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July 31, 1990

90-98

Foreign missionaries to get  
increased financial support

*N-SMB*

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Increased financial support for career foreign missionaries and missionary associates received approval from Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board trustees at their July 23-26 meeting.

The increases, to become effective Jan. 1 as part of the 1991 budget, came after the first comprehensive study of the whole missionary support package in five years.

The package includes an increase in base salaries, higher U.S. cost-of-living supplements and rent supplements, increased disability coverage and, for some, higher life insurance coverage. Annual pension contributions will remain at 10 percent but will automatically increase because of hikes in the factors on which they are based.

The study, begun earlier this year, included information on Southern Baptist Convention pastors' support, Foreign Mission Board staff compensation and data from 12 other mission boards, said Carl Johnson, vice president for finance.

Trustees said their approval of the increase is based on the "firm conviction" that Southern Baptists are committed to "our cooperative missions program and to providing the funds to support such a program."

Annual base salary, including longevity pay, will increase \$1,500 for missionary couples (from \$16,200 to \$17,700) and \$900 for single missionaries (from \$9,720 to \$10,620).

Under the new plan all adult missionaries are eligible for \$100,000 in life insurance coverage. Also, life insurance on dependent children, now \$2,000 per child, will be increased to \$5,000.

The plan also will change the way Margaret Fund college education aid for children of missionaries will be provided, with the assistance being concentrated solely on undergraduate aid and with more responsibility being placed on the parents. Students' grades will no longer will be sent to the board. For undergraduates, the board will increase assistance by \$1,000 a year to \$4,000 annually (a \$3,000 scholarship and \$1,000 supplement) for those who begin school after the spring semester of 1991.

Another feature of the new missionary support package will provide more aid to help retired missionaries who need additional help to meet nursing home costs. Currently the board provides up to \$575 per month for such expenses. Over a period of several years the board will increase its nursing home assistance to as much as \$1,000 a month, Johnson said.

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Bill introduced to override  
High Court's Smith decision

By Kathy Palen

Baptist Press  
7/31/90

*N-BJE*

WASHINGTON (BP)--Legislation that would restore the "compelling interest" test in free exercise of religion cases has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The chief sponsors of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, along with representatives of a diverse coalition of religious and civil rights organizations, announced the bill's introduction during a news conference June 26.

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"On April 17, the Supreme Court dealt a devastating blow to religious freedom in the United States," said Rep. Stephen J. Solarz, D-N.Y. "In the case of Oregon Employment Division v. Smith, a majority of the justices held that the First Amendment no longer requires government to accommodate the religious practices of all Americans unless it can demonstrate that the restriction is absolutely necessary to achieve a compelling state interest.

"With the stroke of a pen, the Supreme Court virtually removed religious freedom -- our first freedom -- from the Bill of Rights. We have gathered here today to unveil legislation designed to restore that most precious of freedoms to its place of honor in the Bill of Rights."

In addition to Solarz, the bill's chief sponsors are Reps. Paul B. Henry, R-Mich.; Don Edwards, D-Calif.; and James F. Sensenbrenner, R-Wis. More than 30 other members of the House also have joined in sponsoring the legislation.

The bill is expected to be introduced in the Senate by Joseph R. Biden, D-Del., and Strom Thurmond, R-S.C.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act would restore the compelling interest test used by the Supreme Court prior to its Smith decision. That test required government to demonstrate that any law restricting the free exercise of religion is essential to furthering a compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive means of furthering that interest.

In Smith -- a case involving the religious use of the drug peyote -- the court limited the application of the compelling interest test to a narrow range of cases involving the free exercise of religion.

"In a radical break with established First Amendment jurisprudence, the court has now abandoned this careful balancing act between religious freedom and laws of general applicability," Solarz said. "As the court put it, from now on the traditional standard for protecting religious liberty is a 'luxury' that government is free to ignore."

Balance, Henry explained, is at the heart of the free exercise clause.

"The Smith case obviously is not about drug legalization," Henry said. "Justice O'Connor's opinion made quite clear that the traditional compelling government interest test does not mean that at all.

"The free exercise clause has never provided a carte blanche justification of any otherwise illegal practice. It is about reaching the proper balance between religion and legitimate government functions. We need now to restore the balance in a way which recognizes and respects religion."

Without corrective legislation, Solarz said, the Smith decision could jeopardize the use of ceremonial wine, the right of public school students to take time off for religious holidays, the exemption of church interiors from landmarking laws, the practice of kosher slaughter and the right of students to wear religious garments, such as yarmulkes, or not to wear clothing, such as gym uniforms, they believe to be immodest.

More than 25 religious and civil rights organizations -- from liberal to conservative -- have joined in support of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Representatives of some of those organizations -- including the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, National Association of Evangelicals, National Council of Churches, American Jewish Congress, Agudath Israel of America, American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State -- spoke during the July 26 news conference.

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"Coalitions come and go, but mostly -- in the volatile field of church-state relations -- they go," said Oliver S. Thomas, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee. "That's why this motley gathering of unlikely cohorts is historic.

"Although perennial adversaries, these groups are joining voices to say to the United States Supreme Court that religious liberty is not a luxury to be gratuitously bestowed by a beneficent majority. Rather, the nation's first liberty is a fundamental right entitled to the highest level of legal protections."

Applauding the proposed legislation, Robert P. Dugan Jr., director of the NAE's Office of Public Affairs, said the bill "would restore the balancing process which formerly prevented government from running roughshod over religious freedom. Congress must send a message to a court which has turned its back on the free exercise clause."

The bill, which would not mandate a result in any particular case, would restore nearly 50 years of judicial protection for the rights of all religious observers, especially religious minorities, said Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress.

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Some churches begin  
exploring CP options

By Toby Druin

*N-CO  
Saxas*

Baptist Press  
7/31/90

DALLAS (BP)--A number of Southern Baptist churches have begun exploring options for redirecting their Cooperative Program gifts to bypass the SBC Executive Committee.

The move away from the usual CP giving channels began after the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans and picked up after the more recent firing of two Baptist Press leaders. The move is mostly in the talking stages, and how many ultimately will follow through remains to be determined.

Those contemplating it say it seems to be the only way to "send a message" to current SBC leadership they don't like what has happened in the denomination.

Those opposed say it bears the seeds of disaster for the whole denomination and that ultimately the heaviest price will be paid by state conventions which now retain much of the Cooperative Program dollar for their own use.

But at least two state conventions are considering ways to accommodate their churches interested in redirecting the funds, and a national conference called by Daniel Vestal, pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta, and Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention to consider alternate missions funding methods shows signs of attracting a far larger audience than first anticipated.

Convention officials, while recognizing local church autonomy, are encouraging Southern Baptists to not act impetuously and to stay with the Cooperative Program and the way they have channeled their money to missions, education and other ministries since 1925.

But some churches already have made decisions and others are considering what can be done to express dissatisfaction with the direction of the SBC.

They came away from the New Orleans convention, they contend, with the impression that though the pre-convention talk had been about "inclusion" and "broadening the tent," the thrust of the comment from the podium in New Orleans was "if you don't like the direction the convention is taking, go somewhere else."

"We are being systematically shut out of appointments and the nominations process," one pastor said. "This is taxation without representation, and the time has come to find another way to fulfill our missions commitment. We are not going to continue to do missions the way we have been doing it all these years and not have a voice in it."

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Actions already taken include complete elimination of the Southern Baptist Convention from a church's contribution, elimination of various SBC agencies, escrowing of Cooperative Program funds until a decision can be made about its disbursement and the naming of church committees to study relationships with the SBC.

Trinity Baptist Church of San Antonio grabbed headlines immediately after the New Orleans convention when Pastor Buckner Fanning announced his church will pull its financial support from the SBC and give only the amount necessary (\$2,250 annually) to qualify to have 10 messengers. The church last year gave less than half of one percent of its undesignated offerings to the Cooperative Program, however, a total of \$19,440 out of undesignated receipts of \$4,005,621, according to its Uniform Church Letter.

Others have made similar announcements, however, that involve more offering plate dollars.

Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, where George Mason is pastor, gives 17 percent of its undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program. The portion that would have gone on to the SBC Executive Committee for Southern Baptist causes is being retained in a reserve fund until its disbursement can be determined. By mid-July the amount had grown to \$40,000.

Others in Texas are studying the matter. James Denison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Midland, which gave more than \$1 million to the Cooperative Program to lead all SBC churches last year, said people in his church would like to see them make some response, but any response will be studied carefully, and nothing will be done that would weaken support for state convention programs.

Denison said he will be a convener for a session of the Vestal/Baptists Committed meeting in Atlanta, but that does not imply he is committed to any change. "I am going with an open mind," he said.

The Atlanta meeting scheduled for Aug. 23-25, was called by Vestal, and the executive committee of Baptists Committed to consider ways for Southern Baptists to consider ways to support world missions but to bypass the SBC Executive Committee in distribution of funds.

Other Texas churches known to be studying the funds distribution issue include First Church, Plano; First, Calvary, Columbus Avenue and Seventh and James churches in Waco; Park Cities in Dallas; First, Amarillo; and First, San Angelo. Most have named denominational study committees.

The Amarillo congregation contributed \$722,000 to the Cooperative Program last year to place second in the state and the Park Cities Church was third with \$531,000.

Pastor John Wood of First Church, Waco, preached on the issue in his morning worship service following the New Orleans convention and has had more than 500 requests for tapes of the message. His church is studying the support issue and is holding Cooperative Program funds in escrow until a decision is made.

At Park Cities Church, Dallas, a 23-member committee has been named to study the matter. However, Pastor James L. Pleitz told the Standard, "I am here to say we will stay with the convention; we are not going to leave. I just hope the day will come when the tent will truly be broadened and we see involvement of the 45 percent or so who have been left out for the last 11 years."

Texas Baptist Executive Director William M. Pinson Jr. said he had received "several" calls from pastors and churches studying ways of mission funding.

"I am encouraging people to give it a very careful look and not do anything impetuously," said Pinson, "and frankly I am encouraging them to stay with the Cooperative Program."

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"However," he added, "we also recognize the autonomy of local churches and have always done with the money sent to us what the church has instructed us to do within agreed parameters.

We do not serve as a channel to non-Baptist causes, institutions or agencies."

The 1991 budget of the Baptist General Convention of Texas will be recommended by the administrative committee to the executive board for consideration on Sept. 11 in Dallas. The recommendation reportedly will be that the budget remain the same as that of 1990 -- \$63.5 million with 63.35 percent for Texas mission causes and 36.65 percent earmarked for SBC causes.

Churches in other states also are forming study committees and a few have cut off funds.

Fletcher Allen, editor of the Tennessee Baptist and Reflector, said he is aware of two churches that have cut off funds to the SBC and others have made inquiries about procedures to follow.

Allen noted that Executive Director D.L. Lowrie, who was unavailable for comment, had cautioned churches to think through any action and not to forget the Cooperative Program.

James Griffith, executive director of the Georgia Baptist Convention, said he had received surprisingly few calls about the issue, but noted churches interested may be waiting the outcome of the Atlanta meeting.

Griffith noted also that any church that places restrictions on its Cooperative Program gifts will see those gifts received as designated gifts, not Cooperative Program gifts.

"I am hoping Georgia Baptists will stay with the system," he said. "We are not formulating any plans" to provide an alternative system, he said, but added it could be done by the budget committee or suggested from the floor of the convention.

Two state conventions are considering options in their budgets to permit churches to have a choice in how their funds are distributed. The Virginia Baptist budget committee was to consider this week a plan to present to their annual meeting in October that would provide (1) a method where people could support the Cooperative Program in the traditional way, letting the SBC Executive Committee set distribution guidelines for the SBC portion; and (2) an option where the amount going to SBC entities would be determined by the budget committee.

Virginia already has in place, however, a system whereby churches can delete up to three areas of support, including the Southern Baptist Convention, and still have their gifts considered as Cooperative Program gifts in Virginia.

In North Carolina, Executive Director Roy J. Smith is proposing that the budget committee provide opportunity for churches to contribute for missions support but to have a wider range of options. A total of 31 churches in North Carolina now exclude the Southern Baptist Convention entirely from their gifts, and the number is increasing. Last year a total of \$557,810 was given with the stipulation that none go to the SBC and at the current rate, a Baptist State Convention spokesman said, the rate will be \$800,000 to \$1 million this year. On the opposite side of the coin, \$34,345 was given in 1989 with the stipulation that none go to state convention programs.

John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, said he had received only two phone calls about the matter. "My feeling is that a church is going to do what a church has to do," he said. "I respect the integrity of the church and believe they will do what in good conscience they have to do."

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The moves to escrow funds or to bypass the SBC was soundly criticized by both Paige Patterson, president of Criswell College in Dallas, and James T. Draper Jr., pastor of First Baptist Church of Euless, Texas. Patterson has been one of the architects of the conservative effort over the last dozen years; Draper was president of the SBC in 1982-83.

Both noted that in past years conservatives had been excoriated for so-called negative designation when they said they could not support various parts of SBC or state convention efforts or teaching in seminaries which they considered "unconscionable."

"I do find it a little bit strange that what was often construed as immoral and uncooperative when we talked about designating funds is all of a sudden perfectly okay," said Patterson. "That seems to me to be at best inconsistent and at worst making up the rules as you go along."

"The big loser in this if it actually gets started will be the state conventions," he said, "because in order to offset losses to the national convention budget, conservative churches would be forced to give around the state conventions."

"I don't think anyone wants to do that, but they could be forced to do it."

Draper said the proposals amounted to "gross hypocrisy," noting criticism leveled at conservatives for practicing negative designation in the past.

He noted that if the idea catches on the bookkeeping problem alone for the local church and the state and national conventions will be mind-boggling.

"The Cooperative Program will be effectively destroyed," he said.

Draper, whose church gave \$369,447 in support of the Cooperative Program in 1989, urged moderates to "have the same kind of patience" conservatives had in the past who kept supporting the CP. He urged them to wait on the appointments of new SBC President Morris Chapman to see if he does the "enlarging of the tent" promised before the convention in New Orleans.

Chapman, in a June 26 statement, urged Southern Baptists to "enhance our cooperative spirit through substantial participation in the Cooperative Program. We must be certain that we do not damage our world mission effort to present the claims of Christ to the 5 billion people around the world."

Bypassing national agencies could lead churches to bypass state conventions, he cautioned.

"I do not think this generation of Southern Baptists wants to engage in unraveling the method of funding which God has so greatly honored," he said.

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Baptist church growth  
effectiveness eroding

By Jim Lowry

*N. J. S.*

Baptist Press  
7/31/90

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--The erosion of the effectiveness of church growth among of Southern Baptists calls for increased attention from churches, according to Joe Stacker, director of the church administration department at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

Stacker, addressing pastors in the Growing the Church of the 1990s conference at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center July 14-20, said churches need to mix old and new evangelism methods to successfully reach people.

Stacker echoed church growth specialist Lyle Schaller's recently expressed sentiment that most churches, including Southern Baptist churches, are stuck in a time warp 40 years behind the trends.

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As an example, Stacker cited the ratio of baptisms to church membership in the 50-year period from 1939 to 1989. With 269,155 baptisms in 1939 and 351,107 in 1989, the ratio was one baptism for every 18.4 in 1939 and one for every 42.5 in 1989.

This comes at a time when the number of staff members in local churches is higher than ever before, and the average attendance in Sunday school, for instance, in 1989 was 3.8 million every week, compared to 1.69 million in 1939, said Stacker.

A trend in American life which churches must face, Stacker said, is the obsession people have with speed based on an achievement mentality. "Most people respond best to church initiatives which can be done in the shortest time period."

The concept of flexibility also must be considered by churches as people become accustomed to 24-hour services allowing them to achieve more every day at times convenient to their personal schedules.

Trends in aging, population changes, media impact, pluralism, resistance to change, leisure, globalization and competition all must be met head-on by churches, Stacker said, if Southern Baptists are to realize the potential of the denomination.

In the area of population changes, Stacker said a recent study by the Baptist General Convention of Texas estimated that 95 million people, or 37 percent of the population in the United States, live in multi-family housing. Only three to five percent of that number attend any church.

Population increases will occur in sunbelt areas such as Florida, Texas and California, Stacker said. Southern Baptist work traditionally has been strong in most of these areas, which points to the need for new work in old areas, Stacker said.

"Growing churches meet the needs of the people," Stacker said. "Flexibility must be evident in willingness to change to two worship services, two Sunday schools, flip-flop services or change the time for Sunday school and worship."

"Southern Baptist Convention churches have depended too much on transfer members and not on conversion of unchurched people for growth," he continued. "There are many ways to share Christ, but one is essential. If we do not evangelize, our churches will not grow."

"For churches to grow, they need visionary leadership, adequate space and parking, evangelistic outreach, celebrative worship, organized Sunday school, ministry to the community and a mission spirit," Stacker said.

Factors which inhibit growth also must be addressed, Stacker said in another session with the pastors. These include spiritual, mental and physical barriers to growth in the lives of church members and leaders.

"In church life, regrettably, older ministers do not have tendencies to 'mentor' younger ministers very well," Stacker said. "There is a fear mentality. 'If I help him, he may outgrow me'."

"That troubles me because I had help when I started my ministry in a mission church in northern Virginia," he continued. "These encouragers, or helpers, were concerned about the Kingdom enterprise and not personal agendas."

Other barriers or stressors related to church growth include change and morale.

"Change is inevitable if a church grows or not," Stacker said. The office workload, communication clarity, authority, facilities and volunteer leaders all must be considered to lead a church.

"But when a church is not growing, a sense of depression and failure is often experienced," he explained. "If the pastor loses his fervor and vision, the church probably won't have any either."

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"The future is always coming at us," Stacker warned the pastors. "It is important that we not lose opportunities to reach future members.

"Help your people become growth oriented," he urged. "Teach, preach and write with a clarity of purpose that communicates the truths of the Bible. People need to be involved in church growth, but remember you are often dealing with people in a society who have never been to church."

Stacker then outlined several ideas to point pastors toward "personal involvement in leading a church to grow, including patience, integrity, determination and delegation of the work load.

"Keep your eye on the goal and don't look back," he challenged the pastors. "Be creative in your intentions. Let God give you ability, and trust in him."

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Fun games teach serious  
lessons about missions

By Mark Wingfield

N-CO  
(N.M.A.)

Baptist Press  
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GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--While visiting "Jericho" in New Mexico, Alice Arnold made an imaginary trip to India.

She was illiterate and could find no one to teach her to read.

Her husband, Les, fared better. While his wife stood in the hot New Mexico sun trying to read words she could not understand, he sat in the shade singing "God Bless America."

The two were participants in "Air Jericho," a world-awareness game played during "Jericho: A Missions Festival" at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

Participants were given printed "tickets" to countries with information about culture, population, life expectancy, religion and other vital statistics. Their "flight" consisted of walking from the portico of New Mexico Hall into "countries" marked off in the parking lot with tape.

Mrs. Arnold was transported to a two-foot by three-foot block, which she shared with five other people. She was not allowed to step outside the border.

Meanwhile, her husband sat in a padded chair under the large portico. He was pampered with water to drink and magazines to read.

Members of The Company, a drama troupe from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, acted as hosts for Air Jericho. They dressed in appropriate costumes, such as safari gear for Africa and a Statue of Liberty headdress for America.

In the course of the 45-minute game, an imaginary earthquake hit India, killing three of the six people living there. "Oh, my goodness, there's been an earthquake in the Middle East," a robed actor told the imaginary residents. "You, you and you are dead," she said, pointing randomly to three people.

Some Americans were sent as missionaries to the needy countries, but once there, they had to learn the culture and language by memorizing facts and a string of words that amounted to gibberish in English.

The purpose of the game was to help participants realize the demands of mission work and the relative comfort of Americans, said Dennis Parrish, a Southwestern Seminary professor and director of The Company. Members of the troupe spent months learning facts and customs to make the game more realistic.

"It dramatized for me how soft Americans really have it," said Arnold, who toward the end of the game was sent from America to Pakistan only to be eliminated by an earthquake. "I learned it is tougher to do what you want to do than you realize."

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The Arnolds, from Smoky Hill Baptist Association in Manhattan, Kan., plan to do volunteer work in the real India. After playing Air Jericho, Mrs. Arnold said she was more mindful than ever about the difficult situation and needs there.

Air Jericho was one of numerous games and hands-on experiences offered during the week-long missions conference. Now in its second year, Jericho is a joint project of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, Home Mission Board, Sunday School Board, Brotherhood Commission and Woman's Missionary Union.

A Missions Money game demonstrated the importance of cooperative giving. To play, each registrant was given 10 fake \$10 bills to donate to missionaries during a missions fair.

Dottie Williamson, a home missionary in Mississippi, sent her sister and nephews to solicit Missions Money. One of the children wore a sign around his neck reading: "My aunt is Dottie Williamson, church planter in Mississippi. We are collecting money for a new mission in a rural area of Mississippi. It is poor! We need \$50,000 to build a church. Would you please help us?"

At day's end, Williamson had collected \$6,800. However, the effort caused a distraction because Williamson was supposed to staff an exhibit during that time. "I was so busy collecting money I couldn't work," she said.

Brad and Suzie Price, media missionaries in Colombia, didn't want to ask for donations. They offered drawings of Glorieta scenes for \$50 in Missions Money and collected \$1,500.

Nathan Porter, a home missionary working with domestic hunger, received only a few of the fake bills. During the missions fair he passed out cups of cold water. "I haven't gotten any money because I've been ministering," he said.

Maria Carter, missionary to Argentina, summed up the purpose of the game: "We're extremely grateful for the Cooperative Program so that we don't have to do this every day."

Through the missions fair and a Global Walkaround, Jericho participants were exposed to other games with serious messages:

- Mission Spin, a large wheel-of-fortune type apparatus, where players received information or souvenirs of countries corresponding to the space they landed on;
- On Target, a game where players tossed darts at balloons and received names and addresses of missionaries to pray for or write to;
- Birthday Board, a listing of missionary birthdays by month where participants could pray for a missionary who shares the same birthday;
- Video games with questions about mission work and the Cooperative Program;
- A shooting gallery where players fired suction cup arrows at five aluminum cans under the heading "Knock Down These Excuses for Not Praying for Missions."

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

Baptists walk with  
missionaries at Jericho

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press  
7/31/90

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Lay people and ministers walked among missionaries and were challenged to follow their footsteps during "Jericho: A Missions Festival."

The week-long missions conference at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center was jointly sponsored by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, Home Mission Board, Woman's Missionary Union, Brotherhood Commission and Sunday School Board.

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Nearly 90 home and foreign missionaries spent the week with the 2,250 people attending Jericho. Through seminars, Bible study, interactive games and personal conversation, participants were challenged to give to missions and go as missionaries.

The week built to a climax on the final night when 40 foreign missionaries shared their testimonies in an appointment service. The new appointees will serve in 18 countries.

Through the testimonies, participants heard about the appointees' families, calling and vision.

Elizabeth Hilyer, who along with her husband, Thomas, was appointed to Spain, told how God had called her to missions over the course of 15 years. She recalled attending a missions emphasis where a young man leaned over to her during the invitation to say, "Don't you hear God calling you?"

"I have since married the man who asked me that presumptuous question," she said. The two will return to Spain where Thomas Hilyer previously has been a missionary.

Diane Garcia, a widow with 10- and 11-year-old sons, told about her call to Ecuador. As a 10-year-old, she made a public commitment to missions.

While serving as a summer missionary in Colombia, Garcia met her husband, who was studying there and later became a pastor. After living and working in Colombia, they returned to the United States, where he died of stomach cancer.

"He died two-and-a-half years ago, but my call to missions didn't," she said. "It has been 33 years since I made my public commitment to foreign missions, and as I stand before you tonight at this very special, long-awaited moment of appointment, we are excited about being your missionaries."

James Seale told how he and his wife, Dana, felt called to medical missions in Venezuela but knew it would take "a miracle of God" to be appointed there. At the time there was no Baptist medical work there, and it was almost impossible to get a visa.

"Our testimony tonight is that God is able to open doors that no man can shut," he said, explaining he had received a personal invitation from the Venezuelan government to teach family medicine there.

On the opening night of the missions conference, Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis also testified to God's ability to open closed doors. "There is no wall that can keep God out," he declared, speaking of the Old Testament victory at Jericho.

He cited political, geographic and racial walls that Christians must overcome to spread the gospel today.

"The greatest wall we face is not of steel or stone," Lewis said. "The wall that's stopping our effort to win our world is called indifference."

Throughout the week, Jericho participants were challenged with mission needs across the nation and around the world. Black flags placed among the brightly colored flags of the world symbolized countries and people groups with limited access to a Christian witness.

A total of 68 people made public commitments during the week. Of those decisions, 52 were recorded during the altar call at the appointment service.

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