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October 14, 1986

86-150

Record \$124.2 Million Received
By 1985-86 Cooperative Program

By Marv Knox

N-CO

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—Southern Baptists contributed a record \$124,232,370.54 to their convention's Cooperative Program during the 1985-86 fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30.

Receipts reflect an increase of more than \$6.7 million—5.71 percent—over the \$117.5 million total for 1984-85, said Harold C. Bennett, president and treasurer of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, who announced the results.

The Cooperative Program is Southern Baptists' conventionwide budget, which finances mission, evangelistic and educational endeavors around the world. Funds are given by individuals to their churches, and about 9 percent of those receipts are forwarded by churches to state conventions. State organizations typically retain between two-thirds to one-half of the money they receive for in-state ministry, and the rest is disbursed among 19 SBC entities.

The Cooperative Program is divided into three sections: a first-phase basic operating budget, a capital needs budget and a second-phase basic operating budget. The entire first-phase budget must be met before money is spent on capital needs, and all budgeted capital needs must be met before funds are distributed according to the second-phase budget.

The 1985-86 Cooperative Program goal was \$130 million. The \$124.2 million that was received covered the \$120.6 million budget for phase one operating expenses, paid \$3.34 million for capital needs rolled over from the 1984-85 budget and \$167,632 of \$4.5 million targeted for the 1985-86 capital needs budget. Since that budget was not met, none of the \$1.56 million phase two budget was administered.

"I'm gratified that we received \$3.6 million more than the first phase of the basic operating budget," Bennett said. "However, I'm disappointed we were not able to achieve our total budget.

"Coming out of years of double-digit inflation into a couple of years of low inflation has meant difficulty for Southern Baptist budgeting processes," he added. "It will take another two years, perhaps more, before our SBC Cooperative Program budget will be met."

Another factor that kept the Cooperative Program below budget this year was a two-pronged problem spurred by crises in the petroleum and farming industries, said Tim A. Hedquist, vice president for business and finance.

"We anticipated a slowing of the Cooperative Program's percentage increase because of the problems some state conventions have been having, due to economic conditions," Hedquist said. He noted, however, the 1985-86 increase of 5.71 percent compares favorably to an inflation rate of about 1.4 percent.

Hedquist said the full budget does not reflect all needs. "We need to keep in mind that had we made the total budget we still would not have met all our missions needs," he said. "While we can be grateful for the gifts of the people, we have a long, long way to go with missions needs."

The complete picture of Southern Baptist financing will not be painted until all 37 state conventions report how they fared in 1985-86, Bennett said, adding those reports have not been received.

He related he has been receiving optimistic predictions about future Cooperative Program budgets. "There are increasing numbers of pastors who say they plan to lead their churches to increase their Cooperative Program allocations in the months and years ahead," he said.

That should be good news for Southern Baptist agencies and institutions dependent on the 1986-87 Cooperative Program, which has a \$136 million overall goal. That includes \$126.63 million for the first phase of the operating budget, \$5.87 million for capital needs and \$3.5 million for the second phase of the basic operating budget. In addition, the \$4.3 million not reached in the 1985-86 capital needs budget will be given priority over the \$5.87 million earmarked for capital needs in 1986-87.

Bennett cited two sources of hope for the health of the Cooperative Program.

"We can place hope in new church starts, for excited new churches will feed the Cooperative Program and nurture its health," he said. "And we've got to find hope in Planned Growth in Giving (the SBC stewardship/spiritual emphasis campaign). If that doesn't make a difference, we're not going to make a difference."

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Baptists Respond To Needs As
Floodwaters Inundate Missouri

By Brenda J. Sanders

Baptist Press
10/14/86

ST. CHARLES, Mo. (BP)—Missouri Baptists sprang into action in early October, ministering to victims of heavy flooding across the state.

Several Southern Baptist churches opened their doors to serve as Red Cross disaster shelters, providing a warm place to sleep for people flooded out of their homes. In addition, the Missouri Baptist Convention disaster relief trailer was stationed at First Baptist Church of St. Charles, Mo., to coordinate feeding efforts in the area.

In some areas, Missouri Baptists have worked with flood victims and Red Cross volunteers to arrange for financial assistance from disaster relief funds. A total of \$25,000—\$12,500 each from the state missions offering and the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board—has been made available to help meet emergency financial needs, said Don Anders, associate missions director for Missouri Baptists.

Anders said relief aid is distributed on the basis of greatest need, rather than according to denominational affiliations.

The first days of October brought a near-record rainfall to Missouri. Gov. John Ashcroft reported more than 7,000 people were homeless across the state. Initial residential property and agricultural damage was estimated at nearly \$100 million.

The state's central counties along the Missouri River suffered most of the damage, Ashcroft said, with 80 of Missouri's 115 counties reporting some kind of flood damage. On Oct. 3, parts or all of 162 roads were closed across the state. Further damage is expected in southeastern counties as the pressure of water moving south along the Mississippi River threatens levees.

Missouri Baptists spread their relief efforts to several areas of the state. Churches in several key areas were used as Red Cross shelters and points for distributing Baptist relief funds.

Missouri Baptist Disaster Relief Coordinator Jerry Kersey set up the Missouri disaster relief trailer in front of First Baptist Church of St. Charles Oct. 6. By Oct. 9, the vehicle had been the base for local and mobile feeding of about 2,000 flood victims, Coast Guardsmen and police.

Kersey, associate state Brotherhood director, said the trailer was to stay put through the week of Oct. 14. "We're still needed here," he says. "When people are able to go back to their homes for cleanup, we'll be needed for mobile feeding. So we plan to stay."

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Kersey said feeding victims and relief workers was the main purpose for the trailer's presence in St. Charles. "There are a lot of hurting people here, and we are ministering to their needs," he explained.

Jim McCaughan, director of church development for St. Louis Baptist Association, participated in the unit's first mobile feeding effort Oct. 7. "We are showing people that Missouri Baptists care about them," McCaughan said. "Our efforts are not so much a verbal witness as action to help meet their immediate need for food. We are relieving human suffering in their hour of need."

Mary Dickherber, disaster chairman for the St. Charles County Red Cross, worked with the Missouri Brotherhood volunteers at First Baptist Church. "Missouri Baptists are wonderful," she said. "We work together to help these people (flood victims), and the trailer has been a tremendous help. It's fantastic."

First Baptist Church in St. Charles was a Red Cross disaster shelter for several days. As many as 143 persons stayed there in one night, Kersey said.

One flood victim who found shelter at First Baptist Church of St. Charles especially was grateful to Missouri Baptists. The woman, who wished to remain anonymous, said members of Grace Baptist Church in St. Louis came by to visit her and invite her to Sunday school on the morning of Oct. 4. She had just learned she was in an area that would soon be flooded and needed to evacuate. The Grace Church members helped her move belongings out of her home to safety. She and her two children then found refuge from the disaster in the St. Charles shelter.

The woman, who became a Christian only a few weeks ago, said she would not give in to despair. "You just try and keep going," she said. "I think I'm dealing with this better because I have God than I would if I didn't know him."

The flood victim said Missouri Baptist volunteers and Red Cross workers had given her much-needed moral support. "They give you a hug when you look down," she shared. "They're very understanding and have a positive attitude that really helps me bear this burden. I'm glad they're here."

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(Brenda J. Sanders is a newswriter for Word & Way, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.)

N-BSSB

Internationals Offer Churches
Foreign Missions At Doorstep

By Frank Wm. White

Baptist Press
10/14/86

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—Southern Baptists can find foreign missions at their own doorsteps by ministering to refugees, foreign business professionals, students and illegal aliens, a worker with internationals told church leaders.

"We can deal with the people God has put right under our noses by teaching them English and being friends," said Glenda Reece, a Raleigh, N.C., teacher and Southern Baptist Home Mission Board volunteer specialist in conversational English.

Reece led sessions during a training conference in Nashville, Tenn., for campus and church leaders working with internationals. The conference was sponsored by the national student ministries department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

International college students on campuses throughout the United States total more than 344,000. They may be found on virtually every college campus in the nation, said Nell Magee, national student ministries consultant for international students. State student ministries directors reported Baptist international student programs on 371 campuses last year, with 55 programs for international wives. They cited immediate goals of 163 additional campus international student programs.

National student ministries statistics indicate 1,571 churches have ministries to international college students.

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"We have multiple opportunities to use English as a bridge to reach people," said Reece, who is writing a book on teaching English as a second language through the use of Bible stories. In addition to teaching English as a second language in the Raleigh school system, Reece works in the international department at Forest Hills Baptist Church in Raleigh. The church ministers to international students, business professionals, refugees and illegal aliens, all of whom live and work in most cities, she said.

She said she never knows whether a person is an illegal alien: "I don't ask. We serve them when they show up no matter who they are."

The language needs of internationals range from survival English skills to academic English but they all have needs to be met, she added, noting while it may be impossible to win some internationals to Christ through love, caring and friendship, it may be possible to make them friends of Christ.

International students or professionals from non-Christian cultures could be influential when they return to their countries if they have been befriended and developed an understanding of Christians they met here, Reece pointed out.

Baptist college students should work to develop friendships with international students, Magee said: "We need to be careful not to just invite them to church. That gives the message we are only interested in their becoming Christians. We need to understand them and help them feel good about themselves and what they are doing."

Once international students become oriented to their new surroundings and are willing to move outside their ethnic groups, they need people who are understanding, she said.

A Baptist Student Union or church that is sensitive to the needs of internationals can be an avenue for establishing friendships, she noted. The relationships may begin with a Bible study, English training or simply a service to help international students meet their needs for housing, food, health care and other basic needs.

"Their needs ought to be important to us. Through meeting those needs, we can get to know them," Magee said.

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F - SWBTS

Finlay Graham Shows
Students The World

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press
10/14/86

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)—Finlay Graham has come to Fort Worth, Texas, to show Americans the world.

Graham recently returned to the United States from 40 years of missionary service. He is retiring as the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's associate director for Europe and the Middle East.

As guest professor in missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Graham wants to help his students see beyond themselves, he explains, noting, "We Americans are woefully ignorant of the religions of the world."

This fall Graham is teaching seminary courses in Arabic and world religions.

The Arabic course is a first for the Southwestern curriculum. It primarily will "help students who have the Hebrew to go a little bit deeper," Graham says.

Both courses will draw on Graham's missionary expertise, but the world religions course is a preaching point for him: "We ought to be interested in Islam. The fastest-growing religion in the world today is the Muslim faith."

Muslims have 1 billion adherents around the world today, Graham says. "The petro dollars of Saudia Arabia are financing a crusade in different languages.

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"More people from the so-called Christian countries are becoming Muslim than people from Arab countries are becoming Christian," he adds. Muslims are "winning more people to their faith than all Christian groups together."

Graham explained the Islamic religion cuts out much of the ethical standard of Christianity. "Muhammed made things easy," he says. "But the standard God has for us is very high."

He hopes his world religions course will give students "deeper insight into Muslims." The class will visit one of the two Muslim mosks in Fort Worth. The presence of two Islamic worship centers in Fort Worth is evidence alone for Graham's concern for Muslim ministry, he asserts.

This professor has studied his subject long and hard. While living in Europe, Graham felt God's call to ministry in the Arab world. But since there was no British Baptist work in that region, he went out on his own. After a year he met his wife, Julia, and joined her as a Southern Baptist.

Graham completed his seminary training at Southwestern Seminary during three furloughs.

While working with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, Graham helped establish the Arab Baptist Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon. The seminary celebrated its 25th anniversary last June.

The Beirut seminary and its 70 graduates have had "a wide spectrum of influence" in the Arab world, Graham says.

He will spend the next year influencing American seminary students from the lessons of his missionary service. "We will be sharing much of our experience as well as the scholastic," Graham says of his classes.

Just as in pointing out the Fort Worth Islamic community, Graham will focus his classes on "needs right here in the United States," he promises.

"But hopefully in the wider area, some will find an interest in missions."

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Infant Resource Project
Helps Teen-Age Mothers

By Gretchen Vetter

Baptist Press
10/14/86

F-HMB

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)—Shrill ringing shattered the midnight silence. A worried voice on the telephone brought Sue Brown to full attention: A teen-age mother needed help.

Brown spent the rest of the night in the hospital emergency room with the three-month-old child and his mother, Judy. "I had no one to call. He needed a doctor and I couldn't get him there," Judy explained later.

Brown is director of Infant Resource Project, a ministry to low-income mothers in Louisville, Ky.

The Infant Resource Project "was created in response to the alarming fact that it is common for many low-income mothers to leave the hospital and not have anything to wrap the baby in," explains Jim Holladay, a home missionary and local pastor.

The purpose of the project is to provide the essentials for infants, as well as guidance and support for the young mothers. Project workers also assist in housing and transportation.

The program has eight volunteers who regularly visit girls in their homes. Other volunteers help during the summers.

In addition to donations of clothing, medicine and other items, the project operates on a \$600 annual budget. The money buys infant formula, diapers, cribs and maternity clothes.

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Somehow the project squeezes by. "One day we had a request for five cribs and two strollers. We had none," Holladay remembers. "The next morning when I arrived at the office, four cribs, two car seats, a stroller and a bunch of clothes and toys were in the hallway. And we hadn't put in a call to anybody."

Brown recognizes teen mothers love their babies. "For the first time in their lives, somebody belongs to them," she says. "The sad part is that it's a mother-centered relationship. Babies are not born to fulfill mothers' needs: Mothers must fulfill babies' needs."

Brown wants to help these mothers help themselves—and their babies.

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Adapted from the September-October 1986 issue of MissionsUSA. Vetter is a freelance writer in Louisville, Ky.

(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press

Communication, Conflict
Necessary For Good Marriage

By Terri Lackey

F- BSSB Baptist Press
10/14/86

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)—Good communication skills, even if that means a healthy fight now and then, are imperative for a marriage to mature effectively, conference leaders at a Fall Festival of Marriage said at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center.

Couples commonly fall into four styles of communication: chit-chat, over-responsible, under-responsible and responsible, said Dale Keeton, director of counseling ministries at Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va.

"Chit-chat is just a way for couples to have a re-entry experience after a day of work," Keeton said. "There's no heavy stuff here, and it doesn't do much for building oneness."

He said a partner with an over-responsible communication technique "is very willing to share what he thinks as well as what you think," while an under-responsible communicator "is adept at drawing out conversation but is unwilling to share much about himself."

Responsible communication involves both partners' willingness to share in conversation as well as to listen, Keeton explained.

Five Fall Festival of Marriage weekends are being sponsored by the family ministry department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board this year. Three are being held at Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center, one at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center and one at Lake of the Ozarks, Mo.

Sylvia Widick, a Christian entertainer from Nashville, Tenn., who led a conference on how to avoid "marital dry rot," said several types of communication problems may plague a marriage. Happy marriages are not devoid of problems or conflict, but partners make a responsible effort to deal with them in a healthy way, she said.

Widick noted many couples expect their love to take care of a communication problem, but she added marriages and families create complicated demands that require more conscious efforts of talking and listening to "make things work smoothly."

Widick explained fighting can be constructive if couples adhere to some "positive quarreling techniques." Although couples may be in the midst of a heated argument, they should express opinions, desires and concerns in a calm and lucid way.

"Be willing to listen as well as talk," she advised. "Give up the irresponsible luxury of wild accusations, verbal abuse, threats of divorce, going home to mother or committing suicide. Noise is no substitute for reason."

Widick said name-calling, as well as raking up old arguments, are not allowed in fair verbal marital conflicts. "Stick to the subject," she said.

Mealtime, bedtime or the moment a spouse walks in the door from work are less than ideal times to air differences, she added.

Faith Helps Officer
During 11-Day Manhunt

By Shari Schubert

F-170

WRIGHT CITY, Mo. (BP)—The phone was ringing when John Ford of the Missouri State Highway Patrol arrived home from a church meeting on the night of Sept. 22. He was needed in Wright City to take charge of patrol operations in the search for Michael Wayne Jackson.

Jackson, who allegedly killed two persons in Indiana and another in Missouri, had exchanged gunfire with Wright City police earlier that day. He had disappeared into a wooded area three miles west of Wright City after wrecking a stolen car in which he was holding a man hostage in the trunk. He was presumed to be in the area, armed and dangerous.

Ford, the commanding officer of the patrol's Troop C in Kirkwood, Mo., says the 11-day search for Jackson was the longest manhunt any of the Kirkwood patrol officers can remember. As the situation attracted national attention, Ford was seen and quoted in newspapers and on television. He recalls he sometimes worked 18 to 30 hours without a break. "Faith is what keeps you going," he affirms.

Ford, a member of Ballwin Baptist Church in the St. Louis area, is a Christian family man whose faith has provided strength during many crisis situations, in both his personal and professional life.

While his administrative role in the Jackson manhunt did not place him in serious personal danger, Ford was responsible for decisions affecting the safety of about 60 patrol officers assigned to the area, as well as maintaining the safety of the public.

"My greatest concern was for the men," Ford recalls. He adds the officers' safety was "a matter of prayer" not only for him, but for many others.

Ford knows what it's like to be in a life-threatening situation. He served on riot details in Kansas City, Mo., in 1968 and at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Mo., in 1969. His work in Jefferson City prior to becoming commander of the Kirkwood troop involved manhunts for escaped federal prisoners and numerous arrests of armed felons.

Ford openly acknowledges the need for God's help and guidance in such situations. He and several patrol officers took time out from the search for Jackson to attend Sunday services at First Baptist Church in Wright City, where members of the congregation joined them in prayer that Jackson would be found and that no one else would be killed or injured.

Ford says he knew members of his church in Ballwin were praying for him. He also received phone calls from members of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, where he had been a deacon and Sunday school teacher. The callers assured him of their prayers.

Acknowledging he was under a great deal of pressure during the manhunt, Ford notes, "It is important to keep yourself under control. ... God gives you the strength."

"I could have found myself being very critical of Jackson," Ford says, noting, he does not feel his statements to the public and to the press reflected a critical attitude. He explains he felt he had a responsibility to show consideration for Jackson's family, who also was experiencing a great deal of stress.

He acknowledges there were times when it would have been easy to lose his temper. He says he was perturbed by the two flagrant instances of false reports given to the law officers. In one case, the follow-up investigation resulted in a patrol officer falling out of a tree and breaking his arm.

The highway patrol captain says the people of Wright City "were scared to death." Some were afraid to stay in their homes. Some began carrying weapons. One man, thinking he had heard someone outside, shot the back door off his house. Such actions, stemming from fear, greatly increased the risk of someone in the community being injured or killed, Ford notes.

Ford believes his personal conviction that "God is in control of this world" helped him to reassure others that the situation was under control. One of the things he tried to communicate to people, he says, was law enforcement officers wanted their support and prayers, but that it also was essential to "let us do the job."

Ford commends members of First Baptist Church of Wright City, who provided food for patrol and FBI officers working in the area. He says those who participated in the project performed a valuable ministry to the law enforcement officers and also helped themselves. "They got so wrapped up in the ministry they forgot about (being afraid of) Jackson," he explains.

The manhunt ended Oct. 2, when Jackson's body was found in an abandoned barn. He apparently shot himself when he realized he had been discovered and could not escape arrest.

Ford says he felt relieved that the search was over. Although he had hoped Jackson could be "apprehended with as little violence as possible," he emphasizes his primary concern had been "to protect the well-being of the citizens and the officers."

Ford and several other law enforcement officers who had been involved in the manhunt returned to Wright City the following Sunday night to attend a communitywide interdenominational thanksgiving service.

One of the impressive things about that service, Ford notes, was the Christian concern and prayer support expressed for Jackson's family as well as for the families of his victims. Ford recalls some people attending the service expressed regret Jackson could not be taken into custody alive so that Christians could have had another chance to witness to him.

Ford sees his work as a law enforcement officer as a ministry to which he has been called by God. While he was not consciously aware of God's leading when he began his career with the highway patrol as a driver's examiner in 1962, looking back he can see "God's hand was in it."

Ford says his sense of calling was confirmed in the aftermath of the death of fellow patrolman Jim Froensdorf in March 1985. Froensdorf, also a Baptist and a close friend of Ford's, was killed by the driver of a vehicle he had stopped for speeding. The driver was wanted on felony charges in Texas.

As Ford sought to find answers to the searching questions asked by Froensdorf's three young daughters about the circumstances surrounding their father's death, he was forced to think through his own beliefs about God's will and the importance of civil law.

"It's very necessary for a Christian to uphold the law," he says, citing Romans 13 as the biblical basis for that belief. First, he explains, God established laws and governments. Second, obeying the law is a positive witness for Christ.

Ford has maintained his faith despite the trauma he has seen both in his career and in his family life. Included in those experiences was a stroke suffered by his wife a few years ago which led to extensive neurosurgical procedures.

"I don't question God" about why such things are allowed to happen, he insisted. "God lets the devil sift a lot of us who are Christians. ... He'll use that to build us and make us more like him."

He added it is important to remember God will act on his own time schedule. Recalling the tension that had mounted as day after day passed without a break in the search for Jackson, he notes, "God knew where he was all the time."

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(Shari Schubert is a newswriter for Word & Way, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.)

Pratt's Conversion In Prison Turns
Hateful Bluntness To Holy Boldness

By Trennis Henderson

F. M. O.
Baptist Press
10/14/86

SEYMOUR, Mo. (BP)—When Charlie Pratt visits a state or federal prison to witness to inmates, he knows what they're going through. He's been there.

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Pratt, interim pastor of First Baptist Church of Seymour, Mo., also is a director of New Life—New Hope Ministry, a prison ministry founded in 1981 by Pratt and his wife, Bea. The Pratts minister to inmates and their families through correspondence, Bible studies and counseling.

"We go into a lot of prisons," Pratt explains. "I bring a message of hope to the prisoners. It's a cold reality they've done wrong. I go in to show them there's light at the end of the tunnel." Pratt's unwavering testimony is based on his emergence from the "tunnel" of prison life as a new person in Christ.

Coming from a broken home where "violence was a predominant element in my life," Pratt began shoplifting as a youngster and quickly graduated to burglary and robbery. At age 24, after having been in and out of prison twice, Pratt got into a fight and killed a man. Another five years in prison was followed by parole and a return to the streets.

"Violence was the only expression of emotion I knew," Pratt reflects. "I didn't know how to love. I hated everybody. I hated myself."

Out of prison for a few years, Pratt was a collector for bookies and loan sharks and a bodyguard for an underworld figure. In 1975, during a fight at a South Carolina truck stop, Pratt said his adversary threatened to "blow me away." Reacting with his trademark violence, Pratt shot and killed the man.

Fearful of receiving a death sentence, Pratt plea bargained to receive a 10-year sentence for manslaughter. But this time his trip to prison proved to be different from the other trips.

Teri Lynn Seamster, a 14-year-old girl in Texas, spotted Pratt's address in a magazine advertisement and began writing to the South Carolina prisoner. Her mother, who occasionally wrote letters to Christian prisoners as part of Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship ministry, warned her daughter against writing to a hardened criminal who often spent time in solitary confinement.

But when Pratt sent Teri Lynn a birthday card, her mother agreed to let her continue writing to him. At the end of one of her daughter's letters, Seamster added the note, "I want you to know that we are praying for you that all your days in prison will be short ones and that you'll be released soon."

Pratt fired a letter back to Seamster, insisting there was no such thing as God or prayer and that she "probably believed in the tooth fairy, too."

Writing back to Pratt, she said she would be praying for him and included some Scripture references for him to read. "This woman's a fanatic," Pratt thought to himself. "If I don't do anything else right in my life, I need to straighten her out."

Pratt enrolled in several Bible correspondence courses in order to find loopholes to prove Seamster wrong. That was when it happened. "After a few months, I came to the reality that what I needed was Jesus," Pratt recounts. "I knelt at my bed in the dormitory and prayed. I said, 'Lord, if you're everything in the Bible it says--and I believe it--I want you to change me and make me whole. I want you 100 percent or nothing.'"

From that night in 1979, things moved quickly in Pratt's life. He sensed a call to ministry from God "just a few hours after I was saved. ... I wrote Bea (Seamster) that I accepted Christ in my heart. I asked her to marry me and be my partner in ministry. We made a commitment to marriage and ministry without ever seeing each other."

How could Seamster, the widowed parent of five children, agree to marry a convicted criminal she had never met? "You could tell the work of the Lord going on in his life through his letters," she explains. "His whole personality came through in his letters. I never worried that he was deceiving me. I never doubted he was being honest with me."

Although a few of her relatives "questioned my sanity," she adds, "The Lord impressed me that marrying Charlie was his plan for me. I had been a Christian for 30 years--you certainly learn to discern his voice."

With her children's blessings, Seamster moved to South Carolina and married Pratt on the side of a highway where he was working on a prison chain gang.

Following Pratt's conversion in April 1979 and his marriage seven months later, prison officials began to notice positive changes in his actions and attitudes. In March 1980, with another five years of his 10-year sentence remaining, Pratt was paroled and given permission to move to Texas.

While on parole, Pratt became superintendent of Amarillo's Faith City Mission and was licensed to the gospel ministry by San Jacinto Baptist Church, also in Amarillo. Sixteen months later, the day after he was released from parole, he and his wife founded New Life—New Hope Ministry.

After working in the Amarillo area for six years, the Pratts felt God leading them to a more central location in the Midwest. "One of the ways to know you're in God's will," Pratt explains, "is you don't have to beat on the door for it to open; you don't have to pick the lock."

Finding a warm reception for their ministry in southwestern Missouri, the Pratts moved to Branson where they became members of First Baptist Church and began ministering in the Ozark Correctional Center in nearby Fordland. Leading Bible studies at the center, Pratt became acquainted with a guard and a couple of prison officials who were members of First Baptist Church of Seymour. When the church's pastor left, Pratt became interim pastor.

Open to God's leadership, Pratt says he is willing to become a pastor or associate pastor along with his prison ministry responsibilities. When he has accomplished all he can for Christ in a given area, he is more than willing to move on. "I don't have any problem with being obsolete, because somewhere else I'm needed," Pratt explains. "We don't run out of prisoners, no matter where we go."

As a pastor and prison minister, Pratt is never hesitant to get right to the point. He noted when he became a Christian, God turned his rude bluntness into "holy boldness."

"Very few people I meet, I don't talk to about Jesus," he continues. "I spent 44 years talking about everything else. I just feel like in my Christian walk that we've got to tell it like it is. When you dilute the gospel, you're not doing any good to anybody."

Although Pratt is willing to share his life story to show how God has changed him, his main interest is to talk about Jesus—especially when he is preaching. "When you get in the pulpit, you better tell 'em what the Lord wants you to say. We serve a powerful God. The only limitations God has is what we put on him," he insists.

As a Christian, Pratt has met his share of surprises and disappointments. When he discipled new converts in prison, Pratt says, "I teach them how to cope with the rejection they're going to get from the church" once they leave prison. "I came out of prison thinking all Christians love each other. I was in for a rude awakening. The devil is active in the church."

Another problem Pratt sees is the number of people "in the church 30 or 40 years who are still not committed 100 percent to Christ. I can't get away from 100 percent," he says. "Christ died totally for us to redeem us totally."

As the Pratts continue to serve God together, Bea notes, "I feel like the Lord called Charlie to ministry and the Lord called me to Charlie. My main ministry is to uphold him in prayer and be his helpmate."

As for Pratt, his ongoing ministry is to "share the joy of Christ with others through lifestyle evangelism. I'm not an expert," he admits, "but I know who is and I know how to communicate with him."