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January 20, 1987

87-8

Farmers' Plight Woeful,  
USDA Official Observes

By Joe Westbury

ATLANTA (BP)--Things may have stopped getting worse for the American farmer, but they are not likely to get much better anytime soon, observed a spokesman for the United States Department of Agriculture.

Fred Woods, public policy specialist for the government agency, updated the plight of rural America during a rural-urban leadership conference sponsored by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

"We need to stop kidding ourselves that government programs intentionally designed to help volume production, symbolized by the large farmer, are also going to benefit the struggling mid-size farmer. The programs were never designed to aid the farmer caught in the current financial crisis," Woods insisted.

The crisis has centered around one-third of American farmers who built up high debts relative to their income in the 1970s and then were victims of high interest rates and low farm prices in the 1980s, he explained. Results of the expansion became even more severe when portions of the nation were hit with repeated drought in an already slow market.

Legislation that supported farmers in the past has been dismantled, and their safety net no longer exists. The commodities program now under fire never was intended to help farmers in their current predicament, he noted.

Although the nation continues to lose about 65,000 farms a year due to bankruptcy or consolidation, Woods said the loss is not a threat to national production. "We lost a much greater number of farms from 1940 to 1960, but the farming community did not have the organized voice that it has today," he said.

Woods debunked the myth that loss of farms translates into a loss of national production. Actually, America has an excess of crop land due to higher yields, and the government is seeking to remove 65 million acres of land from production, he said. The nation is not losing production, but it is losing rural jobs, he added.

"Seventy percent of the nation's farms produce less than 10 percent of America's food and fiber products, yet it is those farms that are caught in the financial crises. Those farms account for 1.6 million of the nation's 2.3 million farms and basically satisfy local market needs," he said. "The local farmer characterizes rural America and symbolizes the rich values and traditions of country living. But there are too many myths attached to family farms and the rural life which distort the picture of the current crisis."

"The problem these farmers face is that they have just enough income to prevent them from seeking employment off the farm but not enough to produce a satisfactory standard of living. Their only option is to grow larger and increase their income or seek full employment in a non-farm job and reduce the size of their operation.

"We are grossly naive or unfair if we want to preserve, through government aid, a mid-size farmer whose operation cannot provide a decent standard of living," he said. "A more sensible solution would be to respond with rural development programs that entice industry to smaller towns to create a larger job market."

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Don Evans, state rural-urban missions director for the Missouri Baptist Convention, told conference participants that Southern Baptists in his state are continuing to view the crisis as an opportunity for new and creative types of ministry.

Evans, whose state has the highest farm bankruptcy rate in the nation, said he could attend four or five farm auctions a week. "In many instances the loss of a farm is as great emotionally as the loss of a family member," he noted.

Evans encouraged churches to aid such families by paying utility bills or providing breakfasts for schoolchildren. Missouri Baptists also have compiled a booklet on free counseling and dental and medical care currently available through federal programs.

"The farm family which suddenly cannot support itself can take advantage of numerous social programs which many of them do not know exist. Simply informing them of what is available is a tremendous ministry," he said.

Allen and Delores Baugh, co-directors of missions for Severns Valley Baptist Association in Elizabethtown, Ky., discussed their approach to ministry in the crisis. After assessing the needs in their area, the couple founded Friends of Agriculture, a nonprofit organization that mobilizes community support around struggling farmers. Although partially funded by the association, Kentucky Baptist Convention and Home Mission Board, the Baughs sought to broaden the venture's appeal by soliciting help from local agribusiness, banks and farmers.

The group offers practical seminars such as "How to Locate Off-Farm Employment," "Better Farm Management," "Low-Cost, High-Yield Farming" and "Stress Management." The joint venture between the denomination and secular business community has grown to include 37 supporters and a six-member steering committee.

Baugh, a career farmer who has served the association in a bivocational capacity for 12 years, credits the organization's success with its low-key approach to the denomination. Although he views it as ministry, it is not promoted from that perspective, he said.

"We're not as concerned with who gets the credit as we are with the ministry that's accomplished. We're trying to build a fence at the top of the hill so we don't have to send an ambulance to the bottom of the hill," he explained.

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Private Groups Important  
To AIDS Battle, Panel Told

By Kathy Palen

Baptist Press  
1/20/87

WASHINGTON (BP)—With an AIDS vaccine at least five years away, education and information are the only tools available to fight the spread of the disease that has become the federal government's number one health priority, experts in the field told a Senate panel Jan. 15.

For a massive national education and information campaign to be successful, private groups and organizations — such as the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission — must join efforts with various federal agencies, witnesses also told members of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee.

C. Everett Koop, U.S. surgeon general, described the importance of the advice and counsel he received from such groups while drafting his recent report on AIDS. In addition to consulting medical and scientific experts, Koop said, he also met with leaders of organizations "concerned with the health, education and social well-being of the American people."

In relating responses he received from such groups as the National Parent-Teacher's Association, National Education Association and Synagogue Council of America, Koop specifically mentioned the Christian Life Commission.

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"After I met with Larry Braidfoot and his colleagues from the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, he said the meeting had been 'a very helpful one in catalyzing within our group a focus for a growing concern about the problem and its threat to our society and its families,'" Koop said. Braidfoot is general counsel and director of Christian citizenship development for the Christian Life Commission.

Koop and other witnesses told the committee of the need for continuing cooperation with such organizations.

The Public Health Service has developed a plan, including preparation and dissemination of printed and video materials, sponsorship of national and regional conferences and workshops, and targeting of education programs for all segments of the American public, reported Robert E. Windom, assistant secretary for health at the Health and Human Services Department.

Successful execution of that plan, Windom added, will require "action from and cooperation among state, county and municipal governments, professional and service organizations, the private sector and other departments of the federal government. We expect that non-federal entities, applying their own resources and ingenuity, will build upon and further disseminate the materials and information developed through federal dollars, thereby creating a multiplier effect."

Witness after witness provided statistics about the epidemic proportions of the disease. More than 29,000 AIDS cases have been reported to date in the United States, with 16,500 of those already resulting in death. An estimated 1 million to 1.5 million more Americans are infected with the AIDS virus and can spread it to others. Of those persons, at least 20 to 30 percent are expected to develop AIDS itself within the next five years. Most people with AIDS survive less than two years, and experts project by the end of 1991 more than 179,000 Americans will have died from the disease.

Witnesses also projected astronomical AIDS-related dollar costs. The average hospital costs for an individual AIDS patient now range from \$50,000 to \$150,000. The direct costs of care for all AIDS patients in 1991 are predicted to be \$8 billion to \$16 billion.

Panel members heard of some advances being made in AIDS research. A National Institute of Health official testified that human testing on a possible AIDS vaccine could begin in the United States later this year. But Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, added such a vaccine is not expected to become widely available in the next five years.

Another medical expert told the panel extensive educational programs still will be needed after a vaccine is available. "The social stigma of AIDS may arouse significant reluctance of parents to have their children immunized against a disease which they cannot envision ever affecting them," said Samuel L. Katz, chairman of Duke University School of Medicine's pediatrics department.

The fact that AIDS no longer is isolated to the nation's homosexual population also was raised throughout the hearing. Sen. Lowell P. Weicker, R-Conn., emphasized the need to adopt the philosophy presented in the preface letter to the "Surgeon General's Report on AIDS."

In that letter, Koop wrote: "At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic many Americans had little sympathy for people with AIDS. The feeling was that somehow people from certain groups 'deserved' their illness. Let us put those feelings behind us. We are fighting a disease, not people. Those who are already afflicted are sick people and need our care as do all sick patients. The country must face this epidemic as a unified society. We must prevent the spread of AIDS while at the same time preserving our humanity and intimacy."

Christian Life Commission  
In Effort To Fight AIDS

By Kathy Palen

WASHINGTON (BP)—Christian Life Commission representatives who met with Surgeon General C. Everett Koop about ways to fight the nation's AIDS crisis came out of that private meeting with "a deep and growing concern about AIDS," said Larry Braidfoot, general counsel and director of Christian citizenship development for the Southern Baptist Convention agency.

In recent testimony before the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, Koop — who emphasized the need for private groups and organizations to be involved in AIDS education and information efforts — spotlighted response he received from Braidfoot following their meeting.

The Christian Life Commission was one of four religious groups asked to meet with Koop to provide input on the recently released "Surgeon General's Report on AIDS."

As a result of that meeting, the Christian Life Commission is formulating methods to inform and educate Southern Baptists about the U.S. AIDS epidemic.

The agency held a consultation in Dallas in mid-November that brought together a variety of people from within Southern Baptist life to discuss ways to deal with the AIDS problem, Braidfoot said. Those present focused on education about AIDS, prevention of high-risk activities that can lead to AIDS, and ministry to AIDS victims and their families.

The agency's staff also is working on new educational materials that are to be available in the near future, Braidfoot said. The materials are designed to interpret the problems of AIDS within Christian and Baptist commitments, he added.

The Christian Life Commission also plans to reprint the surgeon general's report for use among Southern Baptists, Braidfoot said.

He recalled two areas of concern that emerged during his meeting with Koop. First, AIDS is having an increasing effect on the nation's heterosexual community. Second, the disease poses a very serious threat to American teen-agers.

"With the kind of data we have on the sexual activity of teen-agers, once the disease is introduced it has the potential to spread like wildfire," he said. "We must do more than we ever have before to educate teen-agers about the Christian view of sexuality or we will see a large number of them dying."

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Numbers Prove Need For  
HMB/WMU Partnership

By Carol Garrett

Baptist Press  
1/20/87

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)—Trends revealed by the most recent Southern Baptist home missions statistics call for continued and even greater cooperation between the denomination's Home Mission Board and Woman's Missionary Union, Bob Banks told WMU leaders.

Banks, Home Mission Board vice president and interim chief executive officer, spoke to Woman's Missionary Union leaders during a session of their executive board meeting.

With the Southern Baptist Convention becoming the most ethnically diverse denomination in America in 1986, WMU is essential to language mission, he said.

This year, language missions will be the largest Home Mission Board program, with a budget of more than \$11 million. That budget will support work with more than 3,200 language units and 400 black congregations started by Southern Baptists during the past 10 years.

Fortunately, ethnic congregations have experienced phenomenal growth of WMU membership, Banks said. That growth reached 63 percent among Indians, 320 percent among Asians, 54 percent among Hispanics and 170 percent among the deaf.

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Because 72 percent of the 84 ethnic groups with which the board works does not have materials in their own language, Banks said, WMU could have a major part in providing materials to those groups.

He also asked WMU leaders to continue expansion of mission action work among ethnics and development of ethnic leadership.

Additionally, one of Southern Baptists' most difficult tasks will be to reach the cities, Banks said. Almost 52 percent of America's population lives in 50 cities, but Southern Baptists have only 19.6 percent of their churches and 28.3 percent of their members in those cities, he said.

"Unless we reach the cities, with all their lostness, hurts and problems, America will be lost to Christ," Banks warned.

With 164 million non-Christians in America, all church organizations must do more to win people for Christ, he said, urging WMU leaders to expand promotion of and training in personal witnessing.

He called for continued support from WMU in church starting, a major board objective. One way WMU is helping start churches is by cultivating target and group through mission action. For example, 17 percent of literacy work had resulted in new church starts, greatly due to WMU mission action, he said.

Banks also challenged the WMU leaders to renew a "covenant of prayer" with the board.

"Our own Baptist heritage and study of history provides convincing evidence that a covenant to pray unceasingly will magnify commitment to missions and evangelism and result in reaching the goals we have adopted," he stressed.

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Don't Let HMB Ordination Policy  
Erode Missions Support, Banks Says

By Carol Garrett

Baptist Press  
1/20/87

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)—The recent Southern Baptist Home Mission Board policy prohibiting future board financial support for women pastors is "probably the best action the board could have hoped for," said Bob Banks, the board's executive vice president and interim chief executive officer.

Banks spoke to Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union leaders during a Jan. 12 session of their executive board meeting.

Banks noted he hopes churches and individuals who disagree with the new policy will not withhold their Annie Armstrong Easter Offering or Southern Baptist Cooperative Program gifts as a form of protest.

"If churches or individuals withhold funds, they punish 3,700 missionaries, provide less ability to reach this nation for Christ and hurt home missions in their state and nation," he said. Refusing to give would be to "opt out of a voice and participation in that part (of home missions) which is good, productive and carries forward the Lord's work."

Southern Baptists who consider withholding their support should also consider the missionaries, he added.

"Here in the midst of a convention in turmoil and travail; here in the midst of unsettling economic times when missions giving is threatened; here when other mission-sending groups are being organized; here in the midst of pressures of every sort, these missionaries are giving their lives in service to the Lord," Banks stressed.

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A focus on the missionary puts the work of the entire denomination into proper perspective, he told the WMU leaders.

"As we look at these missionaries who have been called out to serve and to share the gospel, somehow the purpose of WMU and the HMB is very clear. We are here as enablers, as helpers in the chain of faith," he said.

Although there is deep personal conviction, and therefore sharp division, on both sides of the ordination issue, the new policy is consistent with what the board's ordination study committee perceives to be the opinion held by most Southern Baptists, he said.

"I don't see any reconsideration of this policy at this time," he added, noting, the committee was divided over the question, and the new policy itself is a compromise.

He emphasized the policy only prohibits board funding for women who are pastors of local churches.

About 40 churches, in the Southern Baptist Convention have women pastors, and only one of those receives board funds. That church will not lose funding, since the policy applies only to future requests from churches with women pastors.

Banks reminded WMU leaders the policy neither prohibits the appointment of ordained women as missionaries, nor prevents the use of board funds to employ ordained women in other church or associational staff positions, such as student workers or Baptist center directors.

"We have stressed that the HMB is the mission board of all Southern Baptists. Even if someone may not agree with all the policies, we hope they will be unwavering and unfaltering in support of home missions," he said.

Much is at stake for home missions today, and supporting the vast scope of home missions work is more important than any controversy, he stressed.

God has led Southern Baptists to do missions together, Banks said, adding, "I challenge us to be about our Father's business."