



# BAPTIST PRESS

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November 17, 1988

88-184

Land notes increased  
Baptist social involvement

By Pat Cole

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Southern Baptists now feel free to address social issues because they no longer bear the shame of racial segregation, the head of the denomination's moral concerns agency claimed.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, told students at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary that Southern Baptists were reluctant to speak out on social issues because of the fear of being criticized for their positions on race.

"I think we at least had the decency at some level of consciousness to be ashamed of the segregation captivity of our churches for most of our history," he said. "We were not able to apply our ethical position on social issues until we were liberated from that."

Land addressed two student-led sessions -- Student Evangelical Forum and the Ethics Luncheon -- and lectured in Christian ethics classes at the Louisville, Ky., school. His Nov. 16-17 visit to Southern's campus was his first speaking engagement at a Southern Baptist institution since assuming the Christian Life Commission post in late October.

In addition to overcoming embarrassment over the race question, Land said, a different understanding of the separation of church and state has caused a "sudden upsurge" in political involvement by Southern Baptists. "I think the separation of church and state was used as an excuse for not getting involved as much as it was a conviction over whether we should be involved," he explained.

Much Southern Baptist social involvement is "defensive rather than offensive," Land acknowledged. Much of it, he said, stems from social issues such as abortion, homosexuality and pornography being brought to the forefront by society and the courts.

While Southern Baptists and the nation have made progress in race relations, racism remains a problem, Land said, pledging to make race relations a "high profile agenda" at the Christian Life Commission.

A racially-mixed society is beneficial to both blacks and whites, he said: "I fear that most Southern Baptists look upon race relations as a one-way street and that it is only beneficial to blacks. In fact, it is beneficial to everyone. There is a black perspective on many issues that we are never going to truly understand as Southern Baptists until they are part of the warp and woof of our church life."

Questioned about the economic disadvantages of minorities, Land said a significant number of minorities have been able to move into the middle class, but he said the economic plight of others is getting worse.

The Christian Life Commission will seek to "raise awareness that not everybody starts off on an equal footing," he said, adding churches and society need to "intervene to try to redress that imbalance."

Land also endorsed spending "significant amounts of our society's wealth" to strengthen family structures, provide nutritional programs and improve educational opportunities for minorities. However, he opposes affirmative action programs that give hiring preference to minorities who are less qualified than non-minority applicants, he said.

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Affirmative action is "in the end prejudice, and I think it perpetuates prejudice," he explained. Such programs foster the belief that minorities only advance because of their minority status, he said.

During his campus visit, Land addressed other moral concerns:

-- Sexism. Land said he favors equal rights for women in the work place and in the political arena, and he pledged to "oppose sexism in every quarter." He is against "ordaining women to pastoral authority in the local church," he said, but he added he has "no problem" with women serving in other ministerial capacities and in denominational leadership roles. He noted, however, that the ordination issue is not a program statement of the Christian Life Commission.

-- Abortion. He stated opposition to abortion except to save the life of the mother. The Christian Life Commission will encourage churches and associations to develop abortion alternatives and crisis pregnancy centers, he said.

-- AIDS. The commission will try to help stop the spread of AIDS by encouraging people to follow a "Christian sexual lifestyle defined as a monogamous heterosexual relationship within the confines of marriage," he noted.

-- National defense. He advocated a military posture of "peace through strength." Land said American military strength was responsible for the signing of this year's Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union, which reduces the number of nuclear missiles in Europe.

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Louisiana Baptists  
up budget, hear governor

By Oscar Hoffmeyer Jr.

Baptist Press  
11/17/88

BATON ROUGE, La. (BP)--Louisiana Baptists increased their budget for 1989, which included an increase in the national Cooperative Program unified budget percentage; re-elected the president; and heard a report from the state's governor on his commitments to moral stands.

The 1989 budget of \$15.9 million is an increase of \$300,000 over the current budget. The percentage to the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program was increased from 34.75 to 35 percent of all receipts except funding of the Southern Baptist retirement program for ministers. That total should be \$5,454,785.

Calvin Phelps, pastor of First Baptist Church of Winnfield, was re-elected president by acclamation for a second one-year term. Other officers are James Garner, pastor of First Baptist Church in Bogalusa, first vice president, and Lee Fogleman, a layman from Broadmoor Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, second vice president.

During his president's address, Phelps called for continued attention to the main goal of Louisiana Baptists, developing the Bold Mission Thrust global missions/evangelism campaign.

The agenda "does not allow for controversy and other distractions that divert energies from the main task," he said.

While differences exists, he noted a common bond includes "uncompromising commitment to Jesus Christ, unquestioned allegiance to God's word, concern for the lost, opposition to sin, uncommon devotion to each other and unusual compassion for the helpless."

Louisiana Gov. Buddy Roemer thanked Louisiana Baptists for their prayers and support during the past year in his efforts to bring education and economic reforms: "I thank you for being involved. Moral stands by citizens and their involvement in government is what makes government beneficial to all citizens.

"You should not try to control government, but to influence it."

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In a resolution, messengers commended Roemer "for his stand against increased legalized gambling as a solution for revenue enhancement and that he be encouraged to stand firm in leading the legislature to reject all efforts to utilize gambling as a revenue-raising measure."

During the final session, messengers were presented 13 resolutions on subjects including gambling, off-track betting, media representation of Christianity, focus on the family, illegal use of/abuse of drugs, priesthood of the believer and "celebration of cooperation."

The resolution on priesthood of the believer notes the doctrine is a necessary foundation to Baptist congregational church polity in which authority, under the lordship of Christ, resides in the local congregation. An amendment was defeated to make the resolution conform to a Southern Baptist Convention resolution approved in June.

The resolution on Louisiana Baptists' "celebration of cooperation" calls for a commitment "as manifestations of our denominational unity and vision for the future under the lordship of Christ" and continued recognition of the Cooperative Program and spreading the Christian gospel.

Lloyd Elder, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, speaker during the final session, followed the theme of constructing buildings. "We're building God's house by the design set out by Jesus Christ. We start the life-building process by hearing the words of God," he said.

Stephen No, executive director of the Korean Baptist Convention, thanked Louisiana Baptists for their leadership in mission partnership projects during the past two years. "We look forward to the teams scheduled to come to Korea next May for the 100th anniversary of our convention, when we will have crusades in more than 500 churches," he said.

A total of 1,351 people registered, including 1,029 messengers.

About 200 people attended the first pre-convention pastors' conference Nov. 14. Organizers included Tommy French, pastor of Jefferson Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, who said the meeting was organized for fellowship and preaching.

French was elected president. Darryl Hoychick, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Eunice, was elected vice president, and Jim Wolf, pastor of Cedar Baptist Church in Archibald, was elected secretary.

Speakers during the three-hour meeting included David Hankins, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Lake Charles; Jimmy Draper, pastor of First Baptist Church in Euless, Texas; and Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission in Nashville.

The 1989 convention will be at Horseshoe Drive Baptist Church in Alexandria, Nov. 13-15.

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Ohio Baptists mirror U.S.,  
elevate veep to presidency

Baptist Press  
11/17/88

DAYTON, Ohio (BP)--Ohio Baptists mirrored the U.S. electorate Nov. 10, when they elected their vice president to a term as president.

Darrel Gabbard, two-term first vice president of the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio, was elected to the convention's top post during its annual meeting in Dayton. Gabbard, pastor of First Baptist Church in Perrysburg, a Toledo suburb, is the first convention president from the northern part of the state in two decades.

Ohio Baptists registered another first by electing Gary Frost as the first black pastor to one of the top three offices. Frost, pastor of Rising Star Baptist Church in Youngstown, is the new first vice president. W.A. Ferguson, pastor of Crestview Baptist Church in Dayton, was elected second vice president.

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The convention put a temporary hold on budget increases.

For each of the past 14 years, the Ohio convention has increased the percentage of its budget receipts it sends to Southern Baptist Convention causes by one-half percent. But the 1989 budget will allocate 42 percent of its receipts from the churches -- the same percentage as the 1988 budget -- to the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program unified budget.

When it recommended the hold, the Ohio Baptist executive board indicated it hopes the percentage to SBC causes can be increased by one-half percent again in 1990. Ohio Baptists are moving toward a 50-50 distribution of funds between state and SBC ventures.

Convention officials reported 309 Ohio congregations are giving more to the Cooperative Program this year than last. But another 238 are giving less this year than last.

The decreases have caused projected statewide receipts to fall short of the amount on which budget advances could be based, they said. Departments of ministry in the state convention also will receive temporary budget restraints in 1989.

The 1989 Ohio Baptist budget is \$5,302,086, of which Ohio churches are expected to contribute \$3,117,919. The balance primarily is to come from the Southern Baptist Home Mission and Sunday School boards.

If the convention meets its budget, 42 percent of the receipts from churches will yield \$1,309,526 to Southern Baptist causes around the world. Special home and foreign mission offerings are expected to produce \$858,370.

The Ohio convention registered a record 1,292 messengers and visitors at its Dayton meeting.

After a sermon on the need for bringing people to faith in Christ, SBC President Jerry Vines met several Ohio daily newspaper religion editors for a brief question-and-answer period. In response to a reporter's query, Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., said he did not know of anything to keep him from being a candidate for re-election to the SBC presidency next year.

Wayne E. Ward, professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., used the annual theological address to the convention to report on the new divinity schools being established at Baptist colleges and universities. These new divinity schools, one already established and others expected to open in the near future, offer degrees directly competitive with seminary programs, he said.

In the future, more students will attend classes at off-campus seminary training centers than on the home campus, he predicted. These factors will have an influence on seminary enrollment, he added.

Ward, who has been on the Southern faculty since 1951, also said Southern Baptist seminaries are responding to concerns today that should have been addressed earlier without pressure. Faculties are being widened to include professors with more theologically conservative outlooks, he explained, also noting speakers are being brought to the campuses who represent the inerrantist position on the Bible. Seminaries are emphasizing more evangelism in missions, and more students are volunteering for missions, he said.

A resolution paid tribute to the late Ray E. Roberts, who died this year. Roberts was the first executive secretary of the Ohio convention, from 1954 to 1980. He also was second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Another resolution opposed the move to bring casino gambling to Ohio.

The 1990 convention will meet Nov. 14-16 in suburban Columbus.

CORRECTION: Please change the sixth paragraph of the 11/15/88 BP story titled "Police suspect murder in missionary's death" to read:

The Joneses were missionaries for 32 years in Zimbabwe. They lived in the country, formerly called Rhodesia, during the guerrilla war against white minority rule and pioneered Southern Baptist work in the city of Salisbury, now called Harare.

Thanks,  
Baptist Press

Baptists help refugees  
in 'unnecessary' villages

By Craig Bird

Baptist Press  
11/17/88

GAZANKULU, South Africa (BP)--Aid, both physical and spiritual, is touching the lives of thousands of refugees fleeing Mozambique into the South African homeland of Gazankulu.

The most visible symbol of that aid is a large white truck with the emblem of Xhurani Baptist Center on the side. Its boxy shape contrasts with the soft outlines of a village of round mud and thatch huts, of discarded tin cans and cardboard boxes and plastic bags -- a village that knows neither running water nor electricity.

Under normal circumstances, the truck would not be there, but neither would the hungry refugees, who depend on it to bring them food to fend off starvation and clothes to neutralize the chill of winter.

These people are hundreds of miles from their own homes and their own fields, unable to raise their own food because armies and rebel groups in Mozambique kill each other and civilians, and troops torch crops and blow up bridges.

But the village and truck are not unique, or even unusual. People in thousands of flimsy villages in Chad and Sudan and Angola, and many other places where wars have raged, await either death or such a truck.

Their inhabitants are labeled "political refugees" by sociologists, "malnourished" by relief organizations, "hot copy" by journalists and "pathetic" by Westerners who happen upon them or learn of them through the news media.

While Christians around the world have prayed for rain to end Africa's drought, wars on the continent continue to create more refugees, who in turn produce the need for more villages and more trucks destined for locations not even found on most maps. Recent history indicates people are more willing to aid the victims of drought -- something they cannot control -- than the victims of war.

The tragedy of Mozambique represents the plight of refugees around the world. The languages they speak, the food they eat and the architecture of their pasted-together villages may vary. But the emotional current runs steady: the bloated bellies, the peeling skin and thinning hair of babies, the slumped shoulders of the husband and father who can't find a job, the frantic efforts of a mother to gather firewood and edible leaves from fields long ago picked clean by others like her.

And most of all, the eyes -- eyes of hopelessness, fear, anger. Those are the eyes that look for the truck on a typical day in the relief camp.

Among Gazankulu's 23 camps, the Baptist-sponsored truck typically generates its own crowd. But Peter Khoza and Denis Toko, two African Christians who work in the Baptist relief project, go to the houses away from the truck's path and announce their arrival over a bullhorn. They don't want anyone to miss what they are giving: food and clothing for today, salvation in Jesus Christ for eternity.

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When the crowd is seated -- men on one side, women and children on the other -- Khoza leads them in communal singing. The women and children sing enthusiastically from the first note, but many of the men sit silent. Khoza cajoles them until everyone joins in.

Rosa, Khoza's wife, takes the children to one side for Bible stories while he preaches to the adults. The evangelistic message lasts about 20 minutes and concludes with an invitation to believe in Christ. Thirty-seven people indicate a desire to become Christians, a fairly typical response.

Those who respond and can read or have someone to read to them are given tracts and a mimeographed sheet with six Scripture verses. The Baptist team also enrolls them in the first lesson of a Bible correspondence course, which it will collect when it returns in two weeks and send off to be graded and returned with the next lesson.

On one particular day, two men and a woman stand nervously before the crowd to recite the six verses from memory. Amid cheers and congratulations from their family, friends and neighbors, they receive a Bible from Khoza.

New Christians who display leadership skills will be invited to two weeks of intensive training in how to share their faith and lead Bible study, the first step toward organizing a church in the camp.

After Toko, Khoza's partner, teaches about health and sanitation, the team gives out clothing. Shoes are so highly valued that even single shoes without mates are prized.

Southern Baptist hunger funds used by the team are restricted to buying food and the equipment necessary to distribute it. So Baptist churches in South Africa, primarily black churches, have collected the clothing. Even soap is purchased with special donations.

"When we tell Southern Baptists that 100 percent of their gifts to the hunger funds go to feed hungry people, we mean 100 percent," explains missionary Ed Moses of Orlando, Fla. Moses is the closest Southern Baptist missionary to Gazankulu. He drives four hours each way one week a month to help in the distribution.

Mealy meal, a fine-ground corn meal that is the basic food, and supplemental foods such as peanuts and mixed beans are poured into pans and baskets as people file by the distribution point.

Meanwhile Moses, a pharmacist-turned-church developer, holds a clinic under a shade tree beside the truck. One 7-year-old girl has a leg wound with gangrene. Three adults hold her down while Moses cleans out the wound. Later a baby boy is brought to Moses with puss draining out of his ear.

Most of the cases are more routine -- scabies, eye infections, malaria. "Clean water and soap would cure most of this," Moses points out. But he knows the closest piped water is more than half a mile away, and people without jobs cannot buy soap. Sanitary toilets also are non-existent.

Moses likes to say that Jesus healed the blind with a touch, and he and other Christians can heal with a touch of eye ointment. But there are so many eyes and so few tubes of medicine, and even fewer hands to dispense the medicine.

Less than three hours after arriving, the Baptist team is ready to roll out. More than 700 people have received food and clothing. Another 150 have received basic health care. Three have new Bibles, and 37 have started a new life as Christians.

The effort will be repeated at two different camps the next day and three more the day after. Each camp is visited every two weeks.

The Mozambican refugees in Gazankulu are more fortunate than some, if fortunate can describe people who have been driven from their homes by a war they neither asked for nor understand, people who must rely upon others to feed them.

At least there is a truck driven by Christians who know the way to their village.

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

Mozambican relief work  
produces first church

By Craig Bird

GAZANKULU, South Africa (BP)--An African mechanic, a village chief and a Baptist relief program have produced a strong church in a corner of South Africa, hundreds of miles from any previous Baptist work.

Dinga Baptist Church averaged an attendance of 35 adults and 100 children within 10 weeks of its start. That included five candidates for baptism and 18 people baptized in churches.

Pastor Peter Khoza intentionally delays baptizing new converts who come from a variety of backgrounds. "We want to solidify their faith and their understanding of what it means to be a Baptist," he explains.

Surprisingly, Dinga Church, the first to grow out of the relief project, began in the village of Dinga, not in one of the 23 refugee camps where Baptists minister.

"The chief in Dinga has been unusually supportive of the refugees," Khoza points out. "He has allowed them to build permanent houses and to integrate into the community."

Last January Fabian, a Mozambican refugee employed as a mechanic in a local driving school, told Khoza of his concern for the many spiritually needy people in Dinga. The refugee aid program is not allowed outside recognized government camps, but spiritual aid has no such limits. Fabian offered his home as a site for a Bible study.

Khoza seized the opportunity to establish "a fixed work which would reach both local people and refugees -- and would not fall apart if the refugees left."

A Bible study was started, and the congregation had its own permanent building by mid-April.

Khoza and Southern Baptist missionaries Ed Moses and Mark Morris are committed to starting more churches in the area.

But the mobility of the refugees offers real challenges.

"When someone makes a profession of faith, we get the name and, if he or she can read, we give them tracts to read and to read to others," Moses says. "Then, when we return to that camp in two weeks, we call the names of all those who made decisions before and enroll them in discipleship training. But so often they will have gone to another camp or even left Gazankulu completely by the time we get back."

But leaders are being identified and trained, and Bible studies are being started wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ can get a foothold through the Baptist program.

As the Bible is read and discussed around hundreds of campfires, Baptists hope it won't be long before Dinga has many sister Baptist churches to help spread the gospel in Gazankulu.

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

Wife of disaster relief  
director dies at home

By Steve Barber

Baptist Press  
11/17/88

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--Joyce Byler, 62, wife of Cameron Byler, the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission's disaster relief and Baptist Men's director, died in her sleep Nov. 14 at the couple's home in Memphis, Tenn.

Mrs. Byler was born in Wharton, Texas, and held degrees from Howard Payne College in Brownwood, Texas, and Texas Tech University in Lubbock. The Bylers served Southern Baptists in Texas and Alaska before coming to the Brotherhood Commission in 1985.

She was a member of the First Baptist Church of Memphis, where she taught a senior women's Sunday school class.

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Survivors include her husband; a son, Chris Byler of San Antonio; a daughter, Barbara Garland of Salina, Kan.; three grandchildren; and three sisters.

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Witness becomes  
Baptist minister

By Sheila Sullivan

Baptist Press  
11/17/88

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--As a third-generation Jehovah's Witness-turned-Southern Baptist minister, Paul Blizard, now leads a crusade against the Watchtower leadership he once followed.

"This is not a hate campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses," Blizard said. "I don't want to see them tarred and feathered and run out of town. But a Jehovah's Witness teaches another gospel."

Blizard, a theology student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., speaks to churches, television audiences and newspapers about dangers he sees in his former faith.

He recently appeared on the "Oprah Winfrey Show", one of three guests who said they had suffered religious abuse.

"I'm pretty well known among cult ministers as a classic abuse case," Blizard said.

His primary purpose in appearing on the show was "to expose the organization," he said. "Secondly, it was to reach out to Jehovah's Witnesses who are alienated from religion -- who have nothing to do with religion."

But public speaking isn't Blizard's only ministry. He is associate pastor of Shively Heights Baptist Church in Louisville and operates his ministry to Jehovah's Witnesses from there.

The congregation "really caught the vision of what could be done," he said. The church pays for his postage and special phone line. That phone, a resource for information forbidden by Jehovah's Witness leaders, rings 40 to 50 times daily, Blizard said.

Blizard spends 40 hours per week answering phone calls and letters from across the country, he said, noting he received more than 500 letters and had one Christian salvation experience reported since his appearance on Winfrey's show.

Most of his personal counseling is done with people who have left or been kicked out of the Watchtower society, the Jehovah's Witness fellowship. Blizard hopes to work with more television projects, support groups and eventually a network of information phone lines, he said: "I want to help people move from religion to relationship with God through Christ. Being a Jehovah's Witness is repressive and oppressive. Being a Christian means freedom and openness."

While Christianity does not involve bondage to an organization, Blizard said the Watchtower claims to be the only earthly authority for God. Witnesses, he added, are told everyone outside of the society will go to hell.

Salvation will be earned by 144,000 Witnesses from a punitive God, not given by grace, Blizard stressed. Witnesses wait for the destruction of the world, which has been predicted by the Watchtower several times, he said.

Blizard quit high school in 1971 "because the world was going to end in 1975" and went into full-time work as a Witness.

"I expected to see Manhattan sink into the ocean. I even had a spot picked out to watch it," he explained. "I was disappointed (when it didn't happen). The elders explained it all away. We licked our wounds and went on."

During his service at world headquarters in New York, he began to question silently the leaders' practices and beliefs. Later, after returning to his local congregation in Brady, Texas, he expressed his doubts to his father--more--

"My father told the elders of the congregation. My wife and I were brought before a judicial committee and tried for apostasy," Blizard said.

A record of the trial was put in the couple's permanent file for reference. That file still exists, Blizard said, and is constantly updated. "I have been threatened a couple of times," he added.

While the couple "repented" for the two years following the trial, their daughter Jenny was born. So was a new brand kind of trouble.

Jenny had a rare blood disease and needed a blood transfusion when she was a few weeks old. The Blizards prayed, then refused the transfusion because it was against their religion.

"I thought it was against God's law. I thought this would show God I really loved him," Blizard said.

A court order charged the couple with child abuse and neglect and guaranteed Jenny a transfusion. She lived until age 6, and then died when a liver donor could not be found.

Because Blizard had refused to kidnap Jenny at the elders' request and the transfusion occurred, life became more difficult as a Witness. Jenny was shunned by the congregation as contaminated, he reported.

He and his wife began to question their beliefs more deeply, eventually buying an American Standard Bible, which was forbidden by the Watchtower.

After months of searching, he sought help from a local Baptist minister.

The Blizards eventually were "disfellowshipped for conduct unbecoming a Christian," he said, because they had joined a Baptist Church.

"We became Christians. I felt like I was being pushed by God to jump right in the middle of things," Blizard said. "I feel like I have a mission to work with this ministry."

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Sheila Sullivan is a communications intern at Southern Seminary.

Missouri pastor serves  
despite 'inconvenience'

By Susan Thornsberry

Baptist Press  
11/17/88

NEW FLORENCE, Mo. (BP)--The love, appreciation and admiration members of New Florence Baptist Church feel for their pastor, Philip Hamilton, has no end. They describe him as energetic, compassionate, a man of faith.

New Florence, Mo., like many rural Midwestern communities, has seen some difficult times. Located about halfway between St. Louis and Columbia, Mo., the town found itself bypassed when Interstate 70 was built. Economic difficulties resulted in shops closing and people moving away. That, according to some residents, has caused feelings of apathy.

But Hamilton senses great potential for ministry in the town of 731 people. Since becoming pastor of the church a year ago, he has helped members expand their ministry.

"He's a great preacher," noted Tommy Barrett, director of missions for Bear Creek, Cuivre and Salt River Baptist associations. "He always sees the positive side and offers great suggestions with great wisdom that far exceeds his years. He has planted in his congregation a vision of what they're capable of doing, and I think he'll be very successful in leading them as they meet their goals."

The church and association also benefit from Hamilton's musical contributions. "He plays beautifully the guitar and has a well-trained, beautiful voice," Barrett commented. In fact, the association's weekly radio program, "Here's Hope," features Hamilton playing the guitar and singing the lead-in and sign-off hymn.

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All this from a young man in his first full-time pastorate who has been blind since birth.

Yet Hamilton is quick to downplay his blindness, which he calls an "inconvenience," not a handicap.

At first, a congregation may not know what to expect from a pastor who is blind. Hamilton, a happy, outgoing person, encourages people to treat him like they would anyone else.

In fact, he said, being blind can sometimes be a strength: "It helps me as a pastor, in my role of being an equipper. In many churches, the pastor has to do it all, but with me, they know I need transportation." He uses that as an opportunity to help train members, for example, as they accompany him on hospital visitation.

Being blind has given Hamilton an enhanced appreciation of the sense of hearing. He cherishes the joy of listening to Scripture.

"I think one of the most important things during a service is reading of the word (Bible) and it being read well," emphasized Hamilton, who uses an expressive voice when reading from his Braille Bible.

Hamilton was born in Springfield, Mo., the eldest of three children. His parents decided to move across the state to St. Louis so he could attend the Missouri School for the Blind, and the family could continue to be together.

"I'm blessed with a very special family," he pointed out. "My parents always treated me pretty much like my brother and sister. For a long time, I didn't know blind people were any different from anyone else."

His parents also provided a strong Christian home for their children. Active members in St. Louis' Southwest Baptist Church, the family was thrilled when Hamilton felt the call to full-time pastoral ministry.

After graduating from Oklahoma Baptist University, where he majored in church music, Hamilton attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, studying to become a pastor.

Following graduation, he returned to Southwest Church, where he became assistant to pastor Rudy Pulido.

"He has a compassion for people and a unique commitment to the Lord that makes him well suited" to the pastoral care field, said Pulido. "He's a joy to work with."

In December 1986, Hamilton became New Florence Church's supply pastor. Eight months later, he accepted the call to become its full-time pastor.

"I want the Lord to use me to build the kind of fellowship where people can be real and be happy; yet when they're going through difficult times, where they can say so and know that their brothers and sisters will be there, and, of course, know the Lord will be there, too," Hamilton explained.

Looking to the future, he added, "I hope my own example will encourage others -- despite any 'inconvenience' -- to minister in the ways they feel called."

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Thornsberry is a correspondent for Word & Way, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.