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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Phony phone scam  
strikes again

N-FMB

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--"Dr. Bill Slater" is at it again.

"Slater," a thief who also sometimes identifies himself as "Bill Jennings" or "Bill Harmon," calls churches with a sad, false story designed to squeeze money out of generous staff members.

And he's targeted churches in at least three states -- Oklahoma, Kansas and South Carolina -- since the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board warned about the scam last October.

"Slater" places collect telephone calls to Southern Baptist churches, and perhaps others, identifying himself as a missionary to Brazil or as a pastor from the general area of the church he is calling.

He usually claims he is at either JFK or La Guardia airport in New York City, where he has been robbed. He must catch a flight back to Brazil that night, he tells listeners. Then he asks for \$64 -- or \$60, or \$62.50, or \$72 -- to be wired to him at the airport.

Sometimes he adds that he or his "associate pastor" has been shot or stabbed. Sometimes the "robbery" has occurred in a restaurant parking lot. Once he claimed a music group he was leading to Brazil had all their instruments stolen. He apparently has numerous versions of the story that he tailors for the listener he is trying to deceive.

"There is no Southern Baptist missionary by that name, nor am I able to find anyone in Brazil who knows such a person," said Bill Damon, Foreign Mission Board associate area director for Brazil and the Caribbean, in October. Damon had been contacted by several churches that had received such collect calls during the previous six to eight months.

Using his "Bill Jennings" or "Bill Harmon" alias, the caller recently contacted at least three Southern Baptist churches in the Spartanburg, S.C., area. In one case, he claimed to be a Spartanburg minister, in another a missionary to Brazil. None of the churches sent him money; all three had seen a news story warning about the scam in the Baptist Courier, South Carolina Baptists' weekly newspaper.

An Oklahoma church was not as fortunate. "Slater" collected \$72 in December from Clearview Baptist Church in Broken Arrow when a sympathetic deacon who answered the telephone sent the money out of his own pocket. The deacon later was reimbursed by the church.

Another Oklahoma church contacted by the scam artist refused to send money, however; the church staff had seen a warning about the scam in the Baptist Messenger, the state newspaper.

"Jennings" also called several churches in Topeka, Kan., in January, and successfully cheated money out of one.

The caller often contacts churches just before or during a worship or prayer service and asks that the congregation pray on the spot about sending money. He usually knows the name of the target church's pastor and frequently claims to know the pastor, to have a friend or relative in the congregation or to be from the local area.

He always is in a hurry and says he is calling from a pay phone that cannot receive return calls. He asks that the money be sent via Western Union to one of the two New York airports and that the sender indicate proper identification on receipt be waived, since his wallet has been "stolen."

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"Apparently he finds out enough about the local area" where he's calling to fool some victims, said Don Kirkland, associate editor of South Carolina's Baptist Courier. "Obviously he's taken enough time to look carefully at a map or something." He also apparently has a directory of Southern Baptist churches and pastors in some states.

Telephone and FBI officials advised Oklahoma Baptists that the best defense against such scams is to be forewarned. Telephone traces must be arranged in advance of calls.

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Baseball helps Baptists  
hit homer in Venezuela

By Mary E. Speidel

F-FMB

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CARACAS, Venezuela (BP)--They swarmed Bill Cashion behind the dugout.

"Senor, senor," pleaded a boy in a baseball jersey. He shoved a glove at Cashion. Others pushed forward caps and mitts for him to autograph.

He had just finished a day of baseball clinics in Caracas, the capital city of Venezuela. The young people who attended learned baseball techniques from professional players and coaches.

But Bill Cashion is not a sports star. He's a Southern Baptist missionary to Venezuela. And Cashion and his colleagues teach more than baseball tips at the clinics. They introduce people to Jesus Christ.

The clinics, begun about a year and a half ago in Venezuela, have become popular with young people. "The hardest part of the clinics is leaving the ball field," said Cashion of Slater, S.C., a church starter in Caracas. "They want everyone's autograph."

But that's not surprising, according to the missionary. Baseball is Venezuela's No. 1 sport. It's almost a national obsession, he said.

"Kids in the street play with sticks and balls made out of socks or paper or anything they can find," added Venezuelan baseball hero Omar Vizquel, surrounded by fans. Vizquel, a shortstop with the Seattle Mariners, is one of several professional players who have helped Cashion lead clinics.

Another is Carlos Rios, former all-star second baseman with the Richmond (Va.) Braves, top minor-league team for the Atlanta Braves. After retiring as a pro player, Rios will begin coaching rookies for the Braves in Brandenton, Fla., this spring.

During a clinic session on batting, Rios showed the proper grip to a group of boys sitting at his feet. Later the young players listened to Marty Clary, a pitcher for the Atlanta Braves. Clary told the youths and their parents about his most important decision -- accepting Christ as savior.

"It's made me feel better about myself than throwing a shutout against the St. Louis Cardinals," he said.

Standing by Clary near home plate, Rios told the young people how to begin a relationship with Christ. He understands their questions. At their age, Rios was running the bases on youth-league diamonds in Puerto Rico. In those days "baseball was my god," said Rios, 29.

At age 18, he signed with the Pittsburgh Pirates and began playing in the minor leagues. But pro ball's pressure took its toll on Rios. "I was a below-average player then because I was so tense, so worried," he said.

Rios found peace in 1982. He became a Christian through the influence of his wife, Marta, and Baseball Chapel, a Christian organization that coordinates clubhouse Sunday worship services in the major and minor leagues. Local ministers are volunteer chaplains.

For Cashion, 1982 also was a pivotal year. Active as volunteers with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, he and his wife, Kathy, applied for career mission service. They hoped to go to Brazil, where Cashion had coordinated a volunteer partnership project. But they were rejected because of a medical problem. For the next two years, "I was angry with everybody," he admitted.

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During that time, Rios was traded to the Atlanta Braves. He started playing for the Greenville (S.C.) Braves, one of Atlanta's farm teams. Cashion, a former baseball coach, was the team's volunteer chaplain.

Cashion also was pastor of Washington Baptist Church in nearby Greer, S.C. After Rios joined the church, the two became close friends.

Cashion encouraged Rios to volunteer for a Foreign Mission Board partnership project in Chile. There Rios preached for the first time in his life. He realized his potential influence as a Spanish-speaking Christian athlete when 40 people attending evangelistic services at a 38-member church accepted Christ as savior after his sermons.

Back in South Carolina, Cashion still was fuming about being turned down for mission service. One day a friend suggested he read some Scriptures that "cut through my bitterness," he recalled. Finally, he got to the point "that if God wanted us to clean restrooms somewhere, we'd do it."

Following a physician's advice, the couple reapplied for mission service. The Foreign Mission Board appointed them missionaries to Venezuela in 1985.

Cashion and Rios kept in touch. Rios stayed active in Baseball Chapel in the United States and Puerto Rico, where he played baseball during the winter. He also worked with Unlimited Potential Inc., a Christian organization that sponsors youth sports clinics with an evangelistic message.

Through his travels, Rios began to realize the need for Baseball Chapel in Latin American countries. He helped start clubhouse chapels for teams in the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Venezuela. Later he became Baseball Chapel's volunteer coordinator for Latin America, a ministry that caused him to consider becoming a full-time "baseball minister." He was ordained by Grove Avenue Baptist Church in Richmond last year.

Through Rios' contacts, Cashion became national Baseball Chapel coordinator in Venezuela. In that role, Cashion recruits pastors and missionaries to be chaplains for the country's six professional baseball teams. He is chaplain for the Caracas Lions and leads youth baseball clinics in cooperation with Unlimited Potential. In addition, Cashion and Rios have coordinated baseball clinics in several other Latin American countries.

Along the way, Cashion has linked his ministry to local Baptist churches.

Members of Cashion's church consider the ballpark a preaching point, he said. Venezuelan Baptist pastors and Southern Baptist missionaries minister as chaplains and translators for the teams. Services are bilingual to accommodate Venezuelan players and North Americans playing winter baseball there.

Venezuelan Baptist Enrique Montoya, pastor of Memorial Baptist Church in Caracas, has led a ballpark discipleship group for Christian players.

At the baseball clinics, Baptist volunteers help by translating, registering spiritual decisions and distributing tracts. Local Baptist church members follow up by trying to begin home Bible studies in the neighborhoods where clinics are held.

Both programs have given Venezuelan Baptists an open door to unchurched people, Cashion said.

For example, Baseball Chapel transformed the New York Yankees Baseball Academy in Caracas when a dozen players became Christians, Cashion said.

Venezuelan Baptist pastor Leonel Pertillo is chaplain for the academy, which trains promising Venezuelan players.

One of those players is Javier Bracamonte, 18. As a boy he was so enthusiastic about baseball he sometimes slept in stadiums. "I had the fever of baseball," he said. Now his priority is Jesus Christ.

Baseball officials also support the ministry. The chapel services "help (players) during the tension of the season to rest, to relax, just to have time to think and to get away from the rigors of the game," said Pablo Morales, owner of the Caracas Lions.

And Cashion's work with the baseball clinics has brought him an award from a youth baseball district in Venezuela.

But gaining glory isn't what satisfies Cashion; it's knowing he's in the right place, combining his interests in baseball and the Bible. "The strange thing about all this is that Venezuela is the only South American country where baseball is the No. 1 sport," he observed.

Rios, who never made it to the major leagues, finds a similar satisfaction. "It gives me the opportunity to teach the greatest sport ever played and to tell the greatest story ever told," he said.

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

Soviet change produces difficulty,  
defector Sakharov tells students

N-CO  
(Te 705)

Baptist Press  
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ABILENE, Texas (BP)--Rapid changes have made life in the Soviet Union difficult, a dissident who defected from that country told U.S. university students.

"Imagine a whole country that is suddenly given freedom after having everything done for them," said Vladimir Sakharov during talks at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas.

"In order to live in Moscow, you must first work there for two years; in order to work in Moscow, you must first live there for two years. In order to be capitalistic, you must have mobility; the Soviet Union doesn't have mobility."

Sakharov, formerly the Soviet Union's leading expert on Middle Eastern affairs, defected in 1972 and later became a U.S. citizen.

Problems in his native country paint a bleak, but not hopeless, picture, Sakharov told students at the Baptist school. Those problems include male dominance, AIDS, lack of incentive to work, worthless money and racism.

"We know about ethnic unrest," he said. "Nobody likes anybody in the Soviet Union. There is a society called Memory, basically like the KKK, who hates everybody. Right now, the tendency in Russia is to blame all their problems on the Jews. The Jews have literally gone into hiding because of emerging hatred."

Sakharov suggested the Soviet policy of "open exodus" for Jews be expanded to include Shiite Muslims, so members of both groups may leave the country and ethnic strife and bloodshed may be limited.

Turning to strife between the sexes, he predicted a women's liberation movement in the U.S.S.R. Women work all day, stand in line two hours to buy food, return to an apartment shared by multiple families, cook, clean and wash clothes by hand, he noted.

"Soviet women are getting exposed to American culture," he said. "They are seeing that women in the West are dressed well, and they want that. There is no women's liberation movement in the Soviet Union yet, but it will come soon."

A movement already in progress -- alcohol and drug abuse -- also threatens his native land, Sakharov said. Plants used to make many illegal drugs grow wild there, he noted.

"There is a high mortality rate among young Soviet males because of alcoholism. At least 70 percent of all Soviet males are alcoholics," he estimated. "Now they've found drugs."

Another health problem has been created because of a shortage of doctors, nurses, medicine and hospital beds, as well as an abundance of unsanitary conditions that produce disease.

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Life expectancy has decreased while infant mortality rates have increased, he said, noting poor medical practice is compounded by poor diet.

"The Soviet diet is very bad; it is potatoes, cabbage and fat meat," he illustrated. "The three most underpaid professions in the Soviet Union are doctors, nurses and teachers, so there aren't enough doctors and nurses to take care of the Soviets. One other problem is the spread of AIDS. Even in hospitals, needles are often not sterilized."

In addition to ill citizens, the Soviet Union has a weak economy, Sakharov said.

"The Soviets' money, the ruble, is like Monopoly money," he claimed. "The Soviets have nothing to trade with."

Because the government provides their basic needs, and because their money has no value, the workers lack incentive and cannot build many products that other countries will want to buy, he said.

Despite all its problems, the Soviet Union continues to move forward in its struggle to redefine itself while trying to survive, Sakharov reported.

"The reforms of (Soviet leader Mikhail) Gorbachev are impossible to stop now," he maintained. "People currently need food and clothing. That's how they measure Gorbachev's performance. Gorbachev is less popular in the Soviet Union than he is overseas."

But Gorbachev's only real threat is civil war, Sakharov said, noting the leader has driven most of his enemies out of Moscow.

The Soviet request for U.S. professors to teach business administration in the U.S.S.R. is promising, because a Soviet understanding of business could pave the way for American food- and department-store chains to enter the Soviet Union, Sakharov said. The companies would make money, and the Soviets would get the food and consumer goods they need, he reasoned.

Sakharov challenged the students to take advantage of their freedom and be more aware of the world around them.

"We decided the Soviet Union is not dangerous anymore, so we've quit studying them," he said. "Americans can't be isolated all the time. ... Young people in the United States can turn things around. There's a world out there in which students will have to live one day."

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Reported by Duane Simolke, a graduate student working in the Hardin-Simmons media relations office

Tonks takes early retirement  
from Historical Commission

N-60  
(Historical Comm.)

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NASHVILLE (BP)--A. Ronald Tonks, 55, assistant executive director of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission, has announced early retirement effective March 1 to pursue other interests.

Tonks joined the staff of the commission in January 1972 as research director. He assumed his present position in April 1973.

Tonks' major contributions have included conducting oral history interviews with Southern Baptist Convention leaders, acquiring manuscript collections, overseeing the operation of the commission's library and archives, conducting research projects and assisting in the production of 18 videotapes on Baptist history.

Prior to joining the commission's staff, Tonks taught history at Indiana Central University, now the University of Indianapolis, and was pastor of churches in Indiana and Quebec.

He is a graduate of McGill University in Montreal, Quebec; McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario; and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

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