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NATIONAL OFFICE  
SBC Executive Committee  
901 Commerce #750  
Nashville, Tennessee 37203  
(615) 244-2355  
Alvin C. Shackelford, Director  
Dan Martin, News Editor  
Marv Knox, Feature Editor

**BUREAUS**

ATLANTA *Jim Newton, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 873-4041*  
DALLAS *Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 511 N. Akard, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) 720-0550*  
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WASHINGTON *Stan L. Hastey, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226*

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Journeyman stint yields  
missionary career of concern

By Pam Parry

BALTIMORE (BP)--Most people who served in Vietnam in the 1970s wish they could forget the experience, but Southern Baptist missionary Linda Pegram wants to remember.

Pegram, of Joppa, Mo., was a missionary journeyman to South Vietnam in 1972-74. A love and concern God gave Pegram for the suffering in that nation has compelled her toward and throughout eight years of career missions service.

Pegram was appointed a career missionary by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in 1980 and is director of Baptist refugee ministries at the Philippine refugee processing center on Bataan Peninsula. She now is on furlough in Maryland and working toward a master's degree in public health at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Her missions journey, which she described as "step-by-step obedience," began with a deep love for the Vietnamese people and their customs.

"I have a dream of going back to Vietnam one day," Pegram said. "God is the one who took me to Vietnam. He prepared my heart by giving me so much love for those people, and just because the government changed, it doesn't mean I am not in love with the people of Vietnam."

Although Pegram was in the United States when South Vietnam fell into communist hands in April 1975, she believed God opened a door for her to minister to the Vietnamese, even though she could not return to their land. She worked with Vietnamese refugees at Fort Chaffee, Ark., where she taught English as a second language and coordinated information on American school systems.

Pegram also was a Foreign Mission Board volunteer refugee worker in Thailand, a counselor to Indochinese refugees and a case worker for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's refugee resettlement office in Atlanta prior to her career missions appointment. She was appointed to Hong Kong as a refugee worker before being transferred to the Philippines.

"The thing I like least in the world today is to see somebody else suffer," said Pegram. "I probably would not have gone to live in refugee camps except I saw God lead and prepare me.

"The essence of being a refugee is misery, uncertainty, depression. Refugees are very easily victimized; it's a very difficult way to live. They have lost control of their lives; they even have to get permission to leave the camp. It's hard for adults to live like that.

"Refugees need to be treated as if they matter. These people need to feel they are important human beings, and it's a natural response as a Christian to treat people with respect."

Refugees need someone who will listen to what they have been through, she said.

Serving as an advocate for the refugees with the Philippine government is another aspect of Pegram's ministry. Southern Baptists were the only agency of several at the center, which houses about 15,000 refugees, recently given an award by the Philippine government commending the "spiritual guidance" they provide. In 1987, 300 refugees were baptized at the center, she said.

Refugees also need to be prepared for coming to the United States, she said: "They are so anxious to learn to live in this country, and they want to learn from Americans. It's pretty frightening to go to a place and not know how to live. They are such easy victims, they need someone to talk with and to check things with."

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Pegram, who has been stateside since April, is not certain how her studies in primary education at Johns Hopkins will fit in with her current refugee assignment. But she is confident God intends to use it.

"I think that God is equipping me for the next 10 years," she said, adding it is interesting that in her 40th year of life she finds herself "in a very intensive program that probably will change the direction of my whole career. I won't call it a mid-life crisis but a joy gift of God.

"The name 'Johns Hopkins' will do a lot that the name 'missionary' won't. It will make me acceptable on the government level."

Many people in poverty overseas haven't been educated in how to keep themselves healthy, she said. Christian service in health-care education is vital, because the responsibility usually lies with the government, which doesn't have the finances, personnel or knowledge to do it, she said.

"After about 12 years overseas, I am convinced that the only way the missionaries are enabled is through prayer. Our education doesn't always do it, although education is important. Our hard work doesn't always do it, although I have never seen people work harder. All of this simply is not enough to change people's hearts.

"It's an empowering, and I think it's honoring the Lord."

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Missouri congregation opens its  
doors to 90 Romanian immigrants

By Susan Thornsberry

Baptist Press  
12/12/88

UNION, Mo. (BP)--As the newcomers to America gathered around the table with their new friends, all bowed their heads to thank God for their many blessings. Then they enjoyed a feast of turkey, dressing, corn, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie -- and beautiful Romanian pastries.

Such was the scene recently when about 90 Romanian immigrants accepted an invitation for Thanksgiving dinner with the members of First Baptist Church of Union, Mo.

The Romanians, most of whom are related to each other, fled the communist country to come to the United States. They arrived at various times over the past six years and now live in the Union area.

Thanksgiving was "something very special" for Esther Saleniuc, whose parents escaped Romania and come to Missouri only a month ago. "I thought I'd never see them again," said Saleniuc, who fled Romania in 1982.

"In Romania it's so hard to live ... to buy food," her father told her as he looked in disbelief at all the tables at the church, filled with food.

In addition to thanking God for the bountiful Thanksgiving feast, the Romanians and members of First Baptist also expressed gratitude to God for leading them into a unique alliance.

Having outgrown Saleniuc's basement, where they had been holding church services, the Romanian group recently accepted First Baptist's invitation to hold worship services in the church's family life center.

The Romanian congregation had been praying for larger facilities. They believe God steered them to the state Driver's License Bureau, where First Baptist's deacon chairman, Jerry Kreft, administers driving tests.

Several Romanians had entered the bureau to get their drivers' licenses when they met Kreft. "He asked us how we came here, if we're Christians, if we like it here," recalled Mrs. Saleniuc. "Then he said he was a Christian and I was so glad -- a police officer and a Christian."

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Kreft was pleased to learn that the Romanians attended church and invited them to visit his church. Eight of them visited one Sunday night and, later in the week, received Kreft and Pastor Ed Gibson as guests in their home.

As friendships developed, the Romanians attended a church fellowship and toured the church building. Showing them the family life center, Gibson mentioned the possibility of the Romanian congregation using the facilities.

Upon a recommendation from the deacons, the church unanimously extended the offer. Receiving the invitation, the Romanian congregation, led by Pastor Larry Bosancu, affirmed the offer was a direct answer to their prayers.

More than 80 Romanians currently attend services on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings and Thursday evenings. The new facility is "nice and big," said Saleniuc. "We're glad we have a place to worship. We praise the Lord for being able to use it. The people there are friendly and helpful, too."

For example, the church made 50 copies of a Romanian songbook, for which a local corporation donated binders.

The church also helps supply new immigrants with clothes and food baskets.

The Romanian church, in turn, has proved to be a blessing to members of First Baptist. The congregation's involvement with the Romanians has "been like a revival," Gibson observed. "Our people can't wait to get involved; it's brought missions right to us."

Getting to know the Romanian Christians has "made us more appreciative of the freedoms we do have," he said.

"The Romanians really love the Lord," Kreft added. "To see the smiles on their faces and the sparkles in their eyes makes me proud to be able to help these people."

Gibson particularly has been impressed with the dedication of the Romanians, whom he describes as "very spiritual."

Before entering the room for worship services, each one kneels and prays. Men and boys sit on one side; women and girls, their heads covered, sit on the other side.

All ages meet together for three hours on Sunday mornings. They have many times of prayer, during which they kneel; they stand while reading the Bible.

The two churches' partnership is a unique situation, according to Southern Baptist home missionary Alexa Popovici, who ministers to Romanians in Chicago. This is the first time a Baptist church has opened its facilities to an already existing Romanian church, Popovici told Gibson.

The group in Union also is the largest evangelical group of Romanians in Missouri, he said.

"We come for the freedom," said Saleniuc, who explained that believers in Romania face many job restrictions. A Christian there cannot be a police officer, journalist or government employee and usually cannot be a teacher, either.

So it is for a better life that many Romanians leave the Eastern Bloc country, often by crossing a river into Yugoslavia. Although several received permission to leave Romania, most simply escaped. Often a man will escape and come to the United States, then request that his wife and children be permitted to join him.

Even now, several men in Union prayerfully await the arrival of their wives and children.

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

Texas layman leads  
homebound ministry

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (BP)--Reading Scripture to an Alzheimer's patient, trimming trees around a widow's house, delivering large-print Bibles to nursing home residents and visiting a score of homebound senior adults is all in a day's work for Mitchell Parrish of Western Heights Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.

Parrish began his volunteer ministry to the elderly three years ago after a long career in the retail business. When his company abandoned its long-standing policy of closing on Sundays, the executive took early retirement and moved from San Antonio to Waco.

"A couple of weeks after we joined Western Heights, I went to have a talk with the pastor," he said. "I had prayed that God would use me someplace, that I wouldn't just waste time."

Parrish told Pastor Charles Dixon about his concern for the elderly shut-ins, and the pastor agreed that a ministry to Waco's homebound and nursing home residents was needed.

"I just started with the people on our Wednesday night prayer list, and from there it grew slowly," Parrish said. He now visits 100 to 130 people each week, and he directs a half-dozen other people in the Bible distribution and homebound visitation ministry.

The retired executive demands discipline and commitment from prospective volunteers interested in ministry to the homebound elderly. Realizing the nursing home residents and homebound people look forward expectantly to regular visits, Parrish stresses the importance of consistency and requires a firm commitment to weekly visits.

"These people have had enough disappointments in life," he said. "We need to be faithful and dependable."

Parrish takes a no-nonsense approach to every aspect of the homebound ministry, from personal visits, to Scripture distribution, to Bible studies.

"I take everything about this seriously because it's serious to them (the elderly)," he said. "I want to have quality visits. I'm not interested in just killing time. I want to visit with them about the things of the Lord, read Scripture with them and pray with them."

A major part of Parrish's on-going ministry is giving away large-print Bibles and Scripture portions, as well as copies of the Open Windows devotional guide and Mature Living, the Southern Baptist senior adult periodical. In three years, he had distributed about 250 Bibles and untold volumes of inspirational literature.

"I only give Bibles to those who agree to read them," he said. Other than an initial appeal to his church three years ago, Parrish never has solicited funds for the literature. Money is provided by the Sunday school classes and concerned individuals who contribute to a designated account at Western Heights Church.

Parrish leads three hour-long weekday Bible studies at Waco nursing homes, and he alternates Sundays with four other teachers in leading a nursing home Sunday school class.

In the past year, Western Heights Church also has pioneered a reading program for mentally impaired patients in four Waco nursing homes, and Parrish is seeking volunteer readers for other convalescent centers. Although they are incapable of conversing, Parrish said, many of the patients seem responsive to prayer and Bible reading.

That concern for the mental and physical well-being of senior adults is characteristic of Parrish, his pastor said. Dixon praised the deacon's commitment, compassion and dedication to Waco's confined elderly population. "He is an exceptional individual. He really stays on top of the needs of the people he visits."

For Parrish, meeting needs has translated into repairing clocks, cutting grass, bringing potting soil to a 96-year-old indoor gardener and delivering scrap lumber to a wheelchair-bound man who still wanted to "putter around" in his woodworking shop.

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"Little things mean a lot," he said. "It doesn't take me very long at all, but it's a big thing to them."

Because of his willingness to do the "little things" for the homebound elderly, Parrish has led two senior adults to faith in Christ and has helped to strengthen the faith of countless others.

"That's just what the Bible tells us we should do," Parrish said, but he added not everyone is emotionally suited to nursing home visitation. Still, he insisted, a church can have an effective ministry to shut-in senior adults if just one person is committed.

"There must be the desire on someone's part to give of himself to the people and be faithful to them," he said. "If a church wants to do this kind of thing, they should start small and go to one nursing home. Allow for slow growth, set goals and then do it."

Gradual growth has been one key to the success of the homebound ministry at Western Heights Church.

"The Lord has added people to my list as I've been able to take care of them," Parrish said. "They've taught me to be patient, to take one day at a time."

Although he has allowed the ministry to develop slowly, it has not developed without design. Parrish has a five-year plan with definite goals: enlist 75 volunteers to visit the elderly each week; sponsor 15 nursing home Bible studies; operate reading programs in each of Waco's nursing homes; and distribute Bibles to every elderly Waco resident who needs one.

Parrish casually dismisses suggestions that his work is extraordinary.

"People ask me if I get depressed. I never get depressed. I wake up every morning excited about who I'll visit," he said. "I want our church to be known as a ministering church."

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Seminary is a family affair  
for brothers at Southwestern

By Elizabeth Watson

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12/12/88

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--As far as Richard, Thomas and Melvin Blackaby can trace their ancestry, they've had ministers in their family, including four who attended Spurgeon's College in England.

The brothers are proud of their family heritage and faith which they feel divinely called to continue through preparation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

The three sons of Henry and Marilyn Blackaby are attending Southwestern this semester. Richard, 27, is enrolled in the doctor of philosophy program. Thomas, 26, and Melvin, 23, are master of divinity students and are taking three classes together this fall.

Their father is an assistant to the president of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. Their uncle, John Hopper, is president of Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland. And their grandparents, Melvin and Carrie Wells, are former missionaries to Zambia.

Before their father went to the Home Mission Board, he was director of missions in Vancouver, British Columbia, for six years. Prior to that, he was pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, for 12 years.

"The church had about 10 members and a 'For Sale' sign out front when we moved to Saskatoon," Richard said. "Dad had to use us for everything."

The Blackaby family's cooperative and pioneering spirit has resulted in three Baptist associations made up of 20 churches and missions that grew out of Faith Baptist Church.

"We grew up involved in the church. Helping out. It really isn't surprising we all felt called to the ministry," Richard said.

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"Our parents never once pushed us into the ministry," Melvin said. "They just made the opportunities available to us for service if we wanted to participate.

"At times -- when I wasn't sure about my call -- I wanted dad to encourage me to go into the ministry. But it wasn't until after I publicly shared my desire to enter the ministry that he told me he knew all along I was called -- but he didn't want to tell me, because he wanted me to be sure it was God that was calling me, not him."

It was respect for their father that helped the Blackaby brothers withstand tremendous peer pressure in high school.

"The schools were very secular in Canada," Richard said. "It was bad enough to be a religious person to begin with -- but then to be a pastor's son.

"Canadian Baptists are seen more as a cult than anything else. So to be a Baptist minister's son was difficult for us going through school. But because we respected our father so much and believed in his teaching, we would not participate in things even though pressure was enormous."

"When we would have a question, he would ask us, 'Have you asked God about that?'" Thomas said. "That way he helped us to accept God every day."

Richard and Melvin plan to return to Canada when they complete their seminary studies. Thomas plans to serve as a foreign missionary.

But the Blackaby heritage may live on a little longer at Southwestern after these three leave.

The students' youngest brother, Norman, 21, plans to enroll at Southwestern as soon as he graduates from Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. And their only sister, 17-year-old Carrie, a student at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, feels called to missions.

"When the Christian life is real, as it is in the lives of our parents, it's not surprising that we view ministry as a lifestyle," Melvin said.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Southwestern Seminary

Disaster relief brings  
triumph over tragedy

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WESLACO, Texas (BP)--Disaster relief by Southern Baptists in the wake of Hurricane Gilbert in northeastern Mexico this fall has resulted in a continuing saga of people coming to Christ and reaching out to others.

Soon after the storm wreaked death and destruction in the San Fernando and Monterrey areas, disaster relief volunteers Jerry Bob Taylor, manager of Circle 6 Baptist Encampment near Stanton, Texas, and Isaac Torres, Texas Baptist partnership missions consultant to Mexico, witnessed to David Romero, aide to the governor of the state of Tamaulipas.

After Romero prayed to receive Christ as Lord, he exclaimed: "Why have I never heard this before? Why has my family never heard this before? Why has my governor and his wife never heard this before? I'm going home and tell my wife."

When Romero's wife, Irma, heard the gospel, she also received Christ into her life. Then Romero's mother made a profession of faith in Christ.

"It isn't customary for politicians in Mexico to express religion," said Torres. "But David put his career on the line and shared his new-found faith with a group of government leaders." One of them was his brother, Victor, who made a profession of faith in Christ.

David and Irma Romero were invited to give their testimonies at the Texas Baptist Men convention, just prior to the annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Austin in October.

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"We can't do it," they told Torres.

"Why not?" Torres asked.

"Because we're not married," Romero confessed.

"I can fix that," said Torres. "I can perform a wedding ceremony."

They made plans to be married at First Baptist Church of Weslaco, Texas, Saturday evening Nov. 26, and to be baptized the next morning.

When the Romeros arrived in Weslaco with their families and friends, Torres noticed her mother seemed in great emotional turmoil. He inquired, and she admitted her anguish and confusion. Torres shared the gospel with her, and she accepted Christ.

Afterward, she said: "I'm at peace and very happy. I came with a terrible anguish. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I accepted Christ as my personal savior, and that's the reason this is the greatest day of my life."

David and Victor Romero's mother also said it was the greatest day of her life. "I've been praying day and night for my family to have an experience and know the Lord," she said. "The joy and peace that God gives is worth it all. The world cannot give this kind of peace."

Members of First Baptist prepared for the event with a supper and wedding cake.

A nine-member band from Beaumont Baptist Church in McAllen, Texas, played and sang, and Max Guzman, pastor of Rio Bravo Baptist Church in Tamaulipas, gave a brief pre-wedding message, emphasizing the divine nature of Christian marriage which, he said, "consecrates a man and woman uniquely to each other and to God."

Then as David and Irma Romero's three daughters and other members of their family stood by, the couple recited their wedding vows and placed rings on each other's fingers as symbols of their new relationship under Christ.

"I feel like I'm in the clouds," the new Mrs. Romero said. "I never dreamed this would come to pass. Marriage takes on so much more meaning than it ever could had I not known Christ as my savior."

She said she had wanted to foster Christian faith in her children but didn't have the foundation to do so: "I feared they might follow the same course I had. But now I no longer have that fear. Now they will have the reinforcement of a Christian mother and father to help them around the pitfalls."

"Everything is beautiful, but there are so many like us who live together without the benefit of clergy," Romero added. "I want to tell them that they can have what we have."

"I look at politicians and wonder what they could be if they were Christians and how they could change the world. I believe we can help a world of people, just by sharing what the Lord has done for us. I'm willing to go anywhere to give my testimony."

After Torres baptized them following the Sunday morning services at First Baptist Church, Mrs. Romero said: "I feel so clean, so filled. I have a joy and peace I want to share with the whole world."

He added: "We came to be baptized because we understand what it means. I want this to be a testimony so other people can have the same experience we've had."

The mayor of San Fernando, who attended the wedding, has provided land for Baptists to begin two new churches in the Laguna Madre area, where some of the worst storm damage occurred.

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After Leslie Mills, pastor of First Baptist Church of Weslaco, preached on Jesus' commandment that "you must be born again," at the Sunday morning services, Jose and Elisa Torres, friends of the Romeros from Ciudad Victoria, Mexico, made a public profession of faith in Christ. They have announced that their home will be the site for beginning a new Baptist church in their city Jan. 8.

At lunch following the baptism of the Romeros, their oldest daughter, Dalia, accepted Christ.

"Only God knows how far the chain may reach as a result of Baptists' disaster relief to Mexico," said William H. Gray Jr., Texas partnership missions coordinator. "Out of the terrible destruction of Hurricane Gilbert, God's redemptive love has triumphed over tragedy."

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Carnival workers  
get church feast

By Gary W. Griffith

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DERIDDER, La. (BP)--When the fair came to town this fall, Arline Harkreader and Vickie Smith, two members at First Baptist Church of DeRidder, La., weren't interested in the roller coaster, the game booths or cotton candy. They were interested in the carnival workers.

At the end of the carnival last year, the two prayer partners believed God wanted them to do something for the carnival workers. "We discussed the fact that the people that work in the fair look so alone and left out of society," Harkreader recalls. "We prayed about it and asked the Lord not to let us be lax and let another year go by without doing something for the workers."

In August, the two women took their idea -- feed the carnival workers a meal at the local fairgrounds -- to Jerry Masters, minister of education at First Baptist. He encouraged them to "go for it," says Harkreader.

Notices were sent to Sunday school classes, asking members to sign up if they were interested in helping with the project. "The Sunday we did that, about 65 people said they wanted to do it," Harkreader says. "Everyone we talked to said, 'You know, I have always wanted to do something for those people and I didn't know what to do.'"

More than 100 church members volunteered to provide food, serve, set up tents and tables, clean up after the meal or make table decorations.

Every detail of the planning and preparation went smoothly, Harkreader says, but the carnival owners were on the road, and the church members could not contact them.

"The Lord worked all this out," Harkreader notes. "The carnival did not have a fair to go to the week before they were to come for the fair in DeRidder. And they showed up four days early, which absolutely never happens."

Harkreader and Smith met the owners, who were skeptical at first.

"I think they were wondering what in the world we were up to," Harkreader says. "We just told them we wanted to show (the carnival workers) love and respect and serve them a meal, with no strings attached.

"When we told them we would serve it out on the fairgrounds, they were interested. I don't think they would have gone anywhere else for the meal."

The church members passed out flyers with information about the meal to the carnival workers. Smith gave the information to a woman who asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"Vickie replied, 'Because we love you, and we want you to know that,'" Harkreader says. "With dead seriousness, the woman looked at the girl with her and said, 'We finally found somebody who loves us.'"

The incident summarizes the experience of most church members, Harkreader says, noting, "We wanted them to see Jesus' love through us."

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More than 100 carnival workers were fed by the church members the night before the fair opened in DeRidder.

The church members learned several valuable lessons from the project, such as seeing all people as God's children and realizing the Christian responsibility of being an instrument of God's love, Harkreader says.

"For the most part, we learned to see the carnival workers as God's children. And I don't think we had ever seen them in that light before," she acknowledges. "We had looked at them as a burden to the town when they came through. We really didn't bother to see that they were people. But we saw they are God's children just the way they are."

The effort also helped First Baptist members "realize the truth in the words to a song: 'Jesus has no hand but our hands; he has no feet but ours,'" she says.

First Baptist had no concentrated effort to evangelize the carnival workers who gathered for the meal, Harkreader says, "but as one man from our church said: 'I don't know that anybody passed out any tracts. I don't know that the Bible was quoted. But there was no doubt in those people's minds why we were there. The reason was Jesus' love.'"

At the end of the fair, Harkreader asked the carnival owners how the church could improve the effort next year. "They told us that what we did was the thing most appreciated by the workers and the same thing would be fine," she reports. "To us, that means we can go for it again. I think the carnival workers will be curious to see if we will do it again.

"The (church members) are already talking about things we should do next year. I think everyone was renewed again as to what it feels like to really be in on what God wants us to do. It's good to break a strata of society and reach out to people who are different from you.

"We will do it again. How could we not?"

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Congressman Hoyer  
feels home on the hill

By Jim Burton

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WASHINGTON (BP)--Steny Hoyer spends much of his time in a big house on a hill.

It's the U.S. House of Representatives, on Capitol Hill in Washington.

The Democrat from Maryland's fifth district brings more than political credentials to congress. The vice chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, one of only five elected Democratic leaders, also is a committed Southern Baptist layman.

"I feel that there are a lot of different ways to serve him (God)," said Hoyer, "and I felt a strong attraction to public service.

"You cannot divorce your faith and the precepts of your faith from what you do in other facets of your life. It's impossible and unethical to segregate your moral, philosophical veins grounded in your faith from what you do as a public servant."

Hoyer made a quick entry into politics, winning a Maryland state senate race in 1966, the same year he graduated from law school.

Then in 1981, he defeated 31 candidates for his congressional seat.

In 1985, he was appointed to the Helsinki Commission, which monitors human rights issues in the 39 countries that signed the Helsinki Accords in 1975. "It's human rights in most of its manifestations -- religion, free speech, communications," said Hoyer, who currently is chairman of the commission.

The Helsinki Commission has given Hoyer the opportunity to affect issues that are of personal interest, including civil rights and human rights.

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"Central to Christ's philosophy is that individuals need to be given their own freedom to act and choose," he said. "They should not be subject to oppression or guilt. Restraints, yes, so that we don't interfere with the rights of one another."

And just as Baptists championed the issues of religious freedom and separation of church and state during the formation of this country, Hoyer finds himself applying those same basic principles through the Helsinki Commission.

The commission monitors the treatment of Christians and Jews in the communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, he said. Much of the commission's attention is given to the treatment of Christians and Jews in the assignment of public housing and employment.

"It's harder to get a handle on Christians than Jews because they're not as identifiable," said Hoyer. "They don't have as many friends in the West. One of the things we're trying to do is heighten our focus on Christians in the Soviet Union."

In meetings with the Soviet Union and other communist countries, Hoyer said, the commission has emphasized the distribution of Bibles.

The new Soviet policy of glasnost has created an atmosphere of cooperation that makes the Helsinki Commission more effective, he added: "We need not be deluded that whatever they're doing, they're doing for the wrong purposes. They haven't become democratic or civil libertarians overnight. However, they have made a determination that in order for their society to become more effective they must open up to provide for more exchange of information."

Hoyer attends Broadview Baptist Church in Temple Hill, Md. His pastor, Howard Roberts, describes him as a model church member, who attends regularly and has taught a Sunday school class for seven years.

Hoyer's faith has influenced his congressional career, Roberts said: "One of the ways I see that is in his attempt to deal with all people justly, equally and fairly, regardless of their station in life. The Bible informs his faith and his faith then informs his study of the Bible."

"One of the significant contributions that I am making as a pastor is that I'm challenging him to apply biblical principles to what he does and to the decisions he makes. I hope that it's giving him food for thought and nourishment for his decision making."

And plenty of decisions need to be made on critical issues.

Hoyer opposes state-sanctioned prayer in public schools, but has supported bills granting access to Christian student groups. "My God is not small enough to be kicked out of classrooms by the Supreme Court," he said.

He opposes government intervention in a woman's decision to terminate her pregnancy, although he personally is opposed to abortion.

He describes his position on defense to be on the center or to the right of the Democratic party. "I don't perceive my view on defense to be religiously grounded," he explained. "They are related to my perception that there are hostile interests that undermine our security and freedom. Adventurists and terrorists will be encouraged by weaknesses."

But perhaps the most difficult decision was to enter the arena of high-profile, high-pressure politics. Hoyer, who was a Royal Ambassador, a member of the Southern Baptist missions program for boys, thinks more members of his denomination's Baptist Men organization should participate in politics.

"I would encourage Baptist men to participate because our system works if good people are active in it," said Hoyer. "Baptist men take a lot of time to study the Bible and its thoughts, because you can't find any better thought."

"Because they have this background, what they will bring to politics is good for our society."