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88-116

FMB dismisses Willett
for 'doctrinal ambiguity'

By Bob Stanley

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Affirming a staff recommendation, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board voted without dissent July 21 to terminate the service of Michael E. Willett, missionary to Venezuela.

Board President R. Keith Parks said he recommended the missionary's dismissal because of Willett's "doctrinal ambiguity."

The dismissal was effective immediately, but Willett will continue to receive his salary and benefits through the end of the year unless he secures employment earlier. The vote to dismiss Willett was taken during a business session near the end of a four-day dialogue meeting at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

Don Kammerdiener, board vice president for the Americas, told trustees the process that was followed in reviewing Willett's doctrinal beliefs is the same as has been used in such instances for many years. Both he and Parks said the action is not related in any way to the increased number of conservative trustees now on the board.

Willett, of Liberty, Mo., was appointed in April 1987 to teach at a seminary in Venezuela. He would have completed his Spanish language study in Costa Rica Aug. 11.

William C. Link, pastor emeritus of Willett's home church, Second Baptist in Liberty, sat in on a meeting of the Americas committee where the procedure followed in Willett's dismissal was reviewed. He said he had baptized Willett, known him all of his life and "radically disagreed" with the board's decision.

Parks became aware of questions about Willett's theological beliefs when a pastor forwarded him a copy of a letter written by Mike McGinnis of Birmingham, Ala., another Southern Baptist missionary to Venezuela also studying Spanish in Costa Rica. The letter raised questions about the theological beliefs of another "Baptist missionary" without naming him. McGinnis urged that board trustees be contacted to be on the lookout for "this kind of stuff in the future."

Apparently the letter already had received some circulation before it was forwarded to Parks, who then asked J. Bryan Brasington, director of work in Spanish South America, to go to Costa Rica to check into the allegations. Accompanied by Randall Sledge, a Southern Baptist missionary and seminary professor in Colombia, Brasington talked with both McGinnis and Willett and also with other missionaries there June 17-18.

At Brasington's request, Willett submitted his resignation June 18 at the conclusion of the interviews. But the missionary withdrew his resignation July 7 after being informed he was being asked to resign for doctrinal reasons.

In the letter of resignation that he later rescinded, Willett expressed regret the board could not support him in light of an article he had written for the April 1988 issue of SBC Today, an independent publication identified with Southern Baptist moderates. The article, on the role of women in ministry, ran under the title, "Opposition to women is unforgivable sin," a title which Willett said he did not choose.

Brasington wrote back to Willett that the doctrinal issue, not the article, was the primary reason for requesting his resignation. Both Kammerdiener and Parks said Willett's doctrinal ambiguities were the only reason he had been asked to resign.

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In a phone interview with Word and Way, the Missouri Baptist newsjournal, Willett explained why he withdrew his resignation, "If I resigned under these circumstances, I would have been saying the charges against me are true, and I don't think they are."

As the matter came to the board, which must approve appointment or termination of missionary service, Parks and Kammerdiener walked the trustees through the process they had followed in investigating the situation.

Parks said he told Willett at a July 11 meeting in Atlanta that he hoped Willett was still in a process of developing his theology and that when he comes to a point where he can affirm accepted Southern Baptist beliefs, "we would look with favor on his re-evaluation."

In making its decision, Parks added, the board was not evaluating Willett's suitability to teach in a U.S. seminary but only his ability to work effectively in an overseas mission seminary.

They reported McGinnis had been reprimanded for the inappropriate way in which he reported the situation and will be given annual reviews during his first term, instead of the normal single review at the end of the four-year term.

McGinnis, a doctoral graduate of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tenn., was appointed in October 1987. He completed eight hours of course credits at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. A new board policy approved in April 1987 dropped the requirement that graduates of other accredited seminaries attend a Southern Baptist seminary for one year if they can show close identification with Southern Baptists in other ways.

Willett, a doctoral graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., had taught there during parts of 1983 and 1984 while working toward his doctorate. He was an instructor at William Jewell College in Liberty during 1985 and an adjunct professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., during 1986.

In his review with the board, Kammerdiener said six questions had been raised in the case:

-- Did Willett have a fair hearing? "Our last step," he said, "was the Atlanta meeting (July 11). Once again we heard the same ambiguity which has been felt at each level of the interviews."

-- Have Willett's written documents been properly considered? Kammerdiener said no question about the missionary's statements surfaced at the time of his appointment. When the administrators met with Willett in Atlanta, he asked permission to read a four-page statement. He had read about two pages when questions arose about his beliefs in some of Jesus' miracles. Finally, Willett said he saw no point in continuing to review the rest of the statement.

-- Is Kammerdiener, who does not hold an earned doctorate, theologically competent to understand what is being said? If one who is not a highly educated theologian cannot understand, Kammerdiener asked, how could Willett be effective as a seminary teacher working with students with far less theological training?

-- What is the relationship of the SBC Today article to the incident? Kammerdiener said the article was not the major factor.

-- Is the real motivation to protect a questionable decision by an area director? "If the area director had not requested Michael's resignation," said Kammerdiener, "I would have done so."

-- Is Kammerdiener recommending something he doesn't really believe in order to win favor with conservatives on the board? Kammerdiener said that aside from a phone call from one board member to ask if he had seen McGinnis' letter, he had had no contact with board members during the investigation.

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In the statement Willett presented during the Atlanta meeting, he repeated a portion of the doctrinal statement he had made at the time of his appointment and said he holds "these views about Jesus Christ as strongly today as I did when I wrote them, as is true of the rest of the statement."

He quoted one portion: "In Jesus of Nazareth, God has reached out to creation to the fullest extent, as a human being. Jesus performed miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the kingdom of God, died for our sins and was raised by the power of God. The risen Christ is still present in the world today, offering salvation to those who place their trust in him."

Kammerdiener said Willett, when asked about differences between these written statements and verbal statements he made during the Costa Rica interviews and subsequent telephone interviews, said he believed the doctrinal statements he had written. But he said he also believes some other things, one of which was that a few of Jesus' miracles, including turning water into wine and walking on water, may have been expanded or perhaps even created in the early church as the gospel was proclaimed.

Parks said he told Willett the missionary's views conflict with the authority of the Scriptures. The earliest and best manuscripts of the New Testament, he said, do not omit any of the miracles Willett has questioned. After the meeting, Parks said the interview had not changed his view that Willett should not continue as a missionary.

In meetings with trustees at Glorieta, Parks explained that when accusations are made against a Southern Baptist foreign missionary, they are thoroughly investigated. The process followed in this instance was the same as that followed during the four other times that questions have been raised about other missionaries' theological views during his tenure as president, Parks said. In the other situations, one missionary was asked to resign but the other three cases proved to have resulted from misunderstandings or miscommunication.

During the board's discussion, Parks said: "Let's not use one isolated, rare incident to say everything's falling apart. If a motor company had one failure, I don't think they'd tear down the factory."

Considering that he has related to some 5,000 missionaries during the past eight years, Parks said, "The fact that only two were asked to resign says something" of the board's doctrinal integrity.

In a letter to missionaries about the recent case, Parks assured them this was not the beginning of a "purge" of the missionary force. He said the decision was made "carefully and prayerfully in accordance with the convictions of those of us who had to make it."

Willett did not attend the Glorieta meeting and attempts to reach him for comment were unsuccessful.

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Home Mission Board plans
staff restructure in 1989

By Jim Newton

Baptist Press
7/22/88

ATLANTA (BP)--The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board will be reorganized in January 1989 if the agency's board of directors approves a plan to achieve new strategies for the future.

In addition to a proposed reorganization structure, the board also will consider revisions of the agency's statements of purpose and objectives. Any changes in the agency's purpose statement also would require approval by the Southern Baptist Convention and the SBC Executive Committee.

Home Mission Board President Larry L. Lewis outlined the timetable and process for reorganizing the agency's work during the final session of a 30-member strategy planning task force that met in St. Louis July 18-19.

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The task force, appointed last December to recommend future HMB strategies, adopted a resolution during its St. Louis session affirming Lewis for "his commitment to direct the Home Mission Board into greater and more effective evangelistic outreach efforts and new church starts."

Task force members also recommitted themselves to Bold Mission Thrust goals of the denomination and the board and urged all Southern Baptists to pray for and support the agency in its renewed efforts to reach America for Christ.

The St. Louis meeting was the third gathering of the blue-ribbon panel. In previous sessions, task force members had focused on the agency's purpose, objectives and strategies. Previous meetings were held in Atlanta, where the HMB offices are located, but the July session was held in St. Louis because of limited hotel space in Atlanta during the Democratic National Convention.

At St. Louis, task force members divided into four small groups that studied past and previous organization structures. Each group recommended a plan for reorganizing the board to achieve future strategies. Each reorganization plan was discussed and evaluated by the entire task force.

In addition, the task force evaluated and discussed about 20 proposed strategies which had been developed by small groups in the previous meeting last April. After discussion, task force members ranked each strategy idea on a scale of one to seven. In the last two meetings, the task force had developed and evaluated about 50 proposed strategies.

In the opening session, Lewis shared with the task force the process and time schedule the agency is following in developing plans for the future.

The task force had been appointed to help Lewis develop "fresh, exciting new strategies" to accomplish the agency's purpose and objectives, he said. Lewis added he also has involved the agency's 130 elected staff members and 22 national consultants in the process. The staff and consultants spent three days in April recommending new strategies and revisions in the statements of purpose, objectives and reorganized structure.

In addition to the recommendations from the Strategy Planning Task Force, Lewis said he had asked each of the board's five vice presidents to recommend their own proposals. Lewis has written letters to the state directors of missions, evangelism, Woman's Missionary Union and Brotherhood, asking for their suggestions. He also is seeking counsel from an outside professional management consultant on organizational structures.

Lewis plans to spend three days in August at a personal retreat to go over the mountain of material compiled in the process, he said. After a period of prayer and time alone with God, Lewis will develop his own proposals for future strategies, purpose, objectives and organization structure.

Lewis said he expects to present his plan to the HMB vice presidents in a retreat for the board's executive council Sept. 7-8. He will present the plans to the administrative committee of the board of directors Sept. 12.

Although the plan will not be made public until after the full board of directors discussed and adopted the proposals, Lewis said he will share his proposal with several key groups before it is considered by the board.

The plan will be presented to the HMB elected staff Sept. 14 and to the executive directors of state conventions Sept. 16-17.

A written proposal will be mailed to all members of the board of directors about two weeks prior to the board meeting Oct. 11-12. The directors will discuss the proposal and vote on recommendations Oct. 12. Lewis said he anticipates implementing the plan Jan. 1, 1989.

As the task force concluded its work, Jim Currin, executive director of the Baptist Convention of New England, proposed the resolution affirming Lewis for the way he has led in planning.

In response, Lewis praised members of the task force and said an average of only three people had not been able to attend each of the three meetings. Lewis also thanked the members for their willingness to help implement the strategies by leading training conferences and using their expertise as volunteers in HMB programs.

Lewis said he was impressed by the caliber of people involved in the task force and the quality of the ideas they have proposed. The group includes six pastors; seven executives on the Home Mission Board staff; four Baptist state convention executive directors, including one retired; three state convention directors of missions, evangelism and church starting; four Baptist seminary professors, including two retired; two associational directors of missions; a vocational evangelist; a church growth consultant; a layman; and a Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union executive.

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Hunger gifts rise sharply
in first 6 months of 1988

Baptist Press
7/22/88

NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptist gifts to their denomination's program of worldwide hunger ministries rose sharply during the first six months of 1988, compared to receipts for the same periods in 1986 and 1987.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board reported gifts to hunger relief and development abroad during the first half of 1988 were 35 percent ahead of the six-month total for 1987 and 5 percent ahead of 1986.

Through June, the Foreign Mission Board had received \$3,524,367, compared to \$2,612,285 for 1987 and \$3,364,060 for 1986. Receipts for the first half of 1985 were \$5,519,454.

In contrast, gifts through June to domestic hunger through the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board were 3 percent behind 1987 and 7 percent ahead of 1986. Through June, the Home Mission Board received \$552,129, compared to \$570,363 for 1987, \$513,025 for 1986 and \$484,813 for 1985.

In 1985, Southern Baptists contributed a record \$11.8 million for combined hunger ministries abroad and at home, shattering the previous record of \$7.2 million in 1984. Hunger giving in 1986 dropped to \$9 million and leveled off in 1987 at \$8.9 million.

"The overall increase in hunger giving on the eve of the 10th anniversary of World Hunger Day on the denomination's calendar in October is unexpected and promising," said Robert Parham, interim executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"This increase counters the present stagnate level of giving across the convention," he added. "Such support signals that the hunger issue remains a priority and that Southern Baptists affirm the integrity of the hunger ministries of our mission boards."

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BWA General Council
elects Denton Lotz

Baptist Press
7/22/88

NASSAU, Bahamas (BP)--The Baptist World Alliance General Council has elected Denton Lotz as general secretary-treasurer.

Lotz, acting in the post since March 22, was confirmed during the annual sessions of the General Council meeting on Paradise Island in the Bahamas.

The council also accepted four new affiliate bodies within the Baptist World Alliance, heard a progress report on the 16th Baptist World Congress scheduled in 1990 and declined to act upon a proposal to change its current structures.

A total of 416 Baptists from 44 nations, one of the largest representations ever to attend such a meeting, participated in committee, commission and council sessions.

The BWA sessions coincided with the national independence day celebrations of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.

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Sir Henry Taylor, acting governor general of the 15-year-old nation, and Lady Taylor, gave a reception at their residence. They invited Baptist leaders, who mingled with diplomats and international business people.

A memorial service honoring the late Gerhard Claas followed, taking on special significance through the presence of his wife, Irmgard Claas, and daughter, Regina Claas.

The council elected Lotz to succeed Claas, who died in an automobile accident earlier this year. The council members voted unanimously that Lotz become general secretary-treasurer for the two unexpired years of Claas' current term.

The new member bodies, which bring to 141 the total number of BWA member unions and conventions worldwide, were the Convencion Bautista Libre, or Free-Will Baptist Convention, of Cuba; the Maharashtra Baptist Convention of India; the Tripura Baptist Christian Union of India; and the Baptist Convention of Southern Africa.

The Cuban convention was added to two existing member bodies in Cuba. India is home to 11 affiliates, more than any other country except the United States.

The Baptist Convention of Southern Africa is the second affiliate from South Africa. Trevor M. Swart, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa, a long-time BWA affiliate, asked the council for the privilege of seconding the convention's application. "It is important that the convention have its own identity because it will strengthen the united Baptist witness in South Africa," Swart said.

The convention's general secretary, Gideon Makhanya, said admission to the Baptist World Alliance would give the membership a feeling of self-worth and human dignity towards which it "has been painfully striving." Talks of a merger of the two South African groups recently were dropped.

Membership figures of the four bodies shown in their application forms add 55,910 to the world Baptist total reported at the end of 1987. The new total for BWA affiliates worldwide now stands at almost 35.5 million.

The BWA structure committee report was referred for further study. The council instructed the structure committee to consider proposed changes from member bodies and present a further report to the executive committee in March 1989. A final draft then will be submitted to the 1989 General Council meeting Aug. 1-8 in Zagreb, Yugoslavia.

Program plans for the 16th Baptist World Congress in 1990 were polished by core committees meeting in Nassau with the council.

Chairman Roy Bell of Vancouver, British Columbia, said a new aspect of the congress, Aug. 14-19, 1990, in Seoul, Korea, will be more than 60 workshops scheduled each afternoon. They will range from helps for evangelism, education and church growth to moral issues confronting the church today, as well as questions of Christian women, men and youth witnessing in a changing world society.

Stephen No, general secretary of the Korean Baptist Convention, said excitement already is growing among Korean Baptists: "We are waiting to welcome our brothers and sisters from around the world in the hope that this congress will be a real act of the Holy Spirit. It will help us, and we pray it will help churches everywhere to be a part of the growing movement for world evangelization."

Lotz cautioned: "World Baptists do not want a tourist junket. I think they want an opportunity to listen to Korean Christians, see what God is doing in Korea and learn how they can do evangelism today."

The council members got a first look at colorful new brochures outlining the 1990 congress and were invited to be the first to complete registration information.

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No encouraged church pastors to "come and help baptize" in what is expected to be the largest mass baptism since Pentecost on the closing day of the meeting. Korean Baptists expect 10,000 new Christian converts will be baptized in the service.

The congress theme is "Together in Christ -- We Pray, We Love, We Hope, We Witness, We Worship and Serve."

In other action, the council approved starting theological conversations between the Mennonite World Conference and the BWA. The recommendation from the study and research division urged starting the conversations during 1989.

Presently, the Baptist World Alliance is completing five years of discussion with the Roman Catholic Church and in 1989 will complete a four-year round of conversations with the Lutheran World Federation. The talks will be reported to the Baptist World Congress in Seoul in 1990.

Meetings of the Baptist international missions secretaries and BWA division and department committees preceded the council deliberations.

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BWA resolutions speak
to world conditions

Baptist Press
7/22/88

NASSAU, Bahamas (BP)--The Baptist World Alliance General Council expressed concern with world conditions through resolutions on the AIDS crisis, trafficking and abuse of addictive chemical substances, danger from toxic wastes and ongoing hostilities among or within nations, adopted during its annual meeting in Nassau, Bahamas.

The General Council also adopted resolutions hailing reports of growing openness in the Soviet Union and the "multiple gifts and sensitivities which women bring to the service of Jesus Christ and the work of the Baptist family around the world."

The meeting, which drew more than 400 General Council members, BWA committee personnel and study commissioners from Baptist unions and conventions in 44 countries, was hosted by the Bahamas National Baptist Missionary and Education Convention.

Speaking to the AIDS crisis, the Baptist representatives urged that "AIDS now commands the attention of churches and that all Christians take steps to understand their vital role" in a more responsible approach to the problem.

The council urged member bodies "to oppose sexual mores and practices" that contribute to the development and spread of AIDS and to address responsible sex education in a Christian context as well as sharing educational and medical information. The resolution asked Baptist people to be "ministers of compassion, responding ... with prayerful, loving support" to the afflicted and their families.

On addictive chemical substances, the council "gives thanks to God" for the well-being brought through the medical use of drugs but "views with alarm the tragic growth of illicit drug trafficking, subsequent victimizing of people ... and the resulting explosion of drug-related crime." It "recognizes alcohol as the world's most abused drug and decries that the problem is neglected by governments and churches ... in our own Baptist family." The resolution also acknowledges the "widespread destruction of human life caused by tobacco."

As steps to remedy the problem, the council exhorted all Baptist churches to "teach regard for the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit and life itself as the gift of God" and urges Baptists to "work with other responsible groups and organizations for effective education, social controls and legal constraints toward the elimination of drug trafficking and all forms of drug abuse."

On the problem of toxic waste, the council said, "We are stewards of planet Earth, ... disturbed by the pollution of land, air and sea." It alerted member bodies to the dangers that nuclear and industrial toxic wastes pose for "all humanity and for generations to come."

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The resolution called for pressure upon "governments and industries to ensure that they neither deposit nor export death-dealing wastes to anyplace" and encouraged research on an international cooperative basis to reduce the risks of disposing of these materials.

In the tradition of every council meeting since 1980, it reaffirmed its "previous resolutions that have spoken to peace with disarmament and peace with justice."

This year's resolution on peacemaking welcomes the recent Intermediate Range Nuclear Missiles treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union, commends pursuit of the disarmament goals by the United Nations Organization and urges world governments to participate in the multilateral disarmament negotiations conducted under U.N. auspices.

The council also supported "the worldwide process leading toward a world convocation on justice, peace and the integrity of creation." The resolution calls on "every Baptist church in our worldwide family to pray that individuals and congregations will be patient peacemakers in our warring world, bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ who is the source of peace and justice."

Reaffirming its 1985 resolution against apartheid, the council urged "the Baptist Union and the (newly admitted) Baptist Convention of Southern Africa to challenge the evil of apartheid by their own example of reconciliation and full equality within their own churches."

The new resolution condemns such South Africa government actions as banning anti-apartheid organizations; detentions, especially of children; arrests of Cape Town church leaders; and waterhosing a peaceful Christian procession.

Further, it also deplors the government's intention to prevent foreign funding of peaceful and humanitarian agencies and supports the current reappraisal of economic policy towards South Africa by other governments.

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80 prisoners baptized
by Bangkok prison team

Baptist Press
7/22/88

BANGKOK, Thailand (BP)--Eighty prisoners were baptized amid the lily pads of a deep canal at Bangkwang Maximum Security Prison recently, a result of work by a team from two Baptist congregations in Bangkok, Thailand.

Pastors and members of English-speaking Calvary Baptist Church and its sister Thai congregation, Antioch Baptist Church, led the services at Bangkwang and Lard Yao prisons in Bangkok. Southern Baptist mission personnel participated.

Converts who were baptized came from Thai, Chinese and Burmese backgrounds. They attend weekly cell groups and monthly worship services conducted in various languages by fellow Christian prisoners and members of the prison ministry team.

At Bangkwang, as many as 300 prisoners attend monthly services. Southern Baptist missionary Jim Bryant of Harrison, Ark., leads the Burmese group through a translator.

Many released prisoners either continue their relationship with Calvary or restore their relationship with home congregations.

The work in both prisons began in 1971 after Southern Baptist missionary Jack Martin of St. Louis started teaching English to a man in nearby Rayong prison. The prison teams started visiting only foreign prisoners, but the ministry spread to include Thais.

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Vols visit Hungary,
rethink stereotypes

FUQUAY-VARINA, N.C. (BP)--Wade Vuncannon recalls "some of the prettiest singing I've ever heard."

Vuncannon, a home builder, never expected to hear such church music in a communist country. He and his son, Randy, joined four other men from Fuquay-Varina (N.C.) Baptist Church who traveled to Hungary June 26-July 11 to help construct a four-story building at the Baptist seminary in Budapest.

They are one of six volunteer teams slated to work on the new structure this summer. The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board is coordinating the project at the request of Hungarian Baptist leaders.

Vuncannon was amazed by the choirs -- and the congregational singing -- in Baptist services he attended. "It's as if they had been singing together all their lives," he said. "They just sing it from the heart."

In the United States, he quipped, "I've been to services where people feel like it's a chore to get through the song."

One Hungarian musical program spanned more than three hours and 30 musical selections. It was presented by Baptist musicians from various Budapest churches.

Wendell Crenshaw, a systems analyst who builds cabinets for a hobby, reported: "We didn't know what to expect. We were pleasantly surprised." Budapest, a city of more than 2 million people, seemed safer than most American cities, he said.

Buzz Harrell, a department store maintenance supervisor, said he debated in thought and prayer whether to participate in the project. "Something just kept telling me to go and I did," he explained. He decided "to see for myself" whether, "as they say, 'Communists don't allow this and don't allow that.'"

Religious freedom is much greater today than 10 years ago, and it is greater in Hungary than other communist countries, Hungarian Baptist leaders told the volunteers. Government officials monitor church activities, but they do not interfere, "not that we could tell," Harrell said.

Baptists in Hungary worship "pretty much the way we do," he observed.

The caliber of Christians he met during the trip was impressive, he said: "When you're around people who are Christians and truly believe, they don't have to say a word. Somehow, you just know it. And when they speak to you, you know it for sure.

"I told them when I left they would be in my prayers, and I hoped I would be in their prayers."

David Mangum, another home builder, said the trip "reaffirmed my faith that the Lord is working everywhere." The Christian people he met "had a gleam on their face that you could tell the Lord was in their hearts."

Mangum left Hungary feeling U.S. Christians are spoiled by "all the little things we take for granted."

Church needs 'seers,'
Wideman tells grads

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--The greatest need of the church today is for 'seers,' Donald Wideman, executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention, told summer graduates at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, July 15.

Wideman addressed 151 graduates, bringing to 965 the total number of graduates from Southwestern during the 1987-88 academic year.

Wideman asked the graduates two questions he said church search committees are likely to ask them.

The first question is, "Are you a seer?"

"Where there is not enlightened vision and no prophet, the people will run lawless. The church is not meant to be a non-prophet organization," Wideman said.

"A prophet is to be a forthteller. But before he speaks, first he sees. He has enlightened vision. He has seen the Lord. He has seen others as God sees them."

The second question is, "How do you see?"

Comparing physical and spiritual eyesight, Wideman said many people today are in need of spiritual eyeglasses. "Prejudice and routine cause spiritual indifference," he said.

"How do you see people?" Wideman asked the graduates. It is possible to see people as objects, obstacles or opponents, he said. "But Jesus saw people as opportunities. He saw them as God sees them -- objects of God's love and infinite worth."

Wideman also asked the students how they see God. "The best way to see God," he said, "is to get close to him. The most important thing in your life and ministry is to get close to God and get cleansed.

"What you are determines what you see, and what you see determines what you do."