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Baptist presence felt
during GOP convention

By C. Lacy Thompson

NEW ORLEANS (BP) -- Delegates and guests to the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans found a city primed for entertainment, a veritable buffet of Cajun cuisine and Baptists prepared to witness and minister to human needs.

New Orleans rolled out the red carpet for the four-day gathering of Republicans. About 10,000 convention volunteers -- including a number of Southern Baptists -- worked day and night to prepare for the annual meeting and to ensure its smooth operation from start to finish.

The volunteers included 14 Southern Baptist chaplains, who joined with Catholic and Jewish volunteers to provide an ecumenical ministry for conventioners. Jimmie E. Knox, director of Central City Ministries in New Orleans, headed the ministry effort, following the wishes of convention organizers by enlisting a range of chaplains for an ecumenical approach.

Southern Baptists responded best of any group, Knox said, noting that of the 38 volunteer chaplains, 14 were Southern Baptist, 12 represented other protestant denominations, six were Jewish and six were Catholic.

Originally, Knox planned a booth where chaplains could be easily found. Convention planners, however, rejected the idea and the volunteer chaplains roamed the massive Superdome, ministering and witnessing one-on-one with conventioners and volunteers. Six volunteers -- two Protestant, two Catholic and two Jewish -- were present at each convention session.

The chaplains also were available for emergencies via a telephone beeper system connected to security and medical personnel. In addition, chaplains were on call 24 hours a day outside the Super dome to respond to any need away from the convention site.

Fortunately, no emergency arose, Knox said, adding medical personnel told him they were glad the chaplains were available, if needed.

The chaplains also had opportunity to minister to volunteers and security personnel. Volunteers, who worked long hours, often asked the ministers for prayer or came to them for support. A number of Southern Baptists were among the 10,000 volunteers who manned booths, drove shuttle cars and did the numerous tasks necessary for a massive convention.

The chaplains got a chance to share their faith and distribute tracts on an individual basis, Knox said. Emmanuel Gumms Sr., pastor of New Testament Baptist Church in Harvey, agreed, noting he witnessed to a number of persons. "They were very receptive. We didn't have any rejections," he said.

Convention planners were "very complimentary and very appreciative" of the chaplains' efforts, Knox said, adding he believes the ministry laid the groundwork for increased efforts at future conventions and for Baptist ministry in New Orleans as well.

"It was a positive experience," he said. "In some sessions, there were 40,000 or so people in the Superdome. Of course, you can't touch all of those people at one time. You can't touch everybody but you touch who you can. I felt like we had an impact."

The experience was exciting and fascinating as well as beneficial, noted Michael Cramer, pastor of Bridge City Baptist Church in New Orleans. "It was good to have a sense of being a part of history."

Another Baptist couple, the Daniel O'Reagan's, also were on call as interpreters for Japanese news media representatives. O'Reagan, pastor of Gentilly Baptist Church in New Orleans said they didn't have many requests for help since most of the Japanese present spoke English.

Some Baptists had a more visible part than others. A USA Today poll indicated 8 percent of the 2,277 convention delegates were Baptist.

In addition, Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham offered the benediction at the close of the Monday evening session of the convention, which featured an address by President Ronald Reagan. Graham had led a benediction at the mid-July Democratic National Convention in Atlanta.

During the RNC, Graham sat next to Barbara Bush while her husband, George, delivered his acceptance speech as the Republican nominee for president on Thursday night, Aug. 18.

Earlier on Monday evening, convention goers were treated to a story about a pastor and deacons, told by E.V. Hill, pastor of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles during a brief address.

During the Tuesday morning session, Van D. Hipp stood in the spotlight for a few moments in making an introduction. Hipp, Republican State Chairman of South Carolina, is a member of East Cooper Baptist Church in Mt. Pleasant, S.C.

Later that evening, the convention featured an address by television evangelist Pat Robertson, an unsuccessful candidate for the presidential nomination. Robertson was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister but asked his local congregation to withdraw the ordination shortly after he became a candidate for nomination.

During his address, Robertson released his delegates and criticized the Democratic candidates.

And at least one Baptist had a particular view of the convention. Randy Chestnut, a member at First Baptist Church of Arabi, and a New Orleans policeman, served 12-hour security shifts at the convention site. The local police acted as backups to the Secret Service teams in the Superdome, he explained.

Chestnut praised the attitudes of the convention goers. Asked which was worse, convention duty or Superdome duty during a New Orleans Saints football game that attracts almost twice as many persons as the convention, Chestnut responded quickly: "The Saints game. No doubt about it. The Saints game."

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Missionaries mold lives
of Santa Clara potters

By Jim Newton

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SANTA CLARA, N.M. (BP)--For 27 years, Ben and Shirley Yelvington have been molding and shaping the spiritual lives of the Indian potters famed for their black pottery.

It is a time-consuming process, operating constantly on "Indian time" when no one ever gets in a hurry. At times their missionary work has been tried and tested by the fires of opposition from Catholic priests, Indian religious leaders, or village governors who don't want them in the pueblos.

Despite slow response to the Christian gospel in the seven pueblos near Santa Fe, N.M., the Yelvingtons never seem to be discouraged; they are content with what they feel God has given them during their 34 years among the Indians of New Mexico.

"The thing that has kept us here is the awareness of God's calling and God's word and the realization that we are building, little by little, the knowledge and understanding of the gospel among the people," said Yelvington.

The Yelvingtons don't want to go back to their native Florida when they retire in a couple of years. Instead, they want to stay in Espanola -- the New Mexico town closest to their seven beloved pueblos.

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"This is home for us. The Indian people are our people," added Yelvington, 63.

About a dozen members of the Santa Clara church are potters, including Teresita Naranjo whose pottery sells for thousands of dollars and is displayed in museums across the nation. The Santa Clara and San Ildefonso pueblos are famous for their black pottery, polished and fired to a high gloss sheen.

Making pottery reminds Teresita of the hymn, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord." Lyrics of the hymn say that God is the potter, mankind is the clay, and urge God to "mold me and make me after thy will."

Judy Tafoya, a young potter also a member of the Santa Clara church, said God has taken the broken pieces of her life, changed them completely, and put the pieces back together again.

She accepted Christ as a young girl at the Santa Clara church, left the pueblo as a teen-age girl and rebelled in a life dominated by drugs, alcohol and sex. "I was constantly searching for something to satisfy me."

After a traumatic experience when her brother committed suicide, Judy left Santa Fe and came home to Santa Clara. She went to a drug and alcohol treatment center, started going to church, and with God's help was able to change.

"I gave it all up and turned it over to the Lord," she said. "I felt strengthened when I came to church and felt the love of the Yelvingtons and people here. Now I'm able to share the strength of the Lord with those former friends who once gave me drugs. I believe God saved me for a purpose, and he has given me a whole new life."

Today Judy is a happily-married mother of two, teaches Sunday School in the church's nursery, leads an Acteens group, and is trying to improve her talent and business as a potter.

Ben and Shirley are encouraged by her response, saying she is one of several young people who have come back to the pueblo and have become active in the church.

Unlike most non-Indians, Ben and Shirley have been accepted warmly by the Pueblo Indians. They know personally almost every resident in the seven pueblos, but it has taken them almost a quarter of a century and a lifetime of commitment.

Ben and Shirley both felt a call to missions work among the Indians in 1950 when, as students at Stetson University they were summer missionaries in Flagstaff, Ariz. That fall, they entered Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, and were appointed in 1954 by the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board to work at the Indian Center in Santa Fe, N.M.

Ben, who is quiet, serious and soft-spoken, said he has been accepted in the pueblos primarily because of what he calls his "grief ministry."

Whenever there is a death in the pueblo, the Yelvingtons are there. Shirley is often found in the kitchen, preparing food and washing dishes for the large extended families that come for the funeral.

Several villages which previously did not want non-Catholic ministries have opened to the Yelvingtons after Ben preached a graveside service emphasizing the hope of the resurrection.

"The native Indian religion does not deal with the hereafter, with life after death," Ben said. "Our grief ministry has given us an edge when we preach the resurrection at every funeral. It's been my most effective method of evangelism."

The silver-haired missionary estimated he had preached to 90 percent of the people in each of the seven pueblos during graveside services or at the Indian wakes in the homes.

The diminutive Shirley, who talks with a twinkle in her eyes, observed that her most effective work has been leading Vacation Bible Schools for both Indian children and adults.

Several pueblo "governors" have attended Vacation Bible Schools led by the Yelvingtons, and at least one accepted Christ as a result. The pueblo governor, who has much more power than a mayor in the average American city, can grant or deny permission for the missionaries to hold worship services in the village. The couple has been kicked out of several villages by the governor, who may be influenced by the local Catholic priest or the "Kasique," the head leader of Indian religion in the pueblo.

One governor, not a Christian, urged the villagers to support the Baptist mission work. "If you people will listen to what the Yelvingtons are preaching to us, we will have a better community, and we'll have better homes; and you know how many problems we have in our families," the governor said. The next year the governor presented them a plaque in appreciation for what they had done in the pueblos.

The Yelvingtons get plenty of help from Baptist volunteers, including youth groups which have been to nearby Glorieta Baptist Conference Center on summer mission trips, and from Baptist students at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

Shirley said the response has been greatest numerically at the San Juan pueblo, where 110 attended Vacation Bible School this summer. The strongest congregation is in Santa Clara, where the only Baptist church building is located.

They don't know what will happen when they retire in a few years, but are convinced their ministry will continue. They hope a young Santa Clara Indian who is now studying at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, will return to the pueblo as pastor.

But they aren't worried about the future, because the future is in God's hands, just as their lives have been molded and shaped by the Master Potter.

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(BP) photos mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press

Mercer Chancellor Harris
Dies at age 91 after fall

N-CO

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MACON, Ga. (BP)--Mercer University Chancellor Rufus C. Harris, president of the Baptist college for 20 years before retiring in 1980, died Aug. 18 at age 91.

Harris, recognized as an outstanding educator and former president of Tulane University in New Orleans, had fallen and broken a hip the previous weekend. His death was attributed to old age and complications from the fall.

A 1917 graduate of Mercer, Harris received the doctor of jurisprudence from Yale University in 1924. He was dean of Mercer's law school from 1925-27, dean of Tulane's law school for ten years, and president of Tulane for 23 years (1937-60).

During the 20 years he was president of Mercer, enrollment increased from 1,238 to 6,714 students. He led the Mercer trustees in making two highly-controversial decisions when trustees voted in 1963 to desegregate and in 1969 to accept federal grants.

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California church announces
plans to build Holy Land garden

By Mark Wingfield

N-HMB

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ANAHEIM, Calif. (BP)--A Baptist church in Southern California has unveiled plans to recreate portions of biblical Israel in a 50-acre botanical garden in affluent Orange County.

Bryan Crow, pastor of The Garden Church in Anaheim, announced his congregation's plans at an August tent revival on the new site about 15 miles from Disneyland. The \$5 million site on the Riverside Freeway was given to the church for \$1 in a complex arrangement with developers and county officials.

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Future plans call for three worship areas nestled among recreations of the garden tomb, the Garden of Gethsemane, the River Jordan and a miniature Sea of Galilee. Families desiring to worship by themselves will be able to hear sermons on FM receivers in secluded areas of the garden, Crow said. He added the development will be a place of worship, not a tourist attraction.

"We're not going to get into the entertainment business," he said.

Crow came to California nearly 30 years ago from Texas and started Euclid Street Baptist Church one mile from Disneyland. In the recent deal, the Euclid Street facilities were sold to Hope University, a school for gifted mentally retarded children.

A portion of the Euclid Street congregation continues to worship at the old location through an arrangement that gives them access to the property on Wednesday nights and Sundays. About 10 members of Euclid Street who opted to begin the new Garden Church have been meeting in an office park about 12 miles from the old location for the past two years.

Crow has been working with a landscape artist from Israel and has researched plants, flowers and trees of the region. Massive landscaping is expected to begin in October.

Crow said his congregation's dream would not be possible without the land they have been given. "We have land and we have water, so we can accomplish our objective. Those are the two most valuable things in this area," he said.

Southern California is ideal for the garden because the topography and climate are like that of Israel, Crow said. He added that trendy Southern California is the only place such a venture could work. "Unique is a draw here," he said.

Despite criticism, Crow insists the garden is a legitimate plan for ministry.

"If all that ever happened was for people to come and read a verse of Scripture at the foot of a tree, it would be valid," he said. "Primarily, I want to reach this area for Christ. I'm just building a different kind of fishing tank."

Crow compares his new fishing tank to a supermarket rather than the mom-and-pop grocery store that has been the Southern Baptist tradition for decades.

He insists that beginning a small mission church in California does not work the way it does in the South. Californians are accustomed to ready-made success, he said.

"We're taking the Southern California business philosophy and applying it to a church," he explained. "We're building a supermarket."

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press