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Missionary asked to resign;
doctrinal clarity questioned

By Art Toalston

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--A Southern Baptist foreign missionary has been asked to resign because of what was termed a lack of clarity in his views concerning the deity, miracles and physical resurrection of Christ.

Michael E. Willett, who is in language study in Costa Rica and was appointed as a seminary teacher for Venezuela, "did not present a strong positive statement of the gospel," reported J. Bryan Brasington, director of Southern Baptist work in Spanish-speaking South America, after meeting with the missionary in mid-June.

Brasington said the missionary was "hesitant to say Jesus was the Son of God, ... not positive that all the miracles in the Bible occurred" and hesitant to say that Jesus was resurrected physically.

Willett submitted his resignation June 18 but rescinded it in a July 7 telephone call to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

In a telephone interview July 6, Willett said an article he wrote supporting women in ministry was the focus of the meeting with Brasington. He said he was told a number of Foreign Mission Board trustees began demanding his resignation after the article appeared in the April issue of SBC Today, an independent newspaper affiliated with Southern Baptist Convention moderates.

The board will act on Willett's status as a missionary during its July 19-21 meeting at Glorieta, N.M.

Willett is a native of Independence, Mo., and a 1985 doctor of philosophy graduate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He also taught there during parts of 1983 and 1984. He was an instructor at William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo., during 1985 and an adjunct professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., during 1986.

He was appointed a missionary in April 1987, began language studies four months later and was scheduled to move to Venezuela in August.

In his now-rescinded letter of resignation, Willett expressed regret that the Foreign Mission Board "could not support me" in light of his article, "Opposition to women is unforgivable sin."

Brasington, however, wrote back to Willett to reiterate that doctrinal issues, not the article, were the primary reason for requesting his resignation.

Brasington acknowledged the article did raise questions among a number of the board's trustees. In a telephone interview, Brasington said his own view of the article is that it unfairly accuses people on one side of a controversial issue of committing the unpardonable sin. In the ongoing strife among Southern Baptists, he said, "Everybody could be and should be forgiven in order to bring about peace in the convention."

Don Kammerdiener, board vice president for the Americas, also said concern existed among several trustees over the article. But no organized effort to fire Willett was evident when trustees met in June in San Antonio, Texas, Kammerdiener said.

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Brasington, in a meeting with Willett, said he did not debate the missionary's theology but did inform him that his views would not be acceptable in seminary settings in Spanish-speaking South America. A Southern Baptist missionary who teaches in a Baptist seminary in another South American country also participated in the dialogue.

"The Foreign Mission Board has historically expected missionaries to be able to give a clear statement regarding the fundamentals of the gospel, including the deity, miracles and resurrection of Christ," said Kammerdiener.

Willett said he agrees with historic church teaching that "Jesus is God and man, divine and human." He affirmed "the tradition of Jesus as a miracle worker, as a healer, as an exorcist." But he noted "the possibility that some miracle stories were expanded, perhaps even created in the early church as the gospel was proclaimed." The miracle stories he questions "are a small number compared to those I accept," he said.

Jesus, in his resurrection, "was transformed into a new level of existence with God. To say that (Jesus') spiritual body has flesh and bones like you and I have is to reduce the resurrection to a resuscitation," Willett said.

He described his views as "consistent with the mainstream of Christian scholarship." He added: "If only the inerrantist position is going to be acceptable on the foreign mission field, that needs to be stated.

"I am deeply saddened and hurt, because I feel that the work to which God has called me has been taken from me."

Concerns about Willett's theological views surfaced after various conversations with fellow missionaries in Costa Rica, Kammerdiener said. One of Willett's fellow missionaries wrote a letter to a friend in the United States expressing concern about Willett's doctrinal views. The letter received some circulation before being forwarded to Board President R. Keith Parks.

In interviews and written documents prior to his appointment as a missionary, Willett's theological statements were considered consistent with Foreign Mission Board standards, Kammerdiener noted, and were approved by the staff and trustees of the board.

In his letter to Willett, Brasington noted, "I think you realize that if you had expressed these same doubts in your doctrinal statement prior to appointment, you would not have been approved for appointment."

Willett is the second missionary to be asked to resign for doctrinal reasons during the tenure of Parks, who became Foreign Mission Board president in 1980. Edward L. Taylor Jr., then a missionary to Brazil, resigned in 1985 after making statements in Louisiana that were considered at variance with evangelistic efforts among Roman Catholics in Brazil by missionaries and Brazilian Baptists.

Three other missionaries have weathered accusations over doctrinal integrity during the 1980s. In each case, noted Parks, "There was honest misunderstanding that was resolved."

Parks underscored a "rather remarkable" record in Foreign Mission Board doctrinal integrity, "considering the fact of nearly 4,000 missionaries being under scrutiny by Southern Baptists as they write and teach and preach."

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Cecil named to direct
volunteer projects

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RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--James W. Cecil has been named to direct Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board projects involving short-term Southern Baptist volunteers to Canada and Spanish-speaking Latin America.

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As one of four associate directors in the board's Volunteers in Missions department, Cecil will help churches, associations and state conventions plan and organize their participation in volunteer projects with missionaries and national Baptists in 17 countries.

Until May 2, Cecil, 57, directed the board's Laity Abroad program, an arm of the Volunteers in Missions department charged with organizing the ministries of Southern Baptists traveling or working abroad and helping to place Southern Baptists in secular jobs overseas.

Cecil temporarily will continue to work with Laity Abroad, which may become part of a proposed new department to coordinate several types of non-missionary personnel.

A native of Harper Springs, Ark., Cecil was a missionary for 11 years. He served in several positions, including six years as business manager for the organization of Southern Baptist missionaries in Hong Kong and director of program design for the Hong Kong-Macao Baptist Mission. He also taught at Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary.

Cecil has been a pastor in Kentucky, Indiana and Arizona. He is married to the former Katharine Gardner of Penrod, Ky., and they have two adult children.

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General relief needs mount,
but money is almost out

By Marty Croll

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RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Dire overseas human need not related to hunger continues to mount, but the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board has practically no money left to help.

The "general relief" fund earmarked by Southern Baptists for human needs not related to hunger has dwindled to a balance of less than \$50,000. At the \$100,000 mark, the board stops releasing money except for the most urgent circumstances.

During the past six months, the board has turned down more than two dozen requests for general relief funds, said John R. Cheyne, director of the board's human needs department.

The board uses money for needs unrelated to hunger only if Southern Baptists designate it for such. On average, about 5 percent of the money received for human needs is designated for general relief. Last year that income amounted to about \$367,500. Much of it paid for clothing and temporary shelter in response to extensive flooding in Bangladesh and Brazil.

Cheyne said Baptists who give to alleviate only hunger are seeing only part of the picture. They respond to the heart-tug they feel when they see a picture of an emaciated child, he said.

"What those pictures fail to convey is that in addition to hunger, that child needs medical care, shelter, clothing and maybe even a way to go to school to learn how to break the hunger cycle," said Cheyne, a former missionary in Africa.

"You have to understand. For every person in the developed world killed as a direct result of some calamity, 15 are killed in the developing world. People in the lowest income situations are those who have moved into shanties along river banks, unclaimed swamps or other areas where it really isn't habitable. In a crisis experience, they are especially vulnerable."

Missionaries in Bangladesh recently asked for help in getting people back under the shelter of bamboo and grass huts. The board could provide only 50 percent of the general relief funds requested. In 1985, after volcanoes touched off disastrous mudslides in Armero, Colombia, missionaries needed money for extensive medical work and housing, but the board was unable to provide much of it. "The funds just were not there," Cheyne said.

Cheyne said he does not expect Southern Baptists to wipe out the world's need. But while Southern Baptists have given generously to world hunger, they have given so little to general relief that when foreign governments ask for help, missionaries can provide only limited assistance. Because of limited funds in general relief, missionaries are sometimes unable to help those to whom they already minister spiritually.

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Relieving hunger remains the board's first human needs priority, because it keeps people alive, Cheyne stressed. For this reason the board uses specific guidelines outlining what projects it will support using hunger funds. He said he is committed to sticking by those guidelines.

But he added he believes Southern Baptists must find some way to meet the growing demand for relief in times of crisis when hunger is not the only issue.

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Mission touches hard-to-reach
native New Mexicans in Santa Fe

By Mark Wingfield

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SANTA FE, N.M. (BP)--Although Spaniards settled Santa Fe in 1609 and began founding Catholic missions, Southern Baptists have just gained enough strength to start their second Spanish-language mission in New Mexico's capital.

Baptist ministry among native New Mexicans in Santa Fe remains exceptionally difficult, said Abel Becerra, a Southern Baptist home missionary and state language missions director.

"The Catholic families are very close-knit and opposed to outsiders coming in," Becerra said. "The older folks are very much opposed to the gospel, to changing religions, as they say."

However, Southern Baptists' newest congregation in Santa Fe has found a place among the younger generation. "Younger people are not as devoted to the Catholic Church as the older folks," Becerra said. "They are more open to change. They want to know what they believe and why they believe it."

Since moving to Santa Fe nearly two years ago, home missionary Paul Nieto has begun to build a middle-aged congregation at El Buen Pastor Baptist Church. Becerra said Nieto is building "a church for the future."

As a Baptist pastor, Nieto said, he must break through three walls to reach people in Santa Fe. Religious tradition, parent-child relationships and friends all keep the native New Mexicans bound to the Catholic Church.

The biggest problem Nieto faces is teaching native New Mexicans that being born into any church is not enough for salvation. Tradition, not gospel, keeps Santa Fe's residents on the rolls of the Catholic Church, whether they have a relationship with Christ or not, he said.

Rather than breaking old traditions, Nieto tries to start new traditions among the younger generation. "Our future here is going to rest among the young people," he said.

Once he has an opening, Nieto relates naturally to those he seeks to help. He too was born Catholic and is now a Southern Baptist by choice. He knows the influence of family and peer pressure. But he also knows the difference Jesus Christ has made in his own life.

Nieto bridges the gap between the two cultures that vie for loyalty among young Hispanics. He preaches in a bilingual format, 15 minutes in Spanish followed by 15 minutes in English. The music at El Buen Pastor is upbeat -- vibrant choruses with a Spanish flavor and strong biblical messages.

As a result, the church attracts people who do not feel comfortable in either the Catholic Church or an English-speaking Protestant church. "We have reached people that were floating, searching for a church," Nieto said. "We have reached some of the strong Catholic people with the gospel."

Nieto came as pastor of El Buen Pastor in August 1986. For the previous 40 years there had been only one small Spanish-language Baptist church in the city, where 70 percent of the 50,000 residents are Hispanic.

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Leaders of the state Baptist convention, Santa Fe Baptist Association and Southern Baptist Home Mission Board targeted Santa Fe as a priority area for a new church start. White Rock Baptist Church, a white, upper-class congregation in nearby Los Alamos, agreed to sponsor the new work.

Members of the White Rock missions committee and a handful of others from the congregation "really caught the vision," said Pastor Chuck McCullough.

They did not consider their efforts unusual just because they come from a different social class than the people El Buen Pastor reaches, McCullough said. The more significant issue was whether to start a mission at all.

Most of the members of the White Rock church are engineers and scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratories. Because many of them moved to Los Alamos from the northeastern United States, they had no exposure to Southern Baptists' emphasis on missions, McCullough said.

This was the case with Roger and Margaret Persons, who became key workers on the missions committee. Before moving to New Mexico, the Persons were American Baptists.

"We had never done anything like this," Mrs. Persons said. "It was a whole new experience. We've learned that it takes a long time to get a mission going. We've also learned to appreciate the dedication of the missionary and his family."

The uninitiated on the White Rock missions committee discovered missions first-hand. They designed and constructed the church building themselves, even before there was a congregation.

"They built with the conviction there would be a church there," McCullough said.

The small, flat-topped adobe building sits on a major road in the shadow of the old Santa Fe plaza and the Sangre de Cristo mountains. When Nieto arrived, the building was empty. Now it is approaching its capacity.

However, the transformation from empty building to active church came slowly.

"My wife and I started in this community street-by-street and house-by-house," Nieto recalled. "We had no results for the first few months."

Nieto said he soon realized that he and his wife, even though of the same race and background, were outsiders to the people. It took seven months before the first member outside Nieto's own family joined the new church.

Since then, El Buen Pastor has recorded additions every month. The success has come through friends telling other friends, Nieto said.

The church has reached a high attendance of 65 in worship and now has a Sunday school enrollment of 37, with 26 church members.

Nieto said he and his wife never got discouraged. Realizing the need kept them going. "The people all over Santa Fe are needing the Lord," he said.

"Santa Fe is a difficult town, but not impossible."

Worldwide prayer strategy
needs volunteer churches

By Art Toalston

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Wanted: 500 churches to help overcome barriers separating 1.3 billion people from the gospel.

The president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board simply wants the congregations to pray.

R. Keith Parks, in his monthly prayer alert to Southern Baptist churches, is asking 500 of them to make one-year commitments to pray for unevangelized masses of people "where prayer is virtually the only strategy that can be employed."

Last August, in an address during Foreign Missions Week at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center, Parks called for 100 churches to make such commitments. He issued the same call on the Foreign Mission Board's PrayerLine and during Woman's Missionary Union Week at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center. More than 300 churches responded. The board's office of international prayer strategy assigned each congregation to a country or people group and mailed monthly prayer bulletins.

To avoid jeopardizing Christians in countries or cultures where witnessing is restricted, churches were asked not to mention the prayer project in radio and TV broadcasts or in mailings.

"Already we've become aware of positive changes in situations in several of these prayed-for places," Parks noted. "We believe these new developments are the result of concerted prayer."

Parks' call for prayer by 500 churches during the coming year was issued in connection with the July 3 "concert of prayer" in Southern Baptist churches. The "concert of prayer," the first Sunday of every month, focuses on concerns related to world evangelization. Each month's focus is shared over PrayerLine, the board's 24-hour toll-free telephone service.

Parks cited the years of prayer prior to China's renewed openness to foreigners as an example of prayer strategy: "We didn't talk about that as prayer strategy, but that's what it was. We've always known that except through prayer, you can do nothing."

The board is placing "a new emphasis on an old truth -- communicating with Southern Baptists in a systematic way to say: Here are some nations. Except through the grace of God and the power of prayer, we don't know how anything can be done there. No country or people group can close themselves to prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit," he said.

Prayer, then, is the first step to "open the opportunity" for work among people who, in Parks' words, "have never had a clear witness about Jesus and his way of salvation."

Churches interested in volunteering their prayer efforts should call or write the Foreign Mission Board's office of international prayer strategy in Richmond, Va.

"Prayer is not just 'a' strategy, but it is the foremost strategy," said Minette Drumwright, director of the prayer office. "Our deep conviction is that God has chosen to make the prayers of his people essential to the accomplishment of his purposes in the world."

"We are emphasizing two of the great principles of prayer. The more specifically we pray, the more the power of prayer is intensified." And the same result occurs "the more united we pray."