



-- FEATURES

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Teenager Heads
Cookeville WMU

By Johnnie B. McCracken

COOKEVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Karen Copeland, a 16-year-old high school sophomore, not only has started Woman's Missionary Union at Rocky Point Baptist Church in Cookeville but she has been elected WMU director and associational president of Acteens.

"Last January I talked with some friends who go to another church and they were telling me about Acteens," she said. "I asked a lot of questions and they explained the focus of the organization. It sounded like something our church needed."

Copeland visited the meetings a few times and her enthusiasm grew. Coming from a family actively involved in her church it seemed natural for her to follow through.

She talked with Wanda Clouse, associational WMU director, who encouraged her to promote the development of missions education for her church--including Baptist Women, Acteens and Girls in Action. She also talked with her pastor, Jack Gentry, who had been at Rocky Point less than a year. "I could see that she was really dedicated, in spite of her youth, and I encouraged her to go ahead," he said.

A meeting to inform the women of the church about WMU got favorable response and decisions were made about literature and meeting time for various groups (Baptist Women, Acteens and Girls in Action). "Karen is really working hard to make this an active part of the church and community," Gentry said.

The initial WMU project was the first Vacation Bible School at the church in five years. All age groups were involved, preschoolers through adults. This is just the beginning, according to Copeland. "I want our main emphasis to be on ministry to the community," she said emphatically, "with special priority on witnessing to the sick and shut-ins."

She sees the focus of the missions organizations as two-fold: Learning about missions and ministering.

Mrs. Edward (Dot) Hudson, STARTEAM member in the Cookeville area, pointed out, "I cannot take credit for the work started at Rocky Point. Karen came to us for information and we just supplied that. The enthusiasm and determination she felt brought the new WMU into being."

STARTEAM is a select group of 205 women who are making personal contacts with very Southern Baptist church that does not report having WMU. As part of WMU's National Enlargement Plan a goal has been set of more than 6,000 new WMU organizations by Sept. 30, 1983. To date more than 1,400 have been started.

"Later on, after she had made the initial move to organize her church, we had her speak at the WMU associational annual meeting. Her talk showed depth and maturity far beyond her biological age," Hudson continued.

Evelyn Blount, National Enlargement Plan director for WMU, commended Copeland, "for her enthusiasm and commitment.... She will be an example to churches across the Southern Baptist Convention. As women see her missions commitment and catch her enthusiasm I hope they will follow her lead and start new WMU organizations.

Don't Cry For Argentina,
Send Help, Missionaries Say

By Erich Bridges

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (BP)--Southern Baptist missionaries won't be leaving Argentina anytime soon, although memories are still fresh of the South Atlantic war that tore them between their homeland and the land they call home.

In the last four months Southern Baptist missionaries in Argentina have lost one of their own, endured insults and silence from former friends, received anonymous and open threats, faced the real possibility of evacuation and struggled to help their children understand why.

Despite their experiences, missionaries believe now is the time for a new mission push as Argentina struggles to overcome the devastating loss and a threatened economic collapse.

Many Argentine Baptists agree. "Because of the crisis we are in, the people will come to the church, all the churches," active layman Alfredo Constela said. "People always look for God in times of trial. We must use this time."

The Argentine Baptist Mission (missionary organization) has asked for 25 new missionaries and requested reallocation of funds for new projects. Partnership evangelism efforts with Mississippi Baptists are being rescheduled.

"If we could get an influx of missionaries at this time, get them settled and get them started in their work, when the economy changes again we'll have them in place and ready to move," Mell Plunk, mission vice president, pointed out.

For missionaries it was touch and go for awhile. After Argentine forces occupied the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands in April, missionaries watched and prayed from the sidelines until the U.S. government came down firmly on the British side. Then everything changed, according to missionary Bruce Romoser. "The response here was, 'The British are the enemy but the U.S. stabbed us in the back,'" Romoser says.

Hostility toward North Americans in Argentina quickly followed. The tension never approached the terror of the early 1970s when military units and urban guerrillas fought pitched battles on the streets of Buenos Aires and missionaries dodged crossfire. But it was real enough for Southern Baptist missionaries to adopt a contingency plan for evacuating the country. Several began packing.

Some feel the great weight of responsibility and concern felt by mission president Robert Burtis for more than 50 missionaries and their families contributed to his fatal heart attack May 15. A friend called Burtis "a victim of the war."

One missionary received an anonymous letter accusing him of being "a traitor, like all North Americans," and warning him to leave Argentina immediately. Several missionary children were harassed or threatened by schoolmates. A missionary fond of gardening found her plants ripped out and replaced by poison mushrooms.

Nearly every missionary can recount minor incidents--merchants refusing service, insults, sarcastic remarks, the stony silence of once-friendly acquaintances. But they felt greater conflict within. "We stood before our church and told them we felt torn apart," recalled Cecile Alexander, who works with her husband Mark in Mar del Plata. "Yes, we're North Americans, but you don't spend 25 years in Argentina without becoming a part of the people."

Jackie Simpkins remembers the May evening her husband Jimmy called from the mission office in Buenos Aires laughingly advising her that she "better pack a bag."

"He wasn't serious but he didn't realize how it would affect me," she said. "I walked through our home, looked at everything, and sat down and cried."

Missionary children, many born in Argentina, felt the inner struggle even more acutely. Those in Buenos Aires watched as many of the other American and British youngsters at their English-speaking school left for Uruguay, the United States or England.

David Mines, 14, the son of missionaries Don and Margie Mines, found himself wishing he could see relatives and his older brother Steve in the United States but wondering if he could ever return to Argentina if he left.

"I didn't know what to think," David said. "I mean, I'm an American citizen but I'm Argentine. I was born here. I think the Malvinas (Islands) belong to Argentina too!"

Throughout the crisis missionaries said they felt the prayers of Southern Baptists. "We really sensed the prayer support," mission president Leon White reported. "Part of it was felt in the sense of peace and security we had. We felt the Lord was going to take care of it all."

Another source of strength came in the overwhelming outpouring of love and support shown by Argentine Baptists. The National Convention urged missionaries not to leave and affirmed their work and presence through letters and statements.

In individual churches family after family offered homes to missionaries as sanctuaries should protection become necessary. Others wrote letters, brought food or visited missionaries they felt needed encouragement. One overanxious congregation begged a missionary pastor to hide in the baptistry rather than consider leaving, promising to supply food and clothing.

While missionaries temporarily cut back on some public activities (such as evangelistic campaigns and visitation) during the height of the crisis, Argentine Baptists took advantage of new opportunities for ministry, especially in the military. With support from Baptists nationwide, the Baptist church in Comodoro Rivadavia launched ministry to military men at that city's major naval base, one of the primary points of embarkation to the island war zone.

"Many of the boys had never held a Bible before and when they heard God's word and promises their eyes filled with tears," Pastor Omar Szust wrote a missionary.

Baptists distributed thousands of New Testaments to servicemen around the country, according to convention executive secretary Ignacio Loredó. Many of the testaments reached the islands packed in supply boxes otherwise reserved for absolute essentials, Loredó said, and were shipped aboard military supply planes that ran the British blockade. Authorities also distributed the testaments to wounded soldiers in military hospitals.

Loredó believes those ministries and the Argentine Baptists' vocal support of the national cause have increased public recognition of Baptists and other evangelicals, a minority in heavily Catholic Argentina.

Attendance at church prayer meetings soared during the war and at least some of those who came to pray stayed to give their lives to Christ. Monica Graciela Castro, a young woman living in South Buenos Aires, came several times to missionary Glen Johnson's church to pray for her brother fighting in the islands. When he returned she asked to be baptized. "What I went through made me realize there is a living God," she said.

Churches have also banded together to help members in financial straits and families knocking at the door for help.

As the war moves into the background of national consciousness, Southern Baptist missionaries are getting back to work. They admit Argentina won't be an easy place to work for the next few years but talk of leaving is out.

People ask, 'Why did you stay?'," missionary Barney Hutson explained. "That leaves the door wide open for you to relate. You come here to laugh and cry. You are part of a people."

St. Louis Street Ministry
Paul Sasser's Battlefield

By Mike Chute

ST. LOUIS (BP)--Out on the street Paul Sasser is known as "Father Paul." He jokingly says there is nothing "priestly" about him, yet admits "Father Paul can get some things done that Mr. Sasser can't."

Working as minister of Christian concern for St. Louis Third Baptist Church has cost Sasser, 55, a lot. It has cost him a personal life, cost him his marriage through divorce and nearly cost him his life. But Sasser has never stopped to count the cost.

"That's part of the risk you take if you are about what you say you're about," the Southern Baptist minister said. The "street-wise" veteran of 16 years lives with the constant reminder that his life is not his own--it is always in God's hands. But one June night in 1971 even Father Paul couldn't cope with the rage that is sometimes unleashed out on the street.

That night--while trying to help someone he thought was in need--Sasser was "pistol whipped" and shot, at close range, through the stomach. A main artery was bruised, many vital organs hit. He is still deaf in one ear and has severe headaches from the whipping.

"I wasn't supposed to survive that one," Sasser related. "There is something yet God wants me to do. Whatever it is I'm still going for it."

An incident last April brought back memories. It was closing time for the Third Church Service Center when a man pulled a gun ("it looked like a cannon") on Sasser. But this time he wrestled it away. This time he had the upper hand. This time he survived.

He survived so that two weeks later another guy could "come down on me with a two-by-four." However, another man "stepped in and took much of the blow. That's a good feeling," Sasser said, to know that someone out there cares.

But whether it's trying to talk a knife out of someone's hands, "turning the other cheek" to verbal abuse or lying in a hospital expecting to die, Sasser said: "Those are just the risks that are part of my commitment. I don't question it. I never have. I've never said, 'Why me, Lord?' Who I am is in light of my commitment to God. I can't do otherwise."

He doesn't smoke or drink, use street language, have long hair, or wear grubby clothes--he doesn't do any of those things some say are needed to reach street people. He's a living example that you don't have to "become one of them" to minister to them. "They accept me just the way I am," Sasser said. "They know I believe in what I'm doing. That's enough."

He treats everyone as a person of value and he doesn't do anything special for anyone, yet, in reality, does something special for everyone.

"I can't promise you anything but I'll do what I can to help you," Sasser tells those who come through the door of the Service Center, most without a job, hungry, needing clothes and, probably most important, a shoulder to lean on.

And this minister doesn't expect anything in return. He leaves that aspect to the Holy Spirit. Armed with the Bible and Christian love, he counsels men trying to straighten out their lives. But any responses from them are voluntary.

"We don't force anyone through a 'religious experience' in order to get fed or clothes," Sasser explained, a hint of anger in his voice. "I don't believe in that." In his experience that approach "means nothing to the men--it's just a way to get down to the soup quicker."

Sasser doesn't take the term "Christian witness" lightly. He actually lives in this inner-city area and knows the community. "I even know the prostitutes and those in the gay crowd." He doesn't have to approve--but he does try to help them.

This "community" is really Sasser's family. Anytime someone needs him, he's available. Everyone knows where he lives. There's an open invitation--a place to sleep, to get a meal, to watch TV, to just talk. And yes, a place to find out more about Jesus Christ.

It's true, he's been ripped off more times than he can remember. "But I guess I just haven't learned," he chuckled, "because I keep doing it again and again."

Because he's known doesn't make it less dangerous. There's a different element out on the streets these days he has discovered. One extreme is even more dangerous than in the past while the other is even more open to gospel ministry.

The first element really should be institutionalized. Just nine months ago many of the men Sasser works with were in mental institutions before government cutbacks forced them onto the streets. "There're a lot of problems out there today," he said. "There are very short fuses. We really have problems," not talking so much about his ministry as all of society.

The slumping economy has brought the new breed of street people. They're employable but not employed. There are skills there but no jobs.

What really frightens Sasser is it "won't take long before the young ones become street-wise" and all that goes with it. "That's a shame."

For the larger percentage, according to Sasser, the street is not where they ought to be but where they are because of the conditions of the day.

"The hardest thing is to try to help an individual who wants to work--who knows how to work--to find employment. That guy is simply being broken because he can't be what he wants to be. The situation is really destroying him."

Sasser has had to look into many eyes recently and quietly say, "I don't know where you can go or what you can do."

He sees hurt and frustration and anger that not many Southern Baptists are seeing. "At best we are a drop-in referral center" for that kind of help, Sasser concluded, emotionally.

Yet Sasser and his volunteer team--all members of Third Church--seemingly remain undaunted. There's Kathleen Francis, Ray Jones, Marie Ward and Blanche Elkins who help wash, mend and sort clothing, gather food and counsel. There's also Ernest Wingfield, a black, who gives each and every morning to the Service Center.

Most times it seems that God "sends the dirtiest ones our way," said Sasser. "But we just don't smell those smells, or hear those words, or I guess, really see how nasty it is. We really don't pay much attention to appearance. We don't see black or white, brown or yellow; we see people."

The secret to this ministry probably lies in a simple quote from Sasser: "I treat each one differently. Each one is a unique child of God. I can't put everyone in the same bag."

Perhaps that's why many of the street battles waged around Third Baptist are being won.