingly.

"In the first three or four years of busing, everybody in it got all excited," says Wally Bebe, once bus director in Hammond. "They thought, 'Oh boy, this is going to really increase my church.' Then they found out it's a lot of stinking work. Those that didn't want ethnics, who didn't want to increase classrooms and train leaders, backed out."

Bebe now operates his own bus outreach clinics and compiles annual statistics on bus ministries for a national bus newsletter. His 1977 statistics indicated 21 of the top 35 busing churches decreased in the number of riders they brought the previous year. In 1978, 18 of the top 35 showed decreases and in 1979 and 1980 only 11 of the top 35 decreased. To Bebe, that signals bus ministries are stabilizing.

The 5,000 estimate for the number of SBC churches still busing comes from an informal survey among associational missions directors conducted by D. Lewis White, the first man named by the Baptist Sunday School Board to coordinate its bus outreach program.

In 1973, the SBC meeting in Portland assigned busing to the Sunday School Board, though Bill Powell, then with the Home Mission Board, was the prime mover in SBC bus outreach. By his estimate, Powell, now editor of the non-affiliated Southern Baptist Journal, led 300 bus conferences between 1971-1974. The Sunday School Board still conducts several each year.

Broadway Baptist in Memphis, Tenn., is the only Southern Baptist church that appears in Bebe's top 35, although at least two others--Eastwood in Tulsa, Okla., and Dauphin Way in Mobile, Ala.--would if they were included in his research.

Broadway is 11th in the 1980 listing. Bus director Larry Hipps hopes to push the 1,100 they bring now on their 22 buses to 1,300.

As frequently occurs in cities with busing churches, buses from other Tulsa churches cross paths with one of Eastwood's 26 buses. "We're not competition," bus director Barry Edwards says. "We're out there doing what the Lord told us to do and trust they are doing what the Lord told them to do. The main thing is getting the kids in here to hear about Jesus and teach them God's Word."

To get the children to church, some churches employed questionable tactics such as offering local trips and prizes to kids who bring the most guests, and taping money to the underside of seats. Those tactics cost creditability in the eyes of many.

"Some obscene things were done to children to enroll them," says Dale Cross, director of metropolitan evangelism at the Home Mission Board. "They caused the children to see the church as an institution that is out to buy their involvement and participation through various tricks, rather than as people who genuinely care about their lives and needs.

"Our outreach now isn't so they can come help us feel good about our outreach, but so we can help them in their lives."

Cross is positive about church bus outreach "if done with integrity and if it doesn't prostitute all the energies a church has on an altar of trying to pack out a church on Sunday morning."

Buses were sapping the energy of Jim Wright, pastor of Highland Avenue Baptist Church in Queens, N.Y. One day he realized his church had been busing every week for 10 years and there were only three teen-agers still in church who had come up through the bus ministry.

Highland Avenue, with a membership of 1,000, large for a Southern Baptist church in the area, brought in 50 to 60 percent of its Sunday School on buses when they decided to stop. "It just devastated our Sunday School," Wright says. "Enrollment just about fell off the board."

But the decision gave Wright a new perspective on building a church. "God builds a church," he discovered. "The Lord Jesus builds a church."

Bernard Spooner, director of the Sunday School Division for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, feels the busing boom of the '70s was an experiment for Southern Baptists, who then were not aggressive in evangelism and starting new churches.

"Busing served a very valuable purpose to show people can be reached if we're aggressive enough," he says. "But it is not a way to grow a church. It is a way to reach certain pockets of people."

Many churches that got into busing thinking it would pay for itself and grow a church are out. Others, despite pessimistic navel gazings that predict \$4 per gallon gasoline and possible rationing, move firmly ahead.

"The people in it now are those that feel this is a vital ministry to their church and their community and will stay in it," says Hipps, at Broadway. "They know what it's about and feel it's important to keep it going."

Eastwood's Edwards, declares inflation does not affect God's economy: "The Bible says go into the highways and byways and pick up the maimed and the lame. He is going to supply the resources to do it. He's the source of our supply. We never thought eight years ago that gas would get to \$1.20 a gallon but it did and we still take the buses out on Saturday (to enlist riders)."

People have told Bobby Smith, bus director of Dauphin Way, they will give the church their gas ration coupons to keep the buses going if it comes to that. With such dedication by some, Southern Baptists will be riding buses a long time.

## Innovations Keep Buses Operating

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Though Southern Baptists' fervor to bus people to church has cooled, many churches have put the rumbling hulks to innovative use. Three examples:

When J. D. Wynn was pastor of the Dinsmore Baptist Church near Jacksonville, Fla., he converted an old bus to a do-it-all mobile you-name-it chapel and took it to nearby trailer parks.

With several hundred feet of electrical wire, a pocketful of outlets, and some sewing machines, the bus became a sewing classroom; lined with books it was a library and filled with teen-agers and a preacher, it was a chapel.

Wynn's aptitude for mechanized ministries led him to work with handicapped to the extent he now has \$5.5 million in proposals before the federal government to build elderly and handicapped housing.

The Brotherhood at Columbia Drive Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., takes from 15 to 30 women from a predominantly black public high rise each Saturday to a grocery store. Men pick them up, take them to the store and wait while they shop. Buying done, the men mark the bags by apartment number and carry them to the bus, then deliver groceries to their door.

James Pierce, pastor of Porter Memorial Baptist Church in Lexington, Ky., anticipates relieving his church's parking problem with a suburban park and ride service.

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## Defendants Reverse Pleas, Sentenced In Slaying

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ATLANTA (BP)—Brothers Lapas and Rodney Favors, arrested and charged in connection with the Sept. 21 slaying of Jean Bulce, reversed their pleas Dec. 23 to guilty in Bulce's murder and the attack of her co-worker, Betty Ann Miles.

Bulce, daughter-in-law of Atlanta pastor Lester Bulce, and Miles were assaulted while eating lunch in a Decatur city park last September. Bulce died from injuries sustained in the attack.

Lapas Favors, 24, confessed to taking part in assaulting the two women and pleaded guilty to murder, two counts of kidnapping and two counts of armed robbery. Judge Clarence Peeler then sentenced him to life in prison and three 20-year terms to run concurrently. Nine days earlier, Peeler had sentenced Favors' cousin, Anthony Wiley, to six consecutive life terms, plus 45 years in the same case.

Rodney Favors, 20, pleaded guilty to two counts of armed robbery and was sentenced to two concurrent 20-year prison terms. Rodney Favors earlier testified against Wiley, admitting to driving the escape car for his brother and his cousin on the day of the attack.

The two brothers had pleaded innocent to the charges during a Dec. 22 arraignment, but then requested another hearing for Dec. 23 and changed their pleas to guilty.

Meanwhile, the trial for accused murderer Wayne Williams began in Atlanta as more than 800 prospective jurors were summoned and jury selection began. Williams was arrested and charged with two of 28 murders of young blacks in Atlanta over a two-year period.

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SBC Records 1,436 Net  
Church Gain in 70s

ATLANTA (BP)--Southern Baptists will have to establish new churches faster and keep existing churches alive if they are to meet the Bold Mission Thrust goal of 50,000 churches by the year 2000, says a research report prepared by the Home Mission Board.

During the decade of 1970-80, Southern Baptists recorded a net gain of only 1,436 churches, despite having organized over 2,600 churches, according to data compiled by Orrin D. Morris, director of the HMB research division.

"That means there were 1,165 churches that either died, merged or left the denomination during the decade of the 1970s," said Morris in a presentation to Home Mission Board staff members.

When the decade began, Southern Baptists had 34,360 churches, and in 1980, the number had increased to 35,831.

Most of the new churches established during the past decade, 1,696, were in the South, Morris reported. Yet in the South, the net gain was only 699. That means 997 of the new churches, 59 percent, disbanded, merged or left the SBC, Morris said.

The survival rate for churches in the Northeast and West is much brighter, Morris added. In the Northeast, 110 new churches were reported during the decade, but there was a net gain of 136 churches. Morris explained that the net gain was higher than the number of churches constituted because 26 or more churches that were organized before 1970 had affiliated with the SBC between 1970-80.

In the West, 428 new churches were reported, with a net gain of 347 churches (81 percent of the total) during the decade, while in the North Central states, 367 new churches was reported for a net gain of 254.

Morris observed that the net gain of churches in a region or state is much more significant than the total number of new churches established. "If you look only at the total number of churches constituted, it can be deceiving and imply we are making progress as a denomination, when actually, an even larger number of churches may be merging, disbanding or leaving the denomination," Morris said.

In a listing of the top 10 states with the greatest net increase in the number of churches during the decade, California, with 114, and Florida, with 102, led the denomination.

Other top 10 states in net church increase during the decade included Texas, 86; South Carolina, 85; Ohio, 81; Northern Plains Convention (four states), 69; Alabama, 68; Tennessee, 62; Oklahoma, 57; and Arkansas, 56.

On the other end of the scale, Georgia led the list of the states with the smallest net increase, reporting a net decline of four churches during the decade. It was the only state reporting a net decrease in number of churches.

In 1970, the state of Georgia had 2,968 SBC churches. In 1980, the number had dropped to 2,964. A total of 140 SBC churches in Georgia reported in 1980 that were organized in 1971 or later. "This means at least 144 Georgia churches counted in 1970 are no longer in existence or affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention," Morris said.

Other states ranked in the 10 lowest net change in number of SBC churches during the decade were Delaware, 2; Alaska, 4; Illinois, 7; Hawaii, Minnesota and New Mexico, 8 each; Louisiana, 11; Missouri, 13; and Nevada, 14.

## SBC Member Growth Trails Population In 10 States

ATLANTA (BP)--While Southern Baptist resident church membership increased about five percent faster than the national population during the decade of the 1970s, it was slower than the population increase in 10 key states, most of them in the South, said a research report prepared by the SBC Home Mission Board.

The statistics are causing "all Southern Baptist leaders concern, especially as we review the goals of Bold Mission Thrust," said Orrin D. Morris, director of the research division for the SBC Home Mission Board who prepared the report.

While nationally the population increased 11.4 percent and SBC church membership increased 17 percent, in the South the population increased 20 percent and SBC resident membership increased 15.3 percent.

Pointing out that 90 percent of all Southern Baptist members live in the South, Morris warned "It is in this region we seem to have the greatest difficulty keeping up with the population growth."

Southern Baptist resident church membership trailed population growth during the 1970s in Texas, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Louisiana, New Mexico, Arizona and Tennessee (in that order), the report indicated.

If SBC church membership had kept up with the population in these 10 states, the denomination would have reported 427,600 more resident members in 1980, Morris said.

Five of the 10 conventions with the largest numerical increase in resident members, all traditional Southern Baptist strongholds, did not keep pace with the population growth in their states--Texas, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina and Tennessee.

Texas Baptists recorded the largest membership gain with 168,625 new resident members. Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee Baptists also reported net increases of more than 100,000 members. Others in the top ten included Florida, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Mississippi and South Carolina.

None of the Southern states, however, were listed on the chart of top 10 Baptist conventions or states with the largest percentage of increase in resident members.

Wisconsin recorded the largest percentage increase in resident church membership during the decade, with an increase of 219 percent. Iowa ranked second with a 183 percent increase, while Pennsylvania and New England Baptists reported increases of about 150 percent each.

Other states in the top ten, all with percentage increases ranging from 66 percent to 95 percent, included (in order) Nevada, Northern Plains, New Jersey, New York, Minnesota and Utah-Idaho, all areas where Southern Baptist numbers are yet small.

To illustrate, the same states reported the smallest ratio of Southern Baptists to the total population. Minnesota has just one Southern Baptist for every 2,011 residents. New England, New York and New Jersey all reported more than 1,000 residents for every Southern Baptist.

Correspondingly, the deep South states led the list showing the largest number of Baptists in relationship to the total population. Alabama had the best ratio, with one Southern Baptist for every 5.4 Alabama residents. Mississippi was close with one Southern Baptist for every 5.6 residents.

States with the lowest percentage increase in resident members during the decade were Virginia (9.3 percent), Delaware, Louisiana, North Carolina, Texas, New Mexico, Missouri, South Carolina, Kentucky and Georgia.

Other states listed in the top 10 according to the ratio of Southern Baptists to population were: South Carolina (one to 6.0), Tennessee (one to 6.1), Georgia (one to 6.5), North Carolina (6.8), Kentucky (7.0), Oklahoma (7.1), Arkansas (7.6) and Texas (9.8).