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86-162

John Paul II's Peace Initiative
Gets Baptist Leader's Praise

By Stanley Crabb *N-FMB*

ASSISI, Italy (BP)—Pope John Paul II's day of prayer for world peace was "a very spiritual and moving experience," the Baptist World Alliance's general secretary reported.

However, Gerhard Claas acknowledged the Italian Baptist Union and the German Baptist Union's executive committee—both affiliated with the Baptist World Alliance—did not embrace the Oct. 27 event. The Protestant Federation of Italy also did not participate.

Many Christians in Italy were concerned that prayer should never take on the form of a show, Claas said, explaining, "They felt, in this case, that it would." Eight hundred media representatives from all parts of the world covered the event, which Claas attended.

Even so, the reporters' presence did not diminish the thrust for peace, Claas insisted.

Various German Baptist leaders expressed opposition to praying with leaders from such religious traditions as Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. In all, a dozen world religions were represented at the pope's religious summit.

Separate prayer sessions for each belief, however, were scheduled throughout Assisi, Italy, Claas said. "There was absolutely no mix-up of religions," he added, noting Vatican officials had told him the Catholic Church itself "could not pray together with other religions."

"Even in Italy and Germany," Claas pointed out, "Baptists were of differing opinions." In the Italian city of Campobasso, for example, Baptists were meeting with Catholics, Mennonites and Waldensians in three evenings of prayer for peace.

In the prayer session for Christians, Claas said, "the pope was one of us." All were "seated in a semicircle. We were not praying around him but were together with him on the same level."

Claas said he hopes the day of prayer will help kindle "a chain of prayer" for peace. "The danger of war and of the arms race has come to the point ... that nothing else can help" as much as prayer.

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Crabb is director of European Baptist Press Service.

F-CO

Boomers Flood Churches,
Fail To Provide Support

By Adon Taft.

Baptist Press
10/31/86

MIAMI (BP)—They pack the pew but pass the collection plate quickly by.

They like religious music to have a contemporary sound but want Madison Avenue-slick sermons to have old-fashioned biblical content.

They seek answers to difficult personal and social questions but seldom volunteer for demanding but mundane tasks such as teaching Sunday school or working in every-member canvas.

These are the Baby Boomers, 76 million men and women who offer a mixed blessing for America's churches and synagogues. They may be neither the salvation of religious institutions nor their Armageddon.

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The nation's largest generation of 24- to 41-year-olds in history is attending worship services in great numbers but doing less to support churches with their money or talents than older members.

There is some promise in their sheer numbers even though most have not settled into a pew. And those who have come into the church or synagogue have brought with them the ambiguity of the culture in which they grew up.

These are the young adults who gave us both Playboy magazine and the Campus Crusade for Christ, Woodstock and "Godspell," the flower children and the Valley Girl.

They question the morality of war and industry that impacts the environment, but four times as many of them are living together outside of marriage today than 20 years ago and four times as many of them are getting divorced as their parents did.

"That is not to say that the Baby Boomers are amoral," says William McKinney, a sociologist at Hartford (Conn.) Theological Seminary. "They just believe that the individual is the final arbiter of what is right and wrong."

The experts can't agree on how much influence the church wields among the Baby Boomers and to what degree that generation, in turn, is changing the church.

But church historian Martin Marty thinks Baby Boomers have a deeper commitment to their faith, yet less loyalty to religious institutions, than their parents. He sees them as a challenge.

"Forty years ago, people might be (in church services) because of their aunt in the balcony or out of habit," says the University of Chicago professor. "Today, they are more likely signalling something by being there. They are saying, 'Save me, or use me, or intensify me. I don't have to be here.'"

Other experts say the traditional church is failing pretty much to reach the new generation because of old techniques and reliance on authority.

"What you see depends on where you stand when you look," suggests Jack Sims, president of B.O.O.M.E.R.S., a California-based church consulting firm dealing with the 20 to 40-year-old age bracket.

This much seems clear:

-- About the same amount--65 percent--of Baby Boomers attend worship services as previous generations did at their age. But a much smaller percentage--32 percent compared to 40 percent--are becoming full-fledged members of congregations.

-- Only 25 percent of the Baby Boomers give 3 percent or more of their income to religious and other charitable causes compared with 40 percent of the older generation, according to a study by the Yankelovich, Skelley and White survey group. They also are slightly less likely to volunteer their services, 53 percent compared to 55 percent, according to a Gallup survey.

-- Their questioning attitudes have challenged traditional authority in the church, particularly in the area of morals. Some have lifestyles that would have prompted their rejection by religious institutions in earlier generations.

-- Because of a higher level of education, they are demanding more intellectual and theological depth in sermons and religious education literature. At the same time, they want to express more emotion in worship, particularly through music: Witness the growth of the Lubavitch and Hvurah movements in Judaism and the charismatic movement in Christianity.

-- The social activism that characterized the earlier years of their generation has carried over to the church, where the activism frequently is reshaped into social services that have a definitely religious look.

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— Having grown up in a more open society, Baby Boomers are more pluralistic in their attitudes than older generations. That erodes denominational exclusivism and loyalty while it promotes leadership opportunities for women and minorities.

The open society also has produced more interfaith marriages, notes Brooklyn College sociologist Egon Mayer, that demand changes in both theology and organization of churches and sharpens controversies.

Those characteristics of Baby Boomers lead to contradictory evaluations among observers of the religious scene.

McKinney, for example, concludes, "They don't make particularly good church members." He is a sociologist or religion who feels that the generation in question is "not a growth industry" for the church.

On the other hand, Terry Terrell finds the Baby Boomers are providing "a great deal of vigor" for the church. He is the coordinator of church relations for the Assemblies of God, the largest of the Pentecostal churches and the fastest-growing of the major denominations.

Terrell says earlier rebellion against authority—including God's—turns into evangelistic zeal when the Boomers "finally come to grips with life and realize they need answers." He says they are finding such answers in the rapidly growing denomination where the percentage of membership in that age bracket nearly parallels the percentage in the population as a whole.

In fact, at the older end of the generation—the 35- to 40-year-olds, the percentage of church members exceeds the percentage of that age group in the population as a whole 15 percent to 12.5 percent, Terrell notes.

So Baby Boomers pretty much are following the pattern of previous generations in returning to the church as they settle down and have families, according to the Gallup Poll and R.T. Gribbon, a researcher for the interdenominational Alban Institute in Washington.

It usually is a "transition event" which alters a lifestyle that sends a Baby Boomer to church looking for answers to searching questions, Gribbon says. He includes in such events the loss of a relationship, such as death, divorce or moving out, marriage or birth of a child.

When Baby Boomers get to the church, "They are basically seeking what the church always has been about—some connection between their own lives and the transcendent. They are looking for spiritual meaning," Gribbon says.

That is surprising to Gabriel Fackre, professor of theology at Andover Newton Theological Seminary.

"We assumed they would set up some radical, highly experimental house churches," he says. "But that's not the case. They are institutionally oriented. They are not against the system, they are just not settling for the system as it is."

However, a caution flag has been raised: The "average" Baby Boomer attends church only 6.2 times a year—less than half as often as "average" Americans over 40.

To which Landon Jones, managing editor of Money magazine, added at a People magazine forum on the Baby Boomers, "The M&Ms (the married and mortgaged) seem not to be passing on the religion of their parents to their own children."

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(Adon Taft is religion editor for the Miami Herald.)

Namibia War Victims
Include Active Baptist

N-FMB

OSHAKATI, Namibia, South West Africa (BP)—Emilia Noah, an active member of Oshakati Baptist Church, became a noncombatant casualty of the internal strife in Namibia in southwestern Africa.

In August Oshakati, Namibia, came under mortar attack for the third time in 16 months, according to a report just received from the field. During the battle, soldiers returned the fire of fleeing attackers, shooting directly into the black housing area.

Noah, 45, was wounded fatally when an apparently stray bullet crashed through her home. Five other civilians died in the clash.

Despite the warfare and a curfew that limits church functions to daylight hours, Oshakati Baptist is growing, said Adney and Vel Cross, Southern Baptist missionaries from Kentucky and Tennessee who work in the area.

The country is involved in a struggle for independence from South African control.

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F-WMU

Executive Urges Leaders
To Learn Problem-Solving

By Karen Benson

Baptist Press
10/31/86

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)—Problems can be turned into positive opportunities if church leaders know basic problem-solving principles, Bobbie Sorrill, associate executive director of the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, claimed.

Speaking recently to WMU leaders attending an advanced leadership training seminar, Sorrill urged local church leaders to combat problems with proven problem-solving techniques.

"Acknowledge that problems exist and will always exist," she said. "Treat them as positive opportunities."

When they do exist, such problems as declining membership in church organizations, lack of interest in training by leaders, lack of funds or irregular attendance can start to be remedied, she said.

"Problems cannot be ignored. They normally will not go away," Sorrill said. "Learn to anticipate possible problems and be ready to handle them."

A problem might be prevented through good planning, she said, noting, "If you have planned well, the experience is usually a very good one."

Always separate problems from persons, Sorrill urged. "Confront the problem, not the person. Prayer and the Holy Spirit in our lives can make us better able to do this."

Sometimes, problems need to be solved alone. But at other times, "you need to involve other persons," she said. "You must decide whether to go it alone or with others."

Regardless of how difficult the situation might seem, "problems can be solved," she said. "Learn how to find creative alternatives and to decide on and implement a plan of action."

Sometimes, she said, "all it takes is to sit down and talk to the other person."

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Texas Baptist Churches Start
Record Number Of New Works

By Ken Camp

N-Texas

DALLAS (BP)—Texas Baptist churches reported a record number of new mission/church starts in the first year of Mission Texas: 305 new churches and missions during the period from Oct. 1, 1985, to Sept. 30, 1986.

Mission Texas is a five-year emphasis on reaching people, developing believers and strengthening missions that has as one of its goals starting 2,000 new churches and missions in the state by 1990.

"This unprecedented response to the mission challenge in our state means that a new church or mission was started every 30 hours," said J.V. Thomas, coordinator of the church extension section for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. "The record number of new mission/church starts shows that more of our existing churches are recognizing the biblical model of churches starting churches as God's timeless and eternal strategy for growth."

Since Texas Baptists began keeping annual records in the 1870s, the largest previous number of church starts was 241 in the 1984-85 church year.

"In spite of the troubled state economy and the problems that many churches are having meeting their basic budget requirements, Texas Baptist churches are demonstrating their continued commitment to missions by starting new churches and by giving sacrificially to the Mary Hill Davis Centennial Offering for State Missions," said Charles McLaughlin, director of Texas Baptists' State Missions Commission.

Of the 305 new churches started in the past year, about 40 percent were Hispanic and another 40 percent were Anglo. Sponsoring churches ranged in size from some of Texas' largest congregations to churches averaging less than 75 people in attendance.

Nationwide, Southern Baptists officially started 1,805 new churches and missions—including Texas' 305—during 1985-86, according to the denomination's Uniform Church Letter statistics. However, some of those churches may have been started previously and officially constituted during the year.

"Churches are God's primary means for making and maturing disciples. Thousands of churches of all types are needed to reach the mission field called Texas and to expand our mission base in this state," said William M. Pinson, Jr., executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. "We give God the glory for the record number of new starts, and we pray that he will multiply that number in the years ahead."

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Nevada's Record Crowd
OKs \$1.2 Million Budget

CO
N-Nevada

Baptist Press
10/31/86

LAS VEGAS, Nev. (BP)—The largest crowd in history of the Nevada Baptist Convention gathered in Las Vegas for the convention's eighth annual meeting and adopted a \$1.2 million budget and re-elected Jim McLeroy president.

Three hundred eighteen messengers and visitors meeting at Sunrise Baptist Church elected McLeroy, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Las Vegas, as president for a second one-year term. Las Vegas pastors Cary Smith and Bob Stringer were elected first and second vice presidents, respectively.

With the adoption of the \$1,246,850 budget, messengers voted to increase giving to the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program of world mission support from 22 percent to 23 percent. Nevada Baptists have increased their percentage giving to SBC causes by at least 1 percent each year of its brief history.

The 1987 state convention budget reflects a 10.1 percent increase over the 1986 budget.

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In other business, revisions were made to the constitution and bylaws. Constitutional changes increased the size of the Nevada Baptist Convention executive board from 15 to 18 members and increased from three to five the maximum number of messengers that churches can elect and send to the annual meeting. One key bylaw revision restructured the long-range planning committee, broadening grassroots participation in development of convention plans.

Featured speaker for the convention was Perry Sanders, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lafayette, La., emphasizing the ongoing linkage between the Nevada Baptist Convention and the Louisiana Baptist Convention. The conventions have a formal partnership agreement through 1988.

The 1987 Nevada Baptist Convention annual meeting will be at First Baptist Church of Carson City, Oct. 21-22.

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F-Texas

Ministry Unites
Family In Christ

By Orville Scott

Baptist Press
10/31/86

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)—For Larry and Cathy Turner and their three children, NorthWood Baptist Church in the northeast suburbs of Fort Worth, Texas, isn't just one of the fastest-growing new congregations in Texas Baptist history.

It is the reason for the miracles that have transformed their lives from meaningless existence into vibrant testimony for Jesus Christ.

Until the events of this past summer, the Turners little cared they were among 8 million unchurched people in Texas, or that Texas Baptists have a goal to begin 2,000 new churches by 1990 to reach half of the state's population who are unchurched.

They were hardly concerned that NorthWood Church, which started with 19 families under sponsorship of North Richland Hills Baptist Church, grew to more than 90 families with an average Sunday school attendance of 160 during its first year. They didn't care that the new church would demonstrate its concern for missions by giving 8 percent of its undesignated church receipts through the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program and 2 percent to the Tarrant Baptist Association.

For the Turners it all started last summer when NorthWood, assisted by volunteers from Forest Cove Baptist Church in Humble, Texas, conducted backyard Bible clubs to help reach some of the 45,000 unchurched people in their area.

Among the 100 children enrolled in the Bible clubs, three from the same family all made professions of faith in Christ.

That involved the children's parents, Larry Turner and Cathy Childers, who were living together out of wedlock. Both had been married several times before, and each also had lived together with other people.

As NorthWood Pastor Bob Roberts shared the gospel with them, Cathy exclaimed, "No one ever before took the time to sit down and share with me how I could become a Christian."

Larry declared, "I've done so many wrong things there's no way God could forgive me." Finally he asked, "You mean if all I do is put my trust in Christ, he'll come into my heart?"

Both repented and received Christ as their Savior. Then Roberts explained they needed to get married if they planned to stay together. At considerable expense, the couple arranged for separate apartments while they prayed over what to do about their relationship.

They began attending the singles class at NorthWood, where they developed Christian friendships. At the same time, they vowed to maintain relationships with their old friends in hopes of leading them to Christ also.

"When Cathy became a Christian, she didn't know about Christ's second coming," says Roberts. "She was tremendously excited when she learned that Jesus will come again to draw all Christians unto himself."

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As the couple began learning how to witness for Christ, Larry set a goal to witness to at least one person every day.

For the Turners and others at NorthWood, Oct. 29, 1986, will never be forgotten. That Wednesday night, Roberts preached on the uniqueness of Christian marriage, baptized his nextdoor neighbor and then performed a wedding ceremony for Larry and Cathy Turner. Their children also repeated vows to work together to help ensure a Christ-centered family.

Fifteen of their non-Christian friends attended the wedding, and Larry witnessed to them about Christ.

"Nearly the entire church turned out for the wedding, and there were few dry eyes in the place," says Roberts. "The Turners represented the fruits of our efforts to win our community to Christ. Not only were their souls saved, but their marriage and their lives. And the foundation was laid for them to be a dynamic witness for the Savior."

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N-BSSB

Author, Family Ministry Leaders
To Discuss Teen Suicide On BTN

By Frank Wm. White

Baptist Press
10/31/86

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—The best and brightest of America's teenagers are killing themselves, according to the author of a book on teen suicide.

"Teen suicides are most frequent in middle- and upper-class families. There are Christian kids committing suicide. You can't say with any certainty that any teen doesn't have the potential," said John Baucom, a Chattanooga, Tenn., psychologist and author of "Fatal Choice: The Teenage Suicide Crisis."

Baucom recently participated in the videotaping of a panel discussion on teen suicide which will air in January on the Baptist Telecommunication Network. Other panel members are Larry McGuire, minister of youth at First Baptist Church, Plano, Texas; Jimmy Hester, design editor of family ministry products in the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's family ministry department; and Jim Hightower, pastoral ministries consultant in the board's church administration department.

Douglas Anderson, director of the family ministry department, which produced the program, said his department is focusing on teen suicide because it is the second-leading cause of death among America's youth.

Suicide could become the number one cause of teen deaths in 1987 if the trend is not reversed, Baucom said, adding, the churches can help by providing significant adult relationships that teens are missing.

"Make the assumption that every teen you deal with is not getting enough attention," Baucom said. The average parent spends only seven minutes per week in one-on-one contact with each child, he added.

"If churches can help parents relate to teens more effectively, they can help the teen have a healthier relationship with God," Hightower said.

Ministers may spend their time more effectively by training parents and church youth workers to develop relationships with teens rather than trying to develop those relationships themselves, he added.

McGuire said when he went to Plano nearly four years ago, he was aware of the urgent need to address the issue of teen suicide. The community already had made national headlines with a rash of teen suicides. He immediately began basic discipleship training with youth, emphasizing self-worth.

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Developing leaders among the teens who could help others and training teachers to maintain relationships with teens have been crucial elements of the youth ministry there, said McGuire. The church also has developed a network of relationships between teens and senior citizens.

Hightower pointed out networking also can be a crucial factor in giving teens a sense of belonging.

"Students remember people who take a close personal interest in them. There is no magical quality to it," Baucom said. "The burden has to be on the general population, not ministers and psychologists. The vital relationships which can be developed through Sunday school and other church activities are the key elements teens cannot find elsewhere."

The one-hour discussion will air on B7N on the monthly program, "Ministering to Families Today," on Wednesday, Jan. 7, at 10:45 a.m. (CST) and repeated Wednesday, Jan. 21, at 11:30 a.m.

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F - Ed. Com.

Education Commission's Howard
Retires After 33 Years With Agency

By Lonnie Wilkey

Baptist Press
10/31/86

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—Little did anyone know when Marjorie Howard joined the Southern Baptist Education Commission in 1953 her career with the agency would span four decades and include service under all four executive directors.

Thus when she announced her retirement as director of administrative services effective Oct. 31, surprise and regrets began to be expressed by many people with whom she came into contact over the years.

Arthur L. Walker Jr., executive director of the commission since 1978, praises Howard for her knowledge of Southern Baptist educational institutions and years of faithful service.

"Ms. Howard's knowledge of our Baptist schools was evident when I first joined the commission. She was a tremendous help to me as I undertook this new challenge," Walker says. "She has known and worked with hundreds of Baptist college presidents and administrators through the years as the Education Commission has attempted to serve these institutions. Her knowledge about these schools will be sorely missed."

R. Orin Cornett, the first executive director of the Education Commission, first hired Howard as a secretary. He recalls she left "a good job because she was promised an opportunity in which her exceptional management skills would be utilized fully and her opinions and ideas would be valued."

"Ms. Howard's intelligence, her integrity and commitment and her skill in dealing with people were recognized by all who dealt with her. I shall always treasure the working relationship we enjoyed and the mutual respect and admiration it engendered."

Sally Fisher, wife of the late Ben C. Fisher, the third director of the Education Commission, remembers Howard for her "keen mind, quick insight, retentive memory and resourcefulness."

"I think of her attention to detail when I remember that during all the time we lived in Nashville (Tenn.) I called her first if I needed directions to any location. She not only knew the best way to go, but she would ask 'What time of day?' because she knew the traffic patterns well enough to vary the route, if necessary, or to recommend a different way home at peak hours. This is typical of her insistence on accuracy in every realm."

Fisher also views Howard's acquaintance with personnel in the Southern Baptist Convention as a major asset. "She cannot read a denominational publication of any kind without finding reference to numbers of people she knows."

Fisher also recalls Howard's genuine concern for others: "I have been grateful for Marge's help over and over again. One of her most endearing habits is to ask about the welfare of children and grandchildren. This is a trait that goes a long way with parents and grandparents."

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In Howard's position with the commission, she became a familiar figure with Baptist college presidents and administrators.

E. Bruce Heilman, retiring president of the University of Richmond (Va.), notes his friendship with Howard began while he was a college student in Nashville and they were members of the same church.

He says he came to know and appreciate her as she became a friend not just to help him, but his entire family.

Heilman, who has served several Baptist colleges in addition to the University of Richmond, says he benefited from the leadership and goodwill of Howard at each school.

Daniel R. Grant, president of Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark., is another longtime acquaintance of Marjorie Howard.

"Marjorie Howard has certainly made a lot of people look good during her 33 years of service for the Education Commission," he says.

John E. Johns, president of Furman University in Greenville, S.C., and present chairman of the Education Commission, notes, "It was with deep regret that I learned of Marjorie Howard's retirement as director of administrative services for the Education Commission.

"She has been of invaluable service to the Southern Baptist Convention, to me personally as I discharged my duties on the Education Commission, to Furman University and to all Southern Baptist colleges and schools."

Howard, a native Nashvillian, will remain busy during retirement. In addition to travel opportunities, she is an active member of Belmont Heights Baptist Church.

She also is on the board of directors for the Zonta Club of Nashville, a professional women's organization, and treasurer of the Employees Credit Union of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

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Baptist-Catholic Dialogue
Prompted by Film and Art

N - HMB

Baptist Press
10/31/86

WASHINGTON (BP)—The third Southern Baptist-Roman Catholic scholars' dialogue used film, art, slides and a tour of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception to stimulate discussion on the mission of the church.

Unlike previous dialogues, there were no scholarly papers presented. It was part of a series of six dialogue sessions sponsored jointly by the Interfaith Witness Department of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the National Conference of Catholic Bishop's committee for ecumenical and religious affairs.

About two dozen Baptist and Catholic scholars attended the conference at a Catholic retreat center near Washington.

William G. Hendricks, theology professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and Sister Aquin O'Neill, chair of religious studies at Salve Regina College in Newport, R.I., led the group through dialogue prompted by worship, film, slides and the tour.

Previous Baptist-Catholic scholars' dialogues resulted in publication of scholarly papers in the April 1982, issue of Review and Expositor, published by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the January 1986 issue of Southwestern (Baptist Theological Seminary) Journal of Theology.

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Historian Says Rebaptism
Is Major Question For SBC

By Joe Westbury

F - HMB

PRESTONSBURG, Ky. (BP)—The major question confronting the Southern Baptist Convention today is not belief in inerrancy of the Bible but how evangelism is viewed, a Southern Baptist church historian observed.

"The pressing issue facing us today is less of what we (Baptists) believe about the Bible and more of what we believe about the process of salvation," said Bill J. Leonard, professor of church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"The question of biblical inerrancy is a symptom of a much larger identity crisis facing Southern Baptists," he said.

Leonard made the comments to about 120 pastors and directors of missions attending a conference on missions in central Appalachia sponsored by the rural-urban missions department of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. The three-day meeting was held in Prestonsburg, Ky.

Many Baptists seem to feel "it is no longer enough to just believe in Jesus as Savior," Leonard said. "They feel you have to believe as well in an increasing number of doctrines about Jesus in order for your salvation to be valid."

He pointed to several signs to verify this, including the relationship between the baptisms children and adults and a rebaptism phenomenon that appears to be sweeping the convention.

Leonard explained the nation's largest non-Catholic denomination is experiencing a greater number of adults who were converted and baptized as children but who are questioning that salvation experience when they reach adulthood and asking for rebaptism.

"They are confused today because they often feel they didn't understand what they were doing as a child," he said. "We need to find some way to help converted children grow up in the faith without making them start all over again by rebaptism. "It's very natural when they become adults for them to have a different understanding of sin and the meaning of salvation," Leonard said. "But this does not mean they were never saved to begin with.

"In spite of our (Southern Baptist) emphasis on the eternal security of the believer, we seem to have a lot of Southern Baptists who live on the edge of doubt," he added. "I have no doubt there are church members who have not experienced faith in Christ," he added. "But multiple baptisms (rebaptism) may serve to confuse the issue even further."

For a long time, Leonard continued, Southern Baptists stressed "heart religion—it was less what you believed about the Bible and more about the truths of the Bible at work in you. It was experience-centered, the experience you had with Christ that formed your understanding of specific doctrines and governed the way you lived."

Increasingly, a growing number of doctrines about Jesus are becoming prerequisites in the minds of some Baptists for a valid personal salvation experience. Leonard warned this is a recurring theme in church history among all denominations.

"If the (Southern Baptist) convention holds together, I see a growing reaction against dogmatism and a renewal of experiential faith. Historically, sooner or later all Christians grow disillusioned and turn away from such a propositional faith—one that sets guidelines to validate one's salvation experience—back toward an experience with the living God.

"Mental consent to doctrines about Jesus can never be a substitute for a personal faith as nurtured by the Holy Spirit. Only faith in Christ as Savior is fundamental to a salvation experience," he asserted.

"What does it take for a person to be a disciple of Jesus? It is, as Jesus himself said, that we deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him," Leonard said.

"In Christian history, the more the church depends on elaborate doctrines about Christ, the farther it seems to get from experience with the living Christ himself," he concluded. "Isn't that what the Protestant Reformation was all about?"