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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE
SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #7
Nashville, Tennessee 372
(615) 244-23
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 200 Maryland Ave. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

February 16, 1990

90-22

Consensus challenges
'90s, scholars say

By Michael Duduit

N-CO
(Ala.)

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Building a denominational consensus is the major challenge facing the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1990s, according to a panel of Baptist leaders and teachers speaking at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

"The SBC in the Year 2000: Toward a Believable Future" was the theme of a discussion sponsored by Samford's Beeson Divinity School. The session was moderated by Charles T. Carter, pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham and president of the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

Panelists included Nancy Ammerman, assistant professor of sociology of Religion at Emory University and a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta; Timothy George, dean of the Beeson Divinity School; and William E. Hull, provost of Samford University; and Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Describing the convention as "at an impasse," George said: "We cannot go back to the pre-1979 days. Those days are gone forever, along with the Studebakers and 5-cent Cokes." But the SBC "cannot continue along our current course ... without committing denominational suicide," he added.

The solution is a consensus built on several elements, including a structure of dialogue, responsible inclusiveness, theological integrity, evangelical ecumenism and a God-sent revival, George said.

Joining the call for consensus, Land said Southern Baptists are "in search of a new equilibrium."

Ammerman said consensus and equilibrium are different models. "If a new consensus emerges, it will be a doctrinal consensus, not a sociological or cultural consensus" such as that which has united Southern Baptists in the past, she noted.

"To those for whom the equilibrium is satisfactory, it will be consensus," Land said. "There will come to a point at which enough conservatives will be satisfied so that the desire for more" change will be eased.

Another factor in achieving denominational consensus will be emergence of a new generation of Southern Baptist leadership, Hull said. "One of the things that will permit moving beyond polarization is general turnover," he explained.

A member of the SBC Peace Committee, Hull said, "We spent much of our time on the Peace Committee bathing the wounds of ... scarred warriors." For many participants in the denominational battles of the 1980s, he said, too much ill will remains to achieve real consensus.

Land agreed with the need for new leaders to move beyond the current impasse. "I see a real generational difference in willingness to reach out and move beyond past hurts," he said.

Panelists agreed on the need for expanded dialogue as a means of achieving denominational consensus.

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"We need to talk to one another, not just about one another," said George. "It's difficult to demonize someone you talk with and meet with and pray with."

Agreeing on the need for improved discussion between factions in the denominational controversy, Land said: "Two people arguing with each other is not a dialogue. We have to build a trust level ... through listening."

George called on pastors Daniel Vestal of Atlanta and Morris Chapman of Wichita Falls, Texas -- both announced candidates for the convention presidency -- to meet and talk together "both before and after the convention."

Private dialogue, however, may not be sufficient to create a clear consensus, Ammerman noted.

"Southern Baptists still typically talk about dialogue in personal and private terms -- if we can just get these people of good will together and let them discover they like each other, it will all go away," she said.

But such an approach has one major problem she added: "We are talking about public and not private disagreements. If we're going to reach consensus, there must be a public acknowledgement of the positions."

Beyond dialogue, several panelists stressed the need for a new level of inclusiveness in Southern Baptist life.

George expressed "a desire to reach out and include people from both sides who have been excluded." The candidate who wins the presidency, he said, should make appointments which include people from both sides of the convention controversy.

Land said he is optimistic about reaching consensus in the decade of the 90s, noting, "I think we will reach a new equilibrium that will be very inclusive."

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Conservatives endorse Chapman;
urge coalition of inerrantists

By Greg Warner

N- CO
(Fla.)

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--Leaders of the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention unveiled their candidate for SBC president Feb. 12 and urged Southern Baptists who have shunned politics in the last decade to join them in a historic new coalition around "the perfect, infallible Bible."

Texas pastor Morris Chapman, whose candidacy for president was announced the previous week, spoke briefly Feb. 12 at the annual pastors' school and Bible conference at First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., where current SBC President Jerry Vines is pastor.

Chapman, pastor of First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, was joined on the platform by Vines and former President Adrian Rogers, who called the event "the most historic thing that has happened in these 11 years."

Chapman, who made a last-minute decision to fly to Jacksonville for the conference, received a long-distance endorsement from Houston pastor John Bisagno, whose telephone message was relayed to the audience of more than 3,500.

Bisagno issued a five-page statement Feb. 8 endorsing both Chapman and the conservative movement. In the past, Bisagno has positioned himself as a mediator in the denomination's theological-political controversy, but in the statement, he aligned himself with the conservative movement and called Chapman "a man committed to the completion of the correction begun 11 years ago."

Vines, in introducing the telephone call from Bisagno, pastor of First Baptist Church of Houston, said the statement marks the start of "a great coalescing of Bible-believing people" who have not yet been involved in the conservative effort.

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"I want what I am saying to be dead center, bull's eye, perfectly clear," Bisagno told the audience. "The goal of the past 11 years and more -- that every denominational servant and every institutional staff member not only believe in, but teach and perpetuate belief in a perfect, infallible Bible -- must not change.

"While holding unwaveringly to that cause, I am calling for a historic new day. My challenge is to every Southern Baptist within any political parameter who shares that conviction to stand up and say so. Too many of us who feel this way have been silent too long.

"I am calling for a togetherness of shared leadership, transcending anything seen before, to perpetuate an unshakable commitment to teach a perfect Bible in every classroom in the land. I believe that a coalition of all those in or out of any political entity committed to this common goal can bring a quick end to the struggle."

Calling the event "historic," Homer Lindsay, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville along with Vines, told the audience many leaders such as Bisagno who have stayed out the controversy "are coming to the realization that they can remain neutral no longer."

Lindsay said Bisagno "is in the process of bringing these men out of neutrality," and he said other yet-unannounced leaders will make similar statements soon. Lindsay said Vines also has been working to bring in unaligned pastors, telling them "they have to decide if, in the Southern Baptist Convention, they want a split or a splinter."

"If the majority of Southern Baptists believe in this word, then they are the ones that should prevail," Lindsay said. "And if it's the minority that do not believe in this word, then they are the ones who should keep quiet or leave.

"Now, if you don't want to see your convention taken over by liberals, then you'd better get to New Orleans," for the SBC meeting in June, Lindsay told the audience, many of whom were pastors.

Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., and a speaker on the Bible conference program, told participants, "This is the most historic thing that has happened in these 11 years, when men like Dr. John Bisagno, whom I love and respect, say it's time to line up with what began 11 years ago."

Rogers urged conference participants to "do all you can" to elect Chapman president in New Orleans. Rogers then introduced Chapman, noting he asked the Texas pastor to attend the Jacksonville meeting. "He is doctrinally straight, morally pure, eminently qualified," Rogers said. "My dear friends, he has been through the fire. He has paid the price."

Chapman was greeted with a standing ovation by the Jacksonville audience. "I am 100 percent, totally committed to the inerrancy and infallibility of the word of God," he said. "I don't know the will of God about the election, but I do believe God will stand with those who stand for the truth."

Rogers, with his arm around Chapman, led a prayer for the Texas pastor and his candidacy.

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SBC unsettled, not
divided, Chapman says

By Dan Martin

N- CO

Baptist Press
2/16/90

WICHITA FALLS, Texas (BP)--The Southern Baptist Convention is unsettled but not divided, Morris Chapman said.

Chapman, pastor of First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas, made the assessment during an interview with Baptist Press following the announcement he would be the conservatives' candidate for president of the SBC at the 1990 annual meeting June 12 in New Orleans.

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"I think we are an unsettled denomination," Chapman, 49, said. "We are groping for our way, but we are far from being a divided denomination.

"We are unsettled over the nature and authority of God's Word."

Chapman, who was introduced as the conservatives' candidate Feb. 12 during the annual Pastors' School and Bible Conference at First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., said in the interview he believes "the cry of Southern Baptists presently is to return to our historic Baptist principles and practices."

The key to those bedrock principles and practices, he said, is that "our God who is perfect in nature has given us a Bible which is perfect in nature."

"Southern Baptists in the convention setting have established a strong commitment to the perfect Word of God. It is imperative that we agree theologically that the Word of God is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Bible."

Chapman, in a statement released following the announcement of plans to nominate him as president, said: "If I am honored by being elected ... my heart's desire is to be used of God to reach beyond perceived political parameters of our convention to bring us together again.

"The time has come to enlarge the tent of our beloved Southern Baptist Convention to encompass all cooperating Southern Baptists who are dedicated to perpetuating our allegiance to the Bible as the perfect Word from a perfect God.

"We must stay the course of this commitment in the spirit of broadened togetherness and shared leadership."

In announcing Chapman as the conservative standard bearer, conservative leaders urged Southern Baptists who have shunned participation in the theological-political controversy of the past decade to join them in a new coalition around "the perfect, infallible Bible."

Chapman told Baptist Press he plans to "continue to refocus and even sharpen the focus upon what I believe to be the one true issue (of the controversy): the nature and authority of Scripture. Thus, I am reaching out to all persons, desiring to draw together all Southern Baptists who believe in the perfect nature of the Bible, regardless of previous or present political persuasions."

Southern Baptists, in the 1987 annual meeting in St. Louis, in adopting the report of the Peace Committee interpreted "truth without any mixture of error," Chapman said. The phrase is a key statement in the Baptist Faith and Message Statement of 1963 and has been a point of dispute in the controversy.

Chapman quoted the report, which said the phrase meant "these four precepts: Adam and Eve were real persons; the named authors did write the biblical books attributed to them by those books; the miracles were supernatural events in history; and the historical narratives in the Bible are accurate and reliable."

That, he added is "bedrock, Baptist belief."

In the interview, he quoted an action from the 1922 annual meeting of the SBC, "when messengers adopted the Report of the Committee on the Report of the Education Board. In part, the report said, 'While calling for quality education we must not allow ourselves to become so absorbed in creating academic standards that we forget or ignore the main thing for which we entered ... the field of education.'

"The report further stated, 'If ... textbooks cannot be found which are not ... destructive to the faith of the students in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the teachers in such departments should be of such pronounced faith in the Bible and of such learning in their departments as to be able to so explain the defect of the textbooks as to magnify the message of the Bible rather than discredit it.'

Chapman added: "Clearly our forefathers, with great enthusiasm, envisioned staff and faculty in all departments of our Baptist colleges and seminaries as people who, first, profess faith in Jesus Christ as savior and lord, and, second, who believe in the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God.

"I am not in position to determine the extent to which there may be those who may not believe in inerrancy and infallibility of God's Word (in the classrooms and institutions of the denomination). My best impression is that not all who serve within the context of Southern Baptist life have been willing to explicitly state that they believe in the perfect Word from the perfect God.

"I think that until there is an open and thorough declaration on the part of staff and faculty that they, in fact, do believe within the parameters stated by the Peace Committee, that a question would remain in the minds of many."

The Texas pastor commented the "conservative resurgence is still in progress and must continue if we expect to have an ongoing impact for Christ upon this world. Once we are more settled on the issue of the Bible, I expect us to become one of the most exploding forces for Christ across this land and around the world.

"I am extending open arms to all who believe that the Bible is perfect ... desiring to draw together people and move beyond the present expressed polarization. All I can do is take the step, offer the open arms and trust God will move into the hearts of all of us to achieve the common goal of holding steadfast to our convictions about the Bible while broadening our togetherness."

Chapman said he hopes Southern Baptists are "moving toward the end of our internal struggle. It is time for us to move away from a judgmental spirit about each other and to begin binding our wounds. After all, our enemy in the world is Satan."

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FMB trustees uphold
policy on divorce

By Donald D. Martin

N-FMB

Baptist Press
2/16/90

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board trustees unanimously agreed Feb. 14 that the board continue its longstanding policy of not appointing divorced people as missionaries.

The trustee action, following a yearlong study, was in response to a motion adopted at the 1988 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting calling for an evaluation of the mission board's divorce policy.

"From the outset, our committee was determined to do a comprehensive study of the matter of appointing missionary personnel with a history of divorce," said Harmon Moore of Indianapolis, chairman of the special trustee committee that studied the divorce issue and recommended reaffirmation of the policy.

"We did not approach this study with our minds made up on what the conclusions ought to be," said Moore. "I know that the conclusion will not suit everybody by any means. This thing has been brought up at the Southern Baptist Convention for a new explanation more years than it hasn't."

The committee studied theological issues surrounding divorce, Christian ministry and divorce, missiological and practical issues and other relevant matters. It also gathered information from surveys sent to other evangelical missionary sending groups, theological papers written by committee members and surveys of national attitudes in 116 countries where Southern Baptist missionaries work.

"We approached the entire problem with compassion for those who have had a divorce," Moore said. "We sought to learn how (Baptists overseas) would respond to persons with a history of divorce. We tried to be sensitive to our biblical moorings and avoid basing our report purely on current sociological issues. We think we have done the most thorough study on the matter since the Foreign Mission Board was formed."

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According to the overseas survey, only 7 percent of the national Baptist leaders questioned said missionaries who had been divorced would be received well in their countries; 78 percent said they would not accept or would accept with reservations missionaries who had been divorced.

Among missionaries questioned, 14 percent said their missionary colleagues would not accept a divorced missionary; 63 percent said they would accept a divorced missionary with reservations. Ten percent would willingly receive a divorced person as a co-worker.

The survey also sought information on possible legal problems for divorced missionaries in the countries where they would work, visitation rights for the spouse of a divorced missionary with children, attitudes of local Baptist churches and national attitudes toward remarriages. In almost all cases, the survey found that local reaction to a divorced missionary would hinder rather than support mission work.

The committee also contacted other evangelical mission agencies about their divorce policies. The majority of the groups said they do not normally appoint people who have been divorced. The groups surveyed included American Baptists, Assemblies of God, Conservative Baptists, Evangelical Lutherans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians and United Methodists.

Some groups make exceptions, especially for missionaries already on the field who get divorced, but in some cases divorced people are limited to short-term work.

Since 1979, the Foreign Mission Board has allowed qualified people who have been divorced to serve in support roles overseas through Mission Service Corps, a two-year program now part of the board's International Service Corps. To date, 36 divorced people have gone through this program. Opportunities also exist for divorced people in such short-term volunteer programs as partnership evangelism and partnership missions overseas.

Moore said he hoped the study would put the divorce issue to rest. "That's one of the things that pushed us to broaden the scope of the study," he said. "We tried to bring in as many factors as we could so we would have a better view of things. I think when folks look at this study they will see that we have never before brought together this many factors to have bearing on the decision we have made."

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Southern Baptists to
re-enter Nicaragua

By Mary E. Speidel

N-FMB

Baptist Press
2/16/90

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board trustees voted Feb. 14 to re-establish a missionary presence in Nicaragua.

The trustees' vote authorizes the board to fill a new position of Foreign Mission Board liaison in Managua, Nicaragua's capital. The liaison will "minister in partnership with Baptist communities in Nicaragua," said Joe Bruce, area director for Middle America and Canada.

The liaison missionary will "coordinate and provide logistical support for volunteers, projects and ministries provided by the Foreign Mission Board to the Baptists of Nicaragua," Bruce said.

No Southern Baptist missionaries have been assigned to Nicaragua since 1983, when the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua advised furloughing missionaries not to return because their physical safety could not be guaranteed. At that time, political tensions were mounting between the United States and Nicaragua following the 1979 Sandinista revolution there.

Since then, the Foreign Mission Board has maintained contact with Nicaraguan Baptist leaders and provided funds for disaster relief and hunger relief and literature ministry, Bruce said. He and other board officials have visited Nicaragua several times, including a disaster survey trip following Hurricane Joan in 1988.

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Two teams of Southern Baptist volunteers have just returned from a construction project on Corn Island, Nicaragua, where they rebuilt historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, demolished by Joan.

The decision to re-enter Nicaragua was an agreement between Nicaraguan Baptists and board officials, Bruce noted. "It wasn't that we closed the door and decided to reopen it," he said. Both groups reached "a mutual decision that the time was right to renew the relationship."

In 1976, a Southern Baptist missionary couple was assigned to begin a literature ministry in Nicaragua at the invitation of Baptists there. Another couple arrived in 1980 to do music promotion.

The workers to be assigned to Nicaragua probably will be a missionary couple already working in Central America, said Bruce. Once personnel are assigned, Southern Baptists will have missionaries in all Central American countries.

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Agency defers decision
on SEBTS accreditation

By Marv Knox

N-(10)

Baptist Press
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WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada has delayed until June its decision on the accreditation of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The Association of Theological Schools and another accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, have been studying the Wake Forest, N.C., seminary's accreditation for about two years.

Southeastern has been troubled by a dispute between faculty and administration and trustees since October 1987, when the trustees' new conservative majority changed the way the school chooses faculty members. Subsequently, at least 18 faculty and administrators -- including the president and faculty dean -- have resigned or retired.

Both accrediting agencies launched investigations of Southeastern almost two years ago. Both agencies issued reports critical of the seminary, raising issues of institutional effectiveness/image, faculty selection, perceptions of academic freedom and seminary governance.

Trustees and faculty drafted separate responses to those reports, as did President Lewis A. Drummond, who worked with a committee representing the school's constituencies.

Last fall, seminary administrators, faculty and trustees participated in a workshop designed to bring reconciliation to the campus.

They reached a compromise agreement that placed a moratorium on election of permanent faculty until after the trustees' March meeting; instructed a special faculty/trustee task force to propose a new faculty-selection process, which the trustees are to consider in March; and allowed Drummond to appoint temporary faculty as needed during the interim.

In December, the Southern Association placed Southeastern on "warning," a public sanction imposed for a maximum of two years. During that time, the school is to work to correct its deficiencies in the four categories noted in the association's report.

The accrediting agency will send a review team to visit the school during the next year and report on its findings. The association will consider Southeastern's case at its annual meeting in December.

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Meanwhile, the Association of Theological Schools' accrediting commission -- which last June had instructed Southeastern to "show cause ... why it should not be placed on probation" -- met with Drummond and the seminary's academic vice president/dean, L. Russ Bush III, in January. They discussed the school's efforts to comply with the accrediting criteria, Bush reported.

In mid-February, the Association of Theological Schools notified Drummond that it had deferred its decision of Southeastern's accreditation until its June 6-8 meeting.

"The commission on accrediting has asked for additional information," association Executive Director Leon Pacala confirmed. He declined to describe the specific information his agency is seeking, noting, "The association operates with strict protocols concerning reports to the schools."

He added, however, "The requests for information stem from the action of the commission last June" when it sent Southeastern the "show cause" letter. That letter asked for "evidence from representative constituencies" concerning:

-- "Steps that have been taken or are in process to restore collegiality, coherence and effectiveness of institutional life and work, and evidence of progress toward restoration of all three factors.

-- "Evidence of the definition and establishment of the policy-making role of the board, its distinction from administrative functions and means whereby the school is duly protected and free from inappropriate interference.

-- "Steps that have been taken or are in process to redress the alienation of faculty from the governance of the institution, to delineate the appropriate role of faculty and administration in governance and evidence of progress in both areas."

Drummond said of the association, "We're very grateful to ATS for the continuance of their work with us and for giving us this further opportunity for meeting our criteria standards."

Trustees will take up the faculty-selection issue at their next meeting March 12-13, said Chairman James R. DeLoach, associate pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston.

"I know the trustees are going to be considering the things that will be brought to them by the fact-finding committee of faculty, trustees and Dr. Drummond," DeLoach said. He predicted the faculty, administration and trustees will agree on a faculty-selection process that can satisfy the accrediting agencies.

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WMU names Joyce Mitchell
associate executive

By Susan Todd

N- (O)
(WMU)

Baptist Press
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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Joyce Mitchell has been named associate executive director at Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, effective March 1.

She will direct the work of the missions services system in WMU's Birmingham, Ala., national office.

Mitchell will fill the position formerly held by Catherine Allen. Allen left the WMU in October to become executive director of the Samford University Sesquicentennial Commission.

Mitchell will join two other associate executive directors -- June Whitlow and Bobbie Sorrill and Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien -- on the WMU executive council.

In her new position, Mitchell will oversee the staff services and publishing services sections. Staff services includes personnel, travel, facility maintenance and catering functions. Publishing services includes circulation and subscription services, procurement and distribution.

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Mitchell has been director of the WMU interpretation section.

She originally is from Michigan, where she worked as state WMU executive director from 1979 until 1984.

Betty Merrell, age-level magazines group manager at the national WMU office, will succeed Mitchell as director of the interpretation section.

Merrell will provide management and leadership for field services, resource development, product promotion and language field services.

Merrell originally is from Oklahoma. She joined the WMU staff in 1983 as editor of the adult missions magazine, Royal Service. Merrell and her husband, Ron, were Southern Baptist foreign missionaries in Vietnam from 1964 until 1974.

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Baptist philanthropist
Jack C. Massey dies

N- (O
(Tenn.)

Baptist Press
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NASHVILLE (BP)--Baptist philanthropist Jack C. Massey of Nashville died Feb. 15 in Palm Beach, Fla., at age 85.

Massey, who developed Kentucky Fried Chicken and Hospital Corporation of America, was a major benefactor to Belmont College, a Tennessee Baptist Convention-related institution in Nashville. Two main buildings -- Massey Auditorium and Jack C. Massey Business Center, still under construction -- bear his name.

He also helped lay the groundwork for the Southern Baptist Foundation, a Southern Baptist Convention agency with offices in Nashville, and served 12 years on the board of Baptist Hospital of Nashville.

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Romanian waited 25 years
to become a missionary

By Art Toalston

F- FMB

Baptist Press
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RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Tim Marza faced seemingly insurmountable odds to attain his calling as a foreign missionary.

He was the 14-year-old son of a Baptist pastor -- but living in the rigidly communist nation of Romania -- when he first yearned to be a missionary in 1965. He read missionary biographies and particularly was moved by the pioneering efforts of Adoniram and Ann Judson in India and Burma during the 1800s.

"But everything seemed impossible," Marza recalled.

Despite the roadblocks Marza faced, he was among 29 people -- including five others born abroad -- appointed missionaries Feb. 13 by trustees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Marza's calling into missions was clouded by an array of factors. He was "just a teen-ager" at the time. No opportunities existed in Romania for training geared to the rigors of crossing cultures. The Baptist Union of Romania never had sent missionaries abroad. Moreover, the communist government regularly aimed its repressive energies at Christians. He knew a missions education was available in the United States, but government restrictions blocked his way.

Marza even had difficulty getting baptized. "Do you think you will be able to hold the faith," a pastor asked, "in spite of all this persecution?"

"Oh, yes," responded Marza, then 16, a professing Christian since childhood.

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"You will have to prove this," the pastor replied, reflecting a wariness common to Romanian Baptists about baptizing children and young people. Marza waited six more years before he was baptized.

All the while, he continued "praying every day, hoping that 'tomorrow' God would perform a miracle and send me to America to study, ... but that 'tomorrow' seemed like it would never come."

In 1981, at age 29, Marza decided to cease praying for a missions education. He concluded that God, not the communist government, was compelling him to remain in Romania. But just a few days later, a friend helped him escape to Yugoslavia. For two weeks he avoided being detected and made his way into Austria, where he applied for political asylum.

During three months in a Romanian refugee camp, Marza applied for admission to several colleges in the United States with the help of a Southern Baptist missionary. He arrived in America with \$533 and a letter of acceptance from California Baptist College in Riverside. He received a bachelor's degree there in 1985, and a master of divinity degree with an emphasis in communications from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, last December.

As a missionary, Marza will be at the helm of a Romanian-language radio ministry based in Austria. Tapes of the ministry's 30-minute daily program are aired over a Trans World Radio station in Monaco.

He admitted to a longstanding yearning to be a missionary in Africa and a liking for a slower pace of life. "But it seems as if God has been at work opening the doors (to Austria) in such a strong way that if I wanted to close them it would not be possible," he conceded.

Marza marveled at the abrupt ouster and execution of longtime Romanian communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu last December. He knew Ceausescu would have trouble maintaining his staunch communist stance with reforms sweeping through other Eastern bloc countries, "yet I couldn't see how the communists would fall when the secret police were so strong."

The secret police, or Securitate, were "the glue that held everything together ... sort of a combined CIA and FBI but with evil motives," Marza said. "Their strategy was to divide and conquer," to use accusations, innuendo and rumors to make Romanians distrust each other.

The secret police made heavy use of informers, Marza continued. "Half of Romania may have been spying on the other half and giving reports to the secret police," he noted.

"I believe it was God himself who made (the turn toward democracy) possible," he said, but he acknowledged his homeland now sorely needs a Christian message of reconciliation. "It is very possible that Romanians do not trust each other even now."

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

Southern Baptist volunteers
rebuild Nicaragua church

By Mary E. Speidel

N- FMB

Baptist Press
2/16/90

CORN ISLAND, Nicaragua (BP)--McNeil Bryan wept when he saw the broken bell lying among toppled pews and palm branches.

In October 1988, Hurricane Joan knocked down the bell tower, ripped off the roof and destroyed the walls at Ebenezer Baptist Church on Corn Island, Nicaragua. The storm destroyed all but about 25 homes on the island of English-speaking inhabitants, about 45 miles off Nicaragua's eastern coast.

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More than a year has passed since Bryan, Ebenezer's lay pastor, surveyed the damage in the church yard. Now the church has been rebuilt, thanks to the efforts of Southern Baptist volunteers.

Two teams of volunteers spent part of January and February reconstructing the two-story structure, the oldest Baptist church building in Nicaragua. Russell Fox, Southern Baptist missionary to Honduras, coordinated the project. Fox is from Fayetteville, Ark.

In addition to the sanctuary, the first team of 11 volunteers from Arkansas and Georgia built a vestibule, office and bell tower.

"It was a difficult construction project," said Ken Evans, team leader from University Baptist Church in Fayetteville. His team spent Jan. 13-30 working on the project.

But work went so fast that the workers nearly finished the entire church. They slowed their pace when they realized there might not be enough work left to keep the next team busy.

The second team of nine volunteers from Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas finished Ebenezer during their stay Jan. 30-Feb. 13. They had enough materials left to build a steeple and office at Briggs Bay Baptist Church and trusses for the roof of Queen's Hill Baptist Mission on the island.

Volunteers also took time for evangelism.

Members of the first group taught Sunday school and led church services at Baptist churches in Managua, Nicaragua's capital, and in the three Baptist churches on Corn Island.

The second team's lighter construction responsibilities gave members extra time to lead evangelistic services almost every night. And Bruce Edwards, pastor of South Oaks Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, took volunteers with him each day to visit islanders.

Edwards and Mark Dammeyer, a layman at South Oaks, talked to 88 people about spiritual matters during one morning of evangelistic visitation. "They were just so open and honest," Dammeyer said. "They'd tell you right up front that they'd fallen away from the church and exactly why."

Edwards and Jim Palmer, a Southern Baptist missionary to Honduras who helped with the project, also led an evangelism seminar for Corn Island Baptists. Participants went house-to-house to share their faith.

Throughout the project, "we (volunteers) were concerned about rebuilding the church building," said Danny Wright, an attorney from Fayetteville and member of the first team. "They (islanders) were concerned about rebuilding the church people."

Physical reconstruction on Corn Island has been slow in the wake of the hurricane, according to Fox. Problems include a lack of materials and difficulty transporting supplies to the island.

As islanders struggle to rebuild, "what impressed me most was that the devastation only affected them materially, not spiritually," said Wright. "They didn't talk too much about what they lost. They talked about what they had and how the Lord was helping them rebuild."

Team members expressed surprise at the religious freedoms they found in the places they visited in Nicaragua. "We had absolute freedom to go door-to-door, to share our faith and to preach in the churches," said Rob Phillips, associate pastor of Bartlesville (Okla.) Southern Baptist Church.

"The churches are strong, the Christians are strong," added Evans. "There is a great deal of religious freedom now. It's very open."

Harold Carter, a layman at Bethany Baptist Church near Atlanta, shared his faith with an islander who had lived several years in Atlanta. The Atlanta connection gave Carter an open door to "tell him how to become a Christian and give him a gospel tract. I told him he could be a real asset to God's work," Carter said.

The second team returned to the United States Feb. 13. The next day Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board trustees voted to re-establish a missionary presence in Nicaragua. Southern Baptist missionaries have not lived in Nicaragua since 1983, when the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua advised furloughing missionaries not to return to the country for safety reasons.

Since missionaries left, the Foreign Mission Board has provided funds for disaster relief and hunger relief and literature ministry in Nicaragua. Board officials have visited Nicaragua several times, including a disaster survey trip following Hurricane Joan in 1988. The Corn Island project grew out of that visit.

One of the most difficult elements of the project was transporting supplies to the island, Fox said. A total of 90,000 pounds of building materials and food for the volunteers were assembled at First Baptist Church of Pasadena, Texas. The goods were shipped by boat from Houston to Honduras, trucked to Nicaragua, sent down a river to Bluefields, on the eastern coast, and later shipped on another boat to Corn Island.

When volunteers arrived on Corn Island, the only missing items were an electric drill, bits and some food, said Fox. "That in itself was a miracle," he said.

"I don't know that I'd ever felt like a project was more of the Lord than this one was," added Fox's wife, Vicki, who worked with the first team.

Ebenezer Baptist Church now stands as the tallest building on Corn Island. And soon the church bell will be tolling again.

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