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Liberian Confesses Murdering
Missionary Mother, Daughter

By Marty Croll

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YEKEPA, Liberia (BP)—A 32-year-old Liberian man admitted the murder of Southern Baptist missionary Libby Tarlton Senter and her daughter after missionary George Senter told the man he forgave him and asked him to confess.

The Liberian, Benjamin M. Morris, was arrested Nov. 27, the day after he allegedly stabbed Mrs. Senter, 47, and her daughter, Rachel, 10. Police and soldiers apprehended Morris at a checkpoint in Karnplay, Liberia, about 30 miles from Yekepa and 20 miles from the border of Ivory Coast, a nation to the northeast.

A formal charge by Liberian authorities was expected soon afterward, but police first were seeking a written confession. A trial was expected to be scheduled after that.

Morris confessed verbally to Liberian officials the day after he was arrested that he committed the murders after Mrs. Senter intervened to prevent him from molesting her daughter.

His confession came after George Senter asked to speak with Morris privately. He told Morris he forgave him for what he had done to his wife and daughter.

"Looking face to face in Ben Morris' eyes, George expressed his forgiveness and asked Ben to make a confession," said Bradley Brown, administrator for the 67 Southern Baptist mission personnel assigned to Liberia. The conversation between Morris and Senter took several minutes and was punctuated by intermittent periods of emotional breakdown, Brown said.

"It was amazing," Brown said. "When George began to talk to him and tell him what he wanted him to do, very soon he began to cooperate and give the facts."

The murder represents only an isolated incident of a man who "gave himself over to wickedness," said Brown. "Liberians in this area feel terrible about it. There is an overwhelming expression of sympathy here." One Liberian man, who didn't know the family, broke down and cried while talking to Senter when he discovered that it was Senter's wife and daughter who had been killed.

Missionaries and Liberians gathered at Mount Nimba Baptist Church in Yekepa for funeral services Nov. 30. Family and friends held a memorial service the day before in Mrs. Senter's hometown, Shelby, N.C., at Zion Baptist Church.

Mrs. Senter and her daughter had been dead for several hours when a missionary who lives nearby entered their home and found them Wednesday morning, Nov. 26.

Senter had driven to the capital city, Monrovia, Tuesday morning, Nov. 25, to pick up his 15-year-old son, Philip, so the family could celebrate an American-style Thanksgiving holiday together in Yekepa. Philip and a handful of other missionary children attend American Cooperative School in Monrovia, about four hours away.

Missionary Earl Williams went into the Senters' home when Rachel did not appear to leave for the school she attends with his own child. Williams, pastor of Mount Nimba Baptist Church, and his family live across from the Senters.

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Senter of Gibson, Tenn., is assigned as a field evangelist and has been working to start and strengthen churches in about 20 villages around the town. Mrs. Senter, assigned as a church and home worker, was involved heavily in her husband's work. The Senters had lived in Yekepa since their foreign missionary career began in 1980.

Morris, a Baptist seminary graduate, had been doing odd jobs for Senter and Williams, and both men had worked with him to help involve him in Baptist work around Yekepa. But apparently he had been unable to work himself into a meaningful personal ministry in any of the churches, Brown said. "We've found out now there obviously was some resentment that he wasn't able to come in and probably be assistant pastor or something of this sort at Mount Nimba Baptist Church," he said.

Morris came to Yekepa only a few months ago, telling the missionaries he had wandered from the right life but had changed, and wanted to serve God in Yekepa. "Naturally, Earl Williams and George Senter wanted to take him at his word, and they befriended him," said Brown. "Both were trying to help him."

Morris, who was not ordained, had graduated in 1979 from the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary and found a job teaching at Ricks Institute, a Baptist school run entirely by Liberians, Brown said. While working at Ricks Institute, he and another seminary graduate helped in a village church ministry. But he left Ricks Institute early this year and temporarily lost fervor for the Christian life, Brown said.

Morris originally was from Monrovia but came to Yekepa several years ago to secure vocational training as an electrician, Brown said. During this time Williams baptized him as a new Christian.

During recent months Morris had visited regularly in the Senters' home, and he had even slept there. So it was not unusual that Mrs. Senter would let him enter when he came to the door at about 11 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 25, Brown said.

After the murder, Morris apparently took Mrs. Senter's keys and locked the home from the outside, Brown said. According to his own confession, Morris discarded the keys and his own clothes outside after changing into Senter's clothes, Brown said. Near the house, police later found the clothes, the Senters' passports and some letters from a Baptist Royal Ambassador youth group in High Point, N.C.

Yekepa is a modern city by Liberian standards and run by a concern named LAMCO, a Liberian subsidiary of several European and American iron-ore strip mining firms. Because of LAMCO's influence, the town has a modern supermarket, a water system and a company-run school. A planned city, Yekepa is structured much like an old Southern cotton milltown, with districts in which company people live separately from expatriates and non-company people.

LAMCO's own security forces investigated the murder with Liberian police, and Morris made his public confession in the office of the director of plant security with a number of Liberian police authorities in attendance, Brown said.

A picture of Morris, taken from the 1979 seminary yearbook, had been publicized throughout the country before his arrest. Baptist youth in the town of Karnplay, who knew Morris, identified him as he was caught apparently trying to flee the country, Brown said.

Rachel Senter's death is believed to be the first murder of a dependent foreign missionary child in Southern Baptist history. Mrs. Senter's death is the 11th murder of a Southern Baptist foreign missionary since the board was organized in 1845.

The last such victim, James Philpot, was shot to death last year after a traffic accident in Mexico City. The first known victim was J. Landrum Holmes, who was killed in China in 1861 as he attempted to persuade invaders not to attack a village.

Southern Baptist missionaries murdered in the past 25 years were Archie Dunaway, killed by communist-backed guerrillas in Zimbabwe in 1978; Gladys Hopewell, murdered in Taiwan in 1973; Mavis Pate, who died in an Arab guerrilla ambush in Gaza in 1972; and Mr. and Mrs. Paul Potter, found murdered in their home in the Dominican Republic in 1971.

Southern Baptists have 67 personnel, including the Senters, assigned to work in Liberia. More than 50 are on the field now, scattered throughout the nation of about 2.2 million people.

Mrs. Senter was graduated from Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, N.C., with a bachelor of arts degree. She received a master of religious education degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., and a master of science degree in social work from the University of Louisville.

Before she and her husband were employed as missionary associates, she taught high school in Chesapeake, Va., and did social work in Evansville, Ind., where Senter was director of missions for the Southwestern Indiana Southern Baptist Association. The Senters were home missionaries in Indiana from 1971 to 1980.

Besides her husband and son, she is survived by her father and stepmother, Mr. and Mrs. W. V. Tarlton of Shelby; a sister, Janet Tarlton of Durham, N.C.; and a brother, Edwin Tarlton of New York City.

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

Slain Missionary's Family,
Friends Gather To Grieve

By Erich Bridges

FMB

Baptist Press
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SHELBY, N.C. (BP)—Family and friends in the United States came together Nov. 29 to try to understand the life and violent death of Southern Baptist missionary Libby Senter and her 10-year-old daughter, Rachel.

Observed by reporters, television cameras and a community in shock, they quietly gathered at Zion Baptist Church in Shelby, N.C., the home ground that nourished Senter. Her father preached there for 16 years, and she first dedicated her life to missions there.

Current pastor Russell Fitts remembered the last time the missionary family had been in the church, 11 months before.

"Rachel and Philip came with Libby and George to stand where I'm standing, and the entire family took part in a presentation on missions in Liberia," Fitts remembered. "You could tell by the way these children, Philip and Rachel, came to the rostrum and held the banners and posters that they were thrilled to be a part of what their mother and daddy were doing."

Bill Tarlton, Libby Senter's 87-year-old father, smiled at the memory. The retired pastor, known and loved in the Shelby area for almost 40 years, had been smiling for days as he accepted condolences, answered reporters' questions and tried to support other grieving family members. Church members say it is his nature.

"I guess we were both inclined to be optimistic and cheerful," Tarlton said of himself and his daughter, who was also known for her smile. "It's deep, it hurts, but it's over, and there isn't any way weeping or crying or wailing can bring them back. What I've got to try do to is somehow live with it."

The missionary and her daughter were found murdered early Nov. 26 at the Senter home in Yekepa, Liberia. Police arrested suspect Benjamin M. Morris, a graduate of the Liberian Baptist Theological Seminary, the following day as he apparently was trying to escape the country.

Tarlton and others who knew and loved Libby Senter remembered her as a determined, outgoing woman who enjoyed life, trusted almost everybody and feared nothing. She was a tomboy as a child, played football and basketball, loved animals and developed into an excellent student. She was valedictorian of her high school class in Shelby and earned honors at Wake Forest University and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

But the characteristics that turned up most often in memories were her love of people and sensitivity to their needs.

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"It didn't make any difference whether somebody was 80 or eight or one," Tarlton said. "She was especially fond of children and of old folks. She'd just go see all the old people around here, and take food or flowers or whatever we had to send 'em, and stay out with 'em till she had to come back. That was before she was grown, when she was young."

She carried that concern for people to seminary, where she studied ministry through social work. She supported herself there by working at a mental institution and later worked for a year among poor coal mining families in the mountains of eastern Kentucky.

In the mountains, Mrs. Senter once wrote, she "found overwhelming human need, few community resources and people reluctant to use available resources." A grandmother once brandished a pistol and threatened to shoot the young social worker if she tried to teach her granddaughter anything else. But the year helped seal her conviction that God could use her in missions. She married George Senter soon after.

Perhaps the most heart-rending recollections of the missionary came from Hilda Dean, a nurse in Louisville who developed a 20-year friendship with Senter during seminary days. Dean visited Senter in Liberia for a month in 1984 and planned to go again next February. She had earlier planned to call the missionary Nov. 29 to finalize plans for the upcoming visit.

"She was the best friend I ever had," Dean said through her tears. "She wanted to be where she could serve and help people. She couldn't bear the suffering of the people. I'm a nurse, and she would say, 'Hilda, there's a lot of people out there with a lot of needs. Let's get out there and help them.'"

During her 1984 stay in Liberia, Dean helped Senter with her ministry and followed her as she visited marketplaces and homes in Yekepa, where the Senters worked. "She was so proud to be there," Dean said. "She wanted me to see everything she saw and did.

"The people loved Libby. They went to her if they had problems. They went to her if they needed something. They loved her. You could see it in their eyes."

The missionary wanted desperately to speak the difficult Mano language fluently, Dean said, so she could communicate the love of Christ effectively. "She wanted to learn to pray in Mano."

The last communication Dean received from her friend was a cassette tape. On it, Dean related, Senter sounded as excited as always. "I want to live," the missionary said. "I've got so much I want to do. I can't wait for you to come."

Missionaries and Liberians were gathering around George and Philip at the Senter home in Yekepa at the same time the Shelby service was going on, said John Mills, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's director for West Africa. The next day, Nov. 30, the bodies of Libby and Rachel Senter would be buried there. George's brother, Fred Senter, said the missionary couple had long ago decided they wanted it that way—in case either died on the mission field—"as a witness" to the Liberian people.

As the people filed out of Zion Church in Shelby, Bill Tarlton stayed behind and spoke of George Senter. The missionary had met face to face with the suspected killer of his wife and daughter, Tarlton had been told, and had told the murderer he forgave him.

"I haven't got that far yet," Tarlton said quietly. "I might one day, too. I don't know."

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

Chinese Can Reach
World, Parks Says

By Erich Bridges

FMB
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TAIPEI, Taiwan (BP)--Chinese Christians scattered around the world could make a "tremendous impact" for the gospel in many nations, insisted Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks.

"There are enclaves of Chinese all over the world, maybe stronger groups of Chinese in more countries than any other race," Parks said after a recent visit to eastern Asia. If Christians in overseas Chinese communities become committed to world evangelization, he told Chinese Baptists in Hong Kong and Taiwan, "you could influence most of the nations of the world, because you're everywhere."

Parks spoke at special church services in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where Baptists have been celebrating the 150th anniversary of the beginning of Baptist work in China.

Baptist missionaries J. Lewis and Henrietta Hall Shuck of Virginia, originally appointed by the Triennial Convention, reached Macao on the southern coast of China in 1836. They later moved to Hong Kong, where she died in 1844. The following year, Shuck moved to Canton and joined Southern Baptists' newly formed mission board, making China the first foreign mission field for the Southern Baptist Convention.

Thus began more than a century of work carried out by hundreds of missionaries, including such legendary figures as Lottie Moon and Bill Wallace. The missionary era in China ended with the rise of communism, but many Christians in today's post-denominational church of China still value their Baptist heritage. Many others who went abroad helped extend Baptist work throughout Asia.

In Taiwan, observances of this year's anniversary have included Baptist rallies around the country. One of the themes is "Remember, Renew and Redeem"--remember the past, renew commitment and redeem society.

Taiwan Baptists have been praying for at least 150 people to commit themselves to vocational Christian service during the celebrations. They topped that goal in November during a special service at Grace Baptist Church in Taipei, as more than 20 people joined others who already have made public commitments to service.

Parks, who spoke at the Taipei service, said he was moved by emotional expressions he rarely had seen in Chinese worship. "There were so many weeping in the decision-making time," he said. "It was a powerful service."

Admitting he knew little of their language, Parks told the Baptists he understood the word for "overseas Chinese" means or sounds like "China bridge."

"What if ... all the overseas Chinese Christians became bridges into the communities of the world?" he asked. "You could have a real part in winning this world" to Christ.

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

Bold Missions Can Be Reality
If Southern Baptists Face Facts

By Carol Garrett

W M R

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)—If Southern Baptists may wake up in 14 years to discover only 17 percent of the world's population living in countries open to missions, a missions strategist warns.

That means there will be 4.3 billion non-Christians living where missionaries cannot go.

It is even possible that just 25 years later, no missionaries could exist anywhere in the world because all countries have closed their doors to them.

"This is a megatrend we must face," David Barrett told the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union national staff.

Barrett, an internationally known missions researcher, is a consultant with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, researching and documenting world missions information and trends. He is author of "World Class Cities and World Evangelization," a book jointly published by WMU and the board.

Another fact Southern Baptists must face: Of the 7,000 different languages in the world, only 296 have a complete translation of the Bible, and only 1,500 more have a part of the Scripture translated. Barrett called this "shocking, especially since many already had this much" 100 years ago.

In the past century, many of the world's 10,600-plus nationalities have had no Christian influence at all, he added.

History shows that Christian groups have made more than 300 attempts to evangelize the world throughout the last century. Yet all have failed.

"Year after year, we have all this big talk, but as far as completing the task of world evangelization, there is enormous shortfall," Barrett said.

But Southern Baptists can succeed where all other groups have failed, he claimed. That success lies in Bold Mission Thrust, the SBC's plan to give every person in the world an opportunity to hear the gospel by the year 2000.

Because worldwide trends are working against Christian missions, Barrett said, Bold Mission Thrust becomes more critical every day. He is convinced Bold Mission Thrust will not fail: "There is no reason Bold Mission Thrust should fizzle out like other world evangelization projects. By the year 2000, everybody should know the gospel."

His research shows that Bold Mission Thrust, unlike other such efforts, has gained momentum since it began in 1976. There are also millions more people involved in the SBC plan than there have been in any other world evangelization project.

The key to the success of Bold Mission Thrust is that the plan relies solely on a single denomination to work, Barrett said. In contrast, all other world evangelization efforts have been designed and undertaken by several groups who tried to work cooperatively across denominational lines.

While Southern Baptists welcome other groups who want to join in the effort, Bold Mission Thrust does not depend upon that outside help, he stressed. The SBC will be successful in Bold Mission Thrust "not because it's the only denomination, but because people have sensed it's the only way we can make world evangelism work," he said.

The Foreign Mission Board is "getting its house in order" by studying and trying to learn from Christian history while simultaneously gathering world information.

Armed with that information, Barrett said, Southern Baptists will be fully equipped to accomplish Bold Mission Thrust.

Gerontologist Shares Experiences
From Her Journey Into Time

By Karen Benson

W.M.M.F.

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--In 1979, Patricia Moore set out on a journey into her future.

This fall, she came to the national headquarters of the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union to tell about it.

She was the featured speaker for a seminar on "The Older Adult: Health Care Concerns," sponsored by Baptist Medical Center Princeton, located in Birmingham, Ala.

Moore described her experiment in which she disguised herself to look like an 85-year-old woman. For three years, she traveled throughout the United States and Canada in this disguise.

She encountered support, helpfulness and love—and rejection, hatred, anger and fear. She was even mugged by a gang of young boys, and to this day carries the pain and the scars, not to mention the heartbreaking memory.

It was all for a purpose—to see how people respond to the elderly, how products do or do not work for the elderly and how environments impact the elderly.

Her firm, Moore & Associates, develops products, services and marketing strategies for consumers age 50 and older.

"The very survival of these people in our society borders on the phenomenal," Moore said of the elderly.

She described how a simple ride on a city bus, an attempt to cross a busy street and a climb up an apartment stairwell all turned into vicious nightmares when she tried them all as an "elderly woman."

She learned from those experiences, and now she has some things to say to younger generations:

-- "None of us is disabled. We are all differently able. None of us has the right to determine that some people are any less deserving than the other.

-- "As a society, we always shun those who remind us of our darkest fears. The elderly remind us of our own mortality—that we, too, will one day be old. We need to be careful how we treat our elderly. They're being made to feel that somehow, they just don't fit in anymore. That they're even in the way.

-- "The elderly are no different than the rest of us. All they want is the opportunity to exist in peace and happiness. All we really need to do is treat each other as we want to be treated ourselves.

-- "We are each of us changing. With change comes our ability or inability to cope. How we adapt to change will determine the quality of our life."

Perhaps the most frightening discovery she made during her three-year trek, "In America, the fear of dying early has been replaced by the fear of living too long."

To make the long life worth living, Moore said, individual Americans need to learn some of the same things she learned during her unusual journey.

"In this life, you have to do more than look; you have to see. You have to do more than hear; you have to listen. You have to do more than touch; you have to feel. You have to do more than talk; you must say something.

"And you must do more than simply exist; you must work to make a difference."

Baptist Geriatrics Expert
Demands Equal Treatment

By Karen Benson

W.M.

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--The "graying of America" is one of the most significant trends affecting American society and rapidly is leading to a crisis in health care for the elderly, a leading Southern Baptist expert on geriatrics claimed.

Robert Wilkerson called for an increased awareness of ethical dilemmas in caring for the elderly and urged a return to the traditional physician-patient relationship during a speech at the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union office in Birmingham, Ala.

Wilkerson is corporate vice president for geriatric services for Baptist Medical Centers in Birmingham. He was a guest speaker during a seminar on "The Older Adult: Health Care Concerns," sponsored by the Baptist Medical Center Princeton.

Since the beginning of the century, the number of elderly citizens has increased eightfold, Wilkerson said.

In 1900, only 3 million—or 4 percent—of all Americans were 65 or older. In 1980, the older population accounted for 11.3 percent of all Americans, and the number continues to grow, he said.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by the year 2030, up to 21 percent of the American population will be older than 64.

"This astronomical growth has been precipitated by a lowering of the birth rate, coupled with a simultaneous increase in life expectancy," he explained.

At the same time, the huge federal deficit is putting pressure on the government to eliminate or drastically reduce expenditures," he added, insisting, "This obvious mismatch between needs and resources has placed us in a dilemma in which needs are the greatest and resources are at the very lowest."

Thus, allocation of resources is one of the "most important ethical issues in dealing with the elderly," Wilkerson said. "If we accept the fact that our society has limited resources and many goals, we must ask ourselves the questions: Who will we give the resources to? The young or the old? The physically fit or the sick? The rich or the poor? If public funding is limited, what share of those funds are we willing to allocate to meet the healthcare needs of the elderly?"

To help stretch the dollar, healthcare providers seriously have tried to reduce the cost without reducing quality, Wilkerson said: "They have attempted to do this by eliminating waste, avoiding duplication of services and increasing productivity. However, these methods have almost totally been exhausted. Now, the era of cost-containment is giving way, and we have begun to consider the rationing of health care."

But then other questions arise, he said: "Are we willing, as a society, to reduce cost by rationing health care for the elderly? Is it fair or just to do so?"

Allowing the elderly to make their own decisions regarding health care becomes another area of ethical concern, Wilkerson added. "It is unfortunate that a paternalistic approach is often taken with older people, even when there is no reason to suspect that they are not competent to make decisions," he noted.

No matter how noble the motivation behind such paternalism, "it is a form of discrimination and should be rejected," he said. "It is based on ageist premises which assume that to be old is to be poor, sickly, forgetful and dependent. This definitely is not the case or condition of the majority of the elderly population."

In addition, the involvement of third parties "has brought about a situation in which little secrecy or confidentiality exists anymore," Wilkerson said. "The patient may tell the doctor things in confidence, but they go on the chart. And the chart is available to just about anyone in town."

Today, more than ever, it is important to keep the patient's interest primary, he stressed. "Patients should know when they select a doctor it will be someone who will listen to them, who will counsel with them, who will take their needs seriously and respect their confidences."

While these and other ethical concerns do exist regarding the elderly, there should not be any special ethical issues unique to the elderly, Wilkerson said. "Once past childhood, age in and of itself should have no influence on ethical issues in treatment decisions, non-treatment and the distribution of health resources."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is a condensed article from the November-December 1986 issue of MissionsUSA. Names of Sellers Home clients have been changed.

Sellers Home:
Based On Love

By Joe Westbury and Everett Hullum

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NEW ORLEANS (BP)—The first time 14-year-old Paula saw her father cry was when he was told she was pregnant.

"It was 1:30 a.m. and Mom had just awakened him from a sound sleep with the news," she remembers. With tears streaming down his face, he looked into her brown eyes and said, "Paula, I love you more right now than I have ever loved you in my entire life."

It was assurance that Paula needed, calming fears of rejection that had kept her in constant panic for five months.

It was her doctor who recommended Sellers Baptist Home and Adoption Center in New Orleans--the only Southern Baptist maternity home that serves the entire convention.

Cheerleader, varsity swimmer, student council member, Paula suddenly found herself "outcast," staring out of a bedroom window of a strange building, side-tracked by an unwanted pregnancy and a series of question marks for a future. Paula's days grew brighter, however, as Sellers gave her the anonymity and emotional breathing space she needed.

Founded in the 1920s as the Baptist Woman's Emergency Home, Sellers for half a century has ministered to the spiritual, physical, mental and emotional needs of its clients--and, often, of its clients' families.

"I've thanked God over and over that there was a place like Sellers for us to turn to," says Paula's mother.

In 1961 the name was changed to honor Thomas Sellers, an obstetrician who donated his medical services for 33 years.

Although the facility was founded as a ministry to destitute women, many clients today are middle-class. No one is denied admission because of inability to pay, however. Since its affiliation with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in 1933, Sellers has been supported primarily through Southern Baptist Cooperative Program budget receipts and gifts to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for Home Missions.

All of Sellers' services--maternity home, life skills classes, foster care, day care--are offered in a two-story red brick building on a quiet, tree-lined residential street.

"We do not accept anyone against her will," says Mary Dan Kuhnle, Sellers director for the past 11 years. "Sellers does not operate as a reform school. Clients are free to come and go during the day as long as they are here for regular appointments and work assignments."

Dorothy Witt and Debra Reames, both resident managers at Sellers, hold non-mandatory Bible studies that frequently deal with love and forgiveness. "Sometimes I'm saddened by the unkind remarks tossed in our direction when we're out at a mall or restaurant," says Reames. "I tell residents to ignore them, but I understand why they are sometimes reluctant to leave the building."

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Unfortunately, the judgmental remarks and condemning looks are not restricted to the outside world. "You'd be surprised at some of the reactions to our young women," Kuhnle says. "Many adults seem to have the attitude, 'That could never happen to my daughter.' We have to remind them that our clients come from all walks of life—including church families."

The subject of adoption is approached from an objective viewpoint. Through counseling sessions, each expectant mother comes to understand adoption is not child abandonment.

"Many times it takes greater maturity and love for a woman to place a child for adoption than to decide to keep it," says one counselor. "She has realized she cannot provide what the child needs most—a stable family environment."

Such is the case with Paula. "I had to admit that I couldn't be a decent mother at 14, regardless of how much I tried," she remembers.

Paula's mother agreed but remembers the most difficult moment of the experience was returning with Paula and the baby to Sellers, knowing after the adoption she would never see the child again.

With tears in her eyes, she turned to her daughter and first grandson and said, "Paula, you gave that baby the greatest gift—the gift of life. Now give it the second-greatest gift—the chance of a normal family life."

Counselors stress the decision must be made by the mother, and she must be able to live with the decision.

If a client decides for adoption, Kuhnle makes it "very clear that this decision is irrevocable. If anyone talks you into a decision you're not comfortable with, you'll forever blame that person and never accept that decision as your own. That violates a basic precept of mental health—taking responsibility for your own decisions."

For adoptive parents, this process provides an awareness that the child is a gift of love, not rejection.

One adoptive father summed up the experience in a Christmas card he wrote to Sellers' expectant mothers: "Believe me, not being able to have a child when you desperately want one is a terrible experience. You may look fine on the outside, but you are hurting on the inside.

"My wife and I could not possibly love a biological child more than we love our adopted child. The sun rises and sets on this active package of joy. We continue to give thanks to God. ... We also thank God for a place like Sellers and the wonderful people who work there."

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