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Daniel Vestal announces
candidacy for SBC president

By Jim Newton

N-HMB

ATLANTA (BP)--Daniel Vestal, an unsuccessful candidate for president of the Southern Baptist Convention last June, announced to his Atlanta church on Sept. 24 he is willing to be nominated for the SBC presidency when the convention meets at New Orleans June 12-14, 1990.

Vestal made the announcement at Dunwoody Baptist Church during a Sunday night sermon in which he called for Christians to become servant leaders.

He acknowledged it is unprecedented for any candidate for the SBC presidency to announce publicly his willingness to be nominated in September, pointing out this is usually done in the spring.

"But frankly, we are not living in normal times," he said. "We are living in times of crises and controversy in the SBC."

At the Southern Baptist Convention in Las Vegas last June, Jerry Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla., was re-elected to a second term as SBC president, defeating Vestal 10,754 to 8,248.

On April 16, Vestal had announced to the congregation at Dunwoody Baptist Church he would oppose Vines in the election. He chose the same audience to announce his decision to run again in 1990.

Vestal, who was pastor of First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas, before coming to the suburban Atlanta church in 1987, said he had decided to allow himself to be nominated after much prayer and soul-searching.

He said he is convinced "this is God's will for my life, and part of my service to him."

Earlier in his sermon, Vestal had called for church members to be servant leaders who are willing to humble themselves and serve others rather than self.

"I am offering myself as a servant-leader to Southern Baptists. I'm putting into practice in my life the sermon which Joel Gregory preached at the 1987 Convention in San Antonio when he admonished us to extend our hands to one another."

Vestal said he wants to be a peacemaker who brings reconciliation and renewal with integrity to divided forces in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

Later in an interview, Vestal said Gregory's sermon at the convention in 1987 was "a prophetic word from God" which had made a profound impact on him personally. Gregory is pastor of Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and current president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Vestal said he would do as Gregory proposed in his sermon and extend his arms in openness to opposing denominational leaders in an effort to bring the divided convention together.

He declined to answer specific questions on his next steps in seeking to bring about reconciliation between leaders of factions within the SBC.

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"That is something that should be done privately, secretly, and not discussed publicly in the press," he said. "But I will take steps in the future to do this."

Repeating a stance he took last year, Vestal said he was not the candidate of any faction or organization within the convention, but is taking the stand as a concerned individual.

He said "several" individuals had asked for permission to nominate him as president at the New Orleans convention, but he had not agreed to allow anyone to do so yet. "There is no rush on that; there is plenty of time."

He said he announced his plans in September so that he would be able to deal with the issues confronting the convention with honesty and integrity as a recognized candidate.

"I am announcing this decision in September because it is my desire to be open, honest and transparent in all that I do. I do not want to be coy or cunning. I do not want to pretend I won't be a candidate when I will be."

Vestal specifically asked for the support of theological conservatives in the denomination, as well as "those who feel they have been offended and wronged by the present theological-political movement that now controls the convention." He asked those on both sides of the controversy to "join hands with me in putting an end to this division in the denomination."

Opposing the constant use of labels to describe factions in the denomination, Vestal said he is not a "moderate" or a "fundamentalist."

In coining his own phrase, Vestal described himself as a "denominational conservative" who is conservative in theology but loyal to the denomination and its institutions.

Vestal said he believes in the literal interpretation of the Bible, and believes there should be theological parameters in Baptist institutions. "But I also treasure those institutions and believe they should be handled with care. I believe those who administer them should be shown the highest love, trust and support."

Vestal said his decision to be a candidate for president had been influenced by a recent attempt to fire Lloyd Elder as president of the SBC Sunday School Board.

"I was shocked and grieved at the attempt to discredit Lloyd Elder," Vestal said in his sermon. "Lloyd Elder is a fine Christian gentleman, and is as capable an administrator as Southern Baptists have."

"What happened to Lloyd Elder is another of many tragic examples of godly people who have been injured and good institutions which have been impaired, all in the name of 'believing the Bible.' What is happening to good and godly men like Lloyd Elder is wrong."

Vestal said his decision also had been influenced by hundreds of people who had written and called to affirm him, including people of differing (political) perspectives. Vestal said they had urged him to provide leadership in the denominational crisis, to continue to speak out, and to be a candidate in 1990 rather than withdrawing in silence and solitude.

Vestal disagreed with those who say the controversy in the SBC is over, and with those who might charge that his announcement will further polarize the political process in the SBC. "We do have problems, and we must face them honestly and forthrightly," he said.

"The greatest problem of all is that multitudes of good Southern Baptists are denied the privilege to participate in leadership or be involved in the decision-making process because they simply will not be a part of a certain theological-political group," he said. "That kind of exclusion is wrong and must be resolved."

Vestal said his decision was influenced more by principle than by anything else. He repeated views voiced last June that historic Baptist principles are being ignored, violated and eroded by the controversy. Such principles, he said, include the priesthood of every believer, the autonomy of the church, the authority of Scripture, religious liberty and cooperative missions.

"My desire is to see Southern Baptists recover their basic purpose," he said, adding the denomination was founded in 1845 for the purpose of missions and evangelism.

"The time has come for us to face the future with a renewed commitment to cooperative evangelism, cooperative prayer, cooperative giving, cooperative missions and cooperative ministry," he said.

"We cannot undo the past, but we can renew our love and trust for one another, and in openness and liberty we can move into the 21st century," Vestal said. "I have not given up that hope."

Vestal asked his 3,481-member church to pray for him, to become informed on what is happening in the denomination, and to give him their advice, counsel and suggestions.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the church went into a called business session to elect 29 men as deacons.

Denny Spear, long-time chaplain for Days Inn, Inc., and first pastor of the Dunwoody congregation, urged the church to take some official action at its regular October business meeting to endorse, approve and support their pastor.

No action, however, was taken since the called business meeting was specifically for the purpose of electing new deacons.

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Volunteers follow
in Hugo's wake

By Tracy Lee & Joe Westbury

N-HMB

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COLUMBIA, S.C. (BP)--With the help of Southern Baptist volunteers from 11 states, South Carolinians are receiving some relief from the disaster caused by Hurricane Hugo, the state's worst storm in more than a century.

The endeavor is the largest relief effort in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention, according to reports from the SBC Home Mission Board and Brotherhood Commission.

Within 72 hours of the Sept. 21-22 disaster, members of the Baptist Men organization from Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Arkansas, Ohio and Illinois had arrived and were feeding hurricane victims in efforts coordinated by Red Cross and civil defense officials, reported Tim Yarbrough, disaster coordinator for the Brotherhood Commission. The out-of-state volunteers joined efforts of South Carolina Baptist Men members.

South Carolina Baptist Convention general board staff members established an overall disaster relief plan that incorporates three objectives: to coordinate food service units with the Red Cross, to contact churches possibly damaged by Hugo and to recruit volunteers willing to help with clean-up and repair. That effort is being led by Ben J. Connell, the state's Baptist Brotherhood director.

South Carolina Baptists began preparing for the wrath of Hugo Sept. 21, when they realized the potential for disaster, said George Bullard, the convention's missions director. They have operated a full-time "command post" at the Baptist Building in Columbia since Sept. 22.

"We have been operating a minimum of 12 to 15 hours a day and will continue to do this through this week," said Cliff Satterwhite, director of the convention's Royal Ambassadors program, who is assisting Connell with the disaster relief.

Thirteen mass feeding units are located throughout the area struck by Hugo. The units are staffed by the out-of-state Baptist Men volunteers.

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The units are located at Citadel Square Baptist Church, Charleston; Providence Baptist Church, Macedonia; Charleston Heights Baptist Church, Charleston; First Baptist Church, Georgetown; Ashley River Baptist Church, Charleston; Rutledge Avenue Baptist Church, Charleston; Sumter High School; Murrells Inlet Baptist Church; Kingstree Baptist Church; McClellanville community; First Baptist Church, Manning; Union Baptist Church, Hannah; and Baptist College at Charleston.

Although all units did not arrive in South Carolina at the same time, more than 3,200 South Carolinians were fed within the first 24 hours of operation. For some, the Baptists provided their first food in three days.

"When the units are fully in operation, it will be possible to feed 40,000 people a day," Connell said. "These feeding units will be out there as long as they're needed. Most groups have come prepared to stay as long as two weeks."

Emmette Jones, from Alabama, is manning a feeding unit at Citadel Square Church on Meeting Street in downtown Charleston. Jones' group of volunteers arrived in Charleston Sept. 23 and by the end of Sept. 24 had fed 3,500 people. Jones brought 19 volunteers with him, and eight more arrived Sept 25.

Curtis Fowler, a layman representing Tennessee Baptists, is with a feeding unit at Providence Church in Macedonia, a community near Moncks Corner. His group of 11 volunteers served 2,000 meals and may send 2,000 meals to the Santee/Holly Hill area. His group is growing, receiving five or six Sept. 25, eight more Sept. 28 and possibly six or eight more by Oct. 1, if needed.

Although the food service units, using food primarily supplied by the Red Cross, are the convention's main way of helping feed the hungry, it is not the only way, Connell said.

Eager to help the hungry children and adults he had seen while driving around the Charleston area, Connell called Wetterau Food Distributors, a company referred to him by the Red Cross.

Company President Vet McCarty opened his inventory to the needy, and his company donated 7,500 gallons of milk as well as fresh fruit, dry cereal and juice and delivered the supplies in two trailer trucks.

"Food service is going to be the most impressive service in this area," Connell said. "It's amazing what all has been done. They are putting food in people's hands. It is inspiring to know that we had this type of response from just one food distributor in the Charleston area."

As general board staff members continue to man the command post, they are calling churches that may have been in the path of the hurricane, checking with the pastors and asking about damages or any special needs.

While at the Baptist Building Sept. 24, South Carolina convention Executive Secretary-Treasurer Ray P. Rust received the first check for assistance, \$735 from Harmony Baptist Church in Gaston, S.C.

The home of Baptist College at Charleston President Jairy Hunter was destroyed. The school's campus also has some damage, such as roofs and tiles off buildings and trees down. The all-glass Russell Parlor, which is in Russell Dormitory, will have to be replaced.

General board staff and volunteers are continuing to call churches and offer assistance where it may be needed, although telephone communication with some areas is difficult.

They also are coordinating clean-up crews through David Brien, director of missions, and Jesse Stafford, Brotherhood specialist, for Screven Baptist Association. They began putting together teams of volunteers to help churches and locals who suffered damage by the hurricane Sept. 25.

For more information about how to volunteer to help in the relief, call the disaster relief center at the Baptist Building in Columbia, (803) 765-0030.

1 Baptist killed, 2 injured
in south Texas bus tragedy

N-Texas

DALLAS (BP)--One Texas Baptist died and two were injured when a Mission, Texas, school bus collided with a delivery truck and plunged into a water-filled gravel pit Sept. 21.

Twenty children died as a result of the wreck, the worst school bus accident in Texas history.

Ysenia Perez, 16, of Iglesia Bautista Del Pueblo in Mission died Sept. 22 of injuries sustained the day before. Juan and Jesus Cuellar, also of Del Pueblo, were hospitalized.

About 300 people attended a community memorial service at Del Pueblo Sept. 21, said Pastor Juan de la Garza. He noted that members of his church and other Texas Baptist churches in town were preparing meals for, and seeking to offer comfort to, grieving families.

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Prayer leaders seek revival
through prayer, repentance

By Terri Lackey

N-SSB

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NASHVILLE (BP)--A call to prayer and repentance was sounded by five Southern Baptist prayer leaders during the Sept. 17 National Prayer Teleconference broadcast live on the BTN and ACTS networks.

"Southern Baptists must choose between revival or death," said T.W. Hunt, prayer consultant at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. He called for "solemn assembly," an Old Testament concept of praying in unity, repenting and worshipping.

The panel of prayer leaders also included Avery Willis of the Sunday School Board; Minette Drumwright of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board; Doug Beggs of the convention's Brotherhood Commission; and Henry Blackaby of its Home Mission Board.

"To be left out of spiritual revival is death," said Hunt, who explained churches and denominations that do not respond to God's call for revival will die.

"The Holy Spirit is very concerned that the church purify itself for the wedding (or union) between Christ and churches which will take place after the second coming."

"We (prayer leaders) believe Christ is coming soon, but we don't know when," said Hunt, who emphasized the urgency of God's call for prayer, repentance and spiritual awakening. The call is to all Christians and not just Southern Baptists, he added.

Drumwright, director of the FMB international prayer strategy office, said, "I feel God wants work through all believers all over the world."

Blackaby, HMB director of prayer and spiritual awakening, and Hunt recounted several incidents during summer conferences that have led them to believe a major spiritual awakening is about to occur.

Willis said panelists have talked personally with key Southern Baptist Convention leaders, elected officials and agency heads, urging them to call the people they lead to "humble themselves, pray, seek God's face and turn from their wicked ways in solemn assemblies."

In Old Testament times, leaders, priests and/or kings called for solemn assemblies of their people, said Beggs, director of the adult division at the Brotherhood Commission. Each time God called for solemn assemblies, "he was bringing or about to bring severe judgment on his people."

The prayer leaders believe if people respond to God in solemn assemblies, he will bring about spiritual awakening, which will, in turn, result in the realization of the Southern Baptist Bold Mission Thrust campaign goal of sharing the gospel with every person in the world by the year 2000.

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Willis said he and the other prayer leaders believe God is warning Christians in America to "purify themselves" so he can use them to spread the gospel.

"He is calling us back to the biblical understanding of what it is to be a Christian," Willis said. "If we refuse to be used, then he will leave us and go to someone else.

"If the church will become purified and get right with God, multitudes of non-Christians will begin to seek Christ. I do very definitely believe there will be a spiritual awakening, but we have to purify ourselves before we are instruments around the world."

Willis predicted disaster if Christians do not repent and if they turn away from God's call of solemn assembly.

"If people don't come in line with the Lord, I think he will bring judgment on us in several ways," he said. These may include disease, war, famine and drought.

Hunt said he is optimistic Christians will heed God's call to solemn assembly.

"I really feel that large numbers of people and churches will be revived," he said. "I have no idea what will happen to those that resist. I expect they will just be left behind."

A text outlining the prayer leaders' "Call for Solemn Assembly and Prayer," is available by writing the National Prayer Corps, 127 Ninth Avenue North, Nashville, Tenn. 37234, and sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope, Willis said.

Prayer leaders are also urging individual prayer groups to gather for at least one hour of prayer on Saturdays or Sundays to pray for spiritual awakening, Willis said.

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(BP) photo and the text of the "Call ..." mailed to state Baptist newspapers by SSB bureau of Baptist Press.