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July 12, 1988

88-109

Missionary undecided  
on whether to resign

By Art Toalston

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--A Southern Baptist missionary whose theology has been questioned by the denomination's Foreign Mission Board officials said he has not decided whether he will resign or force board trustees to dismiss him.

Board officials have asked Michael E. Willett to resign, saying they are not satisfied with the clarity of his views on the deity, miracles and physical resurrection of Christ.

Willett, who is in language study and was to become a seminary teacher in Venezuela, met July 11 in Atlanta with board President R. Keith Parks, two other administrators and a missionary seminary teacher from Colombia.

Willett refused comment on the meeting, except to verify quotes from a five-page statement he gave to board administrators. The statement concludes with a request that they withdraw their request for his resignation.

After the meeting, Parks said his view is unchanged: that Willett should not continue as a missionary.

Several days earlier, in a telephone interview with Word and Way, newsjournal of Missouri Southern Baptists, Willett said, "If I resigned under these circumstances, I would be saying the charges against me are true, and I don't think they are."

Willett initially submitted his resignation June 18 but rescinded it July 7.

He called the accusations against him a "tragedy of poor communications" and said he is being "martyred" because of an article he wrote. The article, "Opposition to women is unforgivable sin," appeared in the April issue of SBC Today, an independent publication affiliated with Southern Baptist moderates.

Action by Foreign Mission Board trustees on Willett's status will come during their July 19-21 meeting at Glorieta, N.M.

Parks said he told Willett in the July 11 meeting that "doctrinal ambiguity" is the only issue involved in the request for resignation.

As Willett read the first two pages of his document, Parks said, a general discussion developed. Parks said the discussion focused on Willett's belief that a few of Jesus' miracles possibly were expanded or created by the early church.

Parks said he told Willett that Willett's views conflict with the authority of Scripture. The earliest and best manuscripts of the New Testament, Parks said, do not omit any of the miracles of Christ which Willett has questioned. Parks said he disagrees with the missionary on choosing what parts of the Bible to accept.

In an interview, Parks said the other doctrinal questions -- the deity and resurrection of Christ -- and the rest of Willett's statement were not discussed during the two-hour meeting.

In addition to Parks and Willett, participants in the July 11 meeting were Don Kammerdiener, board vice president for the Americas; J. Bryan Brasington, area director for Spanish-speaking South America; and Randall Sledge, a missionary seminary teacher from Colombia.

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In the Word and Way story, Editor Bob Terry reported that a fellow missionary and language student, Michael L. McGinnis of Birmingham, Ala., initially challenged Willett's theology. Both men are doctoral graduates; Willett's degree is from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and McGinnis' degree is from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tenn.

Terry reported that McGinnis wrote to a friend in Tennessee about a lengthy discussion he had with Willett. Without identifying Willett by name, McGinnis wrote that he had talked with a missionary who "believes none of the miracles recorded in the Bible occurred. He says Jesus did not resurrect physically ... he won't say how he resurrected." McGinnis wrote that the missionary would not give "a straight answer" about whether Jesus died for the sins of mankind.

McGinnis urged that board trustees be contacted to be on the lookout for "this kind of stuff in the future."

After receiving some circulation, the letter was forwarded to Parks, who instructed Brasington to investigate McGinnis' complaints. Brasington and Sledge met with Willett and McGinnis June 17 and 18 in Costa Rica, where they are in language school. The two met individually with each missionary and later with both. After lengthy discussion with Willett, Brasington requested his resignation.

Board officials have asked Willett to return to the United States in about a week. They plan to recommend that his salary and missionary support be maintained until the end of the year or whenever he is employed, whichever comes first.

McGinnis has been reprimanded for going outside Foreign Mission Board channels in raising his concerns. Kammerdiener said he knows of no other time in recent board history when a missionary wrote to attempt to involve board members in a campaign against a fellow missionary. Kammerdiener said the correct procedure would have been for McGinnis to express his concerns to the area director.

Willett is from Liberty, Mo. A July 7 Baptist Press story listed him from Independence, where he was born.

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CORRECTION: Please omit the fourth paragraph of the 7/7/88 Baptist Press story titled "Cecil named to direct volunteer projects."

Information in that paragraph was outdated before it was carried by BP.

Thanks,  
Baptist Press

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Soviet Baptists celebrate  
millenium's unique opportunity

By John M. Wilkes

Baptist Press  
7/12/88

KIEV (BP)--The Baptist story began less than 125 years ago in Russia, but the All-Union Council of Evangelical Baptists Christians in the Soviet Union took a high profile in the recent millennium of Christian celebrations. Its congregations held special services, seminars and events to mark the event nationwide.

The 71 churches in the Kiev district organized the first-ever youth conference June 18-19. It drew more than 1,000 delegates and 1,500 more guests, including youth choirs and orchestras.

The Kiev district is one of 25 -- each with its own superintendent -- for Evangelical Baptists in the Ukraine. The district superintendent, Vladimir Y. Kunetz, also is pastor of Darnitsa Baptist Church, which hosted the youth gathering. Participants were lodged in homes of members of the several Baptist churches in Kiev. Baptists hope such conferences may now be held four times each year, Kunetz said.

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U.S. Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, who spoke several times at Russian Orthodox Church functions in Moscow, Zagorsk and Kiev during the official program, preached at Yamskaya Baptist Church of Kiev in a special meeting June 15. European Baptist Federation General Secretary Knud Wumpelmann also preached.

Because of the anticipated crowds, entrance to the building and grounds was by invitation. However, loudspeakers carried the music of a 70-voice youth choir and the preachers' messages to adjacent streets, where thousands more stood listening. Baptist leaders said 3,000 to 4,000 people came. Because members gave their invitations away to friends, at least one-third of the people present were non-believers.

Elsewhere, three congregations at Briansk, an industrial city of 500,000 people, held a joint open-air service Sunday, June 12.

They chose the grounds of a former monastery near where the city's celebration of its own 1,000-year history took place in 1985. Not incidentally, the location at a river's edge permitted the three pastors to baptize 63 new Christian converts -- 15 of whom were teenagers.

The congregation advertised the service not only by word-of-mouth but by putting up posters at markets, bus stops and other points throughout the city. Although the combined membership of the three congregations totals no more than 1,000, about 4,000 persons attended the five-hour service.

Local government representatives attended, a number of print journalists covered the event and Briansk television originated broadcasting from the site. When an invitation to profess faith in Jesus Christ was given, some 50 people responded. The occasion included the marriage of a young couple from one of the congregations.

Even churches not affiliated with the All-Union Council observed the event. In Riga, Latvia, a Russian-language Baptist church whose pastor is Josef D. Bondarenko, a leader in one of the independent groups dating to an earlier split in council ranks, held day-long millennium services June 19.

As an example of the growing cooperation among Baptists in the Soviet Union, however, the regular weekday service in Kiev's Yamskaya Church the evening after Graham spoke included sermons by church assistant pastor; Bondarenko; Gerhard Hamm, originally from the U.S.S.R. but who now works among Soviet emigrants in the Federal Republic of Germany; and a representative from the Baptist World Alliance office in Washington.

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Louisiana College  
gets \$1 million

Baptist Press  
7/12/88

PINEVILLE, La. (BP)--Louisiana College has received the largest gift in the Baptist school's 82-year history.

Norman and Lorraine Martin of Pineville, La., are donating \$1 million to the Pledge to Excellence Campaign for the Pineville college.

Martin, a businessman, is chairman of the Alexandria/Pineville division of the drive to raise \$11 million for endowment and capital needs.

The gift will be used to improve fine arts facilities at the school, which is affiliated with the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

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Deacons can facilitate  
breakthrough growth

By Charles Willis

Baptist Press  
7/12/88

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--Deacons must fulfill their servant ministry role by doing the hard work of witnessing, praying and caring for people that will result in breakthrough growth in churches, participants in the National Deacon Ministry Conference at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center were told.

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"I don't have any slick gimmicks for you," said Joe Stacker, director of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's church administration department. "Servant ministry takes hard work, faith commitment and intestinal fortitude to accomplish breakthrough growth.

"As church ministers and servants, deacons are growth leaders with the pastor and staff to affect the church in numbers and ministry.

Citing the addition of seven deacons to the 12 apostles in the of Acts, Stacker observed. "Although they were not in an apostolic role, they were in a ministry role that resulted in breakthrough growth in the life of the early church."

Today, four types of membership growth exist in the Southern Baptist Convention, he said. In 1986-87, 17,797 churches were categorized as having declining membership. No baptisms were reported from 7,244 churches.

In the category of stagnate or plateaued growth, 2,534 churches reported no change for the year.

Biological growth -- conversions of family members of church members -- accounts for much of the growth in the SBC, said Stacker. Of the 338,495 people baptized in 1986-87, a total of 183,789 were children of church members.

The remaining 154,706 people baptized represented real growth or breakthrough growth, he said.

"When it comes to breakthrough growth, we all have to hang our heads and say, 'We're not there,'" Stacker said. "In real growth in the Southern Baptist Convention during 1986-87, it took 100 persons a year to win one person to Christ."

Baptists need numerical, discipleship, fellowship and new church growth, he said.

He urged deacons to become involved through faith, example, prayer, encouragement and planning.

"What do you believe about salvation?" he asked. "Is hell a reality to you? Do you really care about lost people? No deacon, no church member, no pastor is going to be involved in church growth if they don't want to, if they don't care about people.

"Breakthrough growth must occur. It's winning people who are not your children, winning people who never darken the door of the church and winning folks who are engaging in immorality."

He acknowledged that for some, "it's terrifying to try to witness." However, he said, "We were not called to be successful; we were called to sow the seed."

The National Deacon Ministry Conference was sponsored by the Sunday School Board's church administration department.

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Once a believer in Hitler,  
Now a believer in Christ

By Art Toalston

Baptist Press  
7/12/88

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--"I believed in Hitler," Hans-Gunther Sachse confides. He was active in the Nazi youth movement.

"I thought Hitler would be the best political leader in the world. That was the teaching at the time. The children believed it, and I was such a child."

Sachse became a disillusioned 15-year-old living in a defeated, occupied nation at the end of World War II.

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Now he is the home missions secretary of the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in East Germany. Baptists account for most of the 200 churches and 400 mission stations in the East German union.

Sachse was interviewed during a visit to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Va. He came to the United States to take part in an intercessory prayer planning meeting.

Sachse says he and other youths were shocked when they learned the scope of Hitler's schemes: "'Shocked' is not strong enough. Nobody can imagine what happened in our hearts, our minds. We didn't believe that there would be concentration camps, for instance. Then we saw the pictures; we saw the films."

When Sachse and his peers realized Hitler had been but "a gangster ... a liar," they felt an immense sense of emptiness. Stripped of their idol, they felt they "had no future anymore."

Today, the Hitler years seem like "a demonic dream," Sachse reflects. "It wasn't only a kind of dream. We saw the reality."

When he heard a young woman's presentation of the Christian gospel, Sachse was quick to respond. "In Christ, I saw a new way, I saw again a future for me," he recalls.

Even so, "When I found Christ, I discovered I was so guilty, and not just for my sins," he says. Sachse agonized over the sins of the German people under Hitler and the murder of 6 million Jews in Nazi death camps.

"The Lord forgave me," he affirms. Sachse soon was baptized and intent on entering the ministry.

"There are many in Germany, in the east and west, leaders of the church my age, who have the same story," Sachse says.

Today, he travels to East German churches to teach Christians "to find an evangelistic lifestyle," to build friendships with non-Christians -- friendships in which the gospel can be communicated.

"We are free to have special missions weeks (in the churches)," Sachse says, "but the people we want to come, the non-Christians, don't come. We have found that the old biblical way is the best," a day-in, day-out concern for people.

Sachse says religious freedom in East Germany extends to all activities in church-owned buildings. Thus, the Union of Evangelical Free Churches sponsors a number of retreats each year, each encompassing 40 to 60 people, half of them Christians, the other half non-Christians they have befriended.

"We speak openly about the gospel," Sachse says, and decisions for Christ are urged during the concluding worship service.

East German Baptists operate a bookstore in East Berlin, Sachse notes, and a home for the mentally ill. And two or three times a year, Baptist worship services are featured during a 45-minute Sunday morning slot on government radio.