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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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
NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Lloyd T. Householder, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300
RICHMOND (Foreign) Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151
WASHINGTON Stan L. Hastey, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

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Baptists seek redemptive acts
In South Africa today

By Bill Bangham

FF- (CO)
(A'hood)

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP) -- When a black man collapsed from a heart attack in a Pretoria, South Africa, shopping mall, Ivor Jenkins attempted to resuscitate him.

It seemed forever before someone else knelt to push against the man's chest while Jenkins continued to breath air into his lungs. Paramedics finally arrived, but the man died and Jenkins returned to the insurance office where he worked.

It had been an emotional experience, and became more so. One-by-one, colleagues stopped to congratulate him and say, "I couldn't have done that; I couldn't have put my mouth on the mouth of a black man," said Jenkins.

"I thought, 'O God, what have we done that we cannot break through this barrier of sin?'"

For Jenkins -- a white Afrikaner and American-trained Baptist pastor -- breaking the barrier of sin is more than a rhetorical question. It's a consciously-considered choice -- and not one easily made -- in white-dominated, apartheid-partitioned South Africa.

That choice became an issue for Jenkins while studying at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. And he likens it to a conversion experience.

"My wife and I experienced our conversion with respect to the South African situation knowing we would have to stick to our decision," he said. "And that it would be difficult. We decided we will not be liberals, not people theorizing about the situation. We will be people involved in changing the situation."

Today, Jenkins is on the staff of Koinonia, an interracial Christian ministry confronting apartheid.

In September 1986 -- after returning to South Africa and after a brief stint in the insurance office -- Jenkins joined Koinonia. He was the only employee and the organization operated on a budget of \$30,000 a year. Today, it has 13 employees and a budget of \$500,000. There are 12 Koinonia centers across South Africa, each with 30-500 people in them, and centers have opened in Germany and California.

"We challenge white and black people to say, 'I am going to do more than pray. I am going to the other world to see what the situation is there,'" said Jenkins. "We ask them to leave color and culture behind. We ask the white to go to the black world and the black to go to the white world."

Jenkins likens their efforts to an old saying South Africans had in Sunday school years ago: "Tell me and I can remember; show me and I can believe; let me experience, and only then can I understand."

"It's only when white people experience what it's like to be black that they can understand a 10-year-old throwing rocks at an army vehicle with 15-20 armed guards, or burning down a school."

And for the Christian, there's a cruel irony in that understanding, says Jenkins. "South Africa, with probably one of the most brutal systems in the world, has one of the highest church attendances," he said. "Seventy-nine percent claim Christianity."

Jenkins points to a Baptist church in Durban as an example of how little white Christians in South Africa know about blacks. Out of a congregation of 450, more than 200 had been overseas, yet only six had ever been in a black home. And understanding of whites among blacks is equally lacking.

What Koinonia asks of black and white Christians is to sit down to a meal with each other. Jenkins says they ask this for four reasons. First, it's something everyone can do, rich or poor. Second, it's intimate. Third, sharing a meal is cultural. And fourth, it's something Christ did.

"Throughout the New Testament there are references to him sharing meals with people -- even publicans and sinners," said Jenkins. And, "It is a way of beginning to share our culture with each other."

Koinonia pairs two black couples with two white couples and asks them to meet together for six months. Each couple hosts a meal in their home. They also attend movies and other public events together. At the end of six months, the group splits. Pairings of white and black couples seek other couples to join them and begin the process again.

Mark Morris, a Southern Baptist missionary to South Africa on furlough in Memphis, Tenn., sees Koinonia as a redemptive way of addressing apartheid. He was on an associational committee that introduced the concept to Baptists in Cape Town.

"The most obvious value to Koinonia is it helps people of contrasting social backgrounds relate to each other," he said. "It enables them to relate to each other as people, to see each other as fellow Christians. It bridges the ignorance they have of each other."

And in a country where more confrontational efforts would not be tolerated, "we find symbolic ways of expressing our faith redemptively," said Morris. "For example ... our hands at prayer over a meal."

When Jenkins returned to South Africa, he found his decision to act redemptively made it impossible for him to find a position in the Afrikans Baptist Church where he had served as a pastor four years before going to Southern. Friends quit being friends and family distanced themselves, or looked askance.

"Even today they don't know what we do ... don't want to know," he said. And there has been some pressure from the government. "But I want you to know that whatever price we pay as white people is almost none compared with black people," he said.

One contemporary theologian has called South Africa the conscience of the world, says Jenkins. "If you want to talk about reconciliation in South Africa, you can talk about it and keep it cheap," he continued. "But God didn't talk reconciliation in heaven. He came. He acted. He died.

"That's still the test of Christianity today."

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(BP) photo available upon request from Brotherhood Commission

Large church extends its reach
through smaller congregations

By Frank Wm. White

F-SSB

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TYLER, Texas (BP)--There are people in the east Texas town of Tyler who likely never would attend the 7,000-member Green Acres Baptist Church, but they might be reached by one of the its seven missions.

Church leaders believe many of nearly 500 persons in Tyler attending the seven Southern Baptist congregations in the city which are satellite missions of Green Acres are among those who could not be reached by the larger church.

The missions are being built on the experience of Green Acres which also was started as a mission 37 years ago.

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"This church grew through basic growth principles and relying on Sunday school as the priority and the outreach organization," said Ron Wells, minister of special ministries.

"Sunday school is the most important activity. People won't stay unless they get involved, and Sunday school is the place to do that," said David Shepherd, pastor of Temple Baptist Church, one Green Acres satellite.

Wells said the missions maintain the name "church" and identify themselves as satellites of Green Acres because the name "mission" creates an identity problem in the community.

However, the relationship with Green Acres is more than a name. For example, Green Acres offers to provide Sunday school workers for any of its missions.

At present, three of the 11 Sunday school classes at Southside Baptist Church are taught by members of Green Acres. Other Green Acres members have moved their membership to the mission, said pastor Dennis Wiles.

Workers at both the mother church and the missions are trained using MasterLife and other discipleship training materials through an extensive discipleship program coordinated by Wells.

Reggie Thomas, pastor of Good Samaritan Baptist Church, a Green Acres satellite in a black community, realizes he is challenging tradition by attempting to build a black church around the Sunday school rather than worship.

Nonetheless, more than 60 people are now attending Sunday school at the mission which started with five people in June 1987.

Sylvania Baptist Church became the first mission of Green Acres in 1986. Although it had been a church with more than 200 people in Sunday school in the early 1970s, Sylvania had declined to only 23 members when the church asked Green Acres to take it as a mission.

As he has since done with several of the missions, Wells was interim pastor at Sylvania until a pastor was called. The mission averaged 82 in Sunday school when Matthew McKellar became pastor 18 months ago. Now it averages 150 in Sunday school.

McKellar analyzes Green Acres and implements ideas he thinks will work at Sylvania. For example, he took one couples class with 18 persons enrolled and created three classes which now have more than 80 enrolled.

Green Acres pastor Paul Powell believes the mission pastors are learning through practicing growth principles that took him a lifetime to understand. Through their efforts, they are extending the influence of Green Acres.

Powell cited an itinerant farm worker attending the Hispanic mission and 57 blacks baptized at Good Samaritan as some of the people who likely would not have been reached through direct contact with his church.

To enhance mission support, Green Acres decided four years ago to pay off its debt within a year and use debt retirement allocations to fund the missions.

But even before the year ended, the church had become deeply involved with three missions. A Houston pastor asked if Green Acres could support a Korean mission in Tyler. Then, Sylvania Baptist Church asked Green Acres to support it as a mission, and a Hispanic mission which had been supported by the local Baptist association asked to be transferred to the control of the church.

"We had no idea three years ago that we would have 500 people in our missions," Wells said.

As the missions have grown and persons have left Green Acres to work in the fledgling congregations, Green Acres also has continued to grow.

"We believe the Lord is blessing what we are doing," Powell said.

Baptist couple's adoptions
have impact in Israel

By Art Toalston

F - FMS

TUR'AN, Israel (BP)--Noor, a frolicking child, is a rarity among Arabs in Israel. She's adopted.

Adoption raises few eyebrows in the United States, but it's nearly unheard of in Tur'an, Noor's new hometown in heavily Arab northern Israel, as well as in Arab culture in general.

That doesn't bother Noor's adoptive mother, Fayrouz Abu Samra. No one, she says, can know "how much I love this child."

"Except someone else who has adopted," adds Ray Hicks, a Southern Baptist representative who once lived in the village.

Hicks and his wife, Bev, understand Fayrouz's elation. The Cincinnati couple has adopted three children. Their example stirred Fayrouz and her husband, Micah, to dare to think about adopting a child.

The Hickses worked with the Baptist center in Tur'an for several years, and Fayrouz saw a naturalness in the love expressed in the adopted family. "It's a possibility for us, too," she remembers telling her husband. "We're believers and they're believers. Why can't we do the same thing?" The couple had been childless about 10 years. Three years later, Noor was in their arms.

One Easter morning, adoption officials "told us to get a bottle ready," Fayrouz recounts. "We had two reasons to celebrate" -- Christ's resurrection and a certainty "that this is what God wanted us to do ... for our lives and for the life of a child."

Fayrouz and Micah wondered what reactions they would face in the community. They often had encountered puzzled looks after mentioning that they might adopt a child. "People didn't know anything about it," Fayrouz says. But the couple was pleasantly surprised when, in traditional village fashion, Christian and Muslim friends came to offer their blessings and bring gifts for the infant.

"All we want," Micah says, "is good health so we can raise Noor to be the girl God wants her to be."

The couple is thinking about adopting again, Fayrouz says. She wants another girl; Micah wants a boy.

For Ray and Bev Hicks, the frustration of childlessness has been supplanted by adoption-related joy encompassing, in Bev's words, "some of the times we have felt God's presence more than in any other experiences."

Their adoptions haven't been encumbered with paperwork and legal tie-ups, either, in part because they were willing to accept children with interracial backgrounds. They adopted their first child, Sommer, before being appointed as Baptist representatives to Israel 10 years ago. They have since adopted two other children, Melakee and Micah. Arrangements for each child were handled by the Sellers Baptist Home and Adoption Center in New Orleans.

Hicks, meanwhile, has become administrator of the Baptist Convention in Israel, the organization of Southern Baptist representatives in the country. The family now lives in an Arab community near Jerusalem.

Many societies still have hangups about adoption, the Hickses say. Some parents tell their adopted children to keep quiet about it. Sometimes people aren't told they were adopted until they reach young adulthood, when such news can be traumatic.

To the Hickses, however, adoption is central in the teachings of the New Testament. "I think it is one of the least emphasized concepts within the church today," Hicks says. Jesus, for example, was adopted by Joseph. And Christians are "the children of God. We are adopted, chosen. Jesus said, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you. ...'"

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The Hickses are trying to explain the positive aspects of adoption to Sommer, Melakee and Micah. "They are going to hear the negative things whether they want to or not. They are going to hear things that, at times, are cruel from kids who just don't understand," Hicks acknowledges.

"But we feel God has given us the opportunity to give three kids a special foundation so they can cope with the world that will be facing them. The kids will always have a safe haven here. They will always have support and love. Those things can overcome a lot of problems." Equally important is teaching them "how they can become believers in the Lord Jesus."

"We feel so positively that God brought us all together -- each of our kids and us -- for a very special reason and in a very special way."

To celebrate adoption, the Hickses have a "special day" for each child, much like a birthday, on the date each joined the family. They get out a picture album of the child's early months and recall their thoughts and feelings leading up to the child's arrival.

"They love it," Bev says. "They want us to repeat it over and over again. They want to hear how excited we were."

Each child also gets to pick a favorite eating place where the family will go that night.

Another way the Hickses sought to impart a positive view of adoption was by waiting in another room while Sommer went ahead to be the first member of the family to see and hold Melakee. A few years later, Sommer and Melakee were the first to see and hold Micah.

The Hickses have no worries about rearing their children overseas, and their adoption agency expressed no reservations. "How many kids are bilingual by the fourth grade or have the opportunity to see different parts of the world?" Hicks asks. The children will gain a more realistic view of the world, he believes.

Opportunities for ministering to childless couples seem to abound whenever the Hickses return to the United States. "It is really hard to understand what somebody is going through," Hicks explains, "if you have never been through that process -- all the tests, feeling like God has abandoned you because you can't have biological children."

"It is like a grief process you work through," Bev says.

Until a few years ago, Hicks confides, he occasionally felt that grief -- until he would hear a child's voice or the patter of feet around the house.

"I can't imagine loving a biological child any differently than we love our children," he reflects. "They are special in our eyes and in God's eyes, which is no different from a biological child."

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

Learning styles call for
creativity to reach adults

By Frank Wm. White

N-SSB

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NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptists must find new and creative approaches to learning that will give more adults opportunities to hear and respond to the gospel, according to leaders of a Southern Baptist Sunday School Board seminar on adult learning styles.

"This is an adult world. We need a new vision of the challenge to reach adults because traditional approaches will not reach all people," James Williams, executive vice president of the board told participants in the seminar sponsored by the adult program section of the Sunday school division.

Various segments of the adult population -- baby boomers, senior adults and others -- must get increased attention because adults represent almost 74 percent of the total U.S. population, up from about 70 percent in 1950, Williams said.

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"What will happen if Southern Baptists ignore three-fourths of the population? What will happen if only superficial attention is given to adults? A large part of our commitment in Sunday school work must be to adults," Williams said.

Leaders of a panel discussion agreed that adult literature produced by the Sunday School Board provides a foundation for effective teaching, but it must be coupled with creativity and a sensitivity for the needs of the particular group.

"We need to teach from the vantage point of the individuals, not the teacher," said Mancil Ezell, director of the church media library department.

Various learning styles will be present in almost any group of adults, and different teaching techniques will appeal to different people, Ezell said. Consequently, teachers should use lecture, discussion, role-playing, and other styles of teaching that will involve each person at some point.

Addressing learning styles may require some flexibility in class organization that will allow individuals some choices in Sunday school classes, said Jerry Stubblefield, professor of religious education at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

Stubblefield said he is committed to the concept of the age-graded department structure for adults, but some variations may be needed in some situations.

"We need to be willing to color outside the lines with class organization," he said. "I'd much rather people be involved in a class they are comfortable with rather than stay home because they aren't comfortable."

Larry Shotwell, manager of the Sunday school adult program section, said, "We know churches are going to deviate from the design. Changes will come from churches being successful at new approaches."

Churches should use the literature suggestions as a basis for creative changes, said Bill Young, manager of the preschool-children's section in the church training department.

"We are going to provide the best material we know how. If people use it they will come out ahead. If some deviate from what we provide, they can come out ahead, too. That's the uniqueness of being Southern Baptists," Young said.

With training and materials that are available, churches can provide quality education through the Sunday school, said Mike Harton, associate professor of adult education and denominational ministries at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"People don't see the church as a place for quality education. They expect that from the community college, not from the church. But the church can have it," Harton said.