



BAPTIST PRESS

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September 30, 1988

88-157

Baptists offer meals, medical care,
hope to Mexico hurricane victims

By Ken Camp

N-Texas

CARBONERA, Mexico (BP)--As victims of Hurricane Gilbert began piecing together shattered lives, Southern Baptists ministered in the most devastated area of northeastern Mexico, offering hot meals, medical care and the promise of new life in Jesus Christ.

On September 23, a bi-national Rio Grande River Ministry health-care team expanded Texas Baptists' ministry from the city of San Fernando to Carbonera and surrounding fishing villages in the wind-ravaged Laguna Madre region.

During their first two days in the flooded rural area, the health-care professionals treated 156 families. The four-member team returned to the Carbonera area Sept. 26 for five days of medical, dental and nursing ministry.

After serving 13,000 meals in San Fernando, the Texas Baptist disaster relief unit moved its headquarters and mobile field kitchen to Carbonera the day before the medical/dental team returned. In its first day at Laguna Madre, the disaster relief team served more than 6,300 meals.

Meanwhile, the Louisiana Baptist disaster relief team fed 7,000 meals at Mendez, and the Oklahoma Baptist disaster relief crew served an average of 5,000 meals per day at Monterrey. The Oklahoma team also built several mobile feeding stations in Santa Catarina and trained local Baptist Women's Missionary Union members in feeding operations.

North of the Rio Grande, Texas Baptist volunteers from Wichita Falls and Galveston Baptist associations assisted in feeding, recovery and rebuilding at a community four miles from Donna, Texas.

When the health-care team first arrived at Carbonera after providing treatment to more than 250 patients in San Fernando, they discovered hundreds of malnourished, dehydrated hurricane victims.

"The little houses were blown away. Dead animals and waste were starting to attract flies and infection," said Delores York of Cone Oasis Baptist Encampment, a volunteer Mission Service Corps nurse serving with the River Ministry. We saw children who hadn't eaten in five days. The people didn't have any clean water to drink. Of course, there was water everywhere, but it was all salt water."

During the first two days in the Carbonera area, the health-care team's gospel witness was more through deeds than words, as they distributed baby food and formula for about 350 infants and children.

"We didn't get to share Christ as we would have liked," York said. "There were so many needs -- so many people tugging at your arm saying, 'Food for my baby, my baby!'"

When the medical/dental team returned to Carbonera the following week, they were able to build on the relationships established a few days before.

Marcos Peralez, a dentist from Reynosa, and Hilda Gonzalez, a missionary aide from Primera Church in Progreso, worked at a local clinic in Carbonera. Martha Garza, a physician from Miguel Aleman, and York traveled into isolated fishing villages to offer medical assistance and to collect specimens for laboratory analyses and diagnoses.

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York said that one disaster relief worker smiled and accused her of lying when she spoke of going door-to-door making housecalls. He pointed out that most of the families the team visited no longer had houses, and the few who did had no doors.

As the medical/dental team offered health care, the Texas Baptist disaster relief crew served hot meals and distributed canned goods throughout the Laguna Madre area.

One disaster relief volunteer who had served in Vietnam said the abject poverty and utter devastation in the region surrounding Carbonera was worse than anything he had seen in Southeast Asia. However, the Texas Baptists were impressed by the resiliency of the local residents, who quickly began to rebuild simple shelters for their families out of driftwood and brush.

"These are an amazingly resourceful people," said John LaNoue, on-site coordinator for the disaster relief team. "They are a make-do group."

One group of Hispanic pastors from the Houston area rebuilt a modest home for a widow and her three children. Building supplies were provided by Texas Baptist partnership missions.

Hispanic Texas Baptist pastors and other bilingual team members also served as translators and spiritual counselors. In addition to witnessing to disaster victims, the bilingual volunteers shared the gospel with the rural state police who worked alongside the Texas Baptists both in San Fernando and around Carbonera.

Isaac Torres, a partnership missions consultant, visited virtually every home in Alambre, the worst-hit fishing village, where he offered words of hope and comfort to the frightened and confused villagers.

On the road from San Fernando to the Laguna Madre area, Torres gave a ride to Agapito, a 20-year-old hitchhiker who was returning to his home at Alambre. Torres shared the plan of Christian salvation with the young man and led him to faith in Christ.

Hungry to learn more about Jesus, Agapito spent the remainder of the hour-long ride to Alambre reading a New Testament that Torres gave to him.

When an Anglo disaster relief volunteer was approached by a 9-year-old boy holding a gospel tract and asking for someone to explain it to him, the volunteer summoned Osiris Castillo of Templo Bautista in Beaumont. As Castillo talked with the boy, other children began to gather, showing him a soccer ball that volunteers from University Baptist Church, Clear Lake City, Texas, purchased for them. Before long, Castillo was befriending the children and helping to organize a simple recreation program.

"The boy with the tract was quite confused and insecure. He needed someone to talk to him about God," said Castillo. "That's what we're here for. That's what it's all about."

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Southern Baptists share blame
for decaying cities, Blackaby says

By Joe Westbury

N-HMB

Baptist Press
9/30/88

TOCCOA, Ga. (BP)--Southern Baptists who relocated their churches to the suburbs from the inner cities are partly to blame for the decay of those cities, a home missions leader said.

Henry Blackaby, special assistant in spiritual awakening at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, spoke to an overflow crowd of laypeople at the national renewal conference "think tank" at the Georgia Baptist Conference Center near Toccoa.

The 500 men and women, including a small number of directors of missions and pastors, so overwhelmed the conference center that overflow housing had to be secured in Toccoa. The workshop was sponsored by the Home Mission Board evangelism section and the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission.

Blackaby challenged participants to seek repentance and divine cleansing in order to be used by God in reaching America's cities.

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"We have abandoned the civic leaders and ethnics, avoided the poor and forsaken the social service agencies," he said. "We have developed a hard heart toward compassion and a servant attitude. We have lost our first love."

Blackaby then drew parallels from Ezekiel 37 and the prophet's vision of the valley of dry bones: "When God directed and Ezekiel obeyed, the bones lived and filled the cities. Our repentance and cleansing is necessary today for God to resettle our cities, rebuild the ruins and cultivate the desolate land."

Blackaby chided seminaries that train students "in affluence and style of ministry and comfort, making them unfit for adjusting to the world as it is. The reality of the cities is a harsh climate -- a place filled with AIDS, single-parent families and lonely people."

Dale Cross, director of the Home Mission Board's associational evangelism department, urged Southern Baptists to love the cities through their faith and testimonies.

"Do you realize that no religion has a heaven like the Christian religion? It's a city where people will live in peace and harmony with God. By drawing people to the cities, God is preparing them for life with him," he said.

"A lot of Christians are not going to like heaven at all if they don't learn to love Detroit or Atlanta."

Pete Hammond, director of the marketplace department of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, said nearly 80 percent of any congregation is not involved in any local ministry.

However, the 80 percent are getting restless, he said, "as from Wall Street to Silicon Valley, hungry laypeople are going to work early to have breakfast with other Christians to learn more of Christian discipleship."

"We have fallen into the trap of elitism that says only a few individuals are experts in spiritual matters," Hammond warned.

Charles Chaney, special assistant to the president at the Home Mission Board, presented a historical perspective of lay movements in Christianity.

"Every major renewal or revival has been closely associated with lay involvement," Chaney said. "At the weakest times in Christian history, an awakening among laypeople reversed the tide and breathed new life into the Christian movement."

During the meeting, participants met daily in small workgroups to share creative methods of evangelizing the nation's cities. Early morning prayer vigils, usually beginning at 5:30 a.m., were led by T.W. Hunt of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board; Minnette Drumwright of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board; Blackaby; and Don Miller, a Texas layman.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Photos will not be available from the Olympic Games as previously thought. We are sorry for any inconvenience you may experience because of this.

Thanks,
Baptist Press

Ethicist urges ministers
to model moral standards

By Pat Cole

N-CO
(SBIS)

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--If ministers are going to be respected by their congregations, they must "walk worthily" of their calling, a veteran Southern Baptist ethicist stressed.

Henlee Barnette, emeritus professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said pastors and other ministers should model high moral standards within their congregations and communities.

Basic to the formation of ministerial ethics is a "genuine experience of redemption in Christ," Barnette said. The "grade of a minister" is judged by living a life of unselfish service to Christ, he said.

In addition to being honest in all relationships, Barnette listed other qualities a minister should model:

-- Intellectual maturity. A minister has a moral obligation to develop intellectually and to avoid the "anti-intellectualism that's going around."

-- Emotional maturity. A minister should display self control and be able to "work with others who have a different value orientation."

-- Humble service. That stands in contrast to what Barnette sees as a general lack of humility in today's world.

Barnette, who teaches a course at Southern Seminary on ministerial ethics, encouraged ministers to enter into a covenant agreement with their congregations before accepting church employment. He explained that matters such as job expectations, salary and benefits, vacation time and family expectations should be clarified before a minister accepts a call.

He also maintained a minister should not leave a congregation that is having serious financial difficulty: "That's unethical. A pastor should leave a church in good condition for the next minister."

In an age when television preachers have been plagued by scandals, Barnette noted vocational evangelists particularly must be attentive to issues of morality.

Evangelists should always be careful to "treat people as persons and not things," he said. They should also avoid using their ministry as a "tool for economic gain."

Barnette emphasized evangelists should keep in mind that "evangelism is highly related to justice." Evangelism, he said, "relates to the total person and the total web of a person's social relationships." Therefore, evangelism calls for "the regeneration of the self and the reconstruction of society."

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Southern Baptists face challenge
reaching metropolitan areas

By Frank Wm. White

F-SSB

Baptist Press
9/30/88

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (BP)--With historic roots in homogeneous towns of the rural South, Southern Baptists traditionally have not been effective reaching diverse segments of major metropolitan areas.

One model for reaching metropolitan areas is found in Gulf Stream Baptist Association in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Forty-three of the association's 70 churches participated in a recent Sunday school enrollment/training clinic designed to assist them organizing their Sunday schools and training workers for more effective outreach.

The highly mobile population, variety of ethnic groups and economic diversity of Broward County make it a metropolitan area similar to those found in the Northeast and elsewhere, explained Gulf Stream Executive Director Joe Courson.

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For example, the county is made up of 119 ethnic groups, including the highest Jewish population outside of New York City, he said.

"Our churches need to be like a cafeteria line, where everybody can find something. There's not one thing or one style but a lot of things that will work. If we can find models that work in Broward County, they will work anywhere," Courson said.

Few churches in the association are able to reach a broad spectrum of the diverse population. Instead, most churches are identifying particular ethnic or even economic groups for their ministry efforts.

For example, First Haitian Baptist Church of Pompano Beach began 12 years ago from a Haitian Bible study group at First Baptist Church of Pompano Beach. The Haitian church has grown to a Sunday school enrollment of 367, with an average attendance of more than 200.

The French Creole worship service meets a need of the adults who do not speak English. Pastor Jacques Dumornay believes the church eventually will be English-speaking but will maintain a Haitian cultural base.

"The culture and the language are the vehicles for reaching people," Dumornay said. "I feel just the matter of culture makes it difficult to worship together."

Flamingo Road Baptist Church in southwest Broward County is situated in a seedbed of growth with upwardly mobile families, said Pastor Ben D. Rogers Jr. The 10-year-old church is keenly aware of the economic and social make-up of the area and has structured its program around family needs, he said.

Like many metropolitan areas, Broward County lacks a strong Baptist identity.

"We're not out looking for Baptists; we're looking for seekers. We are trying to appeal to them with something which meets their needs. It's our goal to birth the kind of church which will work here," Rogers said.

While many churches are reaching specific target groups, others believe they can target geographic areas that include various ethnic and economic groups. Atlantic Baptist Church and Riverland Baptist Church are two of those.

Atlantic Church is about 95 percent white with some Haitians, Hispanics and other ethnic groups involved. Pastor Bernard Campbell believes the church eventually will be able to reach a variety of ethnic groups as others follow those who are now involved.

Riverland is in a community that includes homes with yachts as well as low-income families. "We are able to minister to all ethnic groups as long as language is not a problem. We have an open policy and offer our ministries to anyone," said Pastor Ron Geiger.

Through the ministry strategies, Courson said the association will be able to find models that will work for reaching people. Models that work will be crucial in meeting the association's goal of starting 200 new congregations and 200 satellite units by the year 2000.

With the various ministry strategies and ethnic, economic and social makeup, the churches are united by the Southern Baptist distinctives of missions, Bible study and evangelism, Courson said.

"With our diversity, it is even more important that we hone in on those things that have made us great," he added.

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

Motorcycle ministers travel on
two wheels with one message

By Mark Wingfield

F-HMB

WAITSBURG, Wash. (BP)--Preacher Wayne Henderson jokes that his Sunday clothes are leather.

Not only that, he rides a Kawasaki motorcycle to church with his wife, Donnie, hanging on behind him.

The Hendersons are Mission Service Corps volunteer ministers to America's 15 million motorcyclists. The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board has named them 1988 Mission Service Corps volunteers of the year.

"I have a real burden for all the people who don't want to know about the Lord," Henderson explains. "We've got more people outside the church than inside the church. We've got to reach people where they are."

Every weekend, bikers gather in campgrounds, parks and recreation areas within 100 miles of every town in America, Henderson says. During the week, most bikers work traditional jobs as laborers, secretaries, lawyers or accountants.

Because this large segment of society is away from home most weekends, they remain unchurched, he explains, noting, "What we're doing is as valid a mission field as Ethiopia, because these people are totally ignorant about Jesus."

The Hendersons have experienced both sides of the road. Before becoming an itinerant minister, Henderson was a bivocational pastor for 20 years, starting six Baptist churches in the Northwest.

He started riding for relaxation after heart bypass surgery in 1980. His hobby became a full-time vocation in 1984 when he discovered thousands of bikers riding through life with no relationship to Jesus Christ.

Now the Hendersons log more than 60,000 miles each year on their motorcycle, "Ramblin' Rose II." Every weekend from March through November finds one or both of them at a motorcycle rally. They ride among the up-and-out on expensive Honda Gold Wings and among the outlaw bikers on loud Harley-Davidsons.

He is western director for Christian Motorcyclists Association, a non-denominational ministry to bikers. She teaches high school home economics in Waitsburg, Wash., and travels with him in summer.

Their financial support comes from Christian Motorcyclists Association, their Baptist association of churches and individuals. In the first two years of their ministry, they launched out on faith, cashing insurance policies, draining savings accounts and selling everything they could for income.

Few church people realize that long-haired outcasts are a minority among America's motorcyclists, Henderson says: "Bikers are people like the guy who lives down the street. The difference is it's difficult to get them in a church. They're people who need Jesus."

However, the Hendersons take the gospel to the banker bikers and bandit bikers alike. He estimates 20 percent of his work is done among "hard-core" bikers.

Each August, they trek to Sturgis, S.D., for America's third-largest bike rally. There, 75,000 hard-core and outlaw bikers gather for a week of revelry.

Shopkeepers whose services don't appeal to bikers lock their shops or sublet space to tattoo parlors and pinstripers. Before Henderson and the Christian Motorcyclists Association got involved, even the churches locked their doors.

"Bikers are God's kind of people, whether they're my kind of people or not," he says. "In a biking ministry, you accept people as they are until Jesus Christ can work in their lives to make them what he wants them to be."

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"It's hard to do ministry here with my church upbringing. We're taught to place a premium on the external rather than the eternal."

The Hendersons make a point to emphasize eternal things at every rally they attend. They make the rounds in the campground, meeting as many people as possible, striking up conversations and inviting people to Sunday services.

Sometimes Henderson preaches from a tree stump; sometimes he has a pavilion or enclosed room. He preaches a simple salvation message, reminding the congregation of the large sums of money they have invested in their bikes to make his point -- "The greatest treasure you'll ever own is eternal life."

Every conversion marks a bright spot in the Hendersons' journey. "When the victories come, they're treasured," he explains. "They just don't come often enough."

But each victory reaffirms the Hendersons' call to take to the road, even when friends and fellow pastors don't understand. "There's a satisfaction God gives you when you're doing what he wants you to do," Henderson says.

"It's a lot easier to sit in church every Sunday and be ministered to than to go out on the street. But where's the greater need?"

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

Disasters find Baptists
in need of relief money

By Marty Croll

N-FMB
Baptist Press
9/30/88

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Recent disasters in Jamaica and Bangladesh have found Southern Baptists lacking the funds they need to adequately respond, according to R. Keith Parks, president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

At the end of August, money available to the board for helping in disasters stood at less than \$100,000. In Jamaica alone, Hurricane Gilbert did an estimated \$2.2 million damage to 180 of the 270 Baptist churches, plus \$273,000 damage to parsonages. This does not count the needs of many Jamaicans whose homes were destroyed or damaged.

During September the board received one gift of \$150,000 and other gifts totaling about \$18,000 designated for Bangladesh. In addition, about \$10,000 has been received for Jamaica and other uses.

Only gifts designated for general relief can be used by the Foreign Mission Board for needs not related to hunger. On average, Southern Baptists designate about 5 percent of their human needs giving for general relief. If it is not specifically marked for general relief, any world hunger donation goes into the hunger fund and is used only for needs relating to hunger.

Hunger funds have been tapped heavily this year to help feed Mozambique refugees and to help cope with recurring hunger in Ethiopia. They also will be used extensively to help Bangladeshis struggling to survive, as well as other worldwide needs. But they cannot provide for the shelter, supplies and other non-food emergency needs of disaster victims, Foreign Mission Board officials emphasize.

"We need to make it known to Southern Baptists that this is the kind of situation that calls for over-and-above giving," said Parks. "With missionaries on the field, we are in a position to utilize every penny that is given, and there are urgent needs at this time."

In early September floodwaters inundated 47 of 64 districts of Bangladesh, a densely populated nation in Southeast Asia. Then in mid-September Hurricane Gilbert pounded the Caribbean from Jamaica to Mexico. The Yucatan peninsula and northeastern Mexico areas just south of the Texas border suffered heavy damage and loss of life. Mexican Baptist relief funds are meeting immediate needs, but the board expects its representatives to request additional funds as the full extent of damage is determined.

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Much of the Southern Baptist response to both disasters will be related to hunger. But there also will be long-range rebuilding needs, Parks noted, and Southern Baptists have an opportunity to share both their compassion for physical need and their spiritual witness.

"I've had the impression that many Southern Baptists feel we have all the funds we need for these crisis situations," said Parks. "In the past when they were informed, they have always risen to the occasion with great generosity. In this situation, I feel they should have the chance to express the same kind of compassion they always have."

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Conservative SBC leader
changes political parties

W-Texas

Baptist Press
9/30/88

AUSTIN, Texas (BP)--Paul Pressler, a leader in the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention and a Texas appeals court judge, has shifted from the Democratic party to the Republican party.

In a news conference at Texas GOP headquarters Sept. 29, Pressler said his family "has been active as Texas Democrats since Texas became a state. A number of them have been elected to office as Democrats. I myself have been elected to office six times as a Democrat."

"Now I recognize that the party has changed. It has left me. It has moved to the far left and has abandoned the principles which have made us a strong nation and a great people. For this reason I can no longer remain in the Democratic party. It is with deep conviction that I join the Republican party in order to stand for those same principles which my former party once stood," he said.

Pressler in 1986 ran unopposed as a Democrat for a second six-year term as justice on the 14th Court of Civil Appeals in Houston. Previously he served three terms as a district judge and one term in the state legislature.

He said he does not think judges should have to run in partisan elections, and had hoped that the system of electing jurists should be changed. Since that has not happened, he said, and since he "must identify myself with a political party," Pressler said he was becoming a Republican and "enthusiastically support" the "party and its principles."

He added that a "judge does not endorse candidates and this is not an endorsement of candidates, but rather a switch in my own party affiliation."

According to daily newspaper reports, the executive director of the Texas GOP, Fred Meyer, said Pressler's conversion is "a clear signal to voters that the state Democratic party is beginning to look like "the national Democratic party of (Walter) Mondale and (Michael) Dukakis."

The same report quoted the state director of the Texas Democratic party, Ed Martin, as bidding "good riddance" to Pressler, and saying the judge "has long been a charter member of the 'New Republican Party,' the far right."

In a telephone interview, Pressler told Baptist Press that with the victory of conservative candidate Jerry Vines in the 1988 SBC, conservatives have gained control of the denomination.

"For the past 12 years (since the conservative effort began) I have not been able to pay attention to anything but family, work and the SBC. Now, I am free to look at some other things I want to do," he said.

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Mechanic says he's seen God
in life of Utah missionary

By Mark Wingfield

F-HMB

Baptist Press
9/30/88

SALT LAKE CITY (BP)--Snow continued to fall as Nadine Harrell stood at the side of a dilapidated old car, talking to the man and woman inside through windowless doors. Only dangling rags filtered the freezing wind blowing through one window and out another.

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The man needed \$42.63 to get to California where he had a job waiting as a mechanic. He and his wife had lived in the beat-up car for three days, fighting off the cold with nothing to eat.

Traveler's Aid confirmed the man's story and gave him \$42.63, half the amount he needed. Then they sent him to the Baptist Concern Center, where they said he might get the other half.

Baptist Concern Center isn't the largest church ministry in this metropolitan area of 600,000, but it's one of the few that will help those who are not members in good standing of the Mormon church.

As director of the center, Harrell has a policy of not giving out cash. She gladly gives food and clothing and helps people find work if they need it.

When she explained this, the man offered to sell her the one asset he had -- his tools. Although they were worth hundreds of dollars, he was willing to part with them for \$42.63.

Harrell started calling potential buyers. When she couldn't find anyone interested, she decided to buy the man's tools herself.

Harrell gave the couple food and clothing along with the money and walked back into her office with the tools as the car creaked out of the parking lot. She looked at the tools, wondering what she would do with them and what the man would do without them.

With tears streaming down her face, Harrell stopped the car to give the tools back as a gift. "People have told me all my life there's a God and I never would believe it," the man told her. "But today, I've seen God."

That moment touched Harrell as deeply as it did the couple she helped.

There was a time Harrell thought she couldn't help any more. She and her first husband served as home missionaries in San Antonio, Beeville and Abilene, Texas. But his death altered her ministry. "When my husband died, I buried me," she said. "I became a different person."

With time, Harrell remarried and moved from Texas to Utah, where she and her new husband managed a motel. After retiring, Harrell was approached by Bruce Gardner, director of missions for the Utah-Idaho Baptist Convention, about working with the Baptist Concern Center.

Gardner knew Harrell was experienced and committed to Baptist work. Harrell knew that starting a social ministry would bring back painful memories.

She struggled and tried to get out of it, but finally agreed to give the job a try. Since then, helping people in need has renewed her own calling.

"God called me to be a missionary," she said. "Although my husband died, God didn't uncall me."

Harrell's mission now is to show Utah churches that they can do Christian social ministries. She is developing the Baptist Concern Center at Glendale Baptist Church as a model.

Harrell's husband, John, is part-time pastor of the Glendale church which had dwindled to six members but is now growing, with an average attendance of 30.

Although the Baptist Concern Center receives financial assistance through the state office, members of Glendale are heavily involved, Harrell said.

"This little church didn't know they could do something," she said. "No matter how small a church is, if they're willing to help they can give someone a new life."

Harrell has developed a variety of ministries, including food and clothing distribution, hot lunches, ceramics classes and aerobics -- all laced with gospel teachings. "We witness to them without them knowing it, and it's working," she said.

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

Seminary student's wife adopts
new relationship with best friend

By Elizabeth Watson

F-10
(SWBTS)

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--Growing up in Etowah, Tenn., Lisa Condee Witt and Kathy Crockett Burton were so close they often were mistaken for sisters.

A few weeks ago, they found out it was no mistake.

Mrs. Witt, the wife of Robert Witt, a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, is the adopted daughter of Southwestern graduates Ernest and Wilma Condee. She has discovered Burton is her biological sister and that she has another sister as well.

"I wasn't sure if I was awake or dreaming when I received that phone call from the Tennessee Department of Human Services telling me I had two sisters trying to locate me," she said. "I just didn't believe them. I knew I was adopted, but I didn't think I had any biological siblings."

The Condees adopted her in 1966 through an agency in Cleveland, Tenn., when she was 16 months old.

In 1974, Condee became pastor of Goodsprings Baptist Church in Etowah -- the town in which Mrs. Witt's older sister Kathy was living. "Even though Kathy was two years older than me, we became fast friends," Mrs. Witt said. "Her family attended Goodsprings Baptist Church, and we went to the same grammar school.

"A special bonding occurred when we discovered we were both adopted."

The two shared a passion for music. "We both loved to play the piano, and occasionally we would sing duets together," Mrs. Witt said.

Their paths parted when Mrs. Witt moved to Jefferson City, Tenn., to attend Carson-Newman College. Mrs. Burton married shortly after high school graduation and Mrs. Witt married in her first year of college.

But their friendship took on new dimensions when Mrs. Burton asked the Department of Human Services to help locate her biological siblings. Unknown to both women, Karin Clark LeMay, their middle sister living in Hermitage, Tenn., also was seeking her sisters.

After Mrs. Witt's sisters contacted each other, they found her.

"I didn't know what to do for several days after I received the call," she said.

Her parents were participating in a Baptist partnership missions project in Venezuela at the time, so Mrs. Witt finally called Mrs. Burton's mother for advice.

"Before I could say anything, she told me what Kathy had been up to," Mrs. Witt said. "When I called Kathy to talk about it, it didn't take long before she said, 'Lisa, you're that third sister we're looking for.' My birthday matched that of the missing sister, and she was convinced it was me."

Just days after she requested information about her biological sisters, Mrs. Witt's mother-in-law died, and her brother was hospitalized. She immediately flew to Knoxville, Tenn. "Our emotional boat was loaded and about to tip over," she said. "Through it all I learned that God gives more strength than I ever knew I had.

While in Knoxville, a neighbor from Fort Worth, Texas, read over the telephone to her a letter from the Department of Human Services confirming the sisters' relationship.

"Driving back home to Fort Worth, we were so excited," Mrs. Witt said. "We also had one of those reflective moments when you realize that God is holding you through it all."

She will return to Tennessee at the end of October for an official family reunion.

"We all grew up with brothers -- great brothers -- but we secretly wished for sisters," she said. "Our dream came true."