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February 27, 1989

89-32

SBC Executive Committee
hears Las Vegas update

By Marv Knox

N-CO

NASHVILLE (BP)--Five evangelistic/missions ventures will accompany the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in Las Vegas, Nev., June 13-15, members of the SBC Executive Committee learned.

SBC Home Mission Board President Larry L. Lewis told committee members about the Las Vegas project during their winter meeting Feb. 20-22 in Nashville.

The five facets of the evangelistic/missions effort are prayer support, house-to-house witnessing, youth ministries, church starts and simultaneous revival meetings, Lewis said.

The prayer support involves praying for Las Vegas residents by name, he explained. The city's phone book has been divided and sent to 6,089 Southern Baptists who have agreed to pray for the Las Vegas.

The house-to-house witnessing effort will be conducted Saturday, June 10, he said, noting 1,160 people have volunteered to do the visitation.

The youth ministry will involve house-to-house visitation, street services, concerts and other events geared toward teens, he added. A team of 100 young people from across the convention is being formed to lead the effort, and 45 teens already have been enlisted, he said.

Nevada Baptists hope to start 25 new churches in conjunction with the convention project. Eleven churches already have been started, and project leaders are confident at least 20 will be launched by the time of the annual meeting, Lewis said.

In addition, simultaneous revivals are to be conducted across the state the week prior to the annual meeting, he added, noting 80 churches already have agreed to participate.

In other business, the Executive Committee:

-- Elected M. Dean Register, pastor of First Baptist Church of Gulfport, Miss., to be a member of the 1988-89 SBC Committee on Nominations. Register fills a vacancy left by Davis R. Odom, formerly pastor in Brandon, Miss., who moved from the state and no longer is eligible to be on the committee.

-- Learned that \$243,006.73 was expended in defending the lawsuit filed against the SBC and the Executive Committee by Robert and Julia Crowder, Henry C. Cooper and H. Allen McCartney.

The suit was filed in December 1985. The plaintiffs charged their rights were violated by the way then-SBC President Charles F. Stanley presided over the SBC annual meeting that summer.

Two lower courts ruled in favor of the convention, refusing on church-state grounds to decide the dispute. The U.S. Supreme Court decided Feb. 22, 1988, to reject the legal challenge brought by the Crowders, Cooper and McCartney, effectively upholding the lower courts' rulings.

-- Heard that its bylaws workgroup is continuing to study the issue of messenger representation to SBC annual meetings. The item will be on the Executive Committee's agenda for its Sept. 18-20 meeting.

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-- Agreed to recommend a change in SBC Bylaw 23, limiting the convention music director to two one-year terms and citing that a music director cannot then be re-elected until one year after a successor is named. The bylaw change is to take effect after the 1990 annual meeting. It will be presented for approval to messengers to the 1989 SBC meeting in Las Vegas.

-- Elected four members to the SBC public relations advisory committee: Hudson Baggett, editor of the Alabama Baptist newspaper, Birmingham; George E. Worrell, vice president for development, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, N.C.; Mark Wyatt, public relations director, California Southern Baptist Convention, Fresno; and Marshall Walker, communications services section manager, Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, Nashville.

-- Passed resolutions of appreciation for three retiring convention executives: Cecil A. Ray, national director of Planned Growth in Giving, Georgetown, Texas; Earl Kelly, executive director-treasurer, Mississippi Baptist Convention, Jackson; and Darwin E. Welsh, executive director-treasurer, Utah-Idaho Southern Baptist Convention, Sandy, Utah.

-- Authorized a "special allocation" of \$200,000 per year for five years, 1989-90 through 1993-94, to Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., "for endowment in order to help meet the special need of faculty-staff housing."

-- Asked the Executive Committee staff and the six SBC theological seminary presidents to "begin immediately to study the Seminary Funding Formula for implementation after the 1989-90 budget year."

The formula determines how much of the seminaries' allocation of the SBC Cooperative Program unified budget each school receives.

-- Ratified changes in program statements for both the Home Mission and Sunday School boards.

The Home Mission Board's change alters its purpose statement to highlight HMB emphases on evangelism, church planting, church growth and ministry, board President Lewis explained.

The Sunday School Board's alteration changes the name of its program of church training development to the program of discipleship training development.

Executives from both boards said the requests for program statement changes followed extensive research and planning on the part of the boards' staffs.

Both changes will be presented to messengers to the 1989 SBC annual meeting in Las Vegas.

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National WMU President
Appoints Search Committee

By Karen Benson

N-CO
(WMU)

Baptist Press
2/27/89

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Marjorie J. McCullough, national president of the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, has appointed Christine Gregory of Danville, Va., to chair the search committee seeking a successor to Carolyn Weatherford, national WMU executive director.

Weatherford has announced she is retiring and will marry a Cincinnati, pastor Aug. 19. She has held WMU's top post for 15 years.

The other search committee members are Roena Day, Arizona WMU president; Donna Brewer, Illinois WMU president; Ellen Teague, District of Columbia WMU president; and Dorothy Pryor, Georgia WMU executive director. McCullough will be an ex officio member of the committee.

Gregory was Virginia WMU president and a member of the national WMU executive board from 1971 to 1975. She was national WMU president from 1975 to 1981. She was first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1981-82.

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The WMU bylaws allow the search committee to be made up of current WMU board members, former board members and a state WMU executive director. The national WMU executive board is comprised of WMU presidents from states eligible for representation on SBC boards. A nationally elected president and recording secretary, and the national WMU executive director also serve on the board.

"I hope the entire WMU membership will join with the national staff and the executive board in prayer for the search committee as it seeks the right woman for this important job," McCullough said.

"We are hopeful that the committee will have a recommendation to present to the executive board when it meets in June in Las Vegas, Nev."

Suggestions and resumes may be sent to Christine Gregory at the national WMU headquarters: P.O. Box 830010, Birmingham, Ala. 35283-0010.

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Jackson confronts Pressler
during Executive Committee

By Dan Martin

N-CO
Baptist Press
2/27/89

NASHVILLE (BP)--Emotions boiled over during the February meeting of the Southern Baptist Executive Committee as two men on different sides of convention politics confronted each other after a subcommittee meeting.

Richard Jackson, pastor of North Phoenix Baptist Church in Phoenix, Ariz., shouted a question at Paul Pressler, an appeals court judge from Houston, after the business and finance subcommittee had approved a recommendation calling for creation of a Religious Liberty Commission.

Jackson, who lost the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1988 by 340 votes, attempted to ask a question of Pressler, one of the architects of the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention, after the subcommittee vote but was ruled out of order by Chairman David Hankins, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church of Lake Charles, La.

Jackson left the meeting room and stood in the foyer of the SBC Building in Nashville. As Pressler left, Jackson shouted, "Hey, Judge, are you going to answer my question?"

Pressler walked over and the two quickly were surrounded by 40 to 50 people. For about 20 minutes, the two men exchanged opinions, often speaking at the same time and frequently talking loudly.

Part of the confrontation regarded the creation of the Religious Liberty Commission, which would represent Southern Baptists in Washington. Pressler has supported creation of the new agency, while Jackson opposes it.

The conversation, however, ranged over differences of opinion dating back at least 10 years and Pressler's role in the conservative movement in the 14.8-million-member denomination.

After Pressler left the foyer, Jackson told reporters and others still present: "I have no axe to grind, no personal vendetta. It may sound like I have a personal vendetta against the Judge, and the Judge wants to make a personal thing out of it. But it is not a personal thing; it is an ideological thing."

At one point, Pressler told Jackson, "I have offered several times as an individual brother in Jesus Christ to come and sit down with you in Phoenix so you can get to know my heart."

As Jackson attempted to interject a comment, Pressler continued, "If we did more talking, if we did more dialoguing, if we did more understanding, we would solve some problems in the Southern Baptist Convention. ..."

Jackson responded, "I don't particularly want us to sit down, because we don't understand each other."

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The pastor continued, "Before I can be heard among Southern Baptists, I have to sit down with you." Pressler replied, "That is utterly ridiculous."

As the conversation continued, Pressler told Jackson his comments were "an attack and a slur on my character. You have no right to be so judgmental of me. You owe me an apology."

"I don't owe you an apology," Jackson replied, and repeated four times, "You don't have one."

At another point, Pressler said, "Richard, you have such a way of being unfair."

"No, I'm not unfair," Jackson said. "Somebody has finally needed to stand face to face with you and say these things."

"You have never taken one step toward unity except when you can get what you want."

Pressler recounted he has "taken a step toward unity in trying to meet with you, but you have rejected it always."

Jackson said, "I am talking about actions, Judge," and later said, "I want to see you take one step toward it in one of these committee meetings."

The confrontation ended when Pressler told Jackson: "I love you my brother. I am going to pray for you."

Jackson replied, "Thank you."

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Leavell urges cooperation
in witnessing, giving

By Breena Kent Paine

N- (O
(NOBTS)
Baptist Press
2/27/89

NASHVILLE (BP)--"When we become so consumed denominationally with any agenda other than winning people to Christ and discipling them, ... then it's lights out for (our) denomination," Landrum P. Leavell II told Southern Baptist institutional and agency heads.

Speaking during a Feb. 21 luncheon in support of the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program unified budget, the president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary said, "The gospel, especially in the book of Acts, teaches cooperation, not on the basis of some external conformity, but rather on internal compulsion."

New Testament church history shows the clearest focus of the power of the Holy Spirit was when the believers were "of one mind" or "in one accord," he said.

"The New Testament church was so totally dominated by the power and the movement of God's Holy Spirit that their differences were erased, their motives were purified, their love for one another was heightened, and the result was cooperation," he added.

"With a burden for the masses of unsaved people, Southern Baptists received from God a plan that could involve every individual member and every local church in carrying out the Great Commission to the ends of the earth. That plan has served us well now for over 60 years, and it has the potential for continued usefulness until the Lord Jesus Christ returns to this earth."

Leavell offered his "exegesis" on the oft-used statement -- "It is unconscionable to ask me to support with my money what I don't believe."

"First, the individual who says that, if he or she is an American citizen, is both inconsistent and untruthful," he said, because Americans pay income tax, although they may not believe in such governmental acts as federally financed abortions, cocktail parties and military operations that may be viewed as immoral.

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"We pay (income tax) because this is the best there is. I believe in America, and I intend to be a part of the United States."

The statement is also hypocritical, he added, "because most of those same pastors turn around and ask every member of their church to participate in the subscribing of the budget," although many members may not agree with parts of that budget. Yet they are urged to participate "because of the good of the whole."

Furthermore, the statement is dictatorial because the one speaking really is saying, "If you don't do it my way, I won't be a part of it," he said.

Leavell urged: "If we (are to) remain cooperating Southern Baptists and maintain the viability and the integrity of the Cooperative Program, there will be points at which every one of us will have to give a little. The Cooperative Program is our God-given way, the best presently known to humanity, for (individual Baptists) to be personally involved in work and missions and ministry at home and to the ends of the earth."

However, "antithetical to the cooperative spirit that has united us in the past, increasing numbers of churches are keeping larger percentages of their income at home for projects sponsored by the local church," he said.

"Some of our churches divert their missions funds for the support of independent missionaries who are not associated with our denomination. It took us 100 years to get over that mindset. Let's don't go back to that.

"It may be satisfying egotistically for you to say, 'I know this missionary personally, and we're putting money into the life of this family, and I know what they're doing.' You can't know what 3,800 of them are doing. But you can know every night when you put your head on your pillow that you've had a part in giving support to them, and they're out there faithfully serving the Lord."

Instead of backing away from the Cooperative Program, Leavell challenged Southern Baptists to support it through cooperation, working for change -- not destruction -- in the areas where they do not agree.

Baptists need to make the decision not to "throw the baby out with the water," he urged. "The bath water may be putrid, but the baby is precious."

Between 1919 and 1924, Southern Baptists were living in a depressed economy, "under vicious attacks, diversionary tactics by the Norrisites," followers of J. Frank Norris, who urged Christians to leave the Southern Baptist Convention.

During that time, "the attacks came from ... those who left the ranks of Southern Baptists and waged their warfare from outside," Leavell said.

However, "Southern Baptists refused to be diverted from the Great Commission; and they united with a new sense of cooperation and made a powerful impact upon our society," he continued. Pastors had a "burning passion" for evangelism, and their congregations "were living to win the lost to Jesus Christ and to build the kingdom of God."

Leavell commended those leaders for being "wise enough and baptistic enough to know that no one can do it by himself. I don't care how big your church is, brother; you can't win this world by yourself.

"Today, (Southern Baptists) have a program and ... a denominational structure that can be the catalyst to bring us through what we're now facing in terms of our malaise, and bring us to the other side of it even stronger than before."

However, Leavell stressed that at the present rate, two out of every three babies born in the world will never know Christ as savior and lord, and 50 percent of Southern Baptist churches are either stagnant or declining in membership.

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"I think our cooperation, or lack of it, can clearly be seen in our evangelistic efforts," he added. "When we go out of business evangelistically, ... our churches will continue to slowly die.

"When breaches of peace in the fellowship are of no concern to you, that is proof positive that you ... are in a backslidden condition. We've built the biggest and the best, but now we're neglecting the very thing which we have built.

"We haven't ever had total agreement among Southern Baptists and never will until we get to heaven; but in the meantime, (cooperation) points us to the way out, the way of victory."

What made Southern Baptist great, Leavell said, is "not the spirit that asks, 'Which way did you vote?' or 'Whose side are you on?' or 'Where do you stand in the cause?' -- but the kind of spirit that says, 'If you love my Lord, give me your hand.'"

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CLC files first briefs
in Supreme Court cases

By Louis Moore

N-CLC
(CLC)

Baptist Press
2/27/89

NASHVILLE (BP)--For the first time, the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission has joined in filing friend-of-the-court briefs with the U.S. Supreme Court.

The CLC, the social and moral concerns agency for the 14.8-million-member denomination, joined with Citizens for Decency through Law in a pornography case, and with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the National Association for Evangelicals in an abortion case.

The two cases mark the first time the commission has filed friend-of-the-court briefs, and is an important expansion of the CLC's activity on moral issues, said to Richard D. Land, the agency's executive director.

"It is my hope that we can be active on select issues in coming years in seeking to influence the legal status of many issues with which we deal," Land said. "Participating in filing of amicus (friend-of-the-court) briefs in appellate cases will be a significant part of this effort."

A friend-of-the-court brief is a legal opinion presented by an interested party urging the court to issue a certain kind of conclusion.

The filing of the brief in the abortion case was announced Feb. 24 in a news conference on the steps of the Supreme Court in Washington.

CLC Commissioner Gray Crum, a professor at George Washington University in Washington, participated with representatives from Missouri Synod Lutherans and the NAE. He read a statement from Land concerning the action.

A press release handed out at the news conference said the three organizations had asked in their brief that the Supreme Court overturn Roe v. Wade, the 1973 case that permitted legalized abortions.

In the pornography case, the commission joined Citizens for Decency through Law, an Arizona organization specializing in legal issues related to pornography, in urging the high court to uphold a federal anti-pornography statute.

In the abortion case, the CLC joined Missouri Synod Lutherans and NAE in urging the Supreme Court to uphold the constitutionality of a Missouri law restricting the practice of legalized abortions.

The pornography case, Federal Communications Commission v. Sable, grew out of a challenge to a new federal law against indecent and obscene speech via telephone line. Sable Communications of California Inc. provides "dial-a-porn" services, using long-distance telephone calls for pre-recorded messages containing sexually explicit material.

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A federal judge struck down a portion of the law dealing with indecent speech. The friend-of-the-court brief seeks to have that section upheld.

The abortion case, Webster v. Reproductive Health Services et al, is considered by abortion supporters and opponents to be a significant opportunity for the Supreme Court to reconsider, revise or even overturn Roe v. Wade, which set the stage for legal abortions in the United States.

American women today undergo about 1.5 million abortions annually, and since 1972, 22 million legal abortions have been performed, Land said.

Both briefs grew out of a growing Southern Baptist concern for the issues of pornography and abortion, Land said.

"The abortion debate within Southern Baptist life, as signified by resolutions adopted both by the Southern Baptist Convention and many state Baptist conventions, is one which has been mainly about a rather narrow range of exceptions under which abortions would be permissible," he said. "A broad consensus exists among Southern Baptists that abortion on demand is a moral and human tragedy that needs legal remedy."

On pornography, Land said: "Opposition to pornography is even less controversial than abortion among Southern Baptists, as various state and national resolutions clearly indicate. Pornography and its impact on society are major concerns for the convention and the commission. Joining in filing the brief is merely an extension of our previous efforts in this area.

"I am particularly pleased that one of our first briefs involves a pornography statute which the commission staff supported through testimony and lobbying in Congress."

The commission previously discussed the idea of filing briefs but decided only recently to proceed with the action. "We will file briefs selectively," he said. "Filing briefs places a heavy demand on the commission's resources, and this must be weighed carefully for impact on the issues assigned to us by the convention."

The abortion brief was written by the St. Louis lawfirm of Draheim & Pranschke. The pornography brief was written by Ben Bull, legal counsel for Citizens for Decency through Law.

Land and Larry Braidfoot, general counsel for the commission, consulted in the preparation of both briefs.

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Southern Seminary dean
withdraws resignation

N-10
(4815)

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2/27/89

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--William B. Rogers Jr. has withdrawn his resignation as dean of the School of Christian Education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and will continue in that position.

Rogers, dean since 1983, had announced his intention to resign from that position effective July 31 in order to return to full-time teaching at the Louisville, Ky., seminary. His decision to withdraw the resignation came after seminary President Roy L. Honeycutt was joined by the school's trustee executive committee and faculty in asking him to reconsider.

In a February meeting, the trustee executive committee asked Rogers to reconsider his decision on the basis of his "exemplary service" as dean and "the need of Southern Seminary and the School of Christian Education for his continuing leadership."

Rogers said his decision to continue as dean "came not out of a sense of pressure but out of a sense of renewed commitment to the goals of the School of Christian Education."

Honeycutt welcomed Rogers' decision as "good news for me, for the seminary and particularly for the faculty and students in our School of Christian education. We are delighted that he has decided to continue in his effective role as both professor and dean."

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Rogers, a graduate of Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, taught at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary before coming to Southern. Earlier, he worked on ministerial staffs of Baptist churches in Virginia and Texas.

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Court strikes down exemption
for religious publications

By Kathy Palen

N-BJC
Baptist Press
2/27/89

WASHINGTON (BP)--A Texas statute that exempted only religious books and periodicals from state sales tax violated the Constitution's establishment clause, according to a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The high court reversed a Texas appeals court decision that upheld the law as constitutional.

The statute, which was in effect from October 1984 through October 1987, exempted from sales and use taxes "periodicals that are published or distributed by a religious faith and that consist wholly of writings promulgating the teachings of the faith and books that consist wholly of writings sacred to a religious faith."

In 1985, the publisher of Texas Monthly, a magazine that did not qualify for the exemption, paid its sales taxes under protest and sued to recover those payments in state court.

A Texas district court found the exemption unconstitutional and ordered the state to refund the amount of tax Texas Monthly had paid, plus interest. But a state appeals court reversed the decision.

In writing for himself and Justices Thurgood Marshall and John Paul Stevens, Justice William J. Brennan Jr. held that the exemption's narrowness violated the establishment clause.

Although every tax exemption constitutes a subsidy affecting non-qualifying taxpayers, Brennan wrote, if that subsidy is given to a wide range of groups -- including non-sectarian as well as religious organizations -- and has a legitimate secular purpose, it is not unconstitutional. But, he continued, that was not the case with the Texas statute.

"It is difficult to view Texas' narrow exemption as anything but state sponsorship of religious belief," Brennan said.

The state presented no evidence that the payment of a sales tax by subscribers to religious periodicals or purchasers of religious books would offend their religious beliefs or inhibit religious activity, Brennan wrote. Even if members of a religious group succeeded in demonstrating that payment of a sales tax would violate their religious tenets, he added, "it is by no means obvious that the state would be required by the free exercise clause to make individualized exceptions for them."

Justice Harry A. Blackmun, who was joined by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, concurred in the judgment.

Although expressing the opinion that a state could write a tax-exemption statute that would violate neither the establishment nor the free exercise clause, Blackmun said the Texas law was not so written.

"In this case, by confining the tax exemption exclusively to the sale of religious publications, Texas engaged in preferential support for the communication of religious messages," he wrote. "Although some forms of accommodating religion are constitutionally permissible, this one surely is not.

"A statutory preference for the dissemination of religious ideas offends our most basic understanding of what the establishment clause is all about and hence is constitutionally intolerable."

Justice Byron R. White also filed an concurring opinion.

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In a dissent -- joined by Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justice Anthony Kennedy -- Justice Antonin Scalia said he found no basis for disapproving the longstanding and widespread practice of tax exemptions, which he said permeate state and federal codes.

"It is not always easy to determine when accommodation slides over into promotion and neutrality into favoritism, but the withholding of a tax upon the dissemination of religious materials is not even a close case," Scalia wrote. "The subjects of the exemption before us consist exclusively of 'writings promulgating the teaching of the faith' and 'writings sacred to a religious faith.'

"If there is any close question it is not whether the exemption is permitted, but whether it is constitutionally compelled in order to avoid interference with the dissemination of religious ideas."

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Texas Baptists offer relief
to asylum-seeking refugees

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press
2/27/89

BAYVIEW, Texas (BP)--When political upheaval and economic uncertainty brought thousands of asylum-seeking refugees from Central America to the lower Rio Grande Valley, the Texas Baptist Men organization responded to human need by providing hot meals, warm blankets and spiritual counsel.

At the request of the Texas Department of Human Services and at the invitation of the U.S. Justice Department, volunteers set up the Texas Baptist Disaster Relief Mobile Unit on the grounds of the Immigration and Naturalization Service processing center at Bayview, Texas, on Feb. 20. In three days, Texas Baptist volunteers fed more than 900 Central Americans.

Under the supervision of unit director Bob Gilley of First Southern Baptist Church of Bullard, Texas, retiree camp builders who had been on the job at Cone Oasis Encampment in nearby La Feria worked in the mobile unit's field kitchen preparing food provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A regional supermarket chain provided additional commodities, and a restaurant in Brownsville, Texas, supplied sandwiches.

The refugee situation grew out of a series of changes in immigration and naturalization procedures. Last December, the immigration service began restricting Central Americans seeking political asylum to the Rio Grande Valley while their cases were being decided, reversing the previous policy that permitted people to file applications for political asylum in Harlingen, Texas, and then move to other cities within the United States.

The new procedure was challenged in federal court, and a federal judge granted a temporary restraining order allowing the refugees a reprieve until the order expired at midnight, Feb. 20. After the order expired, the immigration service announced yet another new procedure of on-the-spot application processing and detention for people whose applications were denied.

Outside the entrance of the processing center, within 100 yards of the disaster relief unit, demonstrators staged a hunger fast to protest the new procedure. But while other church groups entered the political debate over immigration policy, the Texas Baptist volunteers focused exclusively on ministry to the immediate needs of individuals.

"This is a politically sensitive situation," said Manuel Galindo of Harlingen, president of the Mexican Baptist Convention of Texas and Hispanic coordinator for the disaster relief team. "We wanted to make it clear that we are here out of Christian compassion for the needs of people, and we're working at the invitation of the state and federal government. Period."

"Through what we saw in the press and what we saw in person, we realized the need of these people to be fed and the felt the necessity of being involved," said Tommy Dulin of First Baptist Church of Harlingen, on-site coordinator for the Texas Baptist disaster relief operation.

"It's people to people -- being there for them in times of need. If we see a need, we have and we don't give, how can we call ourselves Christians?"

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As the tide of asylum-seeking refugees flooded the grounds of the immigration service facility, one immediate need the Texas Baptist volunteers tried to meet was protection from the unseasonably cold winds and damp ground.

"There must have been 200 families sleeping out here behind the unit," said Gilley, pointing to a narrow strip of ground the length of a football field. "The dew was so heavy, the people took every piece of cardboard they could find out of the dumpster to sleep on.

"There were a lot of mothers with little babies here. We gave away every blanket we could find and checked on them as best we could."

The Texas Baptists provided meals Feb. 21 to 400 Central Americans and immigration service workers at the mobile field kitchen, and they took an additional 400 meals to people inside the gates of the immigration detention facility.

The volunteers also distributed about 300 copies of the "Roman Road" English/Spanish Scripture portion and a selection of evangelistic tracts to people whom they fed.

Rosendo Lopez, associate director of missions for the Rio Grande Valley Baptist Association, recruited Spanish-speaking volunteers from area churches to help the retirees serve food and to provide a Christian witness to the refugees.

As the Central Americans continued to stream into the processing center, the Texas Baptists offered sweaters, coats and warm shirts made available by an interdenominational south Texas mission center.

By Feb. 22, the stream slowed to a trickle when the new detention policy became common knowledge and the number of asylum applications processed dropped from 200 to 30 in a day's time. After feeding about 65 people at the unit and taking sandwiches to about 75 detainees, Texas Baptists closed the mobile unit and moved off the immigration service property.

"We appreciate what Texas Baptists have done," said Omer Sewell, district director for the immigration service. "We appreciate it and know that those who walked away with something warm in their stomachs appreciated it even more."

"The people were so very thankful, many of them didn't know how to express it," said on-site coordinator Dulin. "I met one lady holding onto her paperwork and her Bible. With her was a six-year-old girl holding a blanket and a teddy bear. I helped the lady carry her food through the line, and from the time she walked up to the time she left, there were tears in her eyes.

"The people were cold and scared and didn't know what to do. We wanted to be there for them."