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Vociferous Sports Fan
Lives Life To Fullest

By Jim Newton

ATLANTA (BP)--Watching a church league softball game, Bill Tanner demonstrates the intensity of his love for family and for life itself.

The president of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board doesn't just watch, he gets involved personally, boisterously roaring his enthusiasm.

When the shortstop fields a grounder, zipping the ball to first base just as the batter sprints across the bag, the umpire declares the runner "safe." Tanner bounds to his feet, roaring disagreement. "She's out by a mile," he rages.

The pert little blonde playing first base is dismayed at the call, but smiles when she hears the familiar voice from the stands. Kim Tanner, 16, knows her dad is behind her all the way, just as he "corrected" umpires on behalf of her three brothers.

Harking back to the early 1950s when he was a baseball pitcher and yell leader at Baylor University, Tanner is a vociferous sports fan, especially when one of his kids is playing.

Every day he attacks life with the same enthusiasm he demonstrates at ballgames, with zest and a hearty sense of humor.

Like their father, all three Tanner boys--Bill Jr., Keith and Mark--were football and baseball players. Ellen Tanner is almost as vocal a fan as her husband. "We both love sports, and love watching games together," she says.

But for the Tanners, it is not just sports, it is family that is important. "The family is right after the Lord on our priority list," says Ellen. "We're a hugging family," Tanner confides. Last November when Tanner visited his oldest son Bill, 28, in graduate school at Baylor, Bill was so glad to see his dad he picked him off the floor like a feed sack, and squeezed so hard he cracked his dad's rib.

Tanner laughs about it as he does many of his experiences in life, believing every leader should be able to laugh at himself.

Last September, he kept members of the SBC Executive Committee in stitches with his jokes and quips, prompting Foy Valentine, executive director of the Christian Life Commission to describe Tanner as "the Bob Hope of the SBC."

Often he laces his sermons with stories and jokes about himself, sometimes telling how he was once thrown out of a Little League ballgame for harrassing the umpire while his son, Keith, was pitching. The umpire ordered Tanner to leave the stands, saying, "Preacher, I'm not going to continue the game 'till you leave the ballpark."

With three sons in sports, the Tanners went to a lot of games while he was pastor of churches in Houston and Cleburne, Texas, and Gulfport, Miss. "We'd go to six games a week in Gulfport," recalls Ellen.

While in Gulfport, Tanner coached a PeeWee football team for 80 third-grade boys. Once, after church, one tyke looked at Tanner and said, "For a coach, you're sure a good preacher."

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Tanner preaches with the same enthusiasm he demonstrates at ballgames, for he loves preaching even more than sports. In preaching he finds his greatest fulfillment and joy. "I think he would dry up if he were cut off from preaching nearly every Sunday," says Ellen, adding he is gone about 75 percent of the Sundays each year.

Last year Tanner was out of the office 113 days, but says he is trying to cut back on travel to spend more time in the office and at home with his wife and daughter.

Because he is people oriented, learning to live with tough and sometimes unpopular decisions has been his hardest lesson, but 10 years as president of Mary-Hardin Baylor College and Oklahoma Baptist University taught him a lot.

At OBU, he faced 400 demonstrating students who threatened to violate curfew regulations, until Tanner called their bluff, threatened to expell them all, and set up a committee process for review of the regulations.

Leaving OBU for the Home Mission Board was a tough decision, especially for Ellen who knew she would be leaving her three sons if she moved to Atlanta in 1976.

Teaching the 1976 home mission study book, "Tomorrow Starts Today," by the late Arthur B. Rutledge, whom Tanner succeeded as head of the Home Mission Board, plus realization of a childhood call to missions, helped Ellen work through the decision to accept the move.

Ellen, the daughter of the late Kyle Yates, professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and head of the religion department at Baylor, wanted as a child to be a missionary to China like her great uncle. Her father had felt the call to missions, but the late William R. Sampey convinced him he could do more for missions by teaching and preparing others.

When they were courting at Baylor, Bill and Ellen were discussing the possibility of being missionaries, and Tanner asked, "Would you be willing to go to China or anywhere as a missionary with me?" Assuming that was a proposal for marriage, Ellen said "yes."

Tanner says he never really felt the call to missions, but deeply wanted to be a Navy chaplain. Now he is head of the SBC agency which commissions chaplains for military service.

Although the responsibility is heavy, Tanner seems relaxed and secure. He handles the tensions and pressure by going home, relaxing, reading espionage thrillers, painting and fixing around the house, mowing grass, doing things with Ellen, enjoying his family, watching sports, playing golf occassionally and preaching.

Perhaps one reason he loves life so deeply is because he came so close to losing it 11 years ago. He was flying home to Mary-Hardin Baylor College when the Rio Air Ways twin-engine turbojet crashed in a dense fog at the Temple (Texas) airport. The plane hit the ground a mile from the runway, skipping three times like a rock on a pond, spinning in a ground loop that sheered off the wing and tail section. No one was killed, but 10 of the 22 on board suffered broken backs, including Tanner with a fractured vertebrae.

When a Federal Aviation Agency official investigating the crash asked Tanner how many passengers were on board, Tanner said 21. When the official pointed out his records showed only 20 passengers, Tanner responded, "Well, God was there." The FAA official said he was amazed anyone had lived through the crash.

Tanner is convinced his life was spared to finish the work God had for him. "There's never been any doubt in my mind since that my role is to be in the active ministry."

Southern Baptist Churches
Respond to Human Crisis

By Duann Kier

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—Southern Baptists are increasing their response to human needs caused by the current social and economic crisis in the United States, according to Foy Valentine, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Valentine, who surveyed several Southern Baptist pastors, said the response is not to Reaganomics but to the demands of the Christian gospel for ministry to the needy and advocacy for the poor.

"Some Southern Baptists, Republicans and Democrats, agree with President Reagan's economic and social goals, while some Southern Baptists, Republicans and Democrats, disagree with those goals," Valentine said. "But all Southern Baptists believe in sharing the good news of God in Christ, including the good news of food for the hungry, clothes for the needy, health care for the sick, advocacy for the powerless, and justice for the oppressed."

"The (Southern Baptist) Home Mission Board ministers to urgent human needs through about 500 skilled and compassionate minister-missionaries and social workers, but the main line Southern Baptist work in meeting human needs is the local church," he said.

Wayne Dehoney, pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church in downtown Louisville, Ky., told Valentine that his church for 15 years has budgeted money for feeding the hungry, but now church members bring food once a month to the church's food closet. The church also maintains a clothing service run by 12 older women of the church who clean, size, and recondition the clothing. The church also utilizes two large houses for drug and prison rehabilitation services for 28 women and 30 men.

"Church members have made available two farms on which these people can work to raise livestock and crops," Dehoney said.

"Two months from now the church will break ground for another high-rise facility for the aging which will include apartments, 60 nursing beds, and security guaranteed by the church for life," he added.

First Baptist Church of San Antonio, Texas, has established a kind of employment office. Pastor Frank Pollard said the church's business manager maintains a clearinghouse where church members with employment openings can be matched with people out of work who call the church.

Pollard said the church has established a special interest-free loan fund for the unemployed, and some unemployed persons are being hired for various jobs around the church properties. The workers are paid \$6 an hour which can be used for necessities or to repay the interest-free loan from the special fund.

"An airline pilot who has just lost his job and whose retirement funds also now appear to be totally lost is involved in this program," Pollard said.

Two social case workers, directed by R.B. Cooper, the church's Christian social minister, work in the church's community ministries building giving the needy a place to clean up, eat and stay for up to three months. The workers also administer tests and provide evaluation, recommendations and counseling for those who are ready for employment or who are suddenly unemployed and are forced to make mid-life career changes.

Pastor Neal Jones of Columbia Baptist Church, Falls Church, Va., in suburban Washington, D.C., told Valentine that his church is heavily involved in work with immigrants and refugees. One member who operates a moving and storage company makes his warehouses available for storage of whole houses of donated furniture until it can be utilized by the church's social action committee.

The church is teaching one Vietnamese woman to be their assistant church hostess even though she cannot yet speak English. Every Wednesday the church transports about 120 people to English classes taught by church volunteers.

The church also works with a number of mildly retarded persons, paying their salaries so they can get work experience and move toward self-support. The church also enlists and trains college-age young people to work in children's day camps.

Kenneth Chafin, pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, says his church has for many years been heavily involved in providing social services through Baptist colleges, children's homes, homes for the aging and youth camps. Now, however, the church is responding to new needs with additional programs.

It now sponsors a health clinic for indigents that is staffed by church members who are medical professionals. It ministers to poor who are not eligible for health care from any government or private program and to immigrants who cannot get help from an organized charity.

Chafin said the clinic was started by a church member, a Spanish-speaking cardiologist, who himself immigrated from Peru.

A South Main member directs the church's immigrant counseling service. The black lawyer, an immigrant from the Caribbean, works with other church volunteers to provide legal services for \$10 which would cost \$1,000 through a law office.

Says Valentine: "It is the conviction of the Christian Life Commission that the government itself has a constitutionally mandated role and responsibility in providing for the 'general welfare' and in meeting human needs of the nation's most needy and vulnerable citizens. This role and responsibility must not be permanently abdicated. In the meantime, however, it is heartening to know that Southern baptists are responding to the mandat of the gospel."

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Largest American Baptist Church
In W. Va. Seeks Dual Alignment

By Jack Walls

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HUNTINGTON, W. Va. (BP)--Highlawn Baptist Church, the largest American Baptist Church in West Virginia, voted June 6 to seek dual alignment with the Southern Baptist Convention.

The 2,300-member church voted 352-223 for the dual affiliation after an effort by the church's 30 deacons to seek dual alignment failed in January 1981.

The Huntington congregation has been part of the American Baptist Convention since it began in 1914. It is the largest Baptist church in the state with 236 additions in 1981 and a \$500,000 annual budget.

Pastor Jim Franklin said the process of seeking dual alignment began in 1980 when the deacons studied the church's stand in areas of theology, missions, evangelism, moral and social issues and found they were in the mainstream of Southern Baptist work.

He said they were particularly impressed with Southern Baptist world missions programs with over 3,000 foreign missionaries in 96 countries and over 3,000 missionaries in the U.S. Franklin said he had a particular burden for non-Christians in West Virginia and wanted to be part of an expanding and growing Christian work in his native state.

The 1982 dual alignment recommendation changed the church's constitution and bylaws to include affiliation with the local Southern Baptist association, the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists and the national Southern Baptist Convention, a recommendation more complete than the attempt in 1981, and it passed.

Franklin feels nearly all who opposed dual affiliation will yield to the majority and the church will function in harmony. A few may not be able to live with the decision and will seek church affiliation elsewhere, he said, but he hoped that shift would be minimal.

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Franklin said dual alignment will open several new service opportunities in missions, evangelism and Christian education. They will gradually adopt Southern Baptist programs as church leadership becomes familiar with materials and resources available. He will encourage attendance at Southern Baptist conferences, seminars and other training opportunities.

Franklin is a native West Virginian trained in American Baptist colleges and seminaries. He came to the Huntington church, where he has been for nine years, from Memorial Baptist Church, Beckley, W. Va., which was dually aligned. Franklin is now on the general board of the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A. and is on the Foreign Mission Board of that convention.

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Attacks on Beirut Curtail
School, Seminary Activities

By Bill Webb

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6/8/82

BEIRUT, Lebanon (BP)—Fighting between Israeli jets and Lebanese anti-aircraft forces in Beirut, Lebanon, has temporarily closed Beirut Baptist School and forced cancellation of a board meeting of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in the city.

Seminary graduation exercises, set for June 11, may be cancelled as well.

In a telephone interview June 7, the fourth day after Israeli invasion of Lebanon, mission chairman James Ragland's voice was calm and steady—despite the sounds of bombs exploding and anti-aircraft artillery firing in the background—as he discussed the situation in Beirut.

Lebanese families from the south have already begun pouring into Beirut, Ragland explained, apparently trying to stay ahead of steadily approaching Israeli ground troops.

"We are just seeing the beginning of a large influx from the south," Ragland said. Missionaries and local Baptists are equipped to assist refugees by providing food and used clothing for distribution.

Minutes before the telephone interview, Ragland heard the ominous sounds of jets streaking overhead, then anti-aircraft fire, planes screaming in and three big explosions, all about a mile from his office.

Children from the Baptist school live in the area where the bombing has been concentrated, he said. "As far as we know, none of them have been injured or killed." The parents of many of his students have already begun moving their families to the mountains for safety.

As the background noise grew louder, he interrupted one of his own sentences: "They're coming in again." Acknowledging the approach of more jets, he added, "I hope we can finish the conversation." Then he continued calmly.

"We hope Southern Baptists will be informed in regard to the root of the problems here," he said. "We have a people who have been uprooted from their homes; they've been trying to find themselves and a place to live for 30 or 40 years."

Missionaries need wisdom, he said. There are 16 Southern Baptist missionaries in Beirut. Often faced with pressure from home to leave Lebanon, they have to weigh their personal situations and needs for continued service, then determine whether to leave or stay.

"At this point, the missionaries need to be held up in prayer, with love and concern," said Ragland, a veteran of 29 years in Lebanon. Missionaries there have each decided where they would go should they need to evacuate quickly.

Asked about his own immediate safety as the sounds of war intensified in the background, Ragland said matter-of-factly, "If the bombing gets too close, I can run downstairs."

A few seconds later, phone contact was lost.

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