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Even When Ceiling Falls In,  
Hopewell Lives Up To Name

By Trennis Henderson

EVERTON, Mo. (BP)—The contractor left, the winds came and the ceiling caved in—that's the bad news, said John Perryman, pastor of Hopewell Baptist Church near Everton, Mo.

But there's also good news. Living up to its name, the Hopewell congregation quickly banded together and began looking to the future. "There was shock on everybody's face" when members discovered the ceiling in their sanctuary had collapsed, Perryman acknowledged. But "immediately the reaction was, 'We've got work to do,' and that's what we did."

Perryman linked the cave-in to the actions of a contractor who put a new roof on the 75-year-old church building about a year ago. He said the contractor cut all the braces between the ceiling and the old roof and then installed the rafters for the new roof directly against the ceiling.

The Hopewell pastor said the pressure from the new roof, coupled with the weight of the old roofing materials not completely removed, took its toll on the sanctuary ceiling. The final element apparently was "a real hard wind that hit the building and helped the ceiling go on down," he noted.

Despite the extensive damage, the pastor and congregation refuse to seek any legal action against the contractor. Perryman declined to even reveal the contractor's name.

Although the contractor "just kind of shrugged his shoulders and walked off" when told about the ceiling, Perryman insisted, "Rather than talking about suing, we're just going to let it go and be better off in the long run."

The rural congregation's bivocational pastor said the results of a lawsuit would be that the church would "get a black eye in the community, the lawyers would get the money and we would walk away with nothing."

So what does the church plan to do? Temporarily, at least, members have tied the walls together with steel cables and plan to install a suspended ceiling. Volunteer labor, combined with \$1,500 in insurance, put the sanctuary in good enough shape to be used for worship Sunday, July 20—for the first time since the ceiling collapse in May, he said, noting the congregation had been "getting by" while meeting in the cramped quarters of the church's educational building for the past two months.

For the long term, members are looking at the possibility of tearing down the damaged facility and building a slightly larger sanctuary, complete with a baptistry and a couple of Sunday school rooms, for an estimated \$50,000.

"Whatever way we go, we'll have to go in unison or we won't go at all," Perryman asserted. So far, he added, "it has drawn the people together even closer. When adversity came, they turned out and really worked."

Recalling the efforts to uncover several pews buried by piles of debris, Perryman continued to count his blessings. "The Lord's been good to us," he insisted. "This could have happened during a service...."

Weitman Retires  
At Truett-McConnell

CLEVELAND, Ga. (BP)—Ronald E. Weitman is to retire this summer as president of Truett-McConnell College, announced J. Truett Gannon, chairman of the two-year Georgia Baptist school's trustees.

The retirement tentatively has been set for Aug. 1, Weitman's 60th birthday.

Weitman will continue to live in the Cleveland, Ga., area where the college is located, a school official said. He will help with any designated duties that may be required of him for the benefit of the school.

"He served us well," Gannon said of Weitman, who has been president of the college since 1973. "The fact that the present enrollment is the highest in Truett-McConnell history testifies to his leadership and the high caliber of people he has selected to serve with him.... I hope the same high caliber of service will continue on behalf of Truett-McConnell College as worthy accomplishment of Dr. Weitman."

Last year the school had a total enrollment of 1,813 students.

Weitman assumed the Truett-McConnell presidency after being acting president for a year. Previously he was dean at Piedmont College in Demorest, Ga., for 10 years.

A native of Glennville, Ga., he is a graduate of Georgia Southern College and the University of Georgia.

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Baptists' Ambassador For Christ  
Stands Out At The United Nations

By Mark Wingfield

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NEW YORK (BP)—As a native of India, Ted Mall blends in with the mosaic of races at the United Nations. But as an ambassador of Christ, he stands out.

Mall came to the United States and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, as an international student in 1976. Today he ministers to the most diverse international assembly in the world. He is Southern Baptists' witness to the New York City diplomatic community—a national ethnic missionary supported by the denomination's Home Mission Board. More than 35,000 people represent most nations of the world either at the United Nations or nearby diplomatic offices.

"Being an international student myself prepared me to identify with these people," Mall says. "I went through some of the same things these people went through."

That understanding gives him an introduction to share the gospel with people who may not have heard of Christianity. And the seminary education, he says, gave him "the biblical background and capability to withstand when somebody questions my faith."

Mall's work takes three approaches.

First is outreach. "We try to make friends and develop relationships through which evangelism can happen," he says.

When a new diplomat arrives, Mall contacts him by letter to set up an appointment. He makes a formal presentation to that person and welcomes him to the United States on behalf of Southern Baptists.

"Sometimes on the very first contact I have occasion to present a Bible or witness to them," he says. "Sometimes it takes weeks or months or years."

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Second is a ministry to social and material needs. Through one program, Mall introduces diplomatic families to local Baptist host families. The host families help the foreigners adjust to American culture. They also include them in family activities at Christmas and Thanksgiving. Mall provides economic assistance to diplomats from poorer nations. Differences in currency exchange and living requirements make some diplomats' salaries inadequate for survival in New York.

Third is cross-cultural communication. "We want to present them Christianity in the most favorable way," Mall notes. One way he bridges the communication gap is through Bible distribution. He keeps copies of the Scriptures in 100 languages, which he gives away. "We make Scripture available to anyone who would want it or need it in any language," he explains.

To help people understand those Bibles, he leads Bible studies twice each week and on request. Over the past year, his Thursday noon Bible study has drawn students from 48 countries.

One Soviet diplomat, who is not a believer, gets a constant supply of Russian Bibles from Mall. She originally took one to display on her bookshelf, but it disappeared. Now she keeps several Bibles on display until they all disappear. Mall calls this his "silent witness" because he is sure other Soviets are taking the Bibles to read. His witness spreads around the world through Bibles and through people.

Early one Sunday morning, he was awakened by a phone call. The voice said only, "I'm Chen and I'm here." Mall had never met the man, but learned a friend from Chicago had referred him. Chen had come from mainland China to work on a project in automation technology. Finally, about 5:30 a.m. he went to get Chen at the bus station. Chen went with his family to church that evening--his first time in a Baptist church.

"He told me he was not really interested in Christianity," Mall remembers. But Mall and his family continued to befriend the man. They took him to tourist spots and showed him how to get around.

Last year, Chen attended a banquet where a Texas youth choir sang. Mall says Chen noticed it "seems like Christian young people have a hope that Chinese young people don't. If hope is part of being a Christian, I might be interested." Soon afterward, Chen became a Christian. He has returned to his hometown in China, where there is no other evangelical witness.

Southern Baptists' ambassador to the United Nations sent out one more ambassador for Christ to the nations.

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(BP) photos mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Southwestern Seminary

Refugee Accepts Christ,  
Now A Baptist Minister

By Breena Kent

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7/22/86

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--At New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary commencement exercises in May, professor Joe Trull was viewing the events when an Hispanic man looked Trull "in the eye and gave a nod of recognition" as he walked off the stage, diploma in hand.

At the time, the associate professor of ethics was puzzled. He did not recognize the name of the Miami extension center graduate, although he remembered the face from somewhere.

"Dr. Trull, do you remember me?" asked the man in broken English after the ceremony.

His name was Nelson Vento when Trull knew him. They met in 1981 when the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board asked churches to place refugees from Cuba. First Baptist Church of El Paso, Texas, where Trull was pastor at the time, responded to the plea, and Vento and his family moved into the city.

"He knew no English and had no job," says Trull. Now several years later, the man's name is Nelson Avila, not Vento; he has a seminary degree; and he is pastor of a Baptist mission in the Miami area.

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As a young Catholic boy in Cuba, Avila dreamed of being a priest. At age 18, he entered a Catholic seminary. Disappointed in the seminary, Avila abandoned his studies and became a youth leader and catechism teacher.

In 1968, Avila was accused of conspiring against the government and sentenced to six years in prison. Because of good conduct, however, he was dismissed after two years, got married and finished high school.

By this time, Avila had begun doubting Catholic beliefs and was somewhat "rebelde" (rebellious). He sought to quench his thirst for peace and happiness by making money, and his new dream was to gain his fortune in the United States.

In 1980, Avila, his family and his brother's family boarded a boat for Miami. In the U.S. immigration office, however, his name was mistakenly written Vento instead of Avila. He soon found himself jobless, in a strange country, with a strange name and \$100 in his pocket, living in a motel that cost \$60 a week.

For the first time in many years, Avila lifted his heart toward God. "Lord," he said in Spanish, "look at my situation. Is this why you brought me here?"

A few hours later, a friend arrived with the news the U.S. government was relocating Cubans. To apply, however, Avila had to state his religion. Rebellious against the Catholic church, he remembered that his sister was Baptist, and Avila claimed her religion as his own.

His family was sponsored by Trull's church, and they moved to El Paso. There Avila said he accepted Christ, but torn with the struggle of 30 years of Catholic tradition in his past, he began to doubt his decision and refused baptism.

Once more, Avila began attending Catholic Bible studies. Afraid his new Baptist friends who had provided him with a job, a home and love would discover he had "betrayed" them, he and his family packed what little they had and moved to Miami.

"But the more I studied the Bible and prayed," says Avila in Spanish, "the more my eyes were opened...until at last I was free of the traditions that I had lived under for so many years." Avila made public his decision to follow Christ and joined a Baptist church.

Once again, Avila entered seminary, only this time it was an extension center of New Orleans Seminary. At last his childhood dreams were realized, only in a different light--instead of a Catholic priest, he became pastor of a small Baptist mission.

"Nelson has a beautiful testimony," says Trull, "and every time he tells it, he speaks of El Paso and the people there. Now we can see the fruit of the seeds planted.... Now we can see the end of the story."

In January of 1986, Avila was given U.S. citizenship, and again his name is Avila, not Vento.

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Gun-Toting Militant Becomes  
Bible-Quoting Evangelist

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press  
7/22/86

LUBBOCK, Texas (BP)—It's a long way to go from being a gun-toting militant to being a Bible-quoting evangelist, but like a modern-day Apostle Paul, Gilbert Herrera bears witness of God's ability to transform an enemy of the church into a preacher of the gospel.

The son of a Lubbock, Texas, police officer killed in the line of duty, Herrera turned against the law early in life. He served two terms totalling five years in the Huntsville, Texas, Walls Unit, first for a burglary to support his \$400 a week heroin habit and later for parole violation.

Following his release from prison in the mid-1970s, Herrera was elected West Texas Prime Minister of the Brown Berets, a para-military Hispanic group.

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"We were called activist, militant, communist. What we were was a group of people willing to die for what we believed in," he said.

Herrera explains the Brown Berets were founded to oppose police brutality, discrimination against Hispanics and other injustices, but members later took a more hate-filled, anti-Anglo position.

"We started with a good purpose, but in time we became just another racist group," he says. "If God had not saved my life, I believe we could have been the next terrorist group in the United States."

Once, when the Ku Klux Klan threatened to patrol the Texas-Mexico border to keep illegal aliens from crossing the Rio Grande River, Herrera led an armed group of Brown Berets to meet them.

"We went to the border with automatic weapons to face the KKK, ready to die if we had to," he says. "I'm glad now that they didn't show up, because if they had, I know someone would have been killed."

Hated and feared by many for his militant stance, Herrera accepted death threats as routine business, and he escaped several attempts on his life. A former companion in prison, Juan Perez, served as his personal bodyguard and as a major in the Brown Berets with 28 men under his command.

In spite of his para-military trappings and questionable reputation, Herrera was courted by respectable politicians who recognized his ability to deliver votes. After actively being involved in one gubernatorial and two presidential campaigns for others, Herrera ran for mayor pro tem of Lubbock, placing third among a field of 12 candidates.

With Perez as his business partner, he began nearly five years ago promoting musical groups for nightclubs and concerts. In spite of his success as a businessman and political powerbroker, he felt unfulfilled.

One evening during a cocaine-induced fit of depression, Herrera put a .38-caliber revolver to his head and pulled the trigger. As if by a miracle, the gun did not fire, but the click of the trigger brought him to his senses. He noticed his television was on, and an evangelist was talking about God's plan of salvation.

"That got my attention," remembers Herrera. "I was tired of being hated. I was tired of being shot at. I said 'I wish I could serve the Lord someday.'"

He still was unable to surrender to God fully at that point, however. Some time later, he encountered Juan de la Garza, Baptist evangelist from Mission, Texas, outside a Lubbock radio station. The two men talked, and Herrera began to feel the need to make a decision for Christ.

"I went for a whole year under conviction," he says. Finally, he contacted De la Garza and expressed his willingness to become a Christian. The two knelt together in a closet, and Herrera accepted Christ. He later joined Iglesia Hispana, a mission of First Baptist Church of Lubbock.

Feeling led into full-time Christian service, the former Brown Beret leader began traveling with De la Garza throughout Mexico and Texas. After he led Perez, his former partner and bodyguard, to Christ, the pair once again began to work together, but this time in the Gilbert Herrera Evangelistic Association.

Herrera will share his testimony during the 1987 Hispanic Evangelism Conference and the Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference. Although he admits some Christians still find it hard to believe he has changed, the Lubbock evangelist says his conversion was as complete as Paul's was on the road to Damascus.

"Ten years ago people saw me on TV carrying weapons, wearing long hair and a military uniform. For me to come back 10 years later and talk about God is hard for some people to accept," he notes. "The story of Paul keeps me alive. It keeps me going."



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