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89-63

Southern Baptists top \$1 billion  
for foreign missions offering

By Marty Croll & Karen Benson

N-FMB

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--The 100th anniversary of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions has brought Southern Baptists to another milestone.

In mid-April, the cumulative total the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board has received for the offering topped the \$1 billion mark.

The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering is taken each December during the Week of Prayer for Foreign Missions in Southern Baptist churches. It supports foreign missions causes and is promoted by the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union and Brotherhood Commission.

Every penny given is sent overseas to support foreign missionaries and their work, missions officials noted. None of the offering is used for administrative purposes, which are funded by the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program unified budget.

"This is probably the single-most exciting news in the Southern Baptist Convention in the past 12 months," said Brotherhood Commission President James Smith. "It is an expression of who Southern Baptists are and what we are all about."

WMU Executive Director Carolyn Weatherford echoed his excitement: "This is tremendous news. Southern Baptists have a reason to be ecstatic. I cannot think of a better way for Southern Baptists to express their love and commitment to missions than by praying daily for home and foreign missions and by giving sacrificially to missions."

Reaching the \$1 billion mark is "a watershed in the history of Southern Baptists," Weatherford said. "This shows what Southern Baptists are capable of doing when they realize the desperate needs of supporting our missions endeavors. It is crucial that we continue to provide this kind of support to our missionaries and our missions causes."

The offering first was taken in 1888 when Lottie Moon, a foreign missionary serving in China, wrote to the newly organized WMU, asking the members to collect funds to send another missionary to China.

The women set a goal of \$2,000 to send two missionaries to China. They surpassed that goal by giving \$3,315.26 -- enough to send three.

"From the early days of the women making sacrificial gifts of their own personal offerings to the present day, they have become the inspirers and motivators for whole churches to engage in prayer and giving for foreign missions," said Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks.

This year, the 1988 Christmas offering goal was \$84 million. The board has received \$75,297,456.52 toward that goal.

Projections indicate offering receipts will total 11 percent more than the 1987 offering receipts of \$69,912,638 -- which would still be about \$6.5 million short of the 1988 goal.

Board officials will continue to receive 1988 Christmas offerings through May 31.

Of the \$1 billion collected cumulatively thus far, 55 percent of the money has been given in the decade of the 1980s. Eighty-two percent was collected during the '70s and '80s, and 94 percent has been collected since 1960.

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Put another way, from the first offering in 1888 until 1959, Southern Baptists gave about \$61 million. From 1960 until the present, the board has received about \$940 million.

Offering statistics show that the total offering receipts doubled from 1960 to 1969, and then more than doubled again in the 1970s.

The offering first broke the \$1 million-per-year mark in 1945, with \$1,201,962.24 given that year. The first single-year offering to go over \$10 million was in 1962.

The 1988 offering is the first single-year offering to top \$70 million.

If the offering increases by at least 3 percent each year over the previous year from now on, Southern Baptists will reach the \$2 billion mark within 10 years -- by 1999.

"I believe the key to reaching the next \$1 billion plateau is missions involvement," Smith said. "People give to what they are involved in. Missions involvement begins with praying and giving to missions."

Parks said he is grateful for the continuity and perseverance over the years of the Woman's Missionary Union's efforts related to the offering.

"It has been the Week of Prayer that has historically provided the context from which the offering is given," Parks said. "We're indeed grateful to the Woman's Missionary Union for keeping uppermost in our minds the priority of prayer -- and out of the commitment that comes from that, the desire to give."

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Baptists suffer losses  
in latest Lebanon strife

By Art Toalston

N-FMB

Baptist Press  
4/21/89

BEIRUT, Lebanon (BP)--Two people closely related to Lebanon's Baptist community died and windows at Beirut Baptist School were shattered during heavy artillery fire in Beirut in recent weeks.

An employee of Beirut Baptist School in predominantly Muslim West Beirut lost her sister soon after fighting erupted in mid-March, reported Jim Ragland, a 33-year Southern Baptist missionary to Lebanon who now lives in Cyprus. The employee's sister was killed by an artillery shell fragment.

In early April, a man who had worshipped regularly at Mouseitbeh Baptist Church in West Beirut was killed when an artillery shell ripped into his home in predominantly Christian East Beirut.

On April 16, an artillery shell hit the playground between Beirut Baptist School and Mouseitbeh Church. No one was injured, but windows throughout the compound were shattered. Ragland estimated the repair bill will reach \$10,000.

"It's about the fifth or sixth time this has happened," he said. The last time windows were blown out was in 1984.

The fighting has kept the school closed for about a month, Ragland said. The school that Ragland founded now has 988 students and about 50 teachers.

A few days earlier, a canning factory partly owned by a member of Ras Beirut Baptist Church in East Beirut was destroyed. An artillery shell struck a large fuel tank at the site and set off a fire that burned out of control for several days and finally triggered an explosion heard up to 15 miles away.

A bomb shelter below the basement of the Baptist Center in East Beirut has housed more than 100 people for several weeks, Ragland added. Among those taking refuge are families of employees of Baptist media, publications and correspondence ministries based at the center, as well as neighbors in the vicinity.

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The two deaths are among more than 225 reported to date during the latest outbreak of violence between so-called Christian and Muslim forces. Lebanon's civil war s back to 1975 and has claimed more than 125,000 lives.

"Baptists and their friends are hurting," said Ragland, who along with other Southern Baptist missionaries was forced to leave Beirut when the U.S. government ended passport privileges for Americans in Lebanon in early 1987.

Ragland and his wife, Leola, were active in the Mouseitbeh congregation, and Ragland counted the dead man who attended that church and his wife as "very wonderful friends." Mouseitbeh is one of 16 Baptist churches in Lebanon.

Also in early April, a husband and wife who are members of Sid el Boucherieh Baptist Church in East Beirut were injured. They had ventured from a shelter to their home during a lull in the fighting when the home was hit by an artillery shell.

"The husband may lose a leg and possibly an eye from the explosion," Ragland said in a telephone interview. The wife sustained minor injuries.

The last Baptist killed in the fighting was a young man struck by a shell fragment in 1984, Ragland said. In 1982, a Baptist husband and wife and a couple of other family members were killed in indiscriminate shooting in a rural village.

Ragland has been able to speak with Baptist friends in West and East Beirut by telephone and has visited with a number of Lebanese who have come to Cyprus on business, for visits or to flee the fighting, he said.

"You never forget what it was like to live in times like they are seeing now in Beirut," said Ragland, who weathered not only artillery fights but also a tension-filled period in West Beirut when American men were being kidnapped. Nine of them still are held hostage.

Ragland reiterated his hope of returning to work in Lebanon someday. He reaches retirement age this year but said has no plans for returning to the United States.

"We don't feel at all good about being in Cyprus while our friends in Lebanon are hurting," Ragland said. "We still feel that we're refugees here. We miss our friends very keenly. Missionaries want to be with the people they've been called to minister to ... in good times and bad times."

Ragland acknowledged "the world is kind of tired of Lebanon," but emphasized that Christians nevertheless have an ongoing responsibility "of prayer, love, sympathy and concern" for the war-weary nation.

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Thomas offers testimony  
on child-care proposals

By Kathy Palen

N-BJC

Baptist Press  
4/21/89

WASHINGTON (BP)--For constitutional purposes, the tax code provides a better mechanism for assisting parents whose children attend church child-care centers than federal subsidies, a Baptist attorney said in testimony presented to two congressional panels.

Any child-care program that provides grants and contracts to churches and other pervasively sectarian institutions is constitutionally suspect, said Oliver S. Thomas, Baptist Joint Committee general counsel, in written testimony to the Senate Finance and House Education and Labor committees.

He cited a 1988 Supreme Court decision that involved a federally funded program of education and social welfare services.

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In Bowen v. Kendrick, Thomas said, the high court held institutions that are merely religiously affiliated -- such as colleges, universities, community centers and church charities -- are eligible to participate on an equal basis with their non-sectarian counterparts. But pervasively sectarian institutions -- such as churches, synagogues and parochial schools -- were held to be disqualified from participating, he added.

"The BJC questions the validity of any federal child-care program that provides grants and contracts to pervasively sectarian institutions," Thomas said. "In addition to containing potentially insurmountable constitutional problems, such an approach seems to be extraordinarily poor public policy.

"Congress, understandably, may wish to assist parents whose children, by choice or necessity, will attend church child-care centers; but government subsidies to those centers are not the answer. To the contrary, churches will be enticed into 'secularizing' their child-care programs and submitting to significant governmental regulation in order to serve the poor more effectively."

Citing a resolution on institutional child care approved by the 1988 Southern Baptist Convention, Thomas said a better approach would be to limit grants and contracts to non-sectarian institutions and then provide whatever assistance would go to families utilizing religious child-care providers through the tax code.

Child-care tax proposals -- unlike child-care welfare programs -- generally do not raise significant constitutional problems, Thomas explained. Few people would question the legality of the dependent-care tax credit that is available to working parents who purchase any type of child care, he said, noting the legality of a tax benefit for all parents of young children -- regardless of whether the parents purchase child-care services -- would be even more secure.

Thomas addressed the constitutional problems of two major child-care proposals now before Congress.

Both proposals -- the Act for Better Child Care Services and the Child Development and Education Act of 1989 -- would authorize grants and contracts to child-care providers.

In order to meet constitutional requirements, Thomas said, both proposals must:

- Prohibit any religious discrimination in hiring child-care workers.
- Require a separate system of accounting for all funds received through government grants or contracts.
- Prohibit capital improvements to properties owned by pervasively sectarian institutions.
- Require a separate teaching staff be employed in any before-school or after-school program at a parochial school.

Even then, he concluded, "the problems associated with providing grants and contracts to pervasively sectarian institutions may be insurmountable."

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Students' weekend travel leads to church-starting 'miracle'

By Mark Wingfield

F-HMB

Baptist Press  
4/21/89

HOUGHTON LAKE, Mich. (BP)--Steve and Alesia Fowler traveled 100,000 miles on the road to success as church starters.

It was a journey that took them 1,000 miles in a passenger van every weekend for three years between Louisville, Ky., and Houghton Lake, Mich. The Fowlers were among a group of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary students participating in the "Van Program" that links Southern Baptists' oldest seminary with one of the denomination's newer state conventions.

Every weekend, about 16 students travel on two vans to different areas of ministry in Michigan. One van stops in Detroit; the other in Houghton Lake in northern Michigan.

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The journey from Louisville to Houghton Lake takes nine hours one way. Students leave after class on Fridays, vining in Houghton Lake around midnight. Some journey to more hours.

The program is sponsored jointly by Southern Seminary, the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the Michigan Baptist Convention.

Fowler stopped riding the van after graduation from seminary last year, but now he coordinates the work of other students making the weekly trek.

He now is full-time pastor of Houghton Lake Southern Baptist Church, the church he and his wife nurtured on weekends and summer breaks for the previous three years. The church averages 70 people in Sunday school attendance and 80 in worship. Fowler has baptized 74 new Christian converts. Dozens of others who trusted Christ earlier have recommitted themselves.

About 70 percent of the area's residents do not attend any church, Fowler said, even though the town is home to about a dozen churches. Also, nine out of 10 residents claim no personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Statistics are similar for other communities around Houghton Lake, where no Southern Baptist churches exist. Because of that need, the young church already is sponsoring a new mission in nearby Lake City, begun by current students Steve and Elizabeth Johnson.

At first, a seminary friend told Johnson he should give the van program eight weeks and then bail out if he saw no results. Instead, Johnson persevered for eight months before seeing any visible results. "You can't limit God," he explained. "He'll do it in his time."

In less than two years, the Lake City mission has grown to about 30 in attendance, has baptized six and recently constituted as a church. Plans are being made to erect a building on a 20-acre site Northland Baptist Association will help to purchase.

Building relationships is the key to ministry, Fowler said: "People here are just like those anywhere else. They need someone to love them, to show them they genuinely care."

That's why Fowler spends as much time out in the community as he does at the church. He drops in regularly at Randy's Country Kitchen. He visits every church family at least once a week and makes regular appearances in community gathering places among the unchurched.

He has more time to do this outreach now that he lives in Houghton Lake full time. But even the student missionaries mentally must make their mission fields home to be successful, he said.

"You've got to come in willing to plant your life. If you don't make where you're serving home, you're never going to relate to the people," Fowler said. "They need somebody to build a relationship with them."

"When you grow a church, you get people to trust Christ, but at the same time they're entrusting themselves to the person who wins them. If they think you're not going to stay around, how quickly do you think they'll put their trust in you?"

"There's a need for people who have been called to minister with whatever it takes, whether it's cleaning the bathroom, standing out in the snow to fix a car or driving the church bus."

"It's a trite saying, but the bottom line is making friends for Jesus -- getting to know people to share Christ with them so they can do the same."

Fowler compared the birth of the church to the birth of his infant daughter, Carol Ann. "The birth of a child is exciting yet very painful," he explained. "I cried with Alesia. But when it was all over, the doctor held up our baby and said, 'That's a miracle!'"

"That's the way it is in starting a church. It's exciting but very painful. It's also a miracle to create a church out of nothing."

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