



BAPTIST PRESS

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Heightened Religious Interest Offers Churches Opportunity

By Craig Bird

WASHINGTON (BP)--The "giant paradox" of religious activity increasing while moral standards continue to decline offers American churches a great opportunity, George Gallup says.

Gallup told approximately 600 participants at the Christian Life Commission Seminar on Christian Citizenship 1984, the Gallup polls consistently show interest in religion and church attendance has increased significantly in the past decade.

"However, we also find there is very little difference in the views of the churched and the unchurched in many moral matters," he explained. "Eight of 10 Americans claim to be Christians--only one-half can identify who preached the Sermon on the Mount and the majority could not name even half of the Ten Commandments."

But among the 12 percent of the population which Gallup defines as "deeply committed" to Christianity, the polls show moral standards are significantly higher.

"These findings should set the agenda for churches in the 1980s," Gallup said. "The churches urgently need to take advantage of the increased interest in religion to move the people from the 'church' category to the 'deeply committed' category.

"And the way to do that, I feel, is to become 'intensely practical.' Our churches are assuming people know what they believe and why; they are assuming people have a regular prayer life and find the Bible accessible--but that is not true."

Among his suggestions were: the organization of small Bible study groups with trained leaders; structured programs to help individuals with their prayer life; "thinking small" by building small support groups for prayer and Bible study, and dramatically increasing religious education programs.

Failure by Christian churches to respond to the increased religious interest, could mean other religions, including cults, could fill the void, he warned.

"The majority of Americans believe in a living, indwelling Christ, as opposed to a historical Christ; most homes have at least one Bible, though most gather a great deal of dust; and most have more confidence in the church than any other public institution," Gallup said. "We are favorably disposed toward religion and we want our faith to deepen."

If churches can move an occasional church attender into a deeper knowledge and commitment to Christianity, moral and social conditions will improve, Gallup said. "We will not have social renewal until we have inner renewal. We will never have peace on earth until men are brought into a proper relationship with an indwelling Christ."

Gallup is president of the Gallup Organization of Princeton, N.J. The Gallup polls classify people as "churched" if they attend church once every six months. The "intensely committed" people answered yes to such questions as "do you find comfort and support from your faith, does your understanding of faith affect the things you do, do you want your faith to grow, do you believe in the divinity of Jesus," in addition to regular church attendance, Bible study and prayer.

Wilson Chiko Of Kenya
Exchanged Fear For Faith

By Cari Hyden

BELTON, Texas (BP)--The story of Wilson Chiko is the story of a man who defied his family to worship God.

Chiko, now studying religion at the University of Mary-Hardin Baylor in Belton, Texas, formerly was pastor of Shauri Moyo Baptist Church in Kenya--the largest Baptist church in Kenya and the first to be sponsored by Southern Baptists in that country.

Chiko was reared in a home built of sticks covered with mud and roofed with thatch. Kigiryama and Swahili were his native tongues; amulets and spirits were what he worshiped.

"Growing up in a non-Christian home is just impossible," Chiko said. "You live in fear--fear of the evil spirits. Fear that they will take you away.

"I felt fearful all my life until I finally started school. Some missionaries spoke in class and showed films about the death and resurrection of Christ.

"It interested me so much that I wanted to learn more about this man who came for everybody, including me."

When he reached high school, Chiko began attending Sunday school in a Baptist church.

"It was then that I knew I had been living in fear," Chiko remembers. "When I accepted Christ as my personal savior, things began to change."

The fear was gone, Chiko said, but he faced a different struggle.

"I felt like an outcast; I was rejected by my family. My only friend was a small book of the gospel of John. My father took the book away from me. 'I don't want you to talk about this man called Jesus,' he said to me."

Chiko found himself spending most of his time in the home of his pastor. After high school, he was elected by a church to take care of a small congregation. In 1973 he was recommended to attend the seminary for pastoral training.

While away at school, Chiko continued to correspond with his father, "talking about the man Jesus Christ, telling about my situation at school and that this man was taking care of me.

"I had written that I felt rejected in my home but found comfort because Jesus had accepted me in his home--I belonged to the family of the Creator," Chiko said.

Chiko's father joined him in 1974 for a three-day open air meeting with an evangelist.

"On the third day my father came forward," Chiko said, his face glowing at the memory. "I cannot put into words how I felt. I felt such joy--I wanted to start jumping around and yelling. All I could do was go and shake his hand--he had tears running down his face. I don't know, I probably wept too."

Two of his three brothers have become Christians and the third now attends church regularly.

Chiko was graduated from the seminary and began work on the "Giryama Project," a two-year effort to start churches among the nine coastal tribes of Kenya.

Each tribe spoke a different dialect of the same language; none had been introduced to Christianity.

The villagers "used to bring me amulets. They would ask, 'Do you believe that if you touch this, you will wake up with a very serious headache?' I told them to bring me all the amulets, and after Bible study I would touch them.

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"They eventually burned them. 'How can we believe in these things you play with as if they were toys?' they said."

About 500 churches were established.

Chiko then began work with a radio ministry preparing cassettes for church use and serving the Shauri Moyo Church. By 1980, the church demanded his full attention, so he resigned from the radio ministry. The church grew from 280 to 565 members, and Chiko was becoming known throughout Kenya. In 1981, he was named executive secretary of the Baptist Convention of Kenya.

First Church, Edna, agreed to sponsor Chiko, and he arrived this year to begin studies at Mary Hardin-Baylor.

"I felt like the Lord was delaying my education so I could come to a Christian university," Chiko now says of the wait.

He is impatient to complete his studies, for he has been unable to find means to bring his wife and three children to this country.

And he misses Kenya.

"I want to minister to my people," he said.

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Michigan Church Starter Aims For
'A Church In Every Town'

By Patti Stephenson

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INDIAN RIVER, Mich. (BP)--Carrol Fowler, a self-described Arkansas country boy, recounts a conversation among three Michigan oilmen about his church-starting venture in Manistee, Mich.

"One said to his friends, 'I hear someone's starting a Southern Baptist church in our town,'" Fowler relates. "'Who?' they asked. 'That Yankee who talks funny.'"

Fowler's booming laugh underscores his deep pleasure at being accepted as one of their own--despite a strong southern accent--by the "northlanders," as he calls residents of Michigan's upper peninsula.

Fowler is a big man, with a rippled wave of salt-and-pepper hair across his brow, a ruddy face creased by laugh lines, and a penchant for black leather, pointed-toe boots. A church planter strategist appointed by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, he helps start SBC churches across 21 Michigan counties included in the Northland, Upper Peninsula and Bay Area Baptist Associations. His job is to find where Southern Baptist outreach is most urgently needed, start works there, then ferret out the people and resources to sustain them.

Fowler's trek from Arkansas to Michigan resulted from his participation in a 1977 revival campaign in Gaylord, Mich., a town with no SBC witness. "I left knowing someday I would return," he remembers.

In January 1980, Fowler conceded "God was calling us into pioneer missions." After he and his wife, Wilma, visited Onaway, Mich., a town of 900 people. "We weren't very impressed," he admits. "There were only seven people involved in a chapel there." But they also agreed it was the place God wanted them to be.

Fowler remembers one of the most difficult times of his life was "leaving the comfort zone of a growing church in the Arkansas Ozarks." The same day he and Wilma packed their rental truck for the move to Michigan, their son, Steve, packed and left for college. "We felt we were leaving everything--comfortable salary, friends, family."

The challenge to grow a church was formidable, considering "we were the only Southerners in town and Baptists to boot," Fowler recalls. After two-and-a-half years at Onaway Baptist Chapel, however, he had baptized 132 people into the mission fellowship.

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Fowler's approach was simple: "I just found out how people thought up here and began to think like they did." He plunged into community life by visiting 50 homes a week and coached the high school baseball team to a winning season.

Along the way, he learned to accept "people where they are" in a community plagued by high alcoholism, common-law marriages and illegitimate births. Two-thirds of those who joined the church "had their lives completely turned around by Christ," he says.

But Fowler was not content to see just one church grow. "I know God wants a church in every town in northern Michigan," he explains, but that dream had been detoured by a lack of full-time pastors.

When he took on the job of overseeing church planting in northern Michigan last year, Fowler knew the key to success was finding people who would be challenged by the immens needs and would be willing to make sacrifices to meet them. The solution, he found, was Mission Service Corps, the SBC's short-term volunteer program.

Fowler began recruiting MSC volunteers from all over the country--retired pastors from Arkansas and Indiana, schoolteachers from Tennessee--to become "stack poles" for building new work in unreached communities.

More than a dozen MSC volunteers are now cultivating new work in towns such as St. Ignace, Atlanta, Boyne City and Cadillac. Most all are bivocational; Fowler helps them find housing and jobs, then coaches them through the first six months as they establish the new work.

Fowler's formula for starting churches usually begins with a community survey, searching out people interested in either a home Bible study or correspondence Bible course. Mission teams from Tennessee associations linked to Michigan and other trained volunteers help conduct surveys in the summer.

Fowler is firm about the proper approach. "I tell them all to remember they are God's people and they must show love," he says. "People here want you to care enough to visit them the second time, so not giving up is important."

Not every new church grows quickly. He remembers starting one new mission with 16 people, who were all then laid off and left town. "I preached five Sundays to metal chairs," he tells. But, he's quick to add, the church now has a full-time pastor and will constitute this fall.

In three years, Fowler hopes to have 30 MSC volunteers at work in Michigan. There are 16 churches and four chapels in northern Michigan now. His goal for 1990 is to reach 50.

Fowler thinks two things must happen before Southern Baptists fully penetrate northern Michigan. "First, they have to know about the huge numbers of people who are lost here and how few Southern Baptist churches we have to reach them," he says. "Second, they must experience that need personally for themselves. That's what makes the difference."

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River Ministry Matches
Nurses With Medical Misery

By Keith Randall

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SOLISENO, Mexico (BP)--The old man's tough, leathery skin resembled naughahyde. He was 93, and looked every day of it.

He was thrilled when the nurses and Alfredo Cortes, a physician, of LaFeria, Texas, came into his little wooden shack to examine him. Talking with the man in Spanish, the doctor learned of his ailments: kidney trouble, severe arthritis, emphysema, prostrate trouble and heart disease.

But his most pressing trouble was diagnosed almost immediately--parasites. "He's got a belly full of worms," Cortes said.

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In fact, most of the people in the Mexican village of Soliseno had a belly full of worms, a condition the doctor said is very common throughout the dusty, dirty villages of Mexico.

But for the 14 student nurses from the Baylor School of Nursing who went on the medical mission to the region, it was strictly hard-core, on-the-job training.

Every January for the past few years, a group of Baylor nurses have paid \$60 each to sign up for the medical expedition to the Rio Grande Valley where they distribute medical supplies, including medicine, to the Mexican nationals along the border.

In return, they get little sleep, work 16-hour days, go without hot water and brave bitter cold days and nights. The expedition is part of a program called the Baptist River Ministry.

Often, the nurses and doctors receive sincere "thank-yous" from grateful villagers, frequently in gifts of beans, tortillas or tamales as a sign of their gratitude. But the most personal satisfaction these nurses and River Ministry workers get is knowing they have helped people in this troubled area with their medical problems.

"Almost all of the problems these people have--disease, poor diet, illiteracy--can be traced back to money. They have none," said Cindy Goldfarb, who works with the River Ministry. "The Baylor student nurses will see a wide range of ailments, everything from typhus to tuberculosis to epilepsy. We even helped deliver a baby once."

This year, a historic cold snap in that region hampered medical treatment efforts even more. Temperatures dipped to 19 degrees, one of the lowest on record, causing many of the people to suffer from bronchitis, pneumonia and respiratory problems, in addition to their other ailments. On top of that, none of the homes are heated.

"You see the real problems of the world first hand," said Cindy Moseley, a Plano, Texas, senior. "Our biggest problem is a language barrier--it's hard sometimes to understand what the patient is saying and what ails him. But the experience of treating them is what we come for. For many of these kids, it's the first time they've ever seen a doctor, and the pregnant women have little or no prenatal care."

Added Kathy Wilshire of Carrollton, Texas: "You get a feeling of responsibility being down here. We get theory in the classroom, but the work in these villages gives us some practical experience. You really have to learn to be patient with these people. I'm just amazed at how little they know about their own bodies."

Besides serving a humanitarian need, the River Ministry has a profound effect on the individuals who work as a medical team in the region. Linda Garner, assistant professor of nursing at the Baylor School of Nursing, has made 10 such trips, and she has learned the true meaning on one word--appreciation.

"Once you've been down here, you learn to appreciate what we in America have. All of your problems seem small compared to the problems of these people. And it's such a valuable experience for our students. We examined more than 300 people down here, and the students have seen a wider variety of illnesses than they could have imagined.

"For example, in one day we saw three kids with perforated eardrums. You'd never see that many in a single day in Dallas. Also, we had a young girl come by who complained about her hair falling out. It was a classic case of malnutrition and vitamin deficiency."

The students also learned the true meaning of "roughing it." Indoor toilets are almost non-existent in rural Mexico. When nature calls, it's an outhouse or nothing.

"Most of the girls have never even seen an outhouse, much less used one," said Ross Prater, director of the Baptist Student Union at the Nursing School and a coordinator of the trip. "It's given them a new perspective on life. After they've been down here a few days, they realize not everyone in the world stops by the shopping mall on the way home to check out the new spring line of clothes."



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