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Cooperative missions produces
'cardboard church' in fire hall

F-HMB

HOWELL, N.J. (BP)--The only Baptist congregation in Howell, N.J., is a cardboard church meeting in a rented building with the loudest church bells in the state.

The small Howell Baptist Chapel isn't much to look at right now. All the church's possessions fit in a few cardboard boxes, which are unpacked each Sunday in the local fire station.

Each Sunday, children gather for Sunday school amid fire trucks, emergency medical units and fire hoses. Pastor Neal McGlohon has the potential to preach three-alarm sermons.

But McGlohon and his congregation intend to overcome those obstacles. They're learning to wear out kneepads and shoe leather to build a church.

Right now, more Buddhists than Baptists live in Howell, the fastest-growing township in the United States in 1987. Howell is on the leading edge of a ring of bedroom suburbs moving out from New York City.

The community gained 5,281 new homes in 1987 and another 3,000 in 1988. Schools, restaurants, gas stations, video rental shops -- all the staples of suburbia -- pop up as quickly as carpenters can swing hammers.

It is a challenging place to build a church because of the tremendous mobility: Twenty percent of the people living in the county this year will be gone next year. Colts Neck Baptist Church, one of Howell's sponsoring churches, recorded 40 additions and 37 transfers out in the same year.

However, Colts Neck Pastor Darwin Bacon believes change is a friend of missions. "Change is the key to openness," he says. "In these ring communities, most people experience profound change in new jobs, new homes, new communities, new schools and, maybe, a new faith."

In December 1985, Colts Neck decided to put aside its own need for a new building in order to start a mission church in Howell. Colts Neck was a missions-minded congregation from its inception, giving 10 percent to the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program unified budget from the first offering.

Even though the church needed to expand its own facilities, the congregation was burdened by the families flooding into nearby Howell Township, where no Baptist church existed, much less a building.

The work in Howell started with a two-month intensive visitation canvass by a Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary missions team and volunteers from Hebron Baptist Association in Georgia. They visited 5,000 homes and launched a Bible study leading to the first service in November 1986.

McGlohon points out the contrast with a Southern city where 90 percent of new church members actually are transfers from another church.

"Here we're dealing with people who have never heard the gospel, not the ones who've left it behind," he says. "The percentage of people open to a full witness is a 10th of what I experienced in Texas. But those who listen really listen."

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Because the investigation of faith is so difficult, the congregation's public face is important, McGlohon explains. This makes the church building more significant in New Jersey than it might be elsewhere.

Last February, in a combined service with Calvary and Colts Neck churches, the 34 members of Howell Baptist Church voted to buy a \$250,000 six-acre parcel of land for their future building.

Even with the loan backed by Colts Neck, it was a spine-tingling decision for the young congregation. "The process was more important than the decision itself," McGlohon stresses. "We learned how to pray on this one."

On winter mornings preceding the vote, members met daily at 6:30 a.m. to pray, sometimes at the site. "This is a form of answered prayer we'll look back on for many years," McGlohon says.

The congregation hopes to be able to use a house on the property soon. But that will only solve the growing church's space problems temporarily.

Hebron Association already has set aside \$42,000 of the \$100,000 required to get a building started. "This would never happen without the Cooperative Program and the network of churches helping us," McGlohon says.

Soon Howell will fold up its cardboard church, leaving the fire station for a little building modest by Southern Baptist standards. But if the church is true to its heritage, it will help another band of Baptists in the next township pack up cardboard boxes, knock on doors and pray another church into existence.

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Photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Adapted from MissionsUSA magazine.

Students share gospel
in spiritual 'War Zone'

By Chip Alford

F- CO
(SWBTS)

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FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--Spiritual warfare has a new meaning for two students at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary who ventured into a war zone to share the Christian gospel.

During their seminary careers, Virginia natives David Fuller and Todd O'Brien were involved with Project Hope, an inner-city ministry in an area of south Dallas known as the "War Zone" because of its drug-related violence. The program, designed as a social and evangelistic ministry, is jointly sponsored by Dallas Baptist Association and Strategies to Elevate People.

The War Zone is controlled by drug dealers who run drugs in and out of apartment complexes, said Fuller, who was director of Project Hope until his graduation from seminary May 12. "There was hardly a day that went by that I didn't hear gunshots being fired," he said.

Fuller and O'Brien had close calls in the neighborhood themselves. Once Fuller was sharing the gospel with some men on the street when he was approached by a man with an "offering" for his church.

"I knew it was drug money, but I wasn't sure what to do," he said. "I didn't want to offend him, so I took the money and asked who (the offering) was from. The guy said it was from 'Carl,' who was a drug dealer and is now serving time in jail. I told him I'd like to meet Carl and thank him personally. He told me he'd set it up for me."

The police were looking for Carl, too, though, and on the morning of Fuller's appointment with the drug dealer, Carl was arrested. When Fuller walked into the dope house, he was confronted by Carl's heavily-armed associates who thought he had turned their boss in to police.

"I got out of it, but it was pretty scary," Fuller said. "I just feel like the Lord is sovereign. I know he's in control of what goes on (in the War Zone) just as much as he is anywhere else."

Fuller and O'Brien's friendship began in 1980 when they met at a factory in Roanoke, Va. They became Christians that same year within a few months of each other.

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"One of the st things we did together was go out street witnessing," said O'Brien, who will graduate from Southwestern this summer. Both men feel led to do inner-city ministry.

"When I came to seminary, all I really knew about was the traditional role of the pastor," said O'Brien. "But as I began to preach at different churches around Fort Worth, (Texas), I felt something was missing, so I found myself street witnessing again. I really have a burning in my heart for the poor and needy."

Fuller, the son of Southern Baptist pastor and leader Charles Fuller, also felt uncomfortable in the traditional pastoral setting. "I knew I didn't want to be pastor of a traditional suburban church, and I couldn't be a minister of education or a minister of music," he said. "But one thing I knew I could do is share Jesus with people I came into contact with."

The two men joined forces and began witnessing outside bars on the streets of east and west Fort Worth. Cornerstone Baptist Church in south Dallas found out about their work and invited Fuller to become co-pastor. He later became linked with Dallas Baptist Association as director of Project Hope, and O'Brien soon joined the ministry.

In addition to street evangelism, Project Hope has organized study halls, tutoring programs, food and clothing distribution centers and after-school Bible studies in south Dallas schools. Another successful evangelistic tool for the ministry has been its academic training program for welfare recipients without high school diplomas.

"Despite all the violence and problems, there is a real openness and an acceptance of the gospel in that community," Fuller said. "It really doesn't matter if you're white or black. If people can see Jesus in you, that's all they really need to see."

Although their work in south Dallas has ended, Fuller and O'Brien are only beginning their work in inner-city ministry. Starting July 1, the two will begin church-starting efforts in Fort Myers, Fla.

"We're really excited about the opportunity," said O'Brien. "A lot of doors have already been opened for us."

Both men said they would like to see Southern Baptists become more involved in inner-city ministry.

"I don't think everybody is called to inner city ministry," Fuller said, "but I do think we all bear the responsibility for making sure everybody is reached with the gospel."

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Photo mailed to Baptist state newspapers by Southwestern Seminary.

Chaplain's ministry helps
solve hideous crime

By Jack E. Brymer

F-CP
(Fla.)

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Miami (BP)-- For most of 1984, 16-year-old Ileana Fuster sat speechless in solitary confinement at Dade County (Fla.) Correctional Institution.

In another prison facility nearby was her 38-year-old husband of only a few months. They had been arrested and charged with 14 counts of child abuse -- including sexual abuse -- that allegedly occurred at the unlicensed baby-sitting service the couple operated in their southwest Dade County home.

Locked in Mrs. Fuster's mind -- as securely as was her body in solitary confinement -- was information about an unbelievably horrible escapade of violence and crime. As the trial approached, the truth about the case eluded prison officials, doctors and lawyers appointed by the court, but not the careful attention of a volunteer Baptist chaplain.

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Through months of consistent and compassionate ministry, Assistant Chaplain Shirley Blando gained the trust of the young illegal immigrant from Honduras. With Blando's support and encouragement, Mrs. Fuster broke her silence. She told her secrets to lawyers, psychiatrists and psychologists, then placed her fate at the mercy of the court.

From the beginning of Mrs. Fuster's confinement, Blando and Trudy Smith, a volunteer Christian counselor, had visited her routinely, but with what appeared to be minimal success.

Then, following a special service for juveniles in solitary confinement, the young woman became "distracted," Blando said. This was the beginning of a series of events that led ultimately to Mrs. Fuster's Christian conversion and confession of her role in the crimes.

For weeks, Blando prayed and probed for an explanation of Mrs. Fuster's erratic conversations and behavior. "She would say things that just didn't tick," Blando said.

In a visit by Tommy Watson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Ferrine, Fla., while Blando was out of town, the first secret was revealed. Citing John 8:32, Watson assured the bewildered teenager that only the truth could set her free.

Buoyed by that exhortation, she shared the first of several secrets: She had been raped mercilessly by the man she later married and with whom she was charged with committing child sex abuse.

Watson relayed the new-found information to Blando. Slowly and lovingly, Blando began to help the perplexed young woman sort out the details of an unbelievable episode.

Mrs. Fuster then agreed to talk with her attorneys, but only if Blando was present. Later psychologists and psychiatrists were brought in to sort out the meaning of the young woman's behavior. After each session, she would "crash" from mental exhaustion.

Although the young inmate shared vital information that eventually would be helpful in prosecuting the crime, her loyalty to the husband who had so brutalized her remained a mystery to Blando.

The chaplain called a fellow church member at First Baptist of Ferrine who had been a prisoner of war. From him, Blando learned that a person in solitary confinement will hold onto that last experience she encounters before confinement. That explained, at least in part, the obsessive devotion to her husband.

The progress was slow. Yet Blando, Watson and others continued their visits. Since Mrs. Fuster was reared a Catholic, they enlisted a priest to visit her for confession.

During one visit, Blando discovered Mrs. Fuster screaming in fear. "I told you he would get to me," the frightened inmate said holding a letter. Blando asked if she could read the letter. It recalled how the couple had read the Bible together.

"What Bible?" the stunned chaplain asked. Using the woman's description of the "red book which had a name like Roso on it," Blando discovered it was a publication of the Rosicrucian sect, a secret society devoted to occult studies. Reportedly, members of the sect believe that by touching letters and other objects, people can become recipients of painful messages.

Blando went back to Mrs. Fuster's cell and retrieved everything her husband had sent her. "She has to this day never asked for them," Blando said recently.

Through the weeks that followed, with Blando's assurances, the young inmate talked freely with psychologists and psychiatrists, and finally the judge.

Although she pleaded guilty to the charges against her and agreed to "tell the truth," even against her husband, she insisted she never would have hurt any of the children had she not been so brutalized herself.

In a publicized trial, her husband, Francisco Fuster Escalona, was convicted of 14 child-abuse charges and sentenced to six consecutive terms of life in prison, plus a consecutive 15-year sentence for violating probation. He will not be eligible for parole until the year 2150.

The details of the case have since been published in a book titled "Unmentionable Acts," which also is the title of a motion picture about the trial, scheduled for release in November.

For her role in the crimes, Mrs. Fuster was sentenced to 10 years in prison at the youthful offender facility in Lowell, Fla., plus 10 years of probation.

But she was not forgotten when she left Dade County Correctional Institution in Miami. Blando and Watson have continued their ministry to her at Lowell, including baptism at the prison chapel into the membership of the Perrine church.

Ralph Spiller, chaplain at the Lowell facility and a member of Trinity Baptist Church in Ocala, Fla., describes Mrs. Fuller as a model prisoner whose spiritual experience is "a personal walk with God" rather than "Jailhouse religion."

Jan Grizzard, assistant superintendent for operations at the Lowell facility and a member of First Baptist Church of Ocala, describes the young woman "one in a thousand" who has taken advantage of the facility's programs as an opportunity to grow.

"Without a doubt, she is one of the most effervescent inmates I have ever dealt with," said Grizzard.

Recently, Spiller arranged an interview with Mrs. Fuster for the Florida Baptist Witness, the state's Baptist newsjournal which included a surprise visit by Blando, Watson and his wife, Mollie.

Through a mixture of laughter and tears, Mrs. Fuster said of her Baptist friends: "God sent them to me. I could not have made it without them. They gave me support when nobody would. They trusted me when nobody wanted to trust me. And they gave me their hands when nobody gave them to me."

But it was the compassion and love of "Mrs. Blando" that brought her through the ordeal, she said.

"When I started talking with Mrs. Blando and reading the Bible, it was like I had to realize this (crime) was real, and I had to think about things I didn't want to think about," she said. "I was living in a fantasy world, but Mrs. Blando showed me love and care. She showed me that she could give me unconditional love, and I trusted her and started talking to her about everything."

Spiller suggested that the positive support of Blando, Watson and others had contributed immeasurably to Mrs. Furster's positive attitude.

"I just wish for all the world that there were enough people that could make that same kind of one-on-one commitment with people here at this institution," said Spiller. "I've seen it work with others, maybe not to the degree it has with Ileana. But there are so many here who do not have anybody that will love them, and so they don't have the support to respond positively."

Despite all the support, Mrs. Fuster faces an uncertain future. Still only 22 years old, she is to be deported to Honduras later this month as part of her sentence. She completed high school while serving her time at Lowell and wants to study psychology and work with juveniles.

She leaves prison and the United States regretful of the crime but thankful for the experience.

"In a lot of ways, my life was so messed up," she told the Witness. "I put myself in trouble, and the consequence was jail. But the most important thing is, if I had never gone to jail, I would never have known Christ."

God's business take priority
for retired education dean

By Chip Alford

F- (CO
(SWBTS)

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--As president of the Alabama Baptist Young People's Union and an ordained deacon at 21, Joe Davis Heacock seemed destined for a career in Christian ministry.

But while attending classes at Howard College, now Samford University, in Birmingham, Ala., in the 1920s, the dean emeritus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's School of Religious Education had other plans.

"At the time I was somewhat unsure of what I wanted to be, but my preference was to be a wealthy businessman," Heacock recalled. To that end, Heacock enrolled in Columbia University's School of Business Administration after earning a business degree from Howard in 1929.

"I thought it would move me in the right direction for a successful career in business," Heacock said. But instead, his time in New York City actually helped direct him to a career in religious education.

"When I was going to school at Columbia, I became interested in activities at some of the Baptist churches in New York City," Heacock remembered. "Every Thursday night, the young people from those churches went into the Chinatown section of the city and met with young boys who had just come over from China and couldn't speak English. We taught them English and witnessed to them about Christ."

Heacock left Columbia after only one semester and returned to Birmingham, taking a job with an insurance company. But he couldn't get the idea of church work out of his mind.

"The Lord was really working in my life," Heacock said. "I didn't really know what I was being called to do. There weren't very many full-time, (church) education workers back then."

Heacock and his wife, Nell, moved to Fort Worth, Texas, in 1935, and he enrolled in Southwestern's school of religious education. While in school, Heacock worked for the Allied Youth Movement, an alcohol-education program. He then was Baptist Young People's Union director at North Fort Worth Baptist Church and soon became minister of education at College Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

After graduation from seminary in 1937, Heacock became minister of education at Olivet Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, where he worked for six years. While working in Oklahoma he became president of the state's Baptist Training Union.

In 1942, Heacock took a job as director of associational work in the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's training union department. "I really liked the work there and thought I had come to the place for my life work," Heacock recalled. But after only two years, Heacock was invited to teach at Southwestern Seminary by J.M. Price, the late dean of the school of religious education.

"It is not what I wanted to do at all, but I couldn't get away from the persuasion the Lord was giving me," Heacock said.

He was professor of education administration from 1944 to 1956 and dean of the school of religious education from 1956 to 1973. During his term as dean, Southwestern became the first school of its kind to offer the doctor of education degree.

In addition to his work with students, Heacock also was instrumental in improvements in religious education in the Southern Baptist Convention. He was president of both the Southwestern Baptist Religious Education and Southern Baptist Religious Education associations.

Heacock has seen many changes in religious education during his years of involvement with Baptist work. "It's more expensive and more professional today," he said. "We've tried to take the principles of learning and put them into the churches where in the old days we didn't have all these methods and systems that we offer now."

"But the basics are still the same. We're still trying to get the Bible taught."

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Photo mailed to Baptist state newspapers by Southwestern Seminary.