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July 3, 1990

90-87

Virginia Baptists
propose new budget

N-CO
(VA.)

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Members of two key Virginia Baptist committees have agreed to provide a "clear choice" for Virginia churches to fund ministries in their state and beyond.

The agreement, reached at a joint meeting June 28 of the Baptist General Association of Virginia's budget committee and denominational crisis committee, would permit churches to choose between two budget options in 1991.

The joint meeting was sparked by the decisive victory of conservatives at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans June 12-14.

Virginia moderates, long dissatisfied with the national denomination's rightward tilt, have discussed alternative funding procedures for several years, and many observers expected a Moderate loss in June to generate alternate proposals.

Budget committee Chairperson Mary Wilson of McLean anticipated reaction prior to the SBC by calling a meeting of her panel for June 28. Following the SBC annual meeting, BGAV President Raymond L. Spence Jr. of Richmond asked the crisis committee to join them.

Although the decision to provide two budgets is not binding on the budget committee, it does give the committee "a sense of direction" in proposing Virginia Baptists' ministry budget for 1991, said BGAV Executive Director Reginald M. McDonough.

Normally, the budget committee presents its budget "for information purposes" at the Virginia Baptist General Board's October meeting. However, Spence said he will ask the other officers to join him in calling a special meeting of the general board on July 31.

The committee will present a proposal it hopes to have formulated by then and seek suggestions from the board. It then will incorporate board suggestions for final presentation at the October meeting and submit it to messengers for consideration and action at the BGAV annual meeting, Nov. 13-14.

The 1991 budget would go into effect Dec. 1.

Discussion at the June 28 meeting focused on the possibility of providing at least two options for churches as channels for their missions contributions.

The standard plan -- variously called option A, the traditional plan or the SBC plan -- generally leaves intact the Cooperative Program budget format as it has operated for several years.

Although the division between Virginia and SBC causes might be changed -- currently 62 percent of the \$16.3 million budget supports Virginia ministries and 38 percent funds Southern Baptist causes -- the SBC portion would be distributed according to the formula approved by the SBC in June.

The revised plan -- also called option B or the Virginia plan -- would reduce the amount of money in the SBC portion of the budget by percentages to be determined by the budget committee.

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In addition, the SBC portion would fund only selected ministries, deleting agencies and institutions which Moderates do not feel they can in good conscience support. The Christian Life Commission and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, both now headed by conservatives, were mentioned as possibilities by participants at the meeting.

The SBC portion of the revised plan would include contributions for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, whose budget was slashed by more than \$340,000 by the SBC in June.

SBC guidelines stipulate that if a church contributes funds to the national Cooperative Program while requesting that a portion of the funds be withheld for one or more causes in the SBC budget, all the church's contributions automatically become designated receipts and are not considered Cooperative Program funds.

However, that does not affect a church's messenger status in the SBC, according to BGAV Treasurer Nathaniel Kellum. A church gains messengers on the basis of contributions to any SBC cause, not solely on the basis of undesignated contributions, he said.

That policy contrasts with Virginia's, under which messengers to the state's annual meeting are based on undesignated Cooperative Program receipts alone. There is a limited participation or negative designation provision which permits churches to withhold funds from selected Virginia causes if they choose to do so.

The negative designation policy will remain in effect if the two budget options are adopted, providing in effect a third option for churches who wish to design their own patterns of giving.

Although participants in the meeting agreed on the need for two giving plans, some disagreement emerged over which plan would go into effect if a church sent contributions without choosing an option.

Participants also discussed the process by which local churches would choose between the two options.

The budget committee met following the joint meeting, but did not make a decision. The committee is expected to reconvene on July 19 to continue the discussion.

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(This story was written by Julian Pentecost and Robert Dilday of the Religious Herald, newjournal of the BGAV.)

Education Commission adopts
interim accreditation report

By Tim Fields

Baptist Press
7/3/90

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Members of the Southern Baptist Education Commission adopted an interim report from a special accreditation task force during their annual meeting and voted to present a report of the committee's work to the Southern Baptist Convention in June 1991.

Commission members also expanded the 7-member task force by adding two additional members who are not professional educators and extended their work at least through the next meeting of the Commission in June 1991.

The two new members were added after discussion of a motion referred to the commission by the Southern Baptist Convention.

David B. Wood of North Carolina made the motion from the floor of the recent Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans which requested a committee "to study the feasibility of establishing a Southern Baptist Convention accrediting agency for our seminaries and colleges. This study committee should be composed of Southern Baptist pastors, educators and lay persons whose training and experience relate to this subject."

The motion was referred to the Education Commission under SBC Bylaw 28 which requires that motions pertaining to the work of an agency be referred to trustees of that agency.

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William Cotton, commission chairman, said the request of the motion already was being fulfilled by work of the existing task force.

In related action the Commission voted to increase representation by appointing James E. McDaniel, pastor of First Baptist Church, Brinkley, Ark., and James H. Roach Sr., a layman and president of Briarcliff Corporation of Shreveport, La., to the task force.

Commissioner Bob Agee, president of Oklahoma Baptist University, in Shawnee said the task force had identified specific concerns which have prompted interest in a proposed agency, explored the nature and purpose of accrediting agencies, looked at how accrediting agencies are formed and explored alternative measures which might be taken.

The interim report, drafted by Agee at the request of the task force, said, "There seems to be a widely held perception that accrediting agencies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Association of Theological Schools represent external forces which apply pressures which prevent Baptist colleges and seminaries from being as distinctively Christian as our Baptist constituencies want them to be."

According to the report, the task force reported it is not the purpose of accrediting agencies to prevent Southern Baptist schools and colleges from fulfilling their distinctively Christian mission statements. The report further says the formation of a Southern Baptist accrediting agency probably is not a workable mechanism to assure correction of the perceived concerns of some Southern Baptists.

"The task force needs to gather more input from outside educational circles," Agee said. "We need to poll the views of a broad cross-section of Southern Baptist pastors, educators and lay persons on the issue."

Commission members charged the task force to continue its study and authorized Education Commission Executive Director Arthur L. Walker Jr., to draft an interim report of the Committee's second year of work which would be presented during the Education Commission's report to the 1991 Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta.

In other action the commission recognized Leslie S. Wright, chancellor of Samford University, Birmingham, Ala., as recipient of the 1990 Charles D Johnson Outstanding Educator Award. Wright was president of Samford University from 1958-1983 and a member of the Education Commission from 1981-1989.

The award, established by the Commission in 1983, is given annually to a person who has made significant contributions to Southern Baptist higher education.

The Education Commission also approved a budget for 1990-91 of \$576,114 to be funded by \$495,000 from the SBC Unified giving plan, Cooperative Program, and the remainder from subscriptions to The Southern Baptist Educator, revenue from the sale of educational emphasis materials and educational services and \$19,000 from reserves.

The commission reelected as officers: William R. Cotton, Hastings, Fla., chairman; Van D. Quick, Clinton, Miss., vice chairman and Patrick O. Copley, St. Louis, secretary.

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Alabama Baptists name
new executive secretary

By Robert M. Duck

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Baptist Press
7/3/90

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (BP)--Troy L. Morrison of Montgomery, Ala. has been elected secretary-treasurer of the 1-million-member Alabama Baptist State Convention.

Morrison, 58, was elected July 2 by the 125-member Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions at a called meeting.

He was the unanimous choice of a search committee named last September to seek a successor to A. Earl Potts who will retire Sept. 1, 1990, after six years in the post. The committee was headed by Gerald H. Lord of Florence.

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Morrison has been director of church-minister relations for the Alabama Convention since 1985. Before going to the board, he was pastor of Twelfth Street Baptist Church in Gadsden, for 17 years (1968-1985). Previously, he was pastor of churches in Kentucky and Alabama.

Morrison, born in Jamestown, received a bachelor of science degree from Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Ala.; and bachelor of divinity, master of divinity and doctor of ministries degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kent.

Prior to seminary, he was an assistant principal and teacher at Alexandria High School, Anniston; a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army during the Korean War; and co-owner of a building supply company in Piedmont.

Morrison has served on the Kentucky and Alabama convention executive boards; has been vice-president of the Alabama convention; and was chairman of the Alabama Baptist Convention search committee which recommended Potts as executive secretary-treasurer.

He is first vice chairman of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and was chairman of the search committee that recommended HMB president Larry Lewis.

Morrison's wife, the former Frances Gunter of Piedmont, recently retired as a math teacher at Jeff Davis High School in Montgomery. They have two married children and three grandchildren.

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Low attendance at SBC reports
concerns Jericho participants

By Mark Wingfield

N-HMB

Baptist Press
7/3/90

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--Southern Baptists attending a week-long missions festival wanted to know why messengers to the denomination's annual convention couldn't give one hour to hear a mission board report.

That was the most common -- and most applauded -- question asked of four SBC agency heads by participants in a town hall meeting during "Jericho: A Missions Festival" at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center.

About 200 people attended the question-and-answer session July 1 with Foreign Mission Board President Keith Parks, Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis, Woman's Missionary Union Executive Director Dellana O'Brien and Brotherhood Commission President James Smith. More than 2,000 people registered for the missions festival, which is sponsored by those four agencies and the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

During the one-hour town hall meeting, participants twice asked about low attendance for reports of the Home Mission Board and Foreign Mission Board during the annual Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans June 12-14. A total of 38,465 messengers registered for the convention. Attendance at the HMB report on Tuesday was estimated at less than 3,000 while attendance at the FMB report on Wednesday night was estimated between 8,000 and 10,000.

"Is this a barometer of the spiritual fervor of our convention?" one participant asked.

Parks responded: "I think it indicates that the people who are there do not understand who we are as Southern Baptists and are not focusing on what has brought us together, what has held us together and what is our hope for the future.

"I wouldn't translate it into a spiritual barometer," he added. "I would characterize it more as a lack of understanding of the inherent nature of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"If by indifference and neglect, the enthusiasm and support of our missions agencies dwindles away, the Southern Baptist Convention will die," Parks warned. "I don't think they understand that."

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Smith added that the large number of messengers who registered Tuesday came primarily for the election of a president. "When that one agenda item was over, it was a matter of leaving," he said.

When asked by another person about the same issue, Lewis said he too was disappointed at the small crowd present for the HMB report.

"The format of the convention is such that people are absolutely worn out by the end of Tuesday," he explained. "Most of the major business has been put on the agenda for Tuesday.

"People come in very early to get a seat, and they don't leave even for lunch. When the Tuesday afternoon session is over, they are mentally and physically exhausted.

"A lot of it, too, reflects priorities," Lewis added. "Is the real concern of the convention missions and evangelism? Or is it a political agenda?"

"I think the most important thing we're about as Southern Baptists is to reach our world for Christ."

Lewis and Smith both proposed changes in the SBC program to focus more attention on missions.

Smith suggested the convention begin with a missions rally on Monday night, move into business on Tuesday and end with the election of officers on the last day. His proposal was received with applause and enthusiastic shouts from the crowd.

Lewis suggested having a joint missions emphasis on Wednesday and deleting the Tuesday evening session, although he said he would like to meet with Parks to discuss alternatives before making a definitive statement.

However, Parks declared that simply changing the schedule will not solve the problem. "I think you're going to have to change why people come to the convention and who comes if you're going to change the agenda," he said to sustained applause.

"It's no secret that the primary driving force to get people to the convention is to elect a president," Parks said. "This year, when you didn't have enough people there to have a quorum all day Thursday, I think that indicates people had come to vote, and they didn't come to hear the Foreign Mission Board report or the Home Mission Board report or any other agency report."

Parks said this is not the way Southern Baptists have historically operated. "My prayer and hope is that we will get back to the real purpose of our convention," he continued, "that we'll focus again on missions as the cohesive force of our convention and get away from the political agenda."

Those attending the town hall meeting also asked the agency heads about decreases in missionary appointments, about the lack of WMU and Brotherhood programs in some churches and about agency priorities.

Lewis said that in 1988 the HMB appointed its largest number of missionaries in history, with 3,827 in service at year-end. However, by the end of 1989 that number had decreased to 3,808, he said.

To reach the Bold Mission Thrust goal of 5,000 home missionaries by the year 2000, the HMB must record a net gain of 100 missionaries each year, Lewis said.

He explained the 1989 reduction was brought about partly by budget cutbacks. "We simply did not have the money to put those missionaries on the field," he said.

Parks said the FMB has reallocated budgets to keep new missionaries going to the field. The number of FMB appointees reached a peak in 1985 with 428 new missionaries but has declined each year since. The annual total reached a new low in 1989 with 310 appointments, although the board has projected 380 appointees for 1990.

Parks cited the ongoing denominational controversy as one reason for the decline, but said the unwillingness of Baby Boomers to make long-term commitments is another.

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

Break down walls and give
to missions, Parks pleads

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press
7/3/90

N-NMB

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--Explaining that one-fourth of the world's population has never heard the name of Jesus, Keith Parks urged Southern Baptists to break down the walls that divide them and give sacrificially to missions.

Parks, president of the Foreign Mission Board, issued the appeal in a July 1 sermon to about 2,000 people attending "Jericho: A Missions Festival" at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center.

His plea for greater missions funding came just two days after Virginia Baptists announced they will create a new funding mechanism whereby churches may stop giving to agencies or institutions whose trustees or administration they oppose. Several prominent churches in other states have also threatened to stop giving to the SBC Cooperative Program, which channels 50 percent of its \$137 million annual budget to the FMB.

The protests are being led by Southern Baptists frustrated with changes in the denomination brought about by 12 years of internal strife.

Parks made no direct reference to what has euphemistically been labeled The Controversy, nor did he specifically say how the plans of Virginia Baptists might impact the Richmond, Va.-based agency.

However, he did call on Southern Baptists to break down walls built by ego, fear and ignorance.

Speaking from Ephesians 2:11-22, Parks said Southern Baptists have built walls that keep them from reaching a lost world with the gospel. "The reason we do not move from our personal experience of salvation to sharing the gospel is because of these walls," he said.

Through Jesus Christ, God has broken down every barrier that separates mankind from God, Parks said, although humans continue to build walls that hinder the flow of the gospel.

"The wall that previously had been a separation between God and man is gone, but it is still up in the minds of many people," he said. "Nothing separates any human being from God in God's viewpoint, but there still are barriers between people.

"The walls that I build will prevent the spread of the gospel to the person next door or to the ends of the earth."

Because of these self-made walls, Christians have become inwardly focused and fail to see the great needs in other parts of the nation and world, Parks declared.

"We are so turned in ourselves that we seal off the reality of a lost world," he said. "Through self-indulgence we are seeking our own comfort."

On the whole, Christians spend 97 cents of every dollar earned on themselves while one-fourth of the world goes to bed hungry every night, Parks said.

He compared the spending of American Christians to the lavish purchases of Imelda Marcos of the Philippines or the Ceausescu regime of Romania. "I ask you: How do you think God distinguishes between those kinds of lifestyles and how you and I as Christians are living?" he asked.

"Even that tiny bit we give to the Lord, we take \$99.90 of every \$100 and spend it on ourselves," Parks stated. Of the remaining 10 cents, 9 cents goes to reach the 40 percent of the population that has heard the gospel and rejected it, while only 1 cent is spent to reach the 26 percent of the population that has never heard the gospel, he said.

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Parks urged: "Give more than you've ever given before -- I'm talking about money -- to reach people who have never heard."

At the conclusion of the service, Parks invited people to make commitments to go as missionaries, to increase their giving and to increase prayer support. The congregation gave an offering of \$5,771 to the Cooperative Program, the largest Sunday offering received at Ridgecrest this year.

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Church growth meet
announced for 1992

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Baptist Press
7/3/90

NASHVILLE (BP)--A National Church Growth Conference has been announced for Aug. 31-Sept. 3, 1992, by officials of two Southern Baptist Convention agencies and the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Gary Cook, vice president for church programs and services at the Sunday School Board; Darrell Robinson, vice president for evangelism at the Home Mission Board; and James Semple, director of the missions commission of the BGCT are spearheading plans for the conference to be held in the Dallas/Fort Worth area at a site yet to be determined.

"We are combining the energies and resources of these three SBC entities to generate a new concerted effort toward church growth among Southern Baptist churches," said Cook.

He said program content will deal with helping churches grow through improved efforts in evangelism and Sunday school, as well as extension growth through starting new Sunday schools, satellites and missions.

Robinson said the conference is being planned with the hope that churches will send a team including the pastor, staff and key lay leaders.

"It is our hope that we can project a model or style of church growth that will impact the nation," Robinson said.

Semple said program personalities will include acknowledged experts who have led churches to grow. He said the program will be planned to meet the needs of churches of all sizes.

"This conference will serve as the statement of Southern Baptist theology and methodology of church growth, a sharing of practical principles that have worked in a multiplicity of settings and an encouragement to renewed commitment to reaching people and growing churches," said Semple.

Conference content is being planned to coordinate with a joint definition of church growth developed by leaders of the HMB and SSB.

The definition 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."

Robinson and Cook said the conference is the first major event sponsored by the two agencies since a joint agreement on church growth was announced in February by HMB President Larry Lewis and SSB President Lloyd Elder.

The Home Mission Board will sponsor a church growth conference Dec. 3-5, 1990, in Phoenix, Ariz.

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Missionaries cope with
Ethiopia, Zambia strife

By Craig Bird

N-JMB

NAIROBI, Kenya (BP)--A degenerating civil war situation in Ethiopia and deadly food riots in Zambia have led missionaries in the two African countries to limit travel and maintain low profiles.

Southern Baptist missionaries in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Lusaka, Zambia, said in late June that things were tense, but none felt in immediate danger.

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, is awaiting a threatened attack by forces of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. In a rebel radio broadcast monitored in Nairobi by Kenyan news agencies, the EPRDF claimed to have killed 22,000 government troops in three weeks in June.

Two other rebel groups also are fighting the Ethiopian army. Ethiopian President Mengistu Haile Mariam told international reporters in late June that the country was "on the verge of collapse," and ordered a general mobilization.

All Southern Baptist work upcountry has been suspended since last November, when rebels captured the region where missionaries operated feeding stations and development projects. The missionaries evacuated to Addis Ababa.

Missionaries currently in Addis Ababa include Jerry Bedsole of Foley, Ala., and Rosie Bedsole of Splitlog, Mo.; Paul Gay of Cuthbert, Ga., and Hannah Gay of Jackson, Miss.; John Lawrence of Jonesboro, La., and Mary Lou Lawrence of Amsterdam, Mo.; Howard and Belinda Rhodes of Friona, Texas; Rob Ackerman of Wheaton, Ill., and Patricia Ackerman of Albuquerque, N.M.; Jeff and Margie Pearson of Mora, Minn.; and David Brownfield of Bozeman, Mont., and Debbie Brownfield of Columbus, Ohio.

The only major adjustment the missionaries have made in light of the most recent events is to relocate their annual mission meeting from a site south of Addis Ababa to the mission compound in the city.

In Zambia, the government has instituted a 24-hour curfew in response to rioting that reportedly has left 14 people dead. One unconfirmed report said a policeman was stoned to death by a mob. Missionaries said cars were being overturned and burned.

The riots started June 25 when the price of cornmeal, a diet staple of most residents of the country, was doubled.

Kenyan newspapers reported Zambian rioters have attacked at least two police stations, burned military vehicles and looted shops in several areas. A one-time home of Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, about two miles from his current residence in Lusaka, also was reported burned.

The Baptist office building in Lusaka was closed June 25 so workers could avoid risking harm while trying to come to work. The 18 missionaries in Lusaka said they are staying inside and keeping a low profile.

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Romanian officials endorse
religious liberty principles

By Art Toalston

N-JMB

Baptist Press
7/3/90

BUCHAREST, Romania (BP)--Less than a week after some 10,000 club-wielding coal miners crushed anti-government protests in June, two key Romanian officials were assuring a delegation of churchmen that human rights will be protected.

The delegation, encompassing several Baptist leaders, received specific assurances that the Romanian government will guarantee freedom of religion under a new constitution being drafted, reported James E. Wood Jr., an American church-state expert who was part of the delegation.

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The assurances were voiced by Romania's minister of justice, Teofil Pop, and minister of religious affairs, Nicolae Stoicescu, said Wood.

Wood is professor of church-state studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and director of a church-state studies institute there. He was executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, a religious liberty organization in Washington, from 1972 to 1980. He also was chosen to represent American churches in the implementation of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, a human rights accord signed by 35 nations.

Wood arrived in Romania June 17 in the wake of the coal miners' attacks against protesters June 14-15. Ion Iliescu, the country's president-elect, lauded the coal miners as "people who can be counted on" before they left the capital city June 16. The United States boycotted Iliescu's June 20 inauguration. Iliescu, in his inaugural address, said his government remains committed to democratization.

Iliescu was an official under longtime communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who was overthrown and executed last December. Iliescu nevertheless received 85 percent of the vote in Romania's presidential election May 20.

In separate meetings with the delegation of churchmen June 19, the minister of justice and minister of religious affairs affirmed the principles of religious liberty, said Wood, who gave a presentation on the subject during each session.

Members of the Baptist delegation, in addition to Wood, were Ion Rincu, general secretary of the Romanian Baptist Union and a pastor in Timisoara; Vasile Talos, president of the new Evangelical Alliance and a Baptist pastor in Bucharest; Vasile Talpos, director of the Baptist seminary in Bucharest and a former president of the European Baptist Federation; and Paul Thibodeaux, Southern Baptist fraternal representative to Baptists in Eastern Europe.

Wood quoted Pop, the minister of justice, as saying, "All of us have suffered so much under the old regime that we've got to guarantee religious freedom in our new constitution." At one point Pop brought out a copy of the U.S. Constitution, translated into Romanian, and said it is "the greatest constitution in the world" and that he wants his country to adopt one like it, Wood said.

Pop made his comments with several top aides at his side, Wood noted.

Wood said he was impressed that both ministers felt free to affirm religious liberty, because either could have opted to react noncommittally.

"I think that tells you reform is taking place at the highest levels of government in Romania, even though there are questions about the fairness of the elections," Wood observed. Questions also remain about Iliescu's relationship to the Securitate, the former secret police, he said. Some Romanians believe the Securitate still is active under the new government.

"The situation there, politically, still is very much in turmoil," Wood said.

The two government ministers said they had been open about their identity as Romanian Orthodox churchmen during the Ceausescu years, Wood said. Pop said his career in higher education had suffered because of his religious commitment. He also said he is the son of a Romanian Orthodox priest.

Wood told the ministers he hopes Romania will live up to commitments it had made to religious freedom, including votes for key United Nations declarations on human rights in 1948 and religious rights in 1981 and its signature on the Helsinki accord.

While he is a Southern Baptist and an evangelical, Wood said he was not in Romania "for any special pleading for any religious group." Religious freedom, he said, means "equality of religion under the law, that no group has privileges that other groups do not have. One should not enjoy advantages or suffer disadvantages because of one's religious identity."

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To fully guarantee religious freedom, Wood said, a government "must have in its constitution the prohibition of discrimination based on religion ... in such areas as employment, housing, holding public office and the right to an education. Without the specifics, it may become just an exercise in rhetoric with very little meaning."

In an interview after his visit to Romania, Wood noted that religious liberty advocates have "a very special opportunity in Eastern Europe ... to influence the formulation of constitutional provisions to give a much broader basis to freedom of religion than has ever been known in these countries."

For centuries before the rise of communism, Wood noted, Baptists, other Christians and Jews suffered "from state churches that called upon the state to oppress and persecute those outside the state church. Religious freedom is something these countries have not known in their history."

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Baptists try to recover,
respond in wake of shooting

By Greg Warner

N-90
(21A.)

Baptist Press
7/3/90

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--At first it was just a sound. "I heard a very loud pop, like a large firecracker," said Sally Talton.

But it was a deadly sound -- a sound Talton and her co-workers at the Jacksonville, Fla., office of General Motors Acceptance Corp. would hear a lot in the next few seconds.

At the sound of the gunfire, Talton and most of her 85 colleagues dropped to the floor and crawled under their desks on June 18 while James Pough, a disgruntled GMAC customer, shot 13 workers and customers, killing eight.

"I thought he had come in to kill a particular person and he would be gone," recounted Talton, a bookkeeper at the suburban car-financing office and member of Southside Baptist Church in Jacksonville.

Instead Pough, who owed the company \$6,394 on a car that had been repossessed, walked from desk to desk, shooting people at random. Many who had hid under their desks were easy targets for the gunman and his automatic rifle.

Talton listened from beneath her desk as the gunman continued to fire -- "just pop, pop, pop, pop." From under their desks, several of the workers called 9-1-1 and whispered pleas of help.

"Mine was the very, very back desk. The man never looked at us, never turned toward us." But when the shooting continued, Talton began to look for a way out.

"I saw a girl behind me crawl and go out an emergency exit door. I'd forgotten it was there. I gathered up my courage and peeked up over my desk a little and saw him (Pough). I gathered up my skirt so I wouldn't trip and ran around the corner and out the door."

Talton and a few others who escaped sought refuge at a nearby business. "It lasted several more minutes even after I got out," she said. Police arrived and, after determining Pough had ended his rampage by shooting himself, allowed rescue workers to enter the building to help the victims.

What the rescue workers found was carnage. The dead and wounded were strewn along a path from one end of the office to the other. The body of Pough, with its self-inflicted wound, was found a few feet from Sally Talton's desk.

Coupled with two murders a day earlier which since have been linked to Pough, the construction laborer's rampage became the worst mass murder ever in Florida and the 10th worst in U.S. history.

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At least two of the dead were members of Baptist churches in North Florida. Lee Simonton, a 33-year-old deacon at First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, was customer relations manager at GMAC. He was shot four times in the chest and groin while he hid under a desk. He died after a two-hour surgery in a Jacksonville hospital.

Simonton and his wife, Debra, have two children -- Joshua, 8, and Melissa, 6. "The only peace I can have through all this is I know he's in heaven and one day I'll see him there," Debra Simonton told a Jacksonville newspaper.

Julia Burgess, 42, was a member of Beulah Baptist Church in Keystone Heights, a rural town south of Jacksonville. A customer at the GMAC office, she was the first person shot by Pough. The mother of two grown children, she went to the office Monday morning to make a payment on her son's car. She instructed her young granddaughter to wait in the car while she went inside.

"That was her last act of compassion," Paul Estes, her pastor, told mourners at her funeral June 21.

Although Sally Talton didn't know Burgess, she had worked with Simonton for the two years she had been at the Jacksonville office. "I didn't know Lee well, but I knew he was very active at First Baptist and was a very fine Christian," Talton said.

Moments after the shooting, Talton and other workers who had escaped were summoned back to the office by police. "We were frantically trying to find our friends," she recalled. "I found out some very special people were dead."

It was not just the victims who struggled during and after the shooting. Paramedics, who are used to treating serious injuries, said they were unprepared for the number of injuries and extent of the bloodshed.

Al Hall, a Baptist chaplain at University Medical Center, counseled one of the helicopter paramedics who brought victims out of the office. "He was unprepared for the carnage that he saw," Hall said. "That's the psychological shock that he's trying to live with right now. There were people everywhere, and his concern when he left was 'Did I help the right ones?'"

Paramedics had to decide which victims were in most need of help and which were most likely to benefit from it. Most victims who were taken to hospitals survived, and rescue workers were widely praised for their performance. But others could have been saved if they had received help immediately, paramedics said.

"There are a lot of feelings of helplessness," Hall said.

"And (because of) the senselessness of the tragedy, there are a lot of unanswered questions."

Hospital officials have scheduled a debriefing for rescue workers who were at the scene and one for hospital-based employees who dealt with the victims. Hall said he will follow up on employees in the weeks ahead. "My role will be to see where they are in the process of grief," he said. "There's going to be more and more stuff that they feel the further they get from the incident."

Hall also was asked by GMAC officials to help conduct a private memorial service for surviving employees, who were scheduled to go back to work June 25, one week to the day after the tragedy. GMAC is closing the office and setting up new facilities in the area. Talton said she thought it would be good for her and her colleagues to get back to work, but she wondered how they would respond. "I'm not as traumatized as some of the others who saw their friends die, heard them die," she said. "I'm in awe at how they continue to function. But at least at the new place we won't have any memories. My friends wouldn't have been there and we won't see them sitting in their places."

Talton, who is single, said she received "unbelievable" support from her church members in the hours after the shooting.

Advised by police and rescue workers not to go home alone, she spent the afternoon of the tragedy at her church, where she said staff members took care of her.

She said she also has received encouraging phone calls from church members, business acquaintances, distant relatives and even people she doesn't know. "I can't describe or even count the number of calls I've had," she said.

Now, she said, she's ready to begin putting the incident behind her. She doesn't want to see news reports that are putting together details of the tragedy. "I've just almost had enough. I don't care what I haven't seen. It's time to put it down and let it go." But, she admits, getting back to a normal life will be difficult and take time. "I still cry."

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Texas Pastor needs
heart transplant

By Toby Druin

N. - (CO
Druin) Baptist Press
7/3/90

HOUSTON (BP)--David Whittington said he doesn't feel Southern Baptists owe him anything; the denomination shouldn't have a special fund to help its ministers with catastrophic medical costs. In fact, he and his wife, Becky, said, if anything, they are in debt to Southern Baptists.

But Whittington needs money -- lots of it -- at least \$85,000 to get on the list for a heart transplant and almost that much more for other costs and post-operative care. The 28-year-old father of two small boys has only a 50 percent chance to live out the year if he doesn't get a transplant.

Whittington's plight was shared with Baptist Standard readers in a letter to the editor from his father, Arthur D. Whittington of Santa Fe, Texas, in the June 13 issue. He noted that his son has no medical insurance and a fund has been established to receive contributions.

So far, about \$20,000 has been collected.

Whittington's heart was victimized by a virus. In January he became ill and developed a bad cough. At the time he was preparing to move from Chester Baptist Church in East Texas to Glendale Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas. In three years he had led the Chester congregation to almost double its attendance -- from 63 to 125 in Sunday school, 35 baptisms ("about 10 percent of the town") and to ordain the first deacon in 35 years.

He preached at the Glendale Church while on vacation in December and they invited him back in view of a call to be pastor. He and his wife, whom he met while a student at East Texas Baptist University, were excited about the new challenges in Pasadena and making a new home for their two sons, age 3 years and 20 months.

Whittington also was excited about completing his seminary degree. He and Mrs. Whittington married two weeks after they graduated from ETBU in 1984 and moved to Fort Worth, Texas, to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, but he had to drop out 26 hours short of a degree when the stress of school, working and being a husband and father became too much.

Whittington has been interested in the ministry since early childhood, he said. He accepted Christ as savior at 6, was active in Royal Ambassadors, and surrendered to preach at 19. He chose to prepare for the ministry at ETBU over 20 other schools who were interested in his academic accomplishments.

His years at Chester were "good ones," he said. "I learned a lot about ministry and how to apply what I had learned." His success drew attention from other churches, however, and he got requests from more than 30 for resumes. He began to feel the Lord was going to move him, he said, when Glendale called him as pastor.

In January, however, his cough persisted as he and his family prepared to move. He consulted some doctors who just observed he had a bad cough.

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It got worse, he said, and there were times in January when he could hardly breathe. The Whittingtons moved to Pasadena on Feb. 1, but when he got to their new home he hardly could get out of the truck. He was to preach on Feb. 4 but couldn't do it.

He went to an emergency room and was told he had bronchitis or pneumonia, he said, but on Feb. 8 an X-ray showed his heart was enlarged more than two and a half times its normal size. He had congestive heart failure.

The diagnosis was made at John Sealy Hospital in Galveston where Mrs. Whittington had given birth to their two sons and he had gone because they do not have medical insurance. The church in Chester did not provide it, he said.

"They tried to pay us enough to pay for it," he said, "but we couldn't afford it. We are still trying to pay off our college loans."

More than 20 pounds of fluid was drained from his chest, Whittington said, and he was put on medication to increase his heart rate to keep it from building up again.

"I was told to take it easy and put on a blood thinner and dismissed. I thought everything was going to be all right," he said, even though his heart rate was up to 120 and his heart was still enlarged.

He enrolled in a drug study to get part of the medication he needed provided by a drug manufacturing company and a nurse in the program asked him one day in mid-February how his transplant program was coming along.

He was startled, Whittington said, telling the nurse nothing was being done. She told him his blood supply was only 11 percent and he needed to do something.

"I began to make calls about who did transplants and what it might cost," he said, and a few days later a transplant service coordinator from the Texas Heart Institute at St. Luke's Hospital called saying a physician wanted to talk to him.

The doctor examined Whittington and told him he needed a transplant. Costs were not mentioned, Whittington said, but the first procedure he had to have usually costs \$3,500 and the next about \$6,500. Both were done for \$3,500, Whittington said. His sister paid for one and his mother raised money for the other.

Fund raising began around Memorial Day and to date about \$20,000 has come in. He needs \$85,000 to get on the list to be considered for transplant surgery.

"We are shooting for \$150,000," he said, "for the surgery and post-operative care." The cost of anti-rejection medication alone following the surgery will cost from \$500 to \$1,000 monthly.

The church has "helped every way they can," said Whittington. He has been able to preach infrequently, but they have been very understanding, he said.

"Many little things they do show us how much they care," he said.

The church will be host for a parents' night out this weekend, charging \$10 for keeping children during the evening with the funds going to the transplant fund. Other churches in Houston have offered to be hosts for concerts.

Accepting such things has been difficult, said both Whittingtons. "We have always been on the giving end," they observed.

Both are optimistic the money will come in, Whittington will get on the transplant list, get a new heart and will be able to continue his ministry.

"We feel like what has happened is for good and will enable us to help someone else," he said.

Second Corinthians 1:3-4 have come to mean much to them they said: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort.

"Who comforteth us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort where with we ourselves are comforted of God."

Persons interested in contributing can send checks to the David Whittington Heart Fund, Texas Commerce Medical Bank, P.O. Box 20768, Houston, TX 77225.

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Urgency to preach
guides ministry

By Jim Lowry

N-SSB
Baptist Press
7/3/90

JORDAN VALLEY, Ore. (BP)--An urgent sense of call to preach the gospel at the age of 40 led John Richards to a small town on the border of Idaho and Oregon where he and his wife have settled in to love the people.

Richards, one of two men selected in 1990 as Outstanding Small Church Pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention, was a meat cutter in New Mexico 10 years ago when he felt God's call.

He didn't wonder if he should accept, but instead tried to determine the fastest way to start preaching.

"I just want to be where God wants me to be, and I don't care where it is," Richards said.

After a surrender to the gospel ministry, Richards said he contacted the director of missions in Salt Lake City, looking for a church where he could preach.

"I was 40 years old, and I needed to preach right away," said the soft-spoken pastor of Jordan Valley Village Baptist Church. "I decided a bivocational pastorate would let me begin sooner."

To support his work, Richards found employment at the DeLamar Silver Mine, an open-pit operation where gold and silver are mined in the hills high above Jordan Valley.

For nine years, Richards was a "powder monkey," setting explosive charges to loosen the rock for excavation. Outside work in extreme heat and bitter cold convinced him to apply last year to be a truck driver. He now drives a truck, but it is not your average pick-up truck.

With tires nine feet tall and a load capacity of 85 tons, these trucks are used to ferry broken rock to the "ore pad" where it is separated according to quality. About 9,000 tons of rock are moved during each production shift.

As a pastor in Jordan Valley, much of the ministry is long distance because of the isolated location two hours southwest of Boise, Idaho. It takes two hours to drive to the nearest hospital for a visit, for instance. But after 10 years, loving the people continues to be the key, according to Richards.

"There were Sunday nights years ago when John and (his wife) Fran were the only two persons in the service. After working 40 hours, spending nearly every evening on sermon preparation and traveling two hours to the nearest hospital, both admit to some discouraging times.

However, neither John nor Fran seems to know the meaning of the word quit. When you love the people, they start to love you back.

The church included 17 members when they arrived in January 1980, and met in a 12' by 60' trailer. The people did not know what it meant to be good church members, John said. So he and Fran set out to help them know how to pray, how to teach, how to give and how to worship.

"Our people are starting to think and use their imagination to come up with ideas to bring people to Jesus, instead of relying on the pastor and his wife," Richards said.

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Fran, a gregarious, enthusiastic person who teaches in a two-room country school, said, "It's like they are getting the point of what the gospel is all about -- loving and helping people."

Today, more than 50 attend Sunday morning services in a log-structure church building that was paid off just five years after it was built. Church members now try to reach out to the community of 360 people in numerous ways.

One of the broadest ministries carried out by the church is Vacation Bible School. Nearly every child in Jordan Valley attends Vacation Bible School at the church, with attendance expected to reach 100 this summer. The Methodist church even contributed \$50 to help with expenses. A trailer also is brought in for extra classroom space for the week.

To help church members in their personal discipleship, Richards started a plan to hold Wednesday evening prayer services in three homes near where there are groups of members and prospects. Some church members drive more than 20 miles to church, so Richards is taking the mid-week service to the people.

Over the years, John has taken seminary extension courses and worked to improve his ability to share the gospel. And, there have been opportunities to leave, but John feels a definite call to stay in Jordan Valley.

The former meat cutter-turned-pastor fits right in with the casual western lifestyle in the northwestern United States. The long distances, dusty mine roads, and other obstacles to ministry are dwarfed by his constant, low-key, and friendly approach to ministry which demands first and foremost that you love the people, and the people will love you.

The Outstanding Small Church Pastor awards are made annually by the church administration department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, as part of a nationwide effort to recognize the "dedicated work of pastors in smaller churches.

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

Cancer didn't derail
her missionary calling

By Art Toalston

N-JMB

Baptist Press
7/3/90

TEMUCO, Chile (BP)--Jane Gilbert had just started her missionary career, unaware that an extended bout with cancer loomed ahead.

Gilbert and her husband, John, still were adjusting to the rigors of the Costa Rican language school where they would learn Spanish before moving to Chile to begin their work as Southern Baptist missionaries.

"Lord, I really want to love it here," she wrote in her prayer notebook, three weeks after entering the school in January 1984. "Help me to praise you and give thanks and to see the good things even through the hard times."

Those hard times, she thought, would come during the year of intensive study. She expected it to be "the hardest thing I was ever going to face."

Spanish indeed was arduous for her. She admitted to times when she secretly prayed, "Lord, just send me some honorable way out of here. I'll go home and say, 'I gave it a try and it didn't work.'"

But she didn't know how hard times would get.

Less than five months into language school, she scheduled a doctor's appointment after noticing a slight discharge of blood from one breast. No lumps were found, so she wasn't too worried about cancer. A lab test came back "inconclusive," and minor surgery was scheduled for a suspected lesion.

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The surgery ended up taking several hours. The doctor emerged from the operating room and told her husband that malignant cancer cells had been confirmed and that a mastectomy would have to be done. "He went back and was gone a long, long time," Gilbert said. "When he came out, he said it was worse than he had expected ... so he had to do a radical mastectomy."

"All of a sudden I had cancer," Mrs. Gilbert, now 41, recounted. "I had an honorable way out. How much more honorable can you get? We could have turned in our resignation. But never for one minute did I want it as my out at that point."

Several days before surgery, she had read Psalm 55:22: "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall."

"I claimed that promise," she said. "I laid the problem at Jesus' feet ... truly trusting that everything was in his care. As soon as I was out of the fog of the anesthesia, I returned to reading the Bible. Every time, it spoke to me and met my need."

No family members or comforting pastor were in Costa Rica for her to lean on. "There was John, but I knew that he was suffering, too," said Mrs. Gilbert, a native of Comanche, Okla.

Fellow missionaries sought to help. "But everybody was so broken" by the situation "they weren't in any condition to feed me spiritually. It was a time when nobody could really minister to me. But the Lord did. He really did. I didn't feel alone. I didn't feel abandoned."

Her family upbringing also helped her avoid depression. "Nobody in the family had ever had cancer, but we've been through some other things," she said. "We just didn't have the habit of looking on the down side. We looked on the up side."

"Losing a breast is not a wonderfully exciting thing," she reflected. "But I had three children and it was wonderful that I had a chance to nurse those babies."

Mrs. Gilbert left the hospital after a 5-day stay, hoping the worst was over. But a lab report came back the next day confirming that the malignancy had spread to her lymph nodes. The news brought language studies to a halt; the Gilberts had no choice but to return to the United States for a battery of tests, chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

"I never really thought I was going to die," she said. "But certainly all the possibilities went through my mind. We just took it one day at a time."

Gilbert, however, braced himself for the worst. "I honestly didn't think she was going to survive," said the Joplin, Mo., native. "I thought we were going back to the states and that would be it." Even so, he said, "We never really asked the question, 'Why me?' There was never any bitterness." They took the attitude: "This has happened. We don't know why, but now what are we going to do? What we do from here will determine the kind of people we are."

After returning to the United States and reviewing the case with doctors, the family began sensing a measure of hope. They began to believe they would make it back to the mission field someday. Well-meaning friends "would call us and say things like, 'How do you feel now that you're not going to be able to go back?'" Gilbert recalled. "We said, 'What do you mean, not go back?'"

While on medical furlough, the Gilberts periodically spoke in churches. Before one of their first engagements, Mrs. Gilbert struggled with what to say to a Sunday school department that had given her a few minutes to speak. The night before, "the Lord brought to mind four things that I was extremely grateful for, considering our circumstances," she said.

She told the group she was thankful:

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-- "We had sought the Lord's guidance in our lives and were where we were supposed to be. Had we not been in the center of the God's will, the perfect peace that was so available to me would not have been so available. Even in having cancer surgery in Costa Rica, where better a place to be than where the Lord wants you to be? I don't regret any of those decisions."

-- "All of our lives we had invested in people, not things." During her battle with cancer, "people we had ministered to or loved in any way were right there for us" through telephone calls, telegrams, cards and letters.

-- "I learned to seek the Lord in his word," not solely through sermons or various things people might say.

-- "From my earliest childhood I was taught to have a thankful heart."

By the end of 1984, the Gilberts received medical clearance to return to Costa Rica and finish language school. In July 1985, a lump in Mrs. Gilbert's other breast was found, but tests showed it was a benign tumor. The next month, the Gilberts and their three children headed to Chile.

Although they had never set foot in the country, "It was like we finally made it home when we landed at the airport," Gilbert said. In starting work as a religious education specialist in the city of Temuco, "I had no adjustment problems at all," he added. "I looked around, I saw what the needs were and I went to work. I'm having a ball."

"I would be perfectly content if the Lord would leave us here until retirement," Mrs. Gilbert said. "But if he chooses at any point to change our ministry, I think it will be because he has something else that's equally as exciting. I do not know what the Lord has down the road for us, but there's one thing I know: it's going to be good."

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

Mother of 5 preschoolers
leads 24 people to Christ

By Sarah Zimmerman

N-HMB

Baptist Press
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WOODSTOCK, Ga. (BP)--Vickie Flockhart has five good reasons not to witness.

The 26-year-old mother could say her five preschoolers, ranging in age from 5 to four-month-old twins, keep her too busy to witness. Instead, they are part of what motivates her to share her faith, she says.

Last year Flockhart set a goal of leading 12 people to profess faith in Jesus Christ. By the end of the year, she had led 24 people to Christ.

Flockhart says she wants her four sons and one daughter to know that she cares about them, but just as importantly, that she cares about a lost world.

Flockhart made a public profession of faith when she was 16, largely to please her boyfriend. But she did not make a private, personal confession of faith until she was 24.

She is challenged to share her faith by her husband, Steve, who "witnesses to everything that breathes," Flockhart said. He is minister of evangelism at First Baptist Church in Woodstock, Ga.

On the other hand, Flockhart describes herself as "basically a very shy, bashful person.

"I don't like to witness. It scares me to go up to a strange door," she confides. Yet she finds that God blesses her efforts when she witnesses out of obedience.

Flockhart finds her best opportunity to share her faith during the church's weekly visitation program because child care is provided.

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Another opportunity to share her testimony comes each Sunday as Flockhart counsels people who make decisions during the church service. She finds many people who come for rededication actually need to be saved, just as she did two years ago. She says she had "outwardly conformed to the image of a Christian" so that no one asked about her salvation.

When someone makes a commitment to Christ, Flockhart keeps up with the person to see him through the Christian "birthing process." She disdains what she calls the "hit and run approach" to witnessing.

Each Tuesday and Thursday morning a fellow church member takes care of the children to give Flockhart some free time. This summer she is using that time to disciple a teenage girl in her church.

"I don't know when I'll go to the bank or the grocery store, but God will work that out," she says.

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Mormon ritual changes don't alter
theology, Baptist leader warns

By Mark Wingfield

NMB

Baptist Press
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ATLANTA (BP)--Recent changes in rituals of the Mormon Church do not change the church's basic theology, a Southern Baptist interfaith witness leader said.

Tal Davis, associate director of interfaith witness for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, said the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints still "seriously deviates" from historic Christian doctrine.

Although Mormon church leaders will not discuss temple rituals, reports of changes in the "endowment" ceremony have been published in major daily newspapers, including the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times.

Church leaders have not denied that changes were made.

According to published testimonies of Mormons who have participated in the temple ritual since April, at least three major changes have been made: (1) women now pledge to obey God and listen to the advice of their husbands, rather than vowing obedience to their husbands; (2) a dramatization of Christian clergy as hirelings of Satan has been eliminated; and (3) participants are no longer required to make throat-slitting and disembowelment gestures as symbols of what will happen if they reveal the secret ceremony's contents.

The endowment ceremony is one of three major rituals performed in the 43 Mormon temples, which are considered more holy than local meeting places, called wards. Other rituals performed in the temple are celestial marriage and baptism for the dead.

While Mormons, especially women members, have applauded the changes as signs of the church's responsiveness, Davis warns that Mormon doctrine remains unchanged.

"All these changes are superficial, even though they are significant," Davis said. "I don't think you can cover up 150 years of history with these changes. They haven't really changed their theology.

He noted that Mormon theology is still "radically different" from the beliefs of Southern Baptists and other Christian denominations. "They have a different concept of God," Davis said. "They still reject the trinity and talk about three separate gods. The whole notion of the temple is to prepare them for entering the celestial kingdom in which they believe they too can be gods."

Rather than marking a change in theology, the recent ritual revisions indicate that Mormon leaders are concerned about their public perception, Davis said. He explained that films such as "The God Makers" and "Temple of the God Makers" exposed some of the more bizarre elements of Mormon temple rites.

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"I think they have made changes primarily for the purpose of public relations, to eliminate some criticism," Davis said. "Most of the things that were taken out are direct results of films like 'The God Makers,' where re-enactments were done. This opened them up for a lot of criticism.

"Mormons are trying hard to gain a more acceptable image, to be accepted into the mainstream Christian community. As these things have come to light, it has been an embarrassment to them.

Changing the rituals is "a stroke of genius," Davis said, because it renders critical films such as "The God Makers" obsolete.

Yet he questioned the church's willingness to change ceremonial elements said to have been given by revelation from God. "It seems amazing they can change something like this so radically," Davis said. "It's like us pulling a whole book out of the Bible and saying, 'We don't use that anymore.'"

The Mormon Church has a history of changing practices and doctrines that were said to be handed down by divine edict. Two notable examples were the church's move away from polygamy in 1890 and the 1978 decision to allow black males to achieve the Mormon priesthood.

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Baptist chaplains stand with
veterans at Arlington Cemetery

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press
7/3/90

ARLINGTON, Va. (BP)--When America's veterans are laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery, a Southern Baptist chaplain stands beside the families with a word of hope.

Maj. Gerald Knighton has attended the graves of more than 700 veterans receiving their final military honors at Arlington. As he leaves the cemetery after three years, Capt. Joel Rayfield, another Southern Baptist chaplain, will continue his ministry.

Both Knighton and Rayfield are Air Force chaplains endorsed by the Southern Baptist Chaplains Commission, which is housed at the Home Mission Board. Knighton leaves Arlington July 3 for a new assignment in Guam. Rayfield arrived in February from Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska.

Across the rolling hills of the 612-acre cemetery, about 20 funerals are performed each weekday. The Southern Baptist chaplain, one of five full-time chaplains assigned to the cemetery, may perform as many as five of those services.

If everything goes according to plan, the chaplain counsels with the family by telephone in advance and meets them about 30 minutes prior to the funeral. But because families travel to the cemetery from across the nation, that doesn't always happen, Knighton says.

"Sometimes I literally have a minute and a half to get acquainted with the family before the service," he explains.

In each case, though, the chaplain attempts to personalize the message and give a word of hope specifically for that family. "We try to deal with them on a personal basis without making it seem like some kind of assembly line process," Knighton says.

"There's just enough variety to keep you on your toes. You can't say, 'I've done it like this before.' You always have to be ministering to that family and not the one before or after."

Knighton estimates only 20 percent of the families burying their loved ones at Arlington have an active Christian faith. The remaining 80 percent are either nominal church-goers or have no Christian background, he says.

Dealing with death opens a door for ministry to those without faith, Knighton says.

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"This is an open door -- for some a wide-open door, for some just a little bit open. For some it is the first time they have been open in a long time. This may be the only time they'll ever hear a gospel message."

However, taking the gospel through that open door requires sensitivity, Knighton explains. "You have to show the love of Jesus Christ in a delicate way, in a positive way. You have to plan your sermon to meet the needs of where the people are."

"I do not compromise the gospel, and there is a clear plan of salvation," he adds. "But it's done with a gentleness that encourages people rather than hitting them over the head."

After his first months on the job, Rayfield agrees that ministry at Arlington requires sensitivity and prayer.

"Each service must be preceded by prayer," he says. "Without prayer I cannot have the ability to minister to that family's basic needs."

"It is important to walk alongside families and show them God is the source that can get them through," Rayfield says. "I attempt to feel where they are and in the brief time I have with them reflect Jesus Christ in my own life. The best way I know to do that is to show them love and caring."

In the process, the chaplains take upon themselves some of the grief the families bring. "If you feel for the family, you're going to feel some of the hurt," Rayfield says. "I don't think I can allow myself not to get involved."

Despite those traumas, what might appear to be a gloomy job has its rewards, the chaplains say. Both requested their assignments at Arlington.

"This has been the best job I've ever had," says Knighton. "The people look you in the face and thank you with a sincerity you know has to be real. It makes up for the moments of great sorrow."

Services at Arlington include a number of emotional symbols in addition to the chaplain's message: a uniformed honor guard, the firing of a military salute, presentation of the American flag and the playing of taps. In some cases, the casket is carried from chapel to graveside by a horse-drawn carriage.

"It's amazing what the blowing of taps says to people. It is saying, 'This person really is dead,'" Rayfield notes.

"I don't ever want to get numb to that."

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