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HMB, SSB announce joint church growth efforts

By Linda Lawson & Jim Newton

ATLANTA (BP)--Plans to develop a comprehensive, coordinated approach to church growth that includes Sunday school, evangelism, ministry, church extension, music and discipleship training were announced by the presidents of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and Sunday School Board.

Lloyd Elder of the Sunday School Board and Larry Lewis of the Home Mission Board described the cooperative new effort in a press briefing at the close of the Southern Baptist Press Association in February.

Lewis pointed to research done by the Sunday School Board that indicates two-thirds of Southern Baptist churches are either declining or have plateaued and are not growing at a rate exceeding 10 percent over a five-year period.

"Our goals at the Home Mission Board are clear," Lewis said. "Working with the Sunday School Board, we want to help our churches grow and reverse this trend. By the year 2000, our goal is to see the statistics reverse and to see 75 percent of the churches in the Southern Baptist Convention growing, not just 33 percent.

Elder said church growth must become a top priority in the last decade of the SBC's Bold Mission Thrust evangelism/missions campaign. "We believe this joint agreement will enable us to speak with one voice on the priority of church growth and, in the process, better meet the needs of churches," he said.

Lewis said the key to the cooperative relationship between the two agencies is "serving the churches more effectively." He added that some churches are crying for help, and they don't know where to turn.

Both Elder and Lewis said that every person involved in the process for both agencies had sought to lay aside concerns about "turf protection" and work together to better serve the churches.

In his presentation, Elder announced plans by the Sunday School Board to begin a new quarterly magazine called Growing Churches starting in October. Edited by Gary Hardin, the new 64-page magazine will include church-growth ideas, stories about growing churches, interviews with church-growth leaders and inspiring testimonies, Elder said.

Lewis announced plans for a National Church Growth Conference to be held Dec. 3-5 in Phoenix, Ariz. The conference will feature addresses by some of the fastest-growing churches in the convention, offering practical suggestions on how other churches can grow effectively, Lewis said.

Both Lewis and Elder told the editors their agencies had each established church growth councils comprised of staff members to coordinate what units within the two boards are doing regarding church growth.

In addition, a nine-member coordinating team from the two agencies developed a definition of church growth and common characteristics of growing churches. They also developed strategies by which the two agencies will respond to church growth needs within the denomination.

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Elder said the two agencies address church growth through joint projects such as church starts, new Sunday schools, witness training, bus outreach and evangelism, church and associational planning, Scripture distribution and others.

"In addition, the Home Mission Board and the Sunday School Board are independently involved in helping churches in other dimensions of church growth through our respective convention-assigned programs," said Elder. "In these areas, it is important that each agency base its materials and programs off the same understanding of church growth."

The definition developed by the inter-agency team states:

"Church growth is God at work through his redeemed people in adding to a church those who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and helping inactive believers come to renewed commitment. It is new believers added to existing churches or gathered into new churches and equipped to become responsible church members who minister and witness as personal soul-winners to others. It is strengthening the churches in fellowship, organization and in world missions commitment."

Elder pointed out the definition calls for growing churches to put top priority on evangelism, leading people to faith in Jesus Christ. It also includes reclaiming inactive church members and leading Christians to become disciples who minister and witness. Church growth takes place when existing churches reach more people and grow larger, and when new churches and church-type missions are started, Elder said.

Elder also announced plans to release a planning manual for churches, titled "The Southern Baptist Church Growth Plan," in June 1991. "This plan will become the basis of church growth training efforts by the Sunday School Board and Home Mission Board," said Elder.

Lewis identified 10 common characteristics of growing churches, pointing out that the list was not all-inclusive but includes general, descriptive traits of a growing church. The 10 characteristics are:

- Priority commitment of believers to winning non-Christians to faith in Christ.
- Pastor, staff and laity commit to, and plan for, church growth.
- Places an intentional emphasis on a prayer ministry.
- Use of the Sunday school as the primary outreach and assimilation organization of the church.
- Worship that is joyful, celebrative, expectant, with a spirit of revival.
- Centrality of the Bible in preaching and study.
- Equips believers for spiritual growth, personal evangelism and ministry.
- Provides an effective plan to nurture and assimilate new members.
- A fellowship that expresses acceptance, concern and love for all.
- A Christian concern that understands and responds to the needs of its community and the world.

Both Elder and Lewis stressed the commitment of the two agencies to work together in the area of church growth. "The job is too big for us to try to do it alone," Lewis said.

Balanced churches key to evangelism, Robinson says

By Mark Wingfield

N-HMB

LAKE LANIER, Ga. (BP)--Effective evangelism is the result of a balanced church life, Darrell Robinson told Southern Baptist state paper editors during their annual meeting.

Robinson, vice president for evangelism at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, spoke to the editors about his philosophy of evangelism during the meeting of the Southern Baptist Press Association.

He affirmed editors for their support of evangelism in the state papers. As a young man, Robinson said, he learned to preach by reading the Bible and the Baptist Standard, the Texas Baptist newsjournal.

"You can do as much as any one group in America to influence our people to reach America for Christ," Robinson said, "I want to express appreciation to you as editors for your mission in getting the gospel to every person."

Robinson, who came to his position at the board less than one year ago, told the editors he does not perceive evangelism as a program. "Evangelism is the outgrowth of the life of the church," he said. "Evangelism is the natural consequence of the church being the church."

The church functions as it should when it has a balance of exaltation, equipping and evangelism, he said. Balanced churches do not result when the pastor preaches only evangelistic sermons or when the church puts all its emphasis on equipping and training, he said.

Likewise, the pastor alone cannot make a church evangelistic, Robinson said. The pastor and other leaders must model the evangelistic lifestyle that will inspire members, he added.

"God didn't call pastors to be dictators," he explained. "He called them to be servant-leaders."

"But if the pastor doesn't lead, nobody can. The pastor has to have a passion for reaching people before a church will. The same is true for Sunday school teachers."

A balanced church life also will foster evangelism by making everyone feel welcome, Robinson said.

"One of the most tragic things in our churches is the number of people who feel like nobodies. Our challenge is to help people realize that everybody is somebody in the Lord's body."

"In a lot of Southern Baptist churches, you have to break in to get in. That ought not be."

Churches have a natural tendency toward exclusivity, which defeats evangelism, he said.

Robinson suggested America could be evangelized quickly if churches would take responsibility for sharing the gospel with every person in their geographical area.

"I believe we have the team in place to reach America for Jesus quickly. We have a mighty army of lay people in every church capable of taking their area for Christ," he said.

"The Great Commission is local church centered. From the seventh floor of the Home Mission Board building we're not going to reach many people. If America is reached, it will be through the local churches."

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Editors also heard a presentation by Gustav Niebuhr, religion writer for the Wall Street Journal.

Niebuhr told the editors that religion "is an extraordinary story today" and is shaping the world. He encouraged them to search out truth, noting, "Truth is like a blind date; you have no idea what it will look like or how it will act."

New officers of the press association are J.B. Fowler, president, editor of the Baptist New Mexican; Fletcher Allen, president-elect, editor of Tennessee's Baptist and Reflector; and Quinton Lockwood Jr., secretary-treasurer, editor of the New York Baptist.

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North Texas pastor
enters guilty plea

By Ken Camp

N-TEXAS
Baptist Press
2/19/90

DALLAS (BP)--Leonard Payne, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Leonard, Texas, has pleaded guilty to two counts of indecency with a child in exchange for 10 years' probation, said to Dan Meehan, Fannin County District Attorney.

Under terms of the probation, Payne must undergo sexual abuse counseling for the length of his probation, and he must pay for one year of counseling for the two male youths involved.

Payne has been ordered to have no contact with the teen-agers or their families, and he has been prohibited from having any contact with any youth group or organization, except those involving his own children, Meehan said.

All families involved had been consulted concerning the plea bargain and were satisfied with its terms, he added.

Payne had been indicted by the Fannin County Grand Jury Feb. 3 following his arrest in January. He resigned his pastorate Feb. 11.

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Vietnamese say God's
plan delivered them

By Marty Croll

F-FMB
Baptist Press
2/19/90

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Paul Vo believes God's hand delivered him from Saigon just one day before the city fell to communists in 1975.

Vo and his wife, Theinhuong Dao, who also escaped the fall of Saigon, were among 29 people, including four others born outside the United States, appointed missionaries by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board Feb. 13 in Richmond, Va. Vo and Dao will serve in Taiwan.

Vo, 33, now pastor of a Houston Vietnamese congregation, didn't meet Dao until years after both had found refuge in the United States.

Growing up in Vietnam, Vo had heard the name of Jesus through the Roman Catholic Church there, but his family was Confucianist so he "never paid any attention to it at all," he said. When the Vo family arrived in the United States as refugees, their sponsor was a minister in Pennsylvania who helped Vo find faith in Christ as he settled into his new life in America.

"I know the Lord had a purpose for my life when he brought me from Vietnam to the U.S.," Vo reflected. His two sisters and mother have become Christians and are "very excited" that he and Dao will be missionaries to Taiwan, he said. Dao's sister and brother-in-law, Mary and Long Pham, preceded them to the mission field in 1983 and are stationed in the Philippines.

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Their families were both among the fortunate few Vietnamese with the American connections necessary to leave the country before Saigon fell in 1975. His oldest sister worked as a secretary for the U.S. government in Saigon. Her aunt was married to an American.

Vo's family planned to fly out of Saigon April 28, 1975, but was pinned in by a two-day air strike by North Vietnamese forces until U.S. Marines rescued them and others by helicopter. They left April 29, one day before Saigon fell. The Marines flew them to a waiting U.S. ship, which took them to Guam.

"We left everything behind," Vo said. "We lost everything."

"When we went out, we didn't think we'd be going forever," remembered Dao, who became a Christian in South Vietnam through the ministry of Southern Baptist missionaries. "After we got out (and) heard the country (was) lost, I was real sad."

The two met several years later in Mississippi, where Vo was a mission pastor in Biloxi while attending New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Dao, an illustrator for an industrial consulting firm there, taught children at the Vietnamese mission Vo led.

Early in their marriage they began to feel God calling them to be missionaries. "When I came over here (to the United States) and I received the love God had planned for me, I began to feel the need to go out and share it, and go anywhere he leads me," said Dao. "That is why I'd go anywhere. If a missionary had not come to Vietnam and shared the gospel with our people, I'd still be lost."

At one point, as Dao began to understand that great masses of people in the world had never heard the gospel, she asked herself, "Who will be able to proclaim the word of God to them?" Then she realized God had taken her out of Vietnam to a free country, with "a plan for my life, and I have a chance to serve him," she said.

The couple applied to the Foreign Mission Board as prospective missionaries in 1986, but their initial application was not approved because Vo lacked experience. At first, they were disappointed. But as they moved to Houston, to work with Vietnamese, there, they came to believe that God's timing was more effective than their own.

"When we went to Houston, I looked out over the community of 50,000 Vietnamese people, and I prayed, 'How do you reach 50,000 Vietnamese?'" recalled Vo.

After a year as a mission pastor for Hidden Valley Baptist Church, he was invited to begin preaching on television to the Vietnamese community. He began with a 10-minute sermon and gradually learned how to fill a 30-minute slot. The mission, which began with a group of seven people in Bible study and baptized 15 the first year, has grown to about 55 members.

But the gnawing desire to preach the gospel overseas never went away. "For a long time the Lord called us to be his missionary, to be with lost people," Vo said. "In Houston, he still kept calling. There was a lot of hunger. I was not satisfied where I was."

In Taiwan, after studying Mandarin for two years, they will begin establishing new churches among the Chinese.

Because they lived in Vietnam, where Christians are only a scattered few, Vo and Dao feel the frustration of a world searching for what the gospel offers. They still love the Vietnamese people, Vo said.

But for now, "If we don't go to Taiwan, or to the Chinese people, then who will proclaim the gospel to them? Many have never heard who Jesus is. That's why we follow his calling."