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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. Haste, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

April 5, 1989

N-BIC 89-53

High court rejects  
dispute over zoning

By Kathy Palen

WASHINGTON (BP)--A church's challenge to a county zoning ordinance has been rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The justices, without comment, turned down an appeal from Messiah Baptist Church in Jefferson County, Colo.

In 1974, the congregation purchased an 80-acre parcel for the purpose of building new church facilities. But the property was in a zoning district that did not allow the construction of church buildings.

The county's board of commissioners rejected several requests by the church for an exemption from the zoning ordinance, which allowed only residential and agricultural use.

The church sued the county in 1980, charging the county had violated its members' right to the free exercise of religion.

The Colorado District Court ruled the zoning was based upon valid, neutral criteria and applied fairly to church property.

The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed that decision, holding the ordinance had not infringed upon a protected liberty and was related substantially to the health, safety and general welfare of the county's citizens.

In appealing to the high court, Edward B. Towey, attorney for the church, said: "A place of worship is as central to the First Amendment concept of free exercise as a public forum is central to the concept of free speech. When a government agency seeks to encumber through zoning ordinances the use of buildings for religious worship, it impinges on speech, assembly and religious exercise."

But Patrick R. Mahan, county attorney for Jefferson County, said a congregation's decision where to locate is not rooted in religious belief.

He said even if zoning ordinances' usage classifications and prohibitions incidentally affect religious freedom, "they are nonetheless justified as necessary to accomplish a substantial state interest."

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N-HMB

Volunteer teams needed for  
summer church construction

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press  
4/5/89

ATLANTA (BP)--An additional 150 volunteer construction teams are needed to erect buildings for missions and newly constituted churches this summer, according to a volunteerism leader with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

Elmer Goble, associate director of the board's short-term volunteer department, has called for more construction teams to fill an increasing number of requests. The number of building requests for new congregations has increased along with the board's current emphasis on church starting, he explained.

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By the end of March, the board had received requests for volunteers to help with 151 construction projects this year, said Hugh Roberts, Home Mission Board construction coordinator. Each project will require five to 20 volunteer groups to complete.

Last year the board sent out 324 volunteer construction teams to work on 110 projects, Roberts said. That doubled the number of teams sent the previous year.

Volunteer labor enables new congregations with limited finances to obtain permanent meeting places they might not otherwise be able to afford, he said. The board cooperates with state conventions and the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission in sending out construction volunteers.

Teams working this summer will help congregations like Riva Trace Baptist Mission in Annapolis, Md., and Columbia's Woodcrest Chapel in Columbia, Mo.

The three-year-old Maryland congregation currently meets in two trailers, with an average attendance of 50 people in worship. Volunteer teams will conduct backyard Bible clubs and teach leadership training in addition to driving nails in a new 6,160-square-foot building.

Work by volunteer teams will enable the two-year-old Missouri congregation to move from a rented room in a motel to its own multi-purpose building.

As the need for more volunteer teams increases, Roberts said, he is encouraging more churches that have received help to help others. This year, 27 churches that received volunteer assistance last year will send construction teams to other churches, he said.

Roberts said he will assist volunteer teams of any size. Although the average team includes about 15 people, some have as many as 60, he said. Volunteer builders may choose to work through any of the board's volunteer programs, including Christian Service Corps and Mission Service Corps.

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Anabaptist scholars discuss  
Free Church Movement's roots

By Scott Collins

N-CO  
(SWBTS)

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FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--A group of international scholars from 12 denominations celebrated the English publication of the works of Anabaptist theologian and martyr Balthasar Hubmaier during the sixth International Believers' Church Conference March 30-April 1.

The church historians and theologians at the meeting are dedicated to the study and advancement of believers' baptism as first practiced by Anabaptists in the 16th century, said W.R. Estep, distinguished professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which hosted the conference in Fort Worth, Texas.

The conference recognized the first-ever English publication of Hubmaier's complete works, translated by John Howard Yoder of Notre Dame University and Wayne Pipkin, professor at European Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland. Hubmaier was a German-born theologian and church reformer burned at the stake for his faith in Vienna, Austria, in 1528.

Participants included scholars from Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, Canada and the United States, Estep said. Among the scholars were Torsten Bergsten from Sweden, Christof Windhorst of West Germany, George Huntston Williams of Harvard University, Franklin Littell of Temple University and Yoder.

The major distinction between believers' church denominations and others is an emphasis on baptism for people who make a commitment to Christ as savior, while other denominations practice infant baptism, Estep said.

The first Believers' Church Conference in 1967 at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., grew out of a need for the Anabaptist views of the church and Christian discipleship to be heard in academic settings, Estep and Yoder said. "We are often swallowed up in those academic conferences and our viewpoint is rarely given serious consideration. We needed a more adequate forum to stimulate more academic work in free church origins," Estep said.

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Theological discussions of baptism were "tilted away" from the believers' baptism view, Yoder said. The result was the formation of a forum for the Anabaptists' idea.

The Believers' Church Conferences have not asked "whether the believers' church view is correct, but rather whether it is a helpful tool of classification and interpretation," he said.

Scholars attending the conference said topics addressed by believers' church historians are relevant for issues facing Christians today, such as rebaptism and the baptism of infants.

The scholars, who are viewed generally as theologically conservative, have detected an erosion of personal discipleship in Christianity, Estep said. And many fear the lack of emphasis on Anabaptist theology. European scholars attending the conference said youth on that continent are leaving the church and Christianity is "becoming an old people's religion."

Scholars at the conference identify with much of Hubmaier's teachings, which "call Baptists and others back" to a study of what he called the "real issues facing Baptist churches today," Estep said. He defined those issues as baptism, church discipline, discipleship and church/state relations.

Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., defined modern Reformation thinking, based on four words that directed early reformers.

Those words, "gospel," "word," "church" and "Spirit," were "fundamental," George said: They are what the Reformation was all about. The heart of the Reformation was the idea that God really is for us, not against us."

Speaking during Southwestern Seminary chapel service held in conjunction with the conference, George said reformers like Martin Luther thought every person should have a copy of the Bible: "The legacy of the open Bible is in the importance that we affirm our confidence in the word of God. Those of us who have the Bible do not use the Bible. It remains a closed book."

George decried the "perversion" of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers, saying the original intent of the belief was that "in the body of Christ we are priests to one another." That view is counter to modern thinking that interprets the doctrine to support independent individualism, he added.

Conference participants passed a resolution during their meeting calling for the communist government of Romania to end its policy of relocating rural people to cities. The participants said such a policy harms ethnic Christian minorities by denying people the right of conscience and freedom of worship. The historians fear the agricultural collectivization is destroying Romania's cultural heritage and hinders recent growth among Christians in that country.

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Burmese Baptist tells  
of persecution, hardship

By William N. McElrath

*N- FMB*  
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JAKARTA, Indonesia (BP)--A Burmese woman scheduled to preside over a Baptist congress last year came to Indonesia in March and told how persecution kept her away from her duties.

"I'm making this visit to pay my debt to you," Esther Byu told Baptist women's leaders who heard her speak in four of Indonesia's largest cities. "I heard you did a good job of planning and carrying out the congress during my enforced absence. So I resolved to come and see you as soon as I could."

Byu was elected in absentia as president of the Asian Baptist Women's Union in 1983. But because of Burmese visa restrictions, she was unable to get into Indonesia to preside over the union's congress.

Byu told Indonesians about hardship in her native country. A Buddhist majority forced out all foreign missionaries in 1963. Three years later, the country nationalized foreign-supported institutions except for theological schools.--more--

The Baptist seminary where she formerly taught was closed last August. Churches are allowed to meet only for regularly scheduled events such as Sunday school, worship services and Wednesday night prayer meetings.

But in the midst of restrictions, Burmese Baptists still find a way to share their faith. Baptists working in community centers spread the gospel while meeting human needs. An estimated 422,000 Baptists support about 900 missionaries, many of whom evangelize across cultural boundaries inside Burma.

"I first attended an Asia-wide meeting of Baptist women in 1963," Byu said. "At that time, I felt the Lord calling me to serve him on a wider scale. But because of restrictions such as these, I have never been able to attend another large international meeting of that kind."

As president of the union, Byu works out of Manila in the Philippines. Each time she goes home to Burma she is required by law to surrender her passport. Getting a new Burmese passport takes months, and it gives permission to enter only a restricted list of countries. Currency regulations limit the amount of money a Burmese can take out of the country to about \$13 for each trip.

Born into an ethnic minority group, Byu became an orphan at age 12. But she has attained education at the highest levels and has been equipped to serve as an international Christian leader because of God's grace, she said.

"If the Lord can use me, he can use anybody," she insisted. "Don't try to make yourself become like anybody else. Let the Lord develop the unique gifts he has given only to you."

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'Destroy church-starting myths,' Lewis tells leaders

By Mark Wingfield

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ATLANTA (BP)--Pastors and missions leaders must destroy the "myths" that keep Southern Baptists from starting new churches, said Larry Lewis, president of the denominations's Home Mission Board.

During this year's annual meeting of state church extension directors, Lewis called on the group to take the lead in destroying these myths. And in a later interview, he expanded the charge to all Southern Baptist pastors, asking them to become "new-work minded."

Lewis identified five myths he believes stand in the way of church starting. First is the myth that too many struggling churches already exist, he said.

"There are indeed too many struggling churches," Lewis said. "When 67 percent of our churches are plateaued or declining, we're not doing our job."

"But I submit that starting new churches is not one of the reasons they are declining. I doubt there are many places you could document that a church is in decline because there were too many churches started there."

The second myth Lewis attacked is that starting new work will hurt finances of existing churches.

He cited Luke 6:38, "Give and it will be given unto you."

"I contend that is a promise for the church as well as the individual," Lewis said. "I think there is a curse on the church that is constantly selfish and self-directed. But I think there's a blessing on the church that gives itself."

He suggested churches should tithe their members to new churches in the same way individuals tithe their incomes to the church. From his own experience as a pastor, Lewis said, this principle always helped strengthen his own church.

Third, Lewis attacked the myth that some churches are not able to start missions.

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"There's no church too small or too big to be at the task of starting a new work," he said. "In fact, if there's a real excitement in anything a church does, I think it's being part of starting a new church.

"I have an idea that more churches are started by small churches than by big churches."

The fourth myth is that new churches must start with land and a building in a middle class suburb, Lewis said.

"One of the most common faults in church planting is to buy land and build a building too soon," he said, explaining that such a mistake can forever hinder a church because of bad location or too little space.

Finally, Lewis said, many people think they cannot start a new congregation without help from the Home Mission Board.

"This myth implies that we are dependent upon an agency, not on God," he said. "I contend that if God is in it, God will supply."

The strength of Southern Baptist growth has been the autonomy of local churches as church starters, Lewis said: "Most denominations have an agency that starts churches. But Southern Baptists do not look to an agency to start churches. Our churches start churches."

Also, the need for new churches is greater than what any agency can finance, he added: "Even if every dime in our budget flowed out for church planters, it would still be impossible for the Home Mission Board to start and finance our goal of 1,500 new churches every year.

"We're going to have to rely on volunteers. We're going to have to rely on bivocational pastors. We're going to have to rely on God supplying in many different ways."

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Rural church puts its  
brand on young pastors

By Scott Collins

F-60  
(SWBTS)

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BRANDON, Texas (BP)--Highway 22 winds its way across central Texas, cutting through fields of spring bluebonnets, leading to Brandon, a tiny hamlet 65 miles southeast of Fort Worth.

From late March through April, the nearby pastures come to life with fresh flowers and budding trees. But for more than 75 years, members of Brandon Baptist Church have seen blossoms of another kind.

During that time, more than 40 students from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary have been pastor of the church. Like the majority of Southern Baptist congregations, the church is small, averaging around 25 people in Sunday school.

"We like to have those young men," said Avon Frazier, a 50-year member of the church. "It's kind of like a first grade student. If you get a good start, you'll do all right.

"I just think about the part they've had in my life and the part I've had in theirs. They just bud out while they're here."

Through the years, those students have blossomed into an array of Baptist leaders. The list includes C.Y. Dossey, former director of evangelism for the Home Mission Board; Kearnie Keegan, former director of student work at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board; Woodson Armes, former education director for the Baptist General Convention of Texas; Boyd Hunt, retired distinguished professor of theology at Southwestern; Bill Moyers, public broadcasting producer; and Dan Kent, professor of Old Testament at Southwestern. Moyers, Hunt and Armes are distinguished alumni of Southwestern.

For most of the student pastors, Brandon has been their first stop in the ministry. "We've had young men come who've never been in a pulpit," Frazier said.

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But members of the church have watched patiently while the students develop, partly from seminary classes and partly from the church.

"I learned the basic patterns of relationships between a pastor and the people," said Kent, who was pastor from 1960 to 1963. "They were enthusiastic and still are." Size is not a factor. They love and the Lord and say, 'Let's go.'"

The benefits "work both ways," said Myra Finch, a member of the church for 66 years. "Bill Moyers practically pushed me into teaching Sunday school," she explained.

Having student pastors has given the church "a bird's-eye view of what's going on" at the seminary, Frazier said. And church members like what they see. "We know the seminary is OK because we've seen the students," he said.

"It's precious to me to see a young man stand up and tell about the Lord, and to praise him (the preacher) afterward," said Finch.

"And to tell them when they make a mistake," added Margaret Smith.

And even though the students aren't perfect pastors, church members understand. "I admire seminary students," said Frazier. "I really do."

"They have to overcome so much adversity," added Finch.

Church members have seen students ride buses and trains and borrow cars to get to the church. Moyers didn't have a car when he started at the church. "They come with nothing, but they learn to compensate," Frazier said.

The church's current student pastor, Howard Holmes, knows all about pressure. Holmes retired from the Air Force after 20 years and enrolled at Southwestern. This spring he is taking 13 hours of classes and working from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. five days a week in addition to his church work.

Still, Holmes is committed to being a good pastor. He has emphasized discipleship during his three years at the church. And Holmes said church members keep him on his toes.

"They're Bible scholars," Holmes said, which is a result of having seminary students as pastors. "You don't just come down here and give them three points and a poem. You have to give them some meaty sermons."

For that, Holmes relies on material he learns from his professors. "I've noticed that my sermons tend to go along with what I've been learning in class that week," he said.

Whatever the sermon, church members say they continue to learn from the variety of pastors. And they continue to help the students grow.

"We just think we are so fortunate to have these young men come and preach to us," said Frazier. "We can see the fruits of their labors."

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BP photos mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Southwestern Seminary