



News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

**-- FEATURES**

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Mexican Desert  
 Growing Baptist Churches

By Larry Brumley

DALLAS (BP)--Like a modern-day Apostle Paul, Juan Ponce is combing the northern Mexican states of Chihuahua and Coahuila, preaching the gospel and establishing churches.

The 58-year-old pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church, Alpine, Texas, has adopted the Great Chihuahuan Desert as his personal mission field. The vast rugged country across the Rio Grande River from Big Bend National Park is where God has called him to preach, says the former Mexican farmer.

Since 1974, when he left the Catholic church to become a Baptist missionary, evangelist and pastor, Ponce has established 12 churches and 11 preaching points in small, isolated villages. Most of the pastors are laymen whom Ponce personally led to Christ and disciplined. Some were once drug runners and village rowdies.

In only 10 years, Ponce, who received financial support from Texas Baptists' Mary Hill Davis Offering for State Missions, has seen his labor shift a predominantly Catholic area into a flourishing Baptist mission base. The churches have formed an association (Asociacion Misiones Bautistas de la Frontera de Chih y. Coah.) and are in the process of becoming affiliated with the National Baptist Convention of Mexico.

Though the villages are poor--many families live on \$40 a month--the association has established a mission fund to begin work in surrounding villages. Most of the churches have pledged 20 percent of their receipts to the fund.

Each of the 12 churches has a sponsoring church in Texas. First Baptist Church, Valley Mills; First Baptist Church, Midland; First Baptist Church, San Angelo; and Mother Holmes Memorial Baptist Church, Sheffield, construct buildings, provide financial support for pastors of the churches and send medical teams to the area. First Baptist Church, Valley Mills, and First Baptist Church, San Angelo, paid for seminary extension training for 13 of the Mexico pastors. Eight have completed the course work and recently were ordained.

Ponce said he was raised in a home that was "100 percent religious."

"I was very Catholic, and I fulfilled all the requirements of the church: confession, Mass, rosaries, etc. I also participated in many of the church's organizations. Although I was involved in all of this, I had a great emptiness inside."

While attending Mass one day, Ponce said the priest read Matthew 6:33: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." At first he didn't understand the meaning of the verse. The priest didn't explain it, but the words stuck in Ponce's mind.

"I had an unrest and obsession with it (Matthew 6:33). I searched for a Bible and when I finally found one it seemed like an eternity to reach home so I could read it. When I started reading it, it didn't take long for God to touch my heart. As a good Catholic, I continued to attend church, but I was different. I felt a desire to share with people about Jesus."

Ponce began to preach in the small villages around Santa Elena, Mexico, his hometown on the banks of the Rio Grande River. He encountered opposition from the priest, who ordered him to "restrain himself." Villagers began to ask Ponce to conduct Bible studies in his home. He received a second reprimand from the priest and withdrew from the Catholic church. Four months later, the priest died and opposition to his evangelistic efforts ceased.

A few months later, Ponce met Neal Raymond, a layman from First Baptist Church, Shamrock, Texas, who was working in the area with the Rio Grande River Ministry. Raymond's influence led Ponce to become a Baptist, and he was ordained in 1978 by First Baptist Church, San Angelo.

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Ponce moved to the United States last year to become pastor of Emmanuel. It was a difficult decision, he says, because his heart was in Mexico. Although he no longer gets around to every Mexican village every month, he still makes several trips a year to villages to conduct "institutes" to train and motivate the pastors.

He has no formal education. "My seminary is in the villages," Ponce says. With guidance from Jimmy Smith, coordinator of the River Ministry's Mexican Rural Work, and Raymond Sanders, director of missions for Big Bend Baptist Association, Ponce is helping achieve a major goal of the River Ministry--building strong, self-supporting Mexican Baptist churches.

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R.G. Lee's Niece  
Aids Grand Canyon College

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PHOENIX, Ariz. (BP)—Mrs. Mildred Lee Adair, niece of famed Southern Baptist leader R.G. Lee, and her husband Oliver have given Grand Canyon College in Phoenix their 77-acre estate in South Carolina valued well in excess of \$100,000.

"I think you have a message and I think you are desperately needed, especially in the West," said Mrs. Adair. "I cannot think of a sweeter, finer place. We wanted to give as much as possible. We feel the need for Christian education is at an all-time high."

Mrs. Adair was born in the 150-year-old house which stands on the Carolina property but came to the Navajo Reservation to teach in 1935. She later taught in the public schools of Arizona at Superior, Window Rock, and Kingman.

According to Mrs. Adair, her uncle, too, "was an ardent supporter of Grand Canyon, having given the first large donation and having spoken on the campus several times."

One of the few restrictions placed on the gift is that there be no discrimination as to race, natural origin, sex, age or religion.

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Effective Preaching  
Unites Then and Now

By Jim Lowry

Baptist Press  
9/24/84

ORLANDO, Fla. (BP)—Southern Baptist preachers cannot be experts on the geography of Galilee and at the same time, unaware of the sins of businessmen in the congregation, according to Joel Gregory, professor of preaching at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

"Effective biblical preaching brings together then and now," explained Gregory to pastors attending a conference on preaching at First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla. "You don't have the option of being contemporary OR biblical. You must be both and you can be both."

"Applied biblical preaching is effective for the congregation but demanding for the preacher," he continued. "It is not enough for the preacher to be sophisticated and urbane in terms of drama, art and culture. You have to have a word from God."

"The one major lack in biblical preaching today is specific application," Gregory said. "There is not enough specifically directing the application to life, giving specific instructions, for instance, on when and how to pray unceasingly."

"Many preachers leave the application of the sermon to the inspiration of the moment at 11 a.m. Sunday," he added. "It likely won't happen. Trying to capture an idea that way is like chasing butterflies with a net. You swing a lot at the idea but usually don't catch it."

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"The preacher needs to wrestle with specific application during his sermon preparation just as rigorously as he studies the Bible," Gregory explained. "Fresh, crisp, contemporary illustrations are everywhere—bumper stickers, newspapers and news programs. We need to burn some old sermon illustration books to get a new wave of contemporary illustrations."

Gregory said Southern Baptist pastors also lack the time required to do a thorough, intense biblical exegesis for their sermons.

"Few men can capture the time and solitude for a word-by-word study," he said. "That time and solitude must be recovered as a radical priority if we are to have great preaching."

According to Gregory, congregations reflect a pastor's attitude toward the Bible after a few years under his pastoral ministry.

"If church members see a preacher who handles the Bible casually, they will do the same," he said. "On the other hand, if they see a man who grapples with every word of the text, they will become that kind of biblical students. If there is a revival of biblical preaching, there will be a revival of biblical knowledge."

"Sometimes the text read before the sermon has no more to do with the sermon than the national anthem has to do with a ball game," Gregory said. "If the preacher reads the text and departs from it the people will get a certain impression of the importance of the Bible."

"Preachers need to recover a word-by-word study of the Bible so they can understand the meaning and then make specific applications to the needs of the congregation, because that is the only way to unleash the relevance that is already in the Bible," he urged.

"It is not the role of the preacher to make the Bible relevant," Gregory cautioned. "The Bible is relevant. Just don't stand in the way of the Bible—turn it loose."

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Knapps' Baptisms, Growth  
Keep Soaring In Tanzania

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KYELA, Tanzania (BP)—Baptisms and church growth continue to soar in the ministry of Southern Baptist missionaries Doug and Evelyn Knapp in Tanzania, according to new figures for the 1984 church year ending August 31.

Although full overseas statistics aren't yet available, the advances in Kyela may well rank first in church association growth among Southern Baptist foreign mission fields.

Church membership in the Kyela district—where the Knapps work—jumped 40 percent this year to 19,985. Sunday school enrollment soared almost 35 percent to nearly 7,300 and baptisms rose 15 percent from 5,339 to 6,139 in the Kyela Baptist Association.

Last year Knapp, an agricultural evangelist with 21 years' experience in the East African nation, personally baptized more than 4,000 of the 5,339 candidates. He immersed some 3,850 of the 6,139 new believers this year before leaving for furlough in the United States. African preachers trained by Knapp baptized the others.

Other church growth statistics from Kyela reveal that churches increased from 189 to 215 during the year. Woman's Missionary Union enrollment jumped 15.3 percent and giving soared more than 65 percent.

Kyela churches have multiplied fivefold since 1975, when the Knapps began work in there, and have gone up each year in baptisms, recording more than 17,875 since 1978 under Doug Knapp's leadership.

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The most explosive growth has come since 1982, when Knapp and a team of preachers from the United States led a three-week crusade which saturated the area and resulted in 7,505 professions of faith in Jesus Christ. Another evangelistic effort earlier this year produced 4,119 professions.

Knapp, who combines agricultural ministries and evangelism, said he now faces the task of providing training for the new converts and leaders of the new churches.

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Irving Childress  
Dies In Arizona

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PHOENIX, Ariz. (BP)—Irving Childress, director of the evangelism/missions division of the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention, died Sept. 22 following a brief illness.

After entering a Scottsdale hospital Aug. 21, Childress, who was 58, was placed in intensive care Aug. 23. Doctors have not determined the cause of the illness.

Childress became director of the ASBC evangelism/missions division in March 1983.

Prior to that he had been the state director of evangelism for 17 years, state director of stewardship (1966-68) and Baptist Student Union director (1968-70).

He was also editor of the Baptist Beacon from late 1970 to early 1973.

Before joining the state convention staff, the Virginia native was director of missions for Catalina Baptist Association in Tucson, Ariz., for six years. He also was pastor of two Arizona congregations as well as two churches in Kentucky.

Childress was a graduate of Pikeville College, Pikeville, Ky., and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky. He was awarded the doctorate of divinity degree from Grand Canyon College, Phoenix.

He is survived by his wife, Hettie, a daughter, Nancy Dorris of Phoenix, a brother, two sisters and one granddaughter. Childress' daughter, Nancy, moved to Arizona from California only a few weeks ago when her husband Mark became pastor of Love Baptist Church, Phoenix.

A new work church start trust fund has been established in memory of Childress. Those wishing to make contributions may send them to the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention and designate the gift for the trust fund.

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A.C. Miller  
Dies In Texas

Baptist Press  
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DALLAS (BP)—Acker C. Miller, 92, second executive secretary of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, died Sept. 22 in Dallas.

Miller was known to thousands of Southern Baptists for his pioneering work in the area of race relations during the early years of the American civil rights movement. He became director of the SBC's five-year old Social Service Commission in 1952, following Hugh Brimm. The next year the office was moved from Louisville, Ky., to Nashville, Tenn., and the name of the organization changed to the Christian Life Commission.

Miller retired in 1960 to become pastor of First Baptist Church, Sedona, Ariz. After "retiring again," he and his wife, Margaret, joined the faculty at Fruitland Bible Institute, Hendersonville, N.C., in 1965. They returned to their home in Dallas in 1968, but went back to Fruitland in 1976. Mrs. Miller died in 1981 and Miller retired for the final time in August 1982.

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Born on a horse ranch in Coke County, Texas, Miller was a large, engaging man with a booming bass voice. He graduated from Hardin-Simmons University in 1917. After military duty as a chaplain in World War I, he completed a Th.M. degree in 1921 at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.

In 1944 he became the first secretary of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, a position he held until moving to the SEC agency.

Miller is survived by two daughters, Elsa Billman of Dallas and Clara Buckingham of Mann's Choice, Pa.; two sons, Allister C. and E. Marden, both of Houston; a brother and a sister, 12 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

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Fired Pastor Reinstated,  
Awarded \$53,000 By Jury

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KINGWOOD, W.Va. (BP)—A West Virginia jury has told a church it must reinstate the pastor it fired in 1981 and pay him \$53,000.

James Gillespie was fired as pastor of Elkins Southern Baptist Church in Elkins, W.Va. in March 1981. He filed suit against the church and three individual members charging the action to dismiss him was illegal.

The first trial, in the summer of 1982, lasted two weeks and ended in a mistrial when the jury was unable to reach a verdict.

Gillespie and his attorney then expanded the suit to include the Monongahela Baptist Association, area missionary Donald E. Walls and John Andes, interim pastor of the church.

Robert C. Habritter, county circuit judge, dismissed all the suits except the one against the church after hearing two days of testimony. He ruled that since, according to Baptist polity, there is no ascending authority and each Baptist group is autonomous, the concept of ascending liability did not apply, so the association, Walls and Andes were not liable.

Habritter allowed the case against the church to go to the jury because that case was a matter of judgement and not an interpretation of law.

In ordering Gillespie's reinstatement and the \$53,000 in back salary and damages, the jury apparently accepted Gillespie's testimony instead of the testimony of two of the church's deacons. There were only three ordained deacons at the church at the time the meeting was called to dismiss Gillespie. The two deacons testified they were in agreement in calling the meeting—which constituted a majority.

Gillespie testified the two men had not been in agreement. The jury ruled in his favor.

Habritter said the case was without precedent in West Virginia. He could find no similar case involving a Baptist church or any church which operates as a congregational democracy.

He ruled the church constitution and by-laws did not constitute a binding contract between the church and pastor when it relates to employment; the two deacons who called the March 22 meeting were a majority of the functioning deacon body; and that the moderator had conducted a fair and legal business meeting on March 22. In the 1982 trial the judge had ruled the opposite on all of the issues.

The church is expected to appeal the verdict.

A regular business meeting March 15, 1981 was disrupted which led to the March 22 meeting being called.

Walls said the ramifications of the case could have great effect on how Southern Baptist churches deal with the calling and termination of pastors.

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