

(BP)**-- BAPTIST PRESS**

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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January 14, 1982

82-06

Sorrels, FMB Reconciled;
Foundation Launches Fund

By Robert O'Brien

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Paralyzed former Mission Service Corps volunteer Bob Sorrels and four members of Washington's Capitol Hill Metropolitan Baptist Church traveled to Richmond to tell Foreign Mission Board president R. Keith Parks that "the hurt is gone" and to express "a strong desire for reconciliation."

"We felt we did not act as God would have us act, but out of our own frustration," Sorrels said of a conflict which followed a FMB decision not to provide long-term support for Sorrels.

He was paralyzed from the shoulders down in an automobile accident in April 1980, less than a week after he arrived in Nigeria to serve for a year as an accountant. The accident killed veteran missionary Bill Bender and Nigerian Baptist Seminary professor Titus Oluqafemi.

A group called "Friends of Bob Sorrels," including Bill Vickers and Barbara Cobb, who attended the meeting in Parks' office, sent letters to a number of Southern Baptist leaders criticizing the board's "inadequate" disability program for volunteers and urging Baptists to persuade the board to take remedial action for Sorrels.

The letters created widespread news coverage which quoted Sorrels as saying he felt "abandoned," by the board and its leaders.

"That resulted in a lot of misunderstanding, with people taking sides; none of us want that," Sorrels told Parks at the Jan. 5 meeting. "It doesn't bring glory to God for Christians to have bitterness and conflict over a difference of opinion. This is not a case of the good guys against the bad guys."

Walt Tomme, associate pastor of the Capitol Hill Metro Church, and Vinton Koons, finance chairman, told Parks they felt Sorrels' needs could be best met by setting up a fund to raise support for his continued rehabilitation.

Koons said the District of Columbia Baptist Convention Foundation, 1100 Seventeenth St., N.W., Suite 412, Washington, D.C. 20036, will administer the fund and receive contributions from those who wish to help Sorrels. Koons is president of the foundation's board of trustees.

"The fund is a good way to solve the problem," said Sorrels, 30, who now lives in Norman, Okla., and has long-term needs for support, special equipment and rehabilitation. Besides \$5,000 already spent on his support in Nigeria, Capitol Hill Metropolitan church has voted \$10,000 to buy him a special van, which the State of Oklahoma will equip.

Parks, who accepted an invitation to preach at the Washington church, March 7, called the reconciliation and the news of the fund "an answer to prayer by many of us that this situation would be resolved and Bob's needs would be met."

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He and John Mills, the board's director for west Africa, told the group that many missionaries, staff members and board members have said they would make personal contributions if such a fund is established.

Parks said the board would gladly endorse such an effort, although, under Southern Baptist Convention guidelines, it cannot directly initiate, administer or promote such a fund.

Parks told the group the board has initiated discussions with the SBC Annulity Board to find a way to develop a disability package for other Southern Baptist volunteers--a task which he said will be difficult because the volunteers don't have an employed, salaried relationship with an organization as most such disability insurance requires.

"Although it's difficult to set up, we're working on it," Parks said. "Your situation has caused us to do something."

Sorrels said the meeting with Parks came about because Tomme, who joined the church staff after the conflict developed, "felt burdened that nothing positive could result unless we came to seek reconciliation."

He, Vickers and Cobb said Tomme led in Bible study and prayer which caused them to realize they must act under God's guidance and not out of bitterness and frustration.

Tomme, they said, began the move toward reconciliation and helped set up the visit with Parks, "but the Lord really generated this meeting."

"The hurt is gone," Sorrels said. "I feel like a great burden has been lifted off of me."

"We found what I expected to find when we came to this meeting--compassionate men who have Bob Sorrels' best interests at heart," added Tomme, who has handled pastoral duties at the church since its former pastor accepted a government position.

Sorrels explained that after the accident he didn't have the guidance to figure out how to handle his life and explore the options. In his battle just to stay alive and begin recovery, he said, he could think of only one option--"the Foreign Mission Board will take care of everything."

But, at its October meeting, the board voted to continue providing a \$603.50 monthly stipend only through October 1982, when government disability benefits would normally take effect. In all, the board earmarked more than \$28,000 to help pay Sorrels' expenses resulting from the accident. That includes the monthly stipend it picked up from the sponsoring Capitol Hill Metro Church.

The board said it declined long-term responsibility because Sorrels went out as an MSC volunteer, not as an employee. MSC was set up by the SBC to supplement career home and foreign missionaries under ground rules that the volunteers or their sponsors pay for their support and medical care. All volunteers sign a waiver absolving the board of medical responsibility.

"The board's vote caught me by surprise," said Sorrels, who said he had not remembered the waiver. "My friends and I reacted. We didn't have guidance. We took it upon ourselves to send letters and tried to express ourselves. That resulted in a lot of misunderstanding."

He added that the belief that he would take legal action was incorrect. "I never had any intention of starting a lawsuit. Several attorneys urged me to do so, but I categorically refused," he declared.

Parks said the board could have given more counsel about options Sorrels could have explored if it had not felt the need to be guarded because of concern over possible legal ramifications.

The Washington group said the church's deacons want the church to continue its ministry to Sorrels. "God has called Bob and he's not through with him. We want to help him as he seeks God's leadership and prepares for a worthwhile occupation," Tomme said.

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Americans United Loses
Supreme Court Appeal

WB

Baptist Press
1/14/82

WASHINGTON (BP)--A divided Supreme Court ruled that Americans United for Separation of Church and State did not have legal standing to sue the federal government for donating land and buildings to an Assemblies of God college in Pennsylvania.

In a 5-4 opinion, the high court held that the Silver Spring, Md.-based group failed to prove, either as taxpayers or as citizens, that it was injured by the transfer of a 77-acre plot of ground valued at \$1.3 million to Valley Forge Christian College.

Americans United argued that the gift of the land and buildings violated the no establishment of religion clause of the First Amendment and said it represented the right of all 90,000 of its members not to be taxed for the support of a religious organization.

Writing for the slim majority, Justice William H. Rehnquist ruled that the federal government has the right under Article IV of the Constitution to dispose of land which it owns. That right has been spelled out further in subsequent laws to include such transfers to private groups, he said.

He added the watchdog group failed to prove "any injury of any kind, economic or otherwise, sufficient to confer standing."

Rehnquist, whose opinion was joined by Burger and Justices Byron R. White, Lewis F. Powell Jr. and Sandra Day O'Connor, decried what he called "the philosophy that the business of the federal courts is correcting constitutional errors."

"This philosophy," he declared, "has no place in our constitutional scheme," nor is it made "more palatable when the underlying merits concern the establishment clause."

In a biting dissent, Justice William J. Brennan Jr. accused the majority of using the question of standing "to slam the courthouse door against plaintiffs who are entitled to full consideration of their claims on the merits."

The court's decision, he said, is a "stark example" of an "unfortunate trend" to resolve cases on technical grounds "while obscuring the nature of the underlying rights and interests at stake." That trend, he added, tends "merely to obfuscate, rather than inform, our understanding of the meaning of rights under the law."

Brennan declared that excluding the establishment clause as sufficient ground for allowing an injured class of citizens such as Americans United to bring its case to the court "simply turns the constitution on its head."

Joining Brennan's dissent were Justices Thurgood Marshall and Harry A. Blackmun. Justice John Paul Stevens filed a separate dissenting opinion.

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(BP)

-- FEATURES
produced by Baptist Press

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EDITORS: Following is the second in a series of features on the executive heads of Southern Baptist agencies, boards and institutions. Baptist Press will run one each week, with photo, in no particular order. Each article has been written by a public relations person within the agency.

Agency Head Series

Ferguson's Stories Keep
Seminary Interest High

By Barbara Little

CO

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--He weaves a web of storylines, intricately patterns plots, vividly recalls incidents, people and places, makes the dimmest character bright with life.

Milton Ferguson is a master storyteller.

Ferguson, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1973, uses stories to illustrate sermons, lessons, solutions and conversations.

He has an uncanny way of bringing a listener around the perimeter to discover the meat of the message, much like the basketball that circles and circles the rim before finally dropping through.

His tales are people oriented and insightful. As a sometime contributor to his hometown paper, editor of his high school paper, and keeper of journals, he briefly considered a career as a writer, pre-registering to study journalism in college.

Instead, Ferguson, 53, chose an evangelistic ministry and his skill for spinning yarns was utilized in sermons and messages.

Between 1948 and 1956, Ferguson was known as a dynamic young evangelist who preached with fervor and vitality. He led hundreds of revivals, youth evangelism conferences and state BSU meetings. His evangelistic style appealed to youth, touching an inner core sensitized to the Spirit.

An earlier edition of a weekly newsletter from First Baptist Church, Dallas, reveals the headline, "Uncle Milty to Speak to Children." He has a natural affinity with youngsters that sometimes gets him into deep water. At a recent seminary picnic he found it impossible to refuse to glide down a water slide with a four-year-old. He often displays a childlike humor, breaking up even the most formal occasions with his antics and impromptu singing.

Many of his anecdotes are taken from his early childhood in Oklahoma, where he was one of eight children gathered around a potbellied wood stove, growing up at the end of a red dirt road.

A depression baby, many of his stories recall "suffering" as a poor family. "We were so poor that we never knew about all the good things," he says. "For breakfast we were made to eat hot biscuits, home-cured bacon, and eggs from our own chickens. We couldn't afford fancy cereal that floated on top of the milk."

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Other favorite sketches center around his military career and service in Korea. Slim, a young recruit with telephone pole legs, and a Korean lad with more sense than the soldiers he marched with, have become familiar characters to seminary students, faculty and staff through his tales.

Ferguson is interested in everything and does everything well--a championship high school basketball player, a bogey golfer, a young musician at the piano and clarinet, an avid pilot and a collector and reader of Louis L'Amour novels.

When counseling with his daughters about finding God's will for their lives, he told them: "The basic challenge is to respond to the pattern necessary in being a whole person. If you learn to read, think, articulate, speak and write, then you have the basic equipment to be happy in any vocation."

Ferguson is also an expert yarn spinner at home, while comfortably settled with his wife Bettie at the hearth for the evening, or around the dinner table.

J.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are memorized, quoted and symbolized. Items of memorabilia throughout the Ferguson's home find meaning only through a story retold or incident explained.

The master storyteller once again displayed his craft at the graveside of his youngest daughter, Jo Catherine, whose life was tragically snuffed out in a 1980 auto accident when she was 16. Through tears and breaking voice, he shared the story of C.S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles, explaining that the burial site was picked because the wooded hillside was similar to the imagery found in the chronicles.

Several months before her death, Jo Catherine wrote in her daily journal about her father sharing "wonderful bits of odds and ends of people's lives, cluttered throughout the minds and attics of persons everywhere."

"If only you knew my father," she wrote. "What an intriguing conversationalist! Throughout high school I was involved in speech contests, and my best example was my father, to me the best preacher in the world. He can make anything absolutely captivating to anybody."

The other two Ferguson girls have followed their father's example and advice, and concentrated on areas of communications.

Jane Anne Ferguson Ward, the eldest, is an ensemble actress. Julia, a senior at William Jewell College, is a French and English major.

Both girls portray graphic illustrations and incidents about daily life. Both are capable of spinning a web of characters and conversations. After all, they were apprenticed at the knee of a master storyteller.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Little is supervisor of news and information for Midwestern.

Johnson Named Director
Of Satellite Department

CO

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Michael D. Johnson, administrative assistant in the office of the provost at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has been elected as the first full-time director of the new Seminary Satellite Department.

Johnson will assume his post in the Seminary External Education Division June 1. He was elected by the division's governing board, composed of the presidents of the six Southern Baptist seminaries.

In his position at Southern, Johnson has worked closely with Provost Roy L. Honeycutt in administering off-campus seminary studies programs in Baltimore, Md., Detroit, Mich. and Jackson, Tenn. His new duties will include processing applications for new satellites to be jointly sponsored by all six seminaries through the new department. Once approved and activated, the satellites will receive assistance from Johnson in curriculum planning and the maintenance of permanent student records.

Johnson has completed course requirements for the Ed.D. degree at Southern Seminary and currently is at work on his dissertation. He holds degrees from Southern and the University of Kentucky. In 1982 he was listed among the "Outstanding Young Men in America."

His wife, Teresa Louise, is an M.A. candidate at the University of Louisville. They have one child, Jeremy.

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Smith, Valentine Urge
Panel On Drunk Drivers

By Tim Fields

CO

Baptist Press
1/14/82

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Two Southern Baptist leaders have called on President Ronald Reagan to establish a presidential commission to deal with the problem of drinking drivers and to support legislation requiring a warning label on alcoholic beverages.

Southern Baptist Convention President Bailey E. Smith and Foy Valentine, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, sent the joint letter.

"Few decisions that you make could be as constructive and well received by the American people as a decision to establish a presidential commission to recommend firm actions to deal with the problem of drinking drivers," the two leaders wrote.

"In 1982 it is expected that drinking drivers will be responsible for 25,000 deaths, 750,000 personal injuries, and \$5 to \$8 billion in economic losses. In the last decade almost 250,000 people have been killed because of drunken driving. Action now can save hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars in the next 10 years," they wrote.

The two leaders told the president that a presidential commission on drinking drivers is an idea whose time has come, adding, "at least 55 senators and 248 representatives think so. Many responsible civic and state leaders think so. Legislators and voters in numerous states think so.

"We urge you not to delay on this vitally needed act of moral leadership. Few actions you

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could take would save more lives and money. Immediate action on your part would signal to all Americans that this grave problem of the drinking driver will no longer be ignored."

The Southern Baptist leaders also called on Reagan to actively support Senate Bill 1643 and House Bill 2251 which would require a health warning label on all containers of beverage alcohol. Both bills appear stalemated in committees.

One proposal originating in the House calls for the label to read, "Warning, using this product too fast may cause sickness or death, may impair driving ability, may create dependence or addiction, and during pregnancy may harm the unborn. Legal age required for purchase."

Smith and Valentine told the president: "The medical discoveries related to fetal alcohol syndrome, and the presence in the United States of America of approximately 12 million alcoholics are sufficient indication that beverage alcohol is an addictive drug which should at the very least be adequately labeled."

The leaders told the president that while no one individual or group is ever authorized to speak in behalf of all other members of the Southern Baptist Convention, their views are generally shared by their fellow Southern Baptists.

"The Southern Baptist Convention has adopted many resolutions in recent years dealing with the various forms of alcohol abuse, with the drinking driver being one continuing, but as yet unresolved, concern," they said.

The leaders ended their letter by saying, "We pledge ourselves to pray for you in the days and months ahead as you discharge your heavy responsibilities. May God give you strength and wisdom to lead with justice and compassion in these challenging days."

Valentine said Smith and he wrote the letter "to register our Southern Baptist outrage over the horrors which for far too long have been perpetrated against innocent victims and society by drunk and drinking drivers. In this letter we signal our strong commitment to help solve this grave problem."

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Court To Decide If States
May Ban Bars Near Churches

WB

Baptist Press
1/14/82

WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Supreme Court will decide if the State of Massachusetts may forbid drinking establishments within a 500-foot radius of churches.

At issue is a Massachusetts law banning liquor licenses to bars if churches, schools or hospitals within the prescribed distance object.

When local officials in Cambridge, Mass., denied a license to Grendel's Den at the behest of an Armenian Catholic parish, the bar's owners challenged the law, claiming the Massachusetts Legislature had in effect established religion in violation of the First Amendment.

A federal district court agreed, striking down the law. Although the First Circuit Court of Appeals initially reversed the lower court, it later reconsidered and reversed itself. That maze of rulings led to the state's appeal for Supreme Court review.

In other church-state actions, the high court:

--Denied a hearing to a Boca Raton, Fla. independent Baptist church which argued that it

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should not be required to obtain a "separate use" zoning permit to operate a Christian school. Two lower federal courts ruled against the church, holding that the First Amendment does not forbid such zoning requirements.

--Rejected the appeal of four members of the Church of God of Prophecy, in Collinsville, Va., who claimed that their free exercise of religion was abridged when their congregation expelled them and refused to allow them to attend worship services. Expulsion resulted from a dispute over speaking in tongues.

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Baptists Respond
To Brazilian Flood

RB

Baptist Press
1/14/82

PETROPOLIS, Brazil (BP)--When torrential rains and flooding struck Petropolis, Brazil, in December, local Baptists and Southern Baptist missionaries were ready.

After the first night of flooding, the 1,200-member First Baptist Church, led by Southern Baptist missionary Harold Renfrow, opened a mission church building to house homeless families, the first relief shelter anywhere in the city.

Flooding and landslides left more than 100 dead and 5,000 homeless in the Brazilian city of about a quarter-million people, located in the southeastern state of Rio de Janeiro.

Renfrow and his wife, Nona, live in Niteroi, about 50 miles away, but were in Petropolis to conduct a prayer meeting. "Water got five feet deep on the main street of the town," Renfrow reported. "We could not leave the city. All roads were blocked."

The missionary couple, both Missouri natives, found safety in a hotel for the night.

Renfrow opened the Villa Independencia Baptist Mission the next morning, and more than 200 people crowded into the basement and meeting rooms.

"We set up a soup kitchen and started putting clothes on the wet people," Renfrow said. Church members distributed other provisions collected by the young people of the congregation for Christmas charity.

The mission church housed flood victims for three days, until they could be transferred to hastily prepared city shelters. In the meantime, medical workers treated those needing attention. Renfrow himself helped evacuate families from homes threatened by landslides.

After the transfer, municipal social workers requested volunteers from the church to assist in counseling grief-stricken flood victims. Deacons from both First church and the mission congregation responded. Renfrow reported a number of spiritual conversions and requests for baptism.

Heavy rain struck Petropolis again the following week, bringing more death and destruction to the city and surrounding mountainous region. Renfrow estimated that 15,000 people statewide were left homeless.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board authorized \$20,000 in relief funds, which will be used for home reconstruction, furniture, clothing and bedding. Renfrow and First church members continue relief efforts.

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The congregation's rapid response to the crisis, and the opening of the mission building to flood victims, drew national media attention, Renfrow said. On Jan. 8 Renfrow was declared an honorary citizen of Paulo Frontin, a community south of Petropolis, for his relief work in that city.

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Reagan Seeks Anti-Bias Law
Aimed At Private Schools

By Stan Hasteley

WB

Baptist Press
1/14/82

WASHINGTON (BP)--Reacting to a firestorm of criticism from civil rights leaders, President Reagan will ask Congress to pass legislation denying tax exemption to private schools that practice race discrimination.

Reagan evidently was caught by surprise at the intense protests to a Jan. 7 announcement that the Internal Revenue Service will no longer deny tax exemption to any private school--sectarian or non-sectarian--which discriminates in its admissions policy.

That announcement, approved in advance by top administration officials, was made public in a memorandum to the Supreme Court. The document asked the court to declare moot the issue of admissions bias in a pair of highly publicized cases currently awaiting oral argument.

The cases were initiated by Bob Jones University and Goldsboro Christian Schools after the IRS revoked the tax exemption of the fundamentalist Greenville, S.C., university and denied exempt status to the Goldsboro, N.C., schools.

Reagan's request for legislation does not reverse the memorandum to the Supreme Court as some are interpreting. The memorandum still illustrates the administration's desire to stop the IRS's 12-year policy through which, in effect, it assumed legislative authority it did not have.

By asking for legislation that would deny tax exemption to schools that discriminate, Reagan is asking for the same effect but through appropriate legislative channels.

The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, a Washington agency that monitors legislation for nine Baptist bodies, agrees only in part with Reagan's memorandum to the Supreme Court. Joint Committee Executive Director James M. Dunn and General Counsel John W. Baker say it goes too far because it will allow tax exemption for all private schools which may discriminate, not just religious schools.

Dunn and Baker wanted the Supreme Court to hear to the Bob Jones and Goldsboro cases and issue a narrow ruling based on religious liberty questions alone.

Public debate over the cases and the IRS decision to restore tax exemption has centered on racism. But two religious groups, the United Presbyterian Church and the American Baptist Churches, have argued that Bob Jones University was entitled to tax exemption on First Amendment grounds.

In their friend-of-the-court brief, written by Baker, they asked the court to rule that the IRS policy of requiring proof of nondiscrimination not apply to religious schools whose admissions policies are based on religious convictions.

Of Reagan's memorandum to the Supreme Court removing the IRS tax exempting policy for discrimination, Dunn declared, "it represents an acknowledgement that the Internal Revenue Service cannot arbitrarily and arrogantly establish and enforce national policy at the expense of religious liberty guarantees."

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