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January 31, 1986

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Florida Pastor Eyewitness
 To Space Shuttle Disaster

By Greg Warner

TITUSVILLE, Fla. (BP)—Bill Faulkner heard no explosion from the blue Florida sky, but as he watched the liftoff of the Space Shuttle Challenger, he knew something was terribly wrong.

"It was more a sense of silence than anything else," he said.

Faulkner, pastor of Westside Baptist Church, Titusville, like many who live near the launch site at Kennedy Space Center, watched from the ground as the Space Shuttle disappeared in a cloud of orange smoke, killing seven astronauts.

"Few of us are eyewitnesses to seven people losing their lives," Faulkner said. "It is hard to get perspective on that."

While the nation mourned the death of the seven, Faulkner and others—many of them NASA employees—began coping with their own unique grief.

Tim Shrader, Westside's minister of music and youth, who watched the launch with Faulkner the morning of Jan. 28, said: "There's so much news coverage about Houston and Concord, N.H., (where the astronauts lived) but nobody talks about Titusville."

"These people in Titusville are hurting too," he said. "This affects all of us."

Titusville, a city of 32,000 across the Indian River from the Kennedy Space Center, is the largest of several communities closely related to the space industry, which employs an estimated 20,000 people in the area.

W.D. Sharp, director of missions for the Brevard Baptist Association, estimated three-fourths of the Baptist families in the area are involved in the space program in some way.

Some are more involved than others.

Gene Thomas, a member of First Baptist Church, Merritt Island, was launch director for the Challenger mission and a personal friend of two of the astronauts killed.

Thomas was one of several people counseled and consoled by Len Turner, pastor of the Merritt Island church, in the aftermath of the disaster.

"This has left a devastating impact on our community," Turner said. "We are trying to minister to a lot of folks with deep psychological needs."

Turner and other ministers in the area said Space Center workers carry a special burden for the tragedy.

Faulkner, who formerly was a design draftsman for a NASA contractor, said NASA employees "feel a tremendous amount of responsibility, not only for the vehicle, but for the people in the vehicle." He added employees make a space project "part of you."

Wayne Tucker, business administrator for Park Avenue Baptist Church, Titusville, who was working at the Space Center when three Apollo astronauts were killed in a 1967 launchpad flash fire, said all employees are affected and tend to overreact. "You feel accused and yet you are not accused," he said. "These are the subtle effects people don't really see."

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Even residents not employed in the space program somehow carry the burden, ministers say.

"When the shuttle takes off, it's up there for everyone to see," said Ray Johnson, pastor of First Baptist Church, Titusville.

Baptist churches in the area now are trying to address the unique needs of people whose towns are home to the wounded space industry. First Baptist, Merritt Island, held a memorial service for 1,000 people on the day after the explosion. Park Avenue and Westside churches scheduled special services for Sunday. Other churches held prayer sessions during the week.

Turner said he is confident area residents can turn the "tragedy into triumph. This is drawing people together in an unusual way."

"I feel the Lord is really going to use this," he said.

When the initial trauma subsides, other needs will surface, the ministers say. Of particular concern is the threat of layoffs if the space program is curtailed or slowed.

"This is a one-product economy," Johnson said. "Everybody is involved directly or indirectly."

The shuttle accident has changed many things, Johnson said, including the "blase" attitude of many people toward now commonplace rocket launches.

"The next time, there will be a lot more attention to it."

Space Center Churches
Feel Loss Of Friends

By Toby Druin

HOUSTON (BP)--"Shock"..."quietness"..."absolutely stunned"..."completely devastated".

Pastors in the Johnson Space Center communities south of Houston used these words to describe the reaction of their members to the Jan. 28 disaster that claimed the lives of six astronauts--all of them neighbors or friends--and a New Hampshire teacher aboard the Space Shuttle Challenger.

Clear Lake Baptist Church, Nassau Bay Baptist Church and University Baptist Church near the space center have many members who are involved in the space program, including several astronauts and their families.

None of those killed in the fiery explosion was a Baptist or a member of any of the local Baptist churches, but shuttle Commander Francis Richard (Dick) Scobee's wife, June, is a member of University Baptist Church, Houston, and is a 1970 honors graduate of Baptist College of Charleston (S.C.).

Scobee, who "occasionally attended" the Houston church, according to pastor David Slover, was considered "a loyal friend" of the South Carolina Baptist college. (See related story.)

Another shuttle crewmember, pilot Michael Smith and his wife, Jane, had attended Bible study and chapel at Nassau Bay Baptist Church, according to pastor Bill Rittenhouse.

A third member of the crew, Ron McNair, had been a member of Trinity Baptist Church, in Los Angeles, dually aligned with the American Baptist Churches and the National Baptist Convention, in the late 1970s.

Although NASA does not release information on the religious preference of crew members, Baptist Press reporters determined the crew was religiously diverse. According to sources, Scobee did not have strong church ties; McNair and Smith were listed as United Methodists; mission specialist Judith Resnik was Jewish; teacher Christa McAuliffe was Roman Catholic; mission specialist Ellison S. Onizuka was Buddhist and efforts to determine payload specialist Gregory B. Jarvis' religious preference were unsuccessful.

Joining with many other observances across the nation, the three Texas churches were to hold a memorial service for the astronauts. They were to combine their 11 a.m. worship service Sunday, Feb. 2.

Former astronaut James Irwin, now a Southern Baptist evangelist who was ordained by Nassau Bay Baptist Church, was to be the principal speaker. Three current astronauts—Blaine Hammonds, in training for his first shuttle experience; and Jim Buckley and Bob Stewart, who already have made shuttle trips—were to participate. Hammonds is a member of Clear Lake church; Stewart of University church and Buckley of Nassau Bay church.

University church, with a sanctuary seating about 1,500 was chosen for the joint service. Both the Nassau Bay and Clear Lake churches were also to hold memorial services of their own before the joint services.

All three pastors and their churches quickly rallied to aid and comfort the families of the shuttle crew.

Glen R. Willingham, who came to Clear Lake church only four months ago, said he had just returned to his office from teaching a class in the Bible Chair at San Jacinto College when his door burst open and a woman, almost in hysterics, said she had just learned the shuttle had exploded. The woman, a volunteer working in the church office, was a friend of the Scobees and she and her husband were keeping the Scobee's pets, Willingham said.

The woman's husband, who works at the space center, had called with the terrible news.

"It just devastated my people," Willingham said. Virtually everyone in the church is involved in some way with the space program, he noted, but everyone he had heard comment on it, including astronaut Hammonds' wife, had expressed a desire for the program to go on.

Clear Lake church, Willingham said, was to have a memorial service of its own from 9:30 to 10:15 a.m. Sunday. It was to be a time, he said, "when the pastor of this church can say some things to his people." He added members also will have the opportunity to share their feelings.

Rittenhouse, pastor at Nassau Bay who has been close to the space program almost since its inception, said he had passed up the opportunity to view the shuttle launch from Mission Control (in Houston) but had stopped by his home to watch it.

He said he knew immediately what had happened when he saw the first cloud of smoke. He added one of his first thoughts was of another tragedy which had occurred 19 years and a day earlier, when the only other three astronauts to lose their lives in a space related accident were killed. Virgil I. (Gus) Grissom, Edward H. White and Roger Chaffee were killed when a flash fire engulfed their Apollo I capsule Jan. 27, 1967.

Following the shuttle disaster, Rittenhouse said he immediately called the home of astronaut Buckley and then went to be with the family.

Members of Nassau Bay church, he said, were "absolutely stunned" by the accident. "Not as to why it happened, but that it happened at all," he said. "All were grief stricken and heartbroken for their friends."

At prayer meeting Wednesday night following the Tuesday morning disaster, Nassau Bay members were still suffering the trauma of the accident, Rittenhouse said, but many shared remembrances of the shuttle crew and "the emptiness" they felt.

Rittenhouse said he encouraged them to respect the privacy of the families but not to leave them alone.

David Slover, pastor at University church, said his people were "shocked" by the incident, but a "quietness" followed as the people rallied around those in grief.

His emphasis, Slover said, would not be on the "why" of such things, but on "God's grace and his sufficiency in every trial."

Baptist College Honors
Shuttle Commander Scobee

By Lonnie Wilkey

CHARLESTON, S.C. (BP)--The tragic explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, which shocked an entire nation and sent it into mourning, had a special impact on Baptist College at Charleston.

Challenger Commander Francis Richard (Dick) Scobee's wife, June, was a 1970 honors graduate of the college and the astronaut was considered a "loyal friend" of the South Carolina Baptist Convention-related institution.

After the tragedy Baptist College established the Francis Richard Scobee Scholarship Fund to "honor the couple who have been so closely related to the Baptist College family in recent years," said BCC President Jairy C. Hunter Jr.

In 1984 the Scobees were special guests at the dedication of the college's Lightsey Chapel. Scobee presented college officials memorabilia he had taken into space on an earlier shuttle mission.

Shirley Trainor, director of public relations for the college, said among the items were an American flag and a list of faculty, staff and alumni of the school. Scobee, she said, told those present the items "were blessed in space by God."

Stan and Carole Ricketts, faculty members at Baptist College, met the Scobees while they were at the dedication and soon developed a strong friendship with the couple. Although they became friends only recently, the Ricketts said Dick and June Scobee are "the kind of people you feel like you've known all your life."

Carole Ricketts became especially close to June Scobee because of similar interests in gifted and talented education and the welfare of children. She related Mrs. Scobee enrolled at Baptist College while her husband was stationed at the Charleston Air Force Base. Their two children attended private school at nearby Deer Park Baptist Church.

Mrs. Scobee earned a bachelor of arts degree in English with a minor in education at Baptist College. She later completed a Ph.D. in gifted and talented education at Texas A & M University.

Mrs. Ricketts described June Scobee as an "educational astronaut. "June is an ambassador of goodwill for gifted education. She has traveled to many countries addressing major professional groups on the needs and describing the characteristics of gifted students," she said.

Just last summer, Mrs. Ricketts added, June Scobee spent two weeks at Baptist College as a visiting professor at a giftedness institute sponsored by the college. She worked with graduate students, gifted and talented children and members of the college's faculty.

The Ricketts traveled to Cape Canaveral for the shuttle launching as guests of the Scobees but, because of teaching commitments, had to return to Charleston after the Monday (Jan. 27) launch was scrubbed.

As a result the Ricketts, like millions of Americans, were stunned when they saw television pictures of the explosion of the shuttle which was carrying a close friend.

"We're still in a state of shock," Stan Ricketts said.

Carole Ricketts told Baptist Press her first cry was, "Oh, God, be with June." She said she then huddled with those she had been watching with and prayed.

Her husband described Scobee as the "All-American hero." He had a deep abiding love for his wife, children and grandchild, Ricketts indicated.

Ricketts said he feels Scobee was a "man of deep faith" who knew the risks he was taking. "I feel if he (Scobee) could have chosen a way to go (die), that's the way he would have chosen. He loved to fly," Ricketts said.

The Baptist College professor noted Scobee was very patriotic and did not enjoy the limelight. "He just enjoyed flying and doing his job."

Ricketts said he is confident Dick Scobee would have wanted the shuttle program to continue because he felt space research was vital to mankind.

Mrs. Ricketts observed the same about June Scobee: "She is an American patriot as was Dick. She embodies the finest ideals of what being an American is all about," she said.

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Haiti Looters Take Baptist Food
As National Violence Builds

By Erich Bridges

Baptist Press
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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (BP)--Looters took a truckload of food from a Baptist farm storehouse near Cap Haitien Jan. 30 as national violence and unrest escalated in Haiti.

The report came from Southern Baptist missionaries Jack and Doris Hancox, who said Jan. 31 they were staying inside Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, for the time being.

The stolen food had been intended for schoolchildren involved in Baptists' extensive school nutrition program in Haiti, but schools have been closed since unrest began in late November. Looters also raided three CARE food warehouses in the country.

The Hancoxes said the U.S. government had urged American tourists to leave Haiti and recommended that other Americans stay in Port-au-Prince. Hancox said he told several Southern Baptist volunteer groups in the United States not to come, and he was working Jan. 31 to get 21 American Baptist volunteers out of the country. The American Baptist group, which was in Port-au-Prince, had come to work with missionaries from their denomination stationed in Cap Haitien, site of some of the worst violence. Hancox said he hoped to help them fly back to the United States Feb. 1.

Southern Baptist lay worker Freddie Peters of Oklahoma City and her two daughters are safe in Port-au-Prince, Hancox said. Mrs. Peters' husband, Dan, of Castle Rock, Colo., is in Miami receiving medical treatment. Longtime Southern Baptist volunteers John and Edna Payne of Kentucky have been in the United States since coming home for Christmas. "We have advised them not to come back until this is over," Mrs. Hancox said.

Cap Haitien and all other major towns besides Port-au-Prince are "shut tight," according to Hancox. He said martial law and a state of siege had been announced on national radio the morning of Jan. 31. Port-au-Prince itself was relatively calm, he reported, but he said traffic into the city had been stopped and major roads might be closed.

The Hancoxes said they instructed Baptist workers at the food storage locations not to resist looters if they strike again. "Most of the food that has been brought in has already gone out to our different schools," Mrs. Hancox said. "There is a little bit left in our warehouses.... (Jack) told the guardians just to open the door rather than be hurt. (The looters) come in with guns. You don't want your people hurt over a sack of rice."

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CORRECTION: In Baptist Press story "State Court Suit Filed Against SBC" mailed Jan. 24, 1986, in the 21st paragraph, two words were inadvertently dropped. The paragraph should read (added words underlined): It adds: "Since the meeting in Dallas, Dr. Stanley has reaffirmed his view that the above erroneous rulings and his interpretation of the convention bylaws are correct. In its September vote of approval the (SBC) Executive Committee evidenced its unwillingness to overturn these rulings."

Thanks,
Baptist Press



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