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February 20, 1987

87-23

Vestal Denounces
Political Actions

By Dan Martin

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—Political coalitions in the 14.6 million-member Southern Baptist Convention are "inappropriate" and "immoral," and will "destroy" the convention, Peace Committee member Daniel Vestal told a meeting of Baptist journalists.

Vestal, pastor of First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas, told the journalists he was "speaking as an individual," and not as a member of the 22-member SBC Peace Committee.

The Texas pastor, whose church annually leads the SBC in contributions to the SBC Cooperative Program, commented after two journalists — Bob Terry, editor of Word and Way, the Missouri Baptist Convention newsjournal, and Jim Newton, BP bureau chief in Atlanta — had asked about political coalitions and the appropriateness of caucuses by members of boards of trust to set the political agenda for board meetings.

Terry said he had talked with two members of the SBC Executive Committee who told him of a caucus in which strategy was discussed about ways to block the election of Alvin C. Shackelford as vice president of public relations and director of Baptist Press.

He also referred to "Firestorm Chats," a tape-recorded interview with Paul Pressler, a Houston appeals court judge and member of the Executive Committee, which dealt with creation of a political coalition by fundamental-conservatives to change the denomination.

Terry said he "fears" the denomination has seen groups "committed to a common agenda" which have engaged in "almost purposeful disenfranchisement" of some segments of the denomination.

Newton asked what the Peace Committee "attitude is toward that kind of political activity."

Vestal, who said he was not aware of the Executive Committee caucus, said he has listened to the recording, "Firestorm Chats," in which Pressler reportedly details formation of a coalition with Paige Patterson, president of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas, in the late 1970s with the intention of turning the SBC to a more conservative stance.

"There is a Pressler-Patterson coalition," Vestal said. "There are some of us who feel that this kind of coalition has no place in Southern Baptist polity. I think all of us recognize that there is politics in the convention. If you vote that is politics. There is the sharing of influence and that is politics."

"Many of us believe that the emergence of this (Pressler-Patterson) coalition, which spawned another coalition (Sherman-Chafin-Slatton-Cavender) is not only inappropriate politic but is immoral."

(Following the emergence of the Pressler-Patterson coalition in 1979, a moderate group was formed. Its leaders have been Cecil Sherman, pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and former Peace Committee member; Kenneth Chafin, now a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.; James Slatton, pastor of River Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., and Norman Cavender, a layman from Claxton, Ga.)

Vestal added: "It violates the essence of what congregational polity is. If that kind of politics existed in First Baptist Church of Midland, it would be only a short time before (we) split. The fellowship would be destroyed; we would lose our identity and we would be consumed in infighting."

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"That is what has happened in the Southern Baptist Convention. The emergence of a political coalition has no place in Southern Baptist life."

He urged every Baptist editor, every member of the Peace Committee to listen to the "Firestorm Chats," tape and said, "I wish every Southern Baptist would listen to it. It is a clear statement of a reality that has emerged in Southern Baptist life in the last nine years that is going to destroy the Southern Baptist Convention."

After Vestal made his statement, SBC President Adrian Rogers told the journalists he wanted the record clear "that Dan Vestal is speaking for Dan Vestal."

Earlier, Rogers had told the journalists the Peace Committee had "addressed at great length" the question of political activity. "We found no political malfeasance of any group: no gerrymandering, no ballot-stuffing.

"Obviously, we have found some people who have done some wrong things, but (did not find) a systemitized effort on either side of the aisle," he added.

Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church of Memphis, Tenn., said: "There is a political atmosphere when we go to our convention. ... There is a political drive on the part of conservatives to see that conservative trustees are elected. That is political, but it is being done within the bounds and confines of our constitution. It is being done by conservatives feeling they are using the system that our fathers gave us to correct what they feel is a problem. They don't believe that is an abuse of the system, but a use of the system."

He referred to his often repeated belief that when theological problems are solved, the political problems will disappear and said: "Conservatives feel that when the need (for change) is removed, the system will no longer be used in that way."

He also repeated his pledge to appoint "the best Baptists I know, intellectually, morally, spiritually, denominationally and doctrinally. I would not appoint anybody to anything who does not believe that the Bible has truth without any mixture of error for its matter."

Rogers said: "I will grant that when the conservatives came to the ability to make appointments, for example when I was president in 1979, I was green as a goard. There were a lot of things I didn't know, a lot of people I didn't know. We were more or less like Beverly Hillbillies. We know a little bit more now and want the appointments to be the very best.

"If a man goes onto the (Baptist) Sunday School Board as a result of my Committee on Committees, I want him to be a good trustee, who understands the work of the board and wants it to do the best job it can for Jesus Christ."

He said: "I will not appoint anyone because he has been in the Pressler-Patterson coalition. But I will not not appoint him. I will look at him as a person."

During the hour-long meeting with about 50 representatives of the Baptist news media, Peace Committee Chairman Charles Fuller and member Jerry Vines were asked about the Glorieta Statement, issued in October by the presidents of the six SBC-affiliated seminaries.

In the statement, the presidents pledged allegiance to a belief the Bible is "not errant in any area of reality," and said the schools will "enforce compliance" with the statements of faith signed by faculty and staff at the institutions.

"There are various feelings about the Glorieta Statement," said Fuller, pastor of First Baptist Church of Roanoke, Va. "I personally still feel we have something. Some have accused the presidents of caving in. I do not believe that was their spirit.

"I must believe in their integrity at that point and if I believe (that), I am certainly going to believe in their integrity at facilitation. I think the presidents believe they are facilitating the statement. To what extent and how satisfactory that is is the issue."

The chairman told Baptist Press there had been questions about what the Glorieta Statement in reference to Scripture means. "Speaking as an individual I can say what it means to me. That statement, 'not errant in any area of reality,' does not mean that the Bible is complete and exhaustive in every area of reality upon which it touches, but it does mean that whatever it says about any subject it does touch is true. It is never misleading."

Fuller discounted secular newspaper reports that the Peace Committee is "at an impasse. We are not at an impasse, but we are watching and working. Our report (to the convention) will be strengthened or weakened by what takes place in the next month or two." He said such actions are "observable and tangible and in the realm of facilitation, not just of the Glorieta Statement but of the (presidential) appointments as well."

Vines, co-pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., said the Peace Committee felt the Glorieta Statement "was a very fine statement," but added "two of the presidents have backtracked from it."

He mentioned Roy Lee Honeycutt, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and Randall Lolley, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., as making "subsequent statements (which) do not indicate consistency with what they said at Glorieta."

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Peace Committee
Works On Report

By Dan Martin

Baptist Press
2/20/87

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—The Southern Baptist Convention's Peace Committee spent much of its 13th meeting working on instructions to a drafting subcommittee about the content of the group's final report, according to Chairman Charles Fuller.

The 22-member committee met Feb. 18-19, immediately following the February meeting of the SBC Executive Committee.

In addition to working on the "concept and precept" of the final report, and giving "information and input" to the drafting subcommittee, Fuller told Baptist Press the group spent "a large portion of time focusing on addressing some of the political problems in the 14.6 million-member denomination."

The group, which was created during the 1985 annual meeting of the SBC in Dallas, must make a final report to the 1987 annual meeting, scheduled June 16-18 in St. Louis.

Fuller said the drafting subcommittee, chaired by Bill Poe, an attorney from Charlotte, N.C., will meet twice in March and will submit a first draft of the report to a meeting April 2-3, in Nashville, Tenn. Other members of the drafting subcommittee are Albert McClellan, of Nashville; Jerry Vines of Jacksonville, Fla.; Ed Young of Houston; Daniel Vestal of Midland, Texas; and Bill Hull of Shreveport, La.

"By and large this meeting was invested in determining some general content, but we did give special emphasis to the political matters," Fuller said.

"I do not know of any informed and thinking Southern Baptist today who is saying our differences or not real or that they are minor, or, as we heard several years ago, that they are basically semantic, a matter of verbiage. It is quite obvious to every informed and thinking Southern Baptist that we do have marked differences.

"Those differences must be addressed, both the theological and the political, if we are to continue to minister and work together," he added.

Prior to the committee meeting, Fuller presented a progress report to the Executive Committee. In the report, Fuller noted the committee had "hoped to be ready to present a preliminary draft of the report. We are not prepared to do that."

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Originally, the Executive Committee had scheduled an hour during which it would receive the preliminary report and then allow members to react to the content. When the committee was not ready to make a report, the Executive Committee only heard Fuller's brief report.

In that report, Fuller talked about the prayer retreat the Peace Committee held with seminary presidents and other agency executives in Glorieta, N.M., in mid-October.

"Those who were present at the Glorieta prayer retreat will long remember its spiritual impact upon us all. Vivid in my own memory are those occasions when the Holy Spirit in me testified to himself in one of our convention agency leaders while a testimony of personal conversion was being shared.

"It is regrettable that all 14 million Southern Baptists could not be assembled for such a wholesome exchange and fellowship. Reconciliation is easier to come by when we talk to each other rather than just hear about one another," Fuller said.

He added the statement issued at the retreat by the presidents of the six SBC-affiliated seminaries — known as the Glorieta Statement — had "sparked new hopes for resolution of the controversy in our denomination. Although the presidents did not submit this statement to the Peace Committee for approval, underscoring their intent to carry out their proposals, regardless of our action, the committee heartily endorsed the Glorieta Statement.

"We will anticipate its facilitation in any recommendation we make in our report to the convention this June," he said.

"I, personally, believe in the integrity with which the seminary presidents drafted and offered this statement and would hope their trustees, alumni, faculties and seminary families would support the faith they keep with that statement," Fuller noted.

In the Glorieta Statement the presidents affirm their belief that the "66 books of the Bible are not errant in any area of reality," and pledge enforcement of the seminary statements of faith by faculty and staff.

In his report, Fuller said there are "several assumptions upon which the Peace Committee must work:"

"First, the face value of statements and intentions made by those who have offered contributions to the peace process.

"Second, the conviction that we are committed to keep our convention together and not to entertain a split of the convention as a solution to our problems.

"Third, the willingness of Southern Baptists to consider changes of approach, within the bounds of our polity and our diversity, believing it is better to alter the garment, rather than to rend it.

"Fourth, the tenacity of prayer and faith on the part of the denomination of people who still believe God wants to use us and not pass us by."

He concluded his remarks by reading a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (5:23-24) which speaks of reconciliation.

"I remind you that the word translated 'reconciled' literally means to do all in one's power, to leave no stone unturned, in the pursuit of reconciliation," Fuller told members of the Executive Committee, the Peace Committee and a large gallery of onlookers.

"No doubt, some Southern Baptists have said they have done all they intend to do, or all they wish to do, to accomplish reconciliation in our midst," Fuller said. "That is not the question in light of inspired Holy Scripture. The question is, 'Have we done all that we can do?'

"I do not believe we have. Not yet. And I do not believe we can face our Lord, in peace with him, until we do."

Cooperative Program Aims
At \$140 Million Target

By Marv Knox

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—The Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee has proposed a record \$140 million budget for the 1987-88 SBC Cooperative Program.

Messengers to the convention's annual meeting will vote on the budget when they meet in St. Louis, June 16-18. If approved, the budget — a 2.9 percent increase over the current \$136 million budget — will go into effect Oct. 1.

The Cooperative Program is a convention-wide budget used to support evangelistic, missionary and educational enterprises around the world. Money is channeled from church members to their congregations, to state conventions and to national and international causes. The \$140 million budget represents the goal for financing causes beyond the state level.

Allocation of the budget is divided into three sections: a first-phase basic operating budget of \$132 million, a capital needs budget of \$6.45 million and a second-phase operating budget of \$1.55 million. Funds will not be allocated to the capital needs budget until the first-phase operating budget is met, and funds will not be allocated to the second-phase operating budget until all current and previous capital needs budgets are met.

The first-phase basic operating budget targets funds to 19 convention entities. It represents a 4.24 percent increase over the current \$126.63 million first-phase operating budget.

The lion's share of this phase is designated for the convention's Foreign Mission Board, which is to receive \$66 million, or 50 percent of the total. The next-largest recipient is theological education, with the six SBC seminaries set to receive more than \$26.8 million, or 20.32 percent of the goal. The SBC Home Mission Board is to receive almost \$25.8 million, or 19.54 percent.

The largest percentage increase is allocated to the SBC operating portion of the budget. It is to receive almost \$2.85 million, or 2.16 percent of the total. That is a 44.01 percent increase over the current \$1.98 million allocation.

Three factors made that increase necessary, reported John C. Cothran, a layman from Greenville, S.C., and chairman of the Executive Committee's program and budget subcommittee:

First, the convention operating section jumped 51.94 percent to more than \$1.12 million because of the demand of providing for larger convention halls and larger and more equipment necessary to conduct larger SBC annual meetings.

Fueled by theological-political controversy within the convention, the past two annual meetings have involved more than 40,000 messengers, more than double the previous average size of such gatherings.

Second, a line item of \$250,000 was added to the proposed budget to replace money borrowed from the convention's reserve funds that paid for unbudgeted expenses of the two recent mammoth annual meetings.

Third, another line item of \$200,000 was added to pay legal costs of defending the convention in Crowder, et al, v. SBC, et al, and other pending lawsuits. The Crowder suit was brought by a group of messengers to the 1985 annual meeting in Dallas who claimed their rights were violated by alleged parliamentary irregularities. Cothran noted the convention already had paid \$182,000 on the suit as of Jan. 13 and added that figure will increase as the appeal process continues. The suit initially was ruled in the SBC's favor but the plaintiffs have appealed.

These three factors and two others — decreased revenue from the SBC Sunday School Board and expense on the two-year-old SBC Building in Nashville, Tenn. — were noted during the business and finance subcommittee's report on the 1985-86 SBC operating budget.

Tim A. Hedquist, vice president for business and finance, noted decreased revenues from the Sunday School Board resulted when the board's net income was lower than projected.

Hedquist also explained the interest expense on the SBC Building was higher than expected because the 1985-86 capital needs budget was not met. Consequently, the convention paid only \$167,000 of \$4.5 million targeted for the building. The remainder is to be paid through the 1986-87 capital needs budget.

The \$6.45 million 1987-88 capital needs budget allocates funds to eight SBC entities: Home Mission Board, \$600,000; Golden Gate Seminary, \$900,000; Midwestern Seminary, \$1.07 million; New Orleans Seminary, \$500,000; Southeastern Seminary, \$580,000; Southern Seminary, \$1 million; Southwestern Seminary, \$400,000; and the Radio and Television Commission, \$1.4 million.

The \$1.55 million second-phase operating budget will be distributed on the same percentage as the first-phase operating budget if the first-phase operating and capital needs budgets are met. If all three budgets are met, the excess will be distributed to the Foreign Mission Board, 50 percent; Home Mission Board, 20 percent; seminaries, 15 percent; and Radio and Television Commission, 15 percent.

The only challenge to the proposed budget was an amendment offered by Kenneth R. Barnett, pastor from Lakewood, Colo. He suggested adding \$200,000 to Golden Gate Seminary's \$2,528,946 allocation by removing \$100,000 each from Southwestern Seminary's allocation of more than \$7.8 million and Southern Seminary's allocation of almost \$5.8 million.

"Golden Gate is our only seminary out West," Barnett said in explanation. "We have a huge obligation out West, and the (seminary) funding formula allocation is too small." Golden Gate "started out \$40,000 in the red last year," he added, noting the cost of living in the San Francisco area, where Golden Gate is located, is much higher than the cost of living at the other five seminaries.

"The seminaries did make some adjustment this year to allow Golden Gate to get more than it has been receiving," noted Charles W. Sullivan, pastor from Lenoir City, Tenn. The seminary funding formula provides the basis for allocating funds between the six seminaries, based primarily on average enrollment.

Barnett's amendment was defeated, but the Executive Committee later approved a revised seminary funding formula through the 1989-90 budget year, in consultation with the six seminary presidents and with the agreement any seminary can ask for a review any year.

During discussion of the funding formula, James M. Morton Jr., pastor from Livermore, Calif., noted contradictory statements in background material on the issue. Some material notes "there is a problem" but other material indicates it has been "easily" resolved, he said.

Milton Ferguson, president of Midwestern Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., explained the seminary funding formula and how the seminary presidents worked to reach a consensus on the issue. He denied resolution came easily but noted the presidents did decide they did not need the help of an outside consultant, whom they previously indicated they would use.

Morton, who noted he was "not being provincial," suggested the presidents "get an outside viewpoint" on the situation.

Golden Gate President William O. Crews said he met with the other seminary presidents to work on the funding formula during his first five days on the job last fall. At that time, the presidents agreed Golden Gate faced financial difficulties, he related, noting he felt he could not "stymie" the progress of his colleagues by holding out for other changes.

Noting cost of living is not factored into the formula, Crews said he agreed to the formula proposal with the stipulation that any seminary can appeal for review during the next three years.

HMB Plans Response To Letters
On Pastoral Support For Women

By Sherri A. Brown

ATLANTA (BP)—The executive committee of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board has voted to respond to letters concerning a new policy that no financial support be given in the future to a woman serving as pastor of a local church.

The motion was presented by Barbara Fain of Dunwoody, Ga., who asked that the board of directors as a whole respond to letters referring to the policy adopted by the board in October.

The October action came from an ordination study committee that recommended "no change in our relationship to ordained women presently serving; however, we recommend no financial support be given in the future for a woman serving as pastor of a local church."

The new policy neither prevents ordained women from being appointed as missionaries or endorsement of ordained women chaplains, nor does it withdraw financial support from any woman currently receiving Home Mission Board support.

During the January meeting of the board's executive committee, Fain said she and other board members had received a number of letters from associations, churches and individuals concerning the policy. The board should have an overall consistent response to such letters, rather than each board member writing a personal reply, she noted.

The board's executive committee voted to acknowledge letters addressed to the trustees with an official response expressing appreciation for their writing and encouraging continued prayer support for the Home Mission Board and the directors. No response statement, however, was adopted by the directors, other than the brief motion made by Fain.

In other business, the board elected three staff members.

Phyllis Thompson of Atlanta, associate editor of the board's magazine, MissionsUSA, for the past eight years, was promoted to editor of that magazine. Thompson, a native of North Carolina, succeeds Everett Hillum, who resigned last August.

Quentin Lockwood of Atlanta, director of the rural-urban missions department, was promoted to associate director of the associational missions division. He will assist the division director in training and support of the 935 associational directors of missions.

Gerald F. Hutchinson Jr., church and community ministries director of New River Baptist Association in Jacksonville, N.C., was elected assistant director of the church and community ministries department. He will help provide leadership and administrative assistance to churches, associations and state conventions developing church and community ministries.

The board approved for appointment two missionaries, six missionary associates, four church planter apprentices and two national consultants.

Also approved were eight for language pastoral assistance, 36 for field personnel assistance, four student mission pastors and 26 mission pastors.

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Midwestern Seminary, FMB
Launch New Missions Program

By Pam Parry

Baptist Press
2/20/87

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)—Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has launched a new program of missions involvement in partnership with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Entitled "Professor on Mission," the program is designed to facilitate up to five Midwestern faculty members each year in regular, short-term teaching and ministry assignments overseas.

"The objective of the program is to meet specific missions needs by directly involving seminary faculty members in foreign missions and to impact the seminary community with the results of their firsthand experiences," said Midwestern President Milton Ferguson.

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"This is a first," Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks said, "in bringing together in a formal way a theological seminary and the Foreign Mission Board as a link to the mission fields of the world, providing a consistent, regular and planned exchange involving professors. We see it as a new exciting element in theological education around the world. We are equally confident that Midwestern Seminary will never be the same."

Midwestern will undergird the program financially through the V. Lavell Seats Fund, an endowment fund named in honor of the institution's first professor of missions and dean of students. In 1958, Seats came to the Midwestern classroom after 17 years on a Nigerian mission field. The fund was established by contributions from Seats and his long-time friend and area physician, Burnell Landers. Naming the fund after Seats was a "natural," noted N. Larry Baker, Midwestern's academic dean.

"He is the one person who for three decades has kept the mission enterprise, dream and commitment highly visible at Midwestern," Baker said. "He has been 'Mr. Missions;' so as I look at it, to have the fund and have it named after him is the natural expression of our commitment."

"He has personalized the missions call and career," added Ferguson. "In the classroom and in his leadership as dean of students, he helped students discover the sense of God's leadership for themselves."

The endowment fund will provide transportation to and from the field of service, with Midwestern's first professor participating in the 1987-88 academic year. The board will furnish accommodations and transportation on the field, and faculty members will provide their meals and personal expenses.

All faculty members will be eligible to participate in the program as a part of their regular teaching duties, with a preferred maximum of eight weeks. The dean of the faculty in consultation with Ferguson will select participants. The criteria will be the specific field needs and requests outlined by the board. Assignments may vary from colleges and seminaries to church development.

"The fact that faculty persons in all disciplines are participating is indicative of Midwestern's missions spirit," Baker said. "We don't believe missions belongs to the missions or evangelism professor, but it's something we are all interested in and committed to no matter what we teach."

"It will make available to the Foreign Mission Board some people who are highly skilled, experienced and deeply committed," he added. "They will provide the Foreign Mission Board some very capable volunteers that it would not have otherwise."

M. Vernon Davis, chairman of the faculty affairs committee, said, "We (the faculty) have been entrusted with a great gift and an awesome challenge. The dimensions of this gift are such that none of us sitting here today can ever comprehend. It is a moment that will enable each of us as faculty members to be continually challenged by probing questions, 'How wide is your world?' 'How big is your God?'"

Seats said he hopes the program will unify a missions mindedness among his colleagues which will "uplift Midwestern."

Challenging the convocation crowd, Parks said: "If you are serious about reaching the world, you start here, and fall into the earth and die, climb up on a cross and be crucified. Then you have met the first qualifications, after salvation, for carrying the gospel to the world."

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Crisis Conferences Offer
Place to Learn, Hope

By Tim Nicholas

Baptist Press
2/20/87

ATLANTA (BP)—The jokes are getting grim.

A Natches, Miss., geologist told a group of Baptists recently that in addition to AIDS, there is now a problem called RAIDS — "Recently Acquired Income Deficiency Syndrome."

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The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, along with state conventions and local associations, is sponsoring a series of crisis conferences for farmers, oil industry workers and ministers.

Both American farmers and oil industry workers have been hit with economic reversals represented primarily by drops in farm and oil prices. Mississippi Gov. Bill Allain in his recent state of the state address said farm and oil problems account for 2 percent of the state's unemployment.

In meetings held in Mississippi -- others are scheduled in Missouri and Louisiana -- the speakers, some victims of the crisis, said people in crisis need friends.

Bob Neill is a self-professed "back-slidden Baptist" from Leland, Miss., an almost-former farmer who is writing a book, his second, called, "How to Lose Your Farm in 10 Easy Lessons and Cope With It."

After telling 95 participants at the meeting in Cleveland, Miss., about his attempted suicide, Neill talked about how a person begins to feel desperate: "You get to the point where you think the God that makes it rain and makes it dry must have something against (you) personally. When a fellow thinks God doesn't love him anymore, he's near the end of his rope."

Neill said he'd been a Christian 15 years, an active church member before his financial setbacks. "This may happen to you," he told the farmers. A person "may feel isolated from family, friends and God. When you hear Fred has problems and ain't gonna get financed, you cannot be a friend in the good times only."

Neill said nothing can be done on an individual basis "about the way the government's messed up Fred. But you can go down there and take him a ham. He ain't gonna be as much fun to talk to as he used to be -- but that's when he needs you. If he's got to the point where he believes God does not love (him), he's got to see God through you."

Another speaker to the farm group meeting in Clarksdale, Miss., and in Greenville, Miss., echoed Neill's sentiments. Methodist minister Milton Boyd, outlining his various farming disasters, said, "I thought about blowing my brains out. I thought about shooting some others, ... but I knew I had to meet my master on the other side."

Boyd said Americans are becoming too individualistic to help each other out of binds: "And we farmers are the world's worst. We must be community. We must come back to when the barn burns down everybody comes over to raise a barn."

He added: "Who owns the land? God owns. We tend."

In an interview at an oil crisis meeting in Natchez, Miss., the wife of a geologist admitted, "Other people feel uncomfortable around us." Kitty Kyzar, whose husband, John, has been laid off and now is doing independent consulting, said it does not hurt her to tell others that her husband is unemployed or that they can not afford to go out to eat as often as before.

"What hurts is that people stop inviting," she admitted. "I'd rather them ask me so I can say we can't go this time, please ask us again. In other words, don't disassociate."

Kyzar said parents need to tell children exactly what is going on in the family so that when other children ask, "Why doesn't your daddy go to work anymore?" they will understand.

"When things get bad and we don't know where to turn, we read the Bible and pray together," said Kyzar, among whose three children, one, Russell, is in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, planning for a foreign missions career in Costa Rica.

Longtime family farmers Leroy and Dorothy Johnson, who live near Shelby in the Mississippi Delta, just handed back 1,600 acres and their home place to the federal land bank because they could not make payments.

"You get kind of numb and have to close it off, maybe don't participate in church as much because you have enough to handle. You center down on your own," said Mrs. Johnson, who, with her husband, is a member of First Baptist Church of Clarksdale.

The Clarksdale crisis meeting was the first they had attended. "It's definitely good for us," said Leroy Johnson, who began 38 years ago as a sharecropper and graduated to renting, then owning, land. "Farmers are usually silent people as far as their own problems are concerned."

"We knew that without the Lord we wouldn't come through this," said Mrs. Johnson.

"I don't care how strong your faith is, you're still going to walk with that pain everyday," she added. She said non-farmers do not seem to understand. They seem to believe the only change is that some farmers who once were wealthy are now in financial reversals. "At 60 years of age, we're too old to retrain or find another job. Others don't understand that farmers have lost that way of life," she lamented.

Added her husband, "This country stands to lose something precious."

Career loss is "a major wound that takes time to heal," explained Stan Rushing, a pastor turned counselor. "After the stages of grief -- shock and numbness, then guilt and despair, then gradually acceptance -- I'd add a final stage where you become a wounded healer ... the best healer of all."

Rushing told the groups, "A loving presence can heal in ways that words can never do. The greatest resource available is God's outrageous grace. Nothing in all this world, not a farm crisis or any other crisis, can separate us from the love of our Lord."

Gary Farley, associate director of rural-urban missions at the Home Mission Board, told groups about various denominations offering help for farmers. He said he hoped to get agricultural missions groups to discuss domestic problems.

But Farley said: "There are no immediate solutions. I don't see anybody really smart enough to get us out of this mess. We need prayer."

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