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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE

SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Alvin C. Shackelford, Director
Dan Martin, News Editor
Marv Knox, Feature Editor**BUREAUS**

ATLANTA Jim Newton, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 873-4041

DALLAS Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 511 N. Akard, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) 720-0550

NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Lloyd T. Householder, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300

RICHMOND (Foreign) Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151

WASHINGTON Stan L. Haste, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

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HMB Staff To Reaffirm

BFM Statement: Lewis

By Sherri A. Brown

ATLANTA (BP)--Professional staffers of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board will be asked to reaffirm their commitment to the Baptist Faith and Message Statement as interpreted by the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee, HMB President Larry Lewis said June 26.

Lewis, who was elected president of the Home Mission Board in April and assumed the post June 1, also said future employment practices may be tightened and that there is a need to review the doctrinal stance of missionaries on the field.

"We must give careful attention to the doctrinal integrity of our agency," Lewis said. "Trustees and administrators who will not be responsive will be replaced."

Lewis made his remarks to about 150 employees who attended Friday morning chapel services at the Atlanta offices of the HMB. Employees of the main offices of the HMB include 138 elected staff and 215 other employees. According to the annual report, the HMB has 3,637 appointed missionaries.

Lewis, who was president of 800-student Hannibal-LaGrange Baptist College in Hannibal, Mo., before becoming HMB president, said his action is a result of the report of the SBC Peace Committee during the June 16-18 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in St. Louis.

In its report, the Peace Committee recommended that "trustees determine the theological position of seminary administrators and faculty members," as well as to build their professional staffs and faculties "from those who clearly reflect" the dominant theological viewpoint of Southern Baptists.

The report also noted "most Southern Baptists" interpret the "historic Baptist position" the Bible has "truth without any mixture of error for its matter" as meaning "for example" that Adam and Eve were real persons, the named authors did indeed write the books attributed to them in the Bible, the miracles did occur and the historical narratives in the Scripture are "accurate and reliable."

"I see this (the Peace Committee report) as a mandate. I pledge, as president, I will do everything in my power to lead the board ... to be commensurate with guidelines of the Peace Committee," he said.

Lewis said he believes the "mandate" comes from the recommendation of the Peace Committee, which continues the 22-member group for up to three more years "for the purpose of observing the response of all agencies, officers and other participants to the recommendations of the Peace Committee. ..."

Following the chapel address, Lewis told the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press that although the recommendation of the Peace Committee was specifically directed to seminary administrators and faculty, "I believe the spirit is such for all agencies to comply.

"It behooves us as an agency to take the Peace Committee report and its overwhelming approval by the convention as a mandate. ... I do not see it will measurably affect hiring policies since we already ask professional employees to affirm the Baptist Faith and Message, including Article I."

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Article I deals with the Scripture and contains the phrase that the Bible "has truth without any mixture of error for its matter."

"Agencies exist to serve our people in reaching the world for Jesus Christ," Lewis said. "Our convention has the right and the responsibility to communicate directives. We are responsible for concurring. The grassroots (of Southern Baptists) are solid, Bible-believing, Bible-preaching folks. Southern Baptists refuse to accept muddled, watered-down, neo-orthodox theology."

Lewis said he will ask the staff to "indicate compliance with the Baptist Faith and Message, but not necessarily with a signature. I'll probably send a memo asking anyone who has a problem with it to come talk to me. If they don't come to me, I'll assume they affirm it (the statement).

"I don't expect anybody at the Home Mission Board to be terminated. I don't expect employees to be upset (by these actions)," Lewis said.

Future hiring practices will include a "more involved screening selection of future employees," Lewis said, indicating he will be more involved in interviewing upper-level management staff to determine they are, "doctrinally sound -- one who will without question embrace the Baptist Faith and Message, including Article I, as interpreted by the Peace Committee."

In reviewing hiring practices of both Atlanta staff and missionaries on the field, Lewis said the forms and practices "seem adequate to me. There might be some slight revisions. I like the idea of upper level staff meeting with the board of directors or at least meeting with the administrative committee of the board of directors."

In the only instance where Lewis has been involved in employing professional staff -- the June trustee executive committee meeting -- Lewis broke with hiring tradition to ask the prospective employee to affirm belief in the Baptist Faith and Message Statement.

In presenting Richard Reasoner of Kansas City, Mo., to trustees for election as director of counseling services, Lewis acknowledged he was breaking with regular hiring practices but asked Reasoner to affirm his belief in the BFM, specifically asking if he (Reasoner) agreed with Article I which defines the Bible as being "truth without any mixture of error."

Reasoner responded positively to the requests and answered additional questions, responding that he did not drink alcohol, use tobacco products and would not engage in any behavior that would be an embarrassment to the board. He also answered a question in which he assured trustees he would join and be an active member of a Southern Baptist church after a move to Atlanta.

Lewis said the testimony and questioning of prospective employees will not necessarily become standard practice.

Currently, staff members and missionaries answer questions on their church involvement, their personal witnessing habits and their moral behavior, as well as their doctrinal beliefs, in relation to the Baptist Faith and Message, said Gary Jones, director of the personnel division of the HMB.

The BFM was reaffirmed by the HMB trustees in March 1976 as "the theological basis and guideline for those employed as missionaries and staff of the HMB."

Lewis acknowledged that to review the doctrinal stance of more than 3,000 missionaries on the field would be a phenomenal task. "I'm not exactly sure what we'll do with that," he admitted, declining to comment further.

"I hope and pray that now the Peace Committee has brought a report that peace will be the result. This divisiveness has been a bad witness to the world and thwarted Bold Mission Thrust. I hope all agencies will ensure the recommendations of the Peace Committee," Lewis concluded.

Florida Youth Trip
Ends In Tragedy

By Greg Warner

BLAIRSVILLE, Ga. (BP)--One teenager was killed and 29 other people injured when a bus owned by First Baptist Church of Winter Haven, Fla., plunged into a mountain ravine in northern Georgia June 26.

The group of 36 young people and adult sponsors from the church had completed a weeklong summer camp at Georgia Baptist Assembly in Toccoa and were bound for a day of river rafting June 26 before heading home.

The outing ended in tragedy, however, when the vehicle's brakes apparently failed on a three-mile stretch of mountain road near Blairsville, Ga.

Despite the driver's attempts to stop, the vehicle plowed through a guardrail, hit a stand of trees and stopped 50 feet below the two-lane roadway.

Investigating officers from the Georgia Highway Patrol said the bus negotiated 2.8 miles of the winding road before crashing less than a quarter-mile from the bottom of the mountain.

Some of the travelers were thrown from the bus, while others were trapped in the wreckage for up to two hours.

Angela Jones, 14, was pronounced dead at the scene. Cathy Pooser, 15, suffered a broken neck. She and other seriously injured victims were airlifted to hospitals in Atlanta.

Among those in critical condition was Frank Brooks, 39, driver of the bus and minister of youth at the church. Brooks was thrown from the bus and suffered severe head injuries.

Most of the injured were expected to be released from area hospitals over the weekend, said to William Earnest, minister of education at the Winter Haven church.

The more seriously injured, numbering six or seven, were to remain hospitalized for several days, Earnest told the Florida Baptist Witness, newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention.

A Winter Haven business donated the use of a private plane to transport some parents of the youth to the area. Others parents drove.

Ralph Harris, pastor of First Baptist Church, flew to Atlanta immediately after hearing the news to visit the victims, who were scattered in six area hospitals.

Harris' son, David, 14, was aboard the bus but was not seriously hurt. His wife, Jerrie, was traveling in a van several miles behind the bus.

The church has established a fund to help victims' families pay the expenses of traveling to be with their children, Earnest said.

Although a safety inspection of the bus is not required by the state of Florida, Earnest said the vehicle, including its brakes, underwent inspection before the trip. "Mechanically, we had no problems," he said.

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Kentucky Youth Wins
RA Speak Out Award

By Joe Westbury

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ST. LOUIS (BP)--Tony Carney of Mount Washington, Ky., was presented the 1987 Jerry Clower Award as the National Royal Ambassador Mission Speak Out winner June 17 at the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission breakfast.

Carney, a student at Bullitt East High School and member of King's Baptist Church, received the award from Clower's agent, Tandy Rice. Also joining in the presentation was commission President James Smith.

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Dennis Cebulak, pastor of First Baptist Church, Hermann, Mo., told how Baptist Men disaster relief teams from the Missouri Baptist Convention helped raise Baptist visibility in his town following a devastating flood in July 1986.

"Those Baptist laymen, feeding up to 1,500 daily, were the greatest influence on our predominantly Catholic community we had ever seen. A lot of preconceived ideas of Baptists fell by the wayside as Baptist Men ministered to our needs," he said. "Up until that time I didn't know how Southern Baptists were prepared to share their faith in such a time of tragedy. I'm thankful God has assembled these teams of laymen across the country who are willing to volunteer their time in ministry," he added.

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VBS Can Provide Force
For Summer Evangelism

By Frank Wm. White

Baptist Press
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NASHVILLE (BP)--While some 30,000 churches in the Southern Baptist Convention are conducting Vacation Bible School this summer, Lakeview Baptist Church in Tallahassee, Fla., is preparing for a VBS Explosion.

VBS Explosion, a program under development by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, is a summer-long involvement in Vacation Bible School and relies on the strengths of the program to increase evangelism and enrollment at the church, explained Sharon Smith, minister of education.

The church is participating in a pilot project for VBS Explosion. Materials for the program will be available from the board in October 1988, said Art Burcham, supervisor of small Sunday school administration and project promotion in the board's Sunday school department.

With VBS Explosion, Lakeview Baptist Church will conduct a two-week VBS at the church, multiple Backyard Bible Clubs and a Mission Vacation Bible School which will be the impetus for a new Sunday school.

"The idea is to maximize the potential for evangelism and enrollment. The three types of VBS can be used by churches as their summer program for evangelism," Burcham said. "We believe every church can have Vacation Bible School. We want to see many churches go beyond a single VBS for a summer emphasis on evangelism."

Lakeview Baptist recorded 27 professions of faith in Vacation Bible School last year and has a goal of 50 professions of faith this summer, Smith explained. The two-week VBS is helpful in developing professions of faith, in Christ, he added, noting, "We get more professions of faith with a two-week school than a one-week school."

Despite the apparent evangelistic advantages of a two-week Vacation Bible School, the trend is toward one-week schools, Burcham said.

"Our statistics show that more children make professions of faith in a longer school. The trend creates a challenge for commitment and good training for workers in a one-week school," Burcham said.

Throughout the convention, there were 34,970 Vacation Bible Schools, Mission Vacation Bible Schools and Backyard Bible Clubs held in 1986. That is a decrease from the 35,185 schools conducted the previous summer. Enrollment for 1986 was 3,278,296 -- a decrease from 3,304,463 in 1985.

Despite the decreases in number of schools and enrollment, professions of faith in Christ increased. There were 57,455 professions of faith reported by churches from Vacation Bible Schools in 1986, compared with 51,420 recorded in 1985.

Burcham believes those figures represent the most important aspect of VBS. "Vacation Bible School is a great tool for evangelism. It's a good way to find prospects for the Sunday school, too," he said.

Many of the prospective church members found in VBS will make professions of faith after they are enrolled in Sunday school, Burcham explained.

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In 1986, churches reported 578,593 prospects discovered -- a decrease from the 609,533 reported in 1985. Of the prospects reported in 1986, churches reported 274,004 actually added to the Sunday school rolls. That statistic is new on the VBS report, Burcham said.

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Texas Church Conducts
Innovative Bible School

By Terry Barone

Baptist Press
6/29/87

DALLAS (BP)--A group of fifth and sixth graders gathered on the bank of a local lake learning about Jesus at the Sea of Galilee.

A male teacher dressed up like King David and baked bread on hot, smooth stones.

These are not typical Vacation Bible School scenes unless the school is at Valley Ranch Baptist Church in Irving, Texas, a suburb of Dallas.

The scenes are just a couple of the special activities which occurred during the Valley Ranch Vacation Bible School, said Sherre Stephens, volunteer coordinator of children's ministries and director of the school.

Valley Ranch Baptist, which was constituted as a church on June 7, was a mission of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas. Since the church meets at the La Petite Day Care Academy, Stephens said: "We are working under some very unusual circumstances in the Valley Ranch area. We've had to come up with some creative and ingenious ways to conduct the VBS with no building, limited funds and few children."

Valley Ranch is the name of a newly-developed community made popular by the Dallas Cowboys football team which recently moved its headquarters there.

In talking about the community, Stephens shared some of the church's problems in conducting not only the Vacation Bible School, but a children's ministry.

The Valley Ranch residential area is predominantly upper-middle-class single or young married professionals with no children. The average age of the residents is about 30, and the average annual income per person is about \$50,000.

"Even though our church has grown from less than 30 persons a year ago to about 150 today," Stephens said, "we have had to go out and find children. We can't wait for parents to bring their children to us because there aren't that many in the neighborhoods."

She added the church has had to "take risks" in reaching Valley Ranch children because they "already have a lot in life and can be easily bored."

"That is why we have taken the approach we have in Vacation Bible School," she said.

The approach is different. The school was more like a mission Vacation Bible School than anything else. The five groups of children, ranging in age from 3 through sixth grade, met at homes of church members. The classes were conducted from 6 to 8 p.m. each evening during the first week of June "so it wouldn't be too hot for the children or the workers," Stephens said.

"Since most of my VBS workers, half of whom were men, work, there was no way we could conduct the school during the day," she said.

The average attendance was 35. Since there wasn't an abundance of children in the neighborhood, Stephens said she was "pleased with the response." She added that about a third of the children who attended were from families who are prospective church members.

The Bible school reached anywhere from 30 to 40 children a night, she said. "The children received sound, theological, Christian education," she added. "Yes, we did some different things to attract the children, but while they were at Bible school, the preschoolers learned basic Bible truths and those in elementary school learned about the plan of salvation."

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She said teachers took the basic Vacation Bible School curriculum and elaborated on it in order to help the children learn about God and Jesus and understand how children in Bible times did things.

"By doing some of these activities, the children learned about other times. But they also learned that God and Jesus are as relevant in our lives today as they were to children 2,000 years ago. Because we helped make the stories come alive with practical illustrations and involvement, the children were able to experience and better understand the stories and their meaning," she explained.

To help reinforce the atmosphere, each worker and child wore some type of "period costume to help set the scene for the Bible stories," she added.

Not realizing how people in the neighborhood would react to their dress, Stephens said, "It was a great eye-catcher which helped our church's outreach.

"Marching through an upper-middle-class neighborhood in togas is not a typical scene. People would stop us to ask what we were doing. This opened the door for us to tell them about Vacation Bible School and Valley Ranch Baptist Church."

She said some of the strangest looks came from people as the opening assembly took place on the front lawn of a church member's home. "Here we were dressed in our costumes carrying the Christian and United States flags while a jam box played 'Christian Men, Arise and Give.' Neighbors came out of their homes and watched the assembly. After it was over, they asked what we were doing. Again, this gave us the opportunity to tell people about our church and invite them to attend."

Even though the church has no buildings, equipment or base of children from which to draw, Stephens said, "You can successfully do children's work with little money, but you must be creative."