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Baker Urges United
Action On Abortion

By Tim Fields

NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptists who are concerned about abortion need to "move beyond words to action ... and beyond polarization to a united assault on the forces of death," N. Larry Baker told participants at a national conference on abortion.

Southern Baptists have sounded the alarm concerning abortion in resolutions at the Southern Baptist Convention, at state conventions and at the SBC Christian Life Commission abortion consultation last May in St. Louis, "but those words and resolutions must be translated into the arena that leads to and calls for action today," said Baker, Christian Life Commission executive director.

"Let the world hear us declare that we are outraged by the flippant and casual way in which this society judged the act of abortion and by the unrelenting encouragement that it gives to the practice of abortion. Let the world trumpet our belief that human life from conception is sacred and must be protected and nurtured in all its aspects," he said.

During the closing session of the CLC-sponsored conference that drew more than 150 registrants from 19 states, Baker, who has been under fire from some conservatives for his exceptions to abortion, said he had listened to and talked with hundreds of Southern Baptists who have differing views on abortion.

"I believe that we can move beyond the divisiveness that separates many and beyond the confusion that marks others," he said.

Baker offered several suggestions:

"First, Southern Baptists can move beyond words to actions. There are many ways to act," he said. "An editor writes an editorial. A pastor preaches a sermon. A church opens a crisis pregnancy center. A family takes a woman with a crisis pregnancy into its home. A layperson writes letters. A lawyer works to change laws. A group organizes to influence legislators. A denominational staff person designs material that seeks to inform, sensitize and activate Christians for the struggle."

Second, "rescue the abortion issue from captivity to any secular political agenda," he said. "The sanctity of human life is not a conservative political concern; it is a Christian concern. The concern for women, their needs and their rights is not a liberal political concern; it is a kingdom concern, a Christian concern."

"God's people can stem the tide of abortions if we refuse to be people of the political right, the political left or the political middle."

Baker also encouraged conference participants to move beyond the use of slogans, catchwords, war cries and propaganda campaigns to a new level of understanding where they can find ways to care for women, families and children in crisis.

He urged Southern Baptists to move beyond a single focus to a wide range of abortion-related problems, such as sexual morality, family relationships, personal responsibility, church, community, social class, economics of the baby market and "male chauvinism that manipulates and uses women for sexual gratification and abandons them when something goes wrong."

Baker's final suggestion was for Southern Baptists to "couple opposition to an evil with ministry to hurting persons."

"For most women who seek abortion, an unwanted pregnancy is not an inconvenience; it a catastrophe. That is why we talk about (the need for) crisis pregnancy centers," he explained.

Some teenagers who become pregnant are thrown out of their homes by enraged parents, he said: "Some face poverty and the fear of not being able to care for a baby. Many face the stigma of unwed motherhood. Panic, helplessness, shame, dread and worry terrorize their emotions and inflame the abortion decision.

"All of this is part and parcel of the tragedy of abortion. Scores of women have chosen abortion and struggled with the devastating grief in the aftermath. These women need the care of the church, the healing and forgiveness of God.

"Abortion is not an issue in the abstract," he reminded. "It always comes packaged in persons, with names and faces, hopes and fears, pains and problems that are very human and very personal. We must see beyond a point to be argued to a person to be cared for."

In spite of the conference, which was one of several initiatives on abortion undertaken by Baker since his election in January, CLC commissioner Rudy Yakym told the Tennessean, Nashville's morning newspaper, he expects a motion to remove Baker as director of the moral concerns agency during the annual trustee meeting Sept. 15-16 in Nashville.

The story quoted Yakym, of South Bend, Ind., as saying the move to fire Baker could happen though he does not know if anyone yet "feels called by God to do it. We'd have the votes, but if no one is led by God, it won't happen."

"That's an incredibly profound action with profound consequences. It may be the agenda item that splits the convention. If he's dismissed, it might be the thing that makes left-leaning churches leave the convention. If we don't excise him, conservatives may feel nothing's going to change even though we have a majority on the board," the story quoted Yakym as saying.

The front-page story came just two days prior to the national abortion conference, but Yakym told the Tennessean such conferences "won't fool anyone."

"Most people regard it as window dressing rather than a heart-felt concern for the unborn. He's looking conservative because he has a conservative board. But we don't need a chameleon. We need someone with strong convictions," Yakym said of Baker.

On the heels of Baker's election last January, Yakym and two other conservative trustees said they could not support Baker as CLC head because their views were not fairly represented on the search committee that recommended Baker and because of his beliefs on abortion that would allow for exceptions in cases of rape, incest and "possibly" catastrophic deformity such as the absence of a brain in the fetus.

James Wood, one of those trustees, was quoted in another front-page Tennessean article the morning after the abortion conference as saying he would not rule out a bid to unseat Baker this month.

"I'll be amazed if people like myself do not remain concerned about CLC's leadership," Wood, pastor of Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Atlanta, told the newspaper at the close of the conference, which he attended.

Wood went on to say, however, that he does not plan to make such a motion himself to fire or demote Baker at the trustee meeting.

"We are sounding an uncertain trumpet if our approach to ethics is to try to provide for exceptions on a very tough ethical issue," the paper quoted Wood, who has a severely deformed nine-year-old son, as saying.

Be Strong In Faith,
Lewis Tells Missionaries

By Joe Westbury

NORCROSS, Ga. (BP)--New US-2 missionary candidates must be strong in their faith as they enter the mission field, Southern Baptist Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis told them.

"There are three essentials of the Christian life -- what you believe, how you behave and what you become. Those essentials should guide you in all that you do as you begin your missionary service," Lewis told 37 young people during the annual US-2 commissioning service, which was held at First Baptist Church of Norcross, Ga., a suburb of Atlanta.

"What you believe today about scripture will be the foundation for a successful ministry. The Bible is what it claims to be -- the inspired, infallible word of God," he insisted. "It's not only the reliable word of God but the powerful word of God as well," Lewis said as he challenged the two-year missionaries to place their faith and confidence in Scripture.

"Your life may be the only Bible others may ever see. Is it bearing a witness today in the courtrooms of the world as someone who has a living, dynamic faith?" he asked.

While presenting the candidates, Bill Graham, director of the board's missionary personnel department, said the 37 missionaries from 20 states will be serving in 20 states and Puerto Rico during the next two years.

Two of the missionaries, Alice Thompson of Peoria, Ill., and Greg Graham of Hannibal, Mo., told of their personal call to missions and of the challenges they face.

Thompson, who will be serving in language missions in Minneapolis, Minn., shared her initial fear in launching a deaf ministry in the industrial city: "I worried about how I would be able to contact deaf people in my new community, especially being an outsider, until one day when a carload of deaf people broke down in my driveway. Not only were they from the community, but from right down the street in my own neighborhood."

Thompson credited God with solving the problem and easing her transition into the town.

Graham, who will be serving with his wife, Leanne, in evangelism support in Jefferson City, Mo., related how he became a Christian at age 19 while a student at Hannibal-LaGrange College. Shortly after his conversion, God called him to Christian service, he said.

Graham credited the Missouri Baptist Convention-supported college with providing him with the spiritual environment needed for his early Christian days, during which he was able to lead his father to Christ.

Both Thompson and Graham thanked Southern Baptists for the opportunity to serve and for providing the spiritual and financial support for their ministry.

US-2 missionaries are college graduates age 27 or younger who are appointed for a two-year term of service throughout the nation and its territories. They serve in the areas of Christian social ministries, church and community ministries, special mission ministries, language missions, evangelism support and church starting.

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'Sound Barrier' Falls
For Deaf Baptist Pastor

By Marv Knox

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PONCE, Puerto Rico (BP)--David Mitchell broke the "sound barrier" on a trip to Puerto Rico.

Mitchell didn't make aviation history. But the Southern Baptist pastor did soar beyond a debilitating handicap, leaving disappointment for victory.

Mitchell now is pastor of Mision Bautista Para Sordos -- Baptist Mission for the Deaf -- in Ponce, Puerto Rico. He and his wife, Marsha, are volunteer missionaries who have been serving deaf people on the island since 1985.

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He was pastor of a hearing church in Ridgely, Tenn., before his deafness became so severe he had to quit. He started going deaf about 20 years ago, when he was a young man. Doctors never were sure exactly what caused his deafness, but they think it was an allergic reaction to food and chemicals.

Although Mitchell had been losing his hearing for several years, his eventual deafness came as quite a jolt. It especially hurt because he no longer could be pastor of his church.

"When I first realized I had to stop being pastor, there was shock, non-acceptance, grief -- all the feelings one experiences with any loss of that nature," he remembers. "The greatest thing was a loss of purpose. I had to fight against that.

"The one thing that helped was that I knew God had called me to preach and to pastor. We had to find the people I was fast becoming a part of -- deaf people. I had never met a deaf person until this happened to me."

The Mitchells set out to meet deaf people and to find out how a deaf person gets along in a hearing world. They also held on tight to a promise from the Bible: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose."

Mitchell resigned the church in Ridgely in 1981, and the family moved to Seymour, Tenn. "We went to Harrison-Chilhowee Baptist Academy and took some sign language classes," Mrs. Mitchell says. "However, our biggest training was at First Baptist Church of Knoxville, where we immersed ourselves in the deaf ministry. We taught in Sunday school, mostly working with children who were attending Tennessee School for the Deaf."

After four years of preparation in eastern Tennessee, the Mitchells discovered their opportunity for ministry. They joined Mission Service Corps, a Southern Baptist program designed to supplement the ministry of full-time missionaries with the work of volunteers who raise their own support.

They went to work in a deaf camp in Puerto Rico and served with missionary Bob Bell. The Puerto Rico Baptist Association asked them to stay on, and they sensed God's leadership to remain.

"There are 97,000-plus hearing-impaired people in Puerto Rico. That was overwhelming to us, because Puerto Rico is only 100 miles long by 35 miles wide," Mrs. Mitchell says. "God led us to a town called Ponce and a church, our mother church, Glenview Baptist. Those people had been praying that we would be led to help minister to the deaf people there."

Ponce -- with 250,000 residents -- is Puerto Rico's second-largest city. And until the Mitchells arrived, the city's deaf people had no ministry. Mrs. Mitchell estimates the area of Ponce in which they live is home to as many as 2,000 deaf people.

Their ministry in Puerto Rico "started from nothing in a carport," she recalls: "We found a little group of people who became Christians in Bob Bell's camp. We visited them in their homes and started Bible study and worship on Sunday mornings."

Now, at the end of two years in Puerto Rico, 46 deaf people have accepted Christ as Savior through their ministry. Attendance on Sundays averages 50. At least 110 deaf people have visited the mission.

And on a personal basis, the Mitchells know they have found a place to serve God. They sense the reassurance that they can do what God wants them to do, despite -- or maybe even because of -- Mitchell's deafness.

"There are two things about finding God's will I knew for sure when I lost my hearing," he says. "I knew God called me to preach, and he called me to pastor. I have a heart for people.

"When we made the visit to the deaf camp, both of us were so touched by these 'sheep without a shepherd' -- people who trusted Christ but went back home with no discipleship, Bible training or contact with other Christians."

The mission in Ponce serves those needs every week. The congregation meets Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. The Sunday meetings last for three hours, and the mission does not hold services on Sunday nights.

"The reason is we have to allow time for travel," Mrs. Mitchell explains. "We run a van to pick up almost all of our members, and the first person gets on the van three hours before church starts, and it takes that last person three hours to get home. So we meet for three hours, all at one time."

The mission provides activities that are common at most hearing churches -- Bible study, worship, opportunities to become a better Christian. But members also emphasize building friendships.

"We allow time for fellowship," Mrs. Mitchell says. "Many of our people don't get much fellowship and communication at home. They're lonely."

The Mitchells also try to help with other needs of their parishioners. "We help in home situations and help adults find jobs," she says. "We're also starting to help in school situations, which is a big need. The schools are oral (with no sign language provided for deaf students), so many intelligent children are not receiving the education they need."

In addition to the work with the mission, Mitchell also occasionally preaches in hearing churches. Because he was able to hear for so many years, he still speaks as hearing people do. He reads lips, but his wife often interprets to him, using sign language to tell him what people are saying.

The ministry in Puerto Rico has assured Mitchell of the one truth that has catapulted him over his personal sound barrier.

"God has given us a purpose," he explains. "I now can thank God for this affliction. It has opened up a whole new world to minister to people who never would have had the opportunity to hear about Jesus."

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(BP) photo mailed to Baptist state papers by Baptist Press

Condemned Men's Families
Find Haven In Huntsville

By Ken Camp

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HUNTSVILLE, Texas (BP)--In the anxious hours surrounding the end of a loved one's life, the families of death row inmates find comfort, counseling and sanctuary at Hospitality House in Huntsville, Texas.

When Bob Norris became director of Hospitality House one year ago, he expected to provide a home away from home for the visiting families of inmates in state correctional institutions in the Huntsville area. He never expected to play such a pivotal role in the lives of death row inmates' families.

"This is a ministry we hadn't foreseen," said Norris. "It's something that hasn't happened anywhere else that we know of."

Since January, the state of Texas has executed five prisoners at the Walls Unit in Huntsville. Two had no family, as far as anyone can determine. The families of the other three stayed at Hospitality House.

"When the family of a prisoner awaiting execution comes here, we give them a wing of the home to themselves. They have free run of the place," said Norris. "They are protected here. The immediate family can have privacy if they want it, or they can associate with other family members and friends in the open areas if they desire. In effect, it's like before and after a funeral at home."

Hospitality House also provides a setting for counseling, both by Norris and his wife, Nelda, and by the prison chaplain.

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"It's a lot less cold and impersonal here than it would be at the prison. The chaplain can sit down with the family on a couch in front of the fireplace before the execution to help prepare them. Afterwards, everyone can come back here for coffee and tea to unwind, cool off or whatever.

"There is a lot of pain and a lot of anger that has to be worked out. It's a very intense, shocking, highly emotional time. There's nothing quite like it. It's a pre-planned death.

"The closest thing I can think of would be going to the hospital the final time to see a terminally ill family member. There's always hope up to the last moment, but when there's no chance left and the plug is pulled on the respirator, you know that's it."

Ministering to the families of death row inmates has been the most emotionally draining experience for the Norrises, but it is only one segment of their total ministry.

Hospitality House, which celebrated its first anniversary Aug. 16, has registered 3,988 people in the past year, including about 2,100 overnight guests. There have been 550 counseling sessions and 58 professions of faith in Christ, including several family members of death row inmates who came to know Christ.

Hospitality House is sponsored by the state missions commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Texas Baptist Men and Tryon-Evergreen Baptist Association. It receives about 60 percent of its funding through the Texas Baptist Mary Hill Davis Offering for State Missions.

"These walls erected for the glory of God have become a sanctuary of peace, emotional release, physical needs, sharing, spiritual confrontation and comfort, new life, new hope, some agony, grief and pain," said Norris.

"This house has become a home, a family, a fortress of strength, a symbol of faith and hope -- a statement of God's love to those for whom it was built."