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November 20, 1990

90-161

Maryland/Delaware Convention  
OKs funds for Baptist Joint Committee By Bob Allen

*N-CO (Md. Del.)*

DERWOOD, Md. (BP)--The Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware approved a plan for direct funding to the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, elected a new president and adopted a 1991 budget of \$4.7 million Nov. 12-14.

Messengers also heard an address by their executive director-treasurer asking Maryland/Delaware Baptists to cling to a heritage of diversity and commitment to missions and not be distracted by the clamorings of denominational controversy.

Attendance by messengers and registered visitors exceeded 1,000 for the first time in the state convention's 154-year history. A total of 819 messengers and 186 visitors registered for the annual meeting, held at Redland Baptist Church, Derwood, Md.

Messengers voted 252-153 to adopt a recommendation of the convention's general mission board to restore funding cut in June by the Southern Baptist Convention to the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. The action calls for a lump sum of about \$4,500 be sent directly to the Washington-based religious liberty watchdog agency. The allocation matches the amount of Maryland/Delaware Baptist Cooperative Program gifts that would have gone to the BJC between October 1990 and December 1991 had Southern Baptists not voted to reduce their level of funding to the BJC by 87.5 percent in the 1990-91 budget they adopted earlier this year in New Orleans.

The funds earmarked for the BJC will be deducted from the half of budget surplus to be sent at year's end to the SBC. The remaining 50 percent of surplus funds will be built into future Maryland/Delaware budgets.

A 1991 budget adopted by messengers forwards 41 percent of Cooperative Program receipts to national causes, the same division of funds in the 1990 budget. The convention departed, however, from a practice in recent years of dividing year-end surpluses evenly between state and national causes, voting that in 1991 all such overage will stay in the state convention.

The action will help erase a deficit in the performance-based BCM/D budget, provide new program dollars for the first time in several years and give the state convention financial stability needed to pursue its stated goal of moving toward a 50-50 division of all Cooperative Program receipts between state and national causes.

The convention elected Homer Carter, pastor of First Baptist Church, Rockville, Md., as its new president. Carter described himself as "a representative of all Maryland/Delaware Baptists," though he was perceived to be the candidate of choice for moderates in the convention. His opponent, Iris White, a businesswoman and member of South Columbia Baptist Church, Columbia, was described as a non-political candidate but was nominated by Dana Walter Collett, pastor of Covenant Baptist Church in Columbia, a regular spokesperson for conservative views in the state.

Two vice presidents were elected unopposed. Romelle Jones, a member of University Baptist Church in Baltimore, was chosen first vice president and Otis Doherty, pastor of Ogletown Baptist Church, Newark, Del., was chosen second vice president.

In other business, messengers adopted a resolution on harmony, pledging to "commit ourselves to practice the principles of love in all relationships with one another" and another affirming the sanctity of human life.

Maryland/Delaware Baptists will meet next year at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Bel Air, Md.

Record Kentucky convention  
avoids political extremes

By Marv Knox

N-19  
(K.Y.)

PADUCAH, Ky. (BP)--Kentucky Baptists steered clear of political extremes during their 1990 convention in Paducah Nov. 13-14.

A record 2,262 messengers packed First Baptist Church and spilled over into Immanuel Baptist Church for the 153rd annual meeting of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

They elected a self-proclaimed non-partisan as president and split decisions on a pair of controversial proposals.

J. Robert White, pastor of First Baptist Church of Paducah, won the presidency over C. Wyman Copass, pastor of Farmdale Baptist Church in Louisville, 1,274 to 796.

White described himself as "a conservative preacher of the gospel who is non-political." Conservatives had placed Copass at the head of a slate of candidates, a first in KBC history.

Only one of the four candidates on the conservatives' slate was elected to office. C.C. Brasher Jr., pastor of Briensburg Baptist Church in Benton, was chosen first vice president by acclamation.

Diversity also was evident in debate and balloting on the two controversial proposals.

They had been offered by President Bill Messer, pastor of First Baptist Church of Ashland, to provide "a place for all Kentucky Baptists" to stand on potentially divisive issues. Along the way, they generated their own share of debate.

The first proposal recommended creation of a special committee to study how the convention "receives and qualifies Cooperative Program gifts from the churches."

The Cooperative Program is Kentucky and Southern Baptists' unified giving plan. It has become a par of the Southern Baptist Convention's ongoing controversy. Some moderates claim the conservatives, who control the SBC apparatus, are expecting them to help fund the convention but not giving moderates voice in how its agencies and institutions are run.

The issue is more complicated in Kentucky, because KBC policies dictate that churches' representation at the Kentucky annual meeting is based on undesignated gifts to the national Cooperative Program. So churches that might continue to support KBC causes but drop SBC causes could lose their rights to participate in Kentucky decision-making.

The proposal passed, 904 to 885, and Messer named 15 people to the committee.

The second proposal recommended creation of an endowment in the Kentucky Baptist Foundation on behalf of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, established by the KBC executive board through deposit of \$25,000 from 1989-90 year-end funds. It also would have provided a one-time allocation of \$17,358 from year-end funds to the Washington-based religious liberty organization "to cover the KBC's portion of this year's reduced Cooperative Program funding."

The Baptist Joint Committee, comprised of nine Baptist denominations, has been embroiled in controversy for most of the past decade. Conservatives say it's too liberal, and moderates counter that it's done a proper job of championing religious liberty and church-state separation.

The BJC endowment proposal came about after the SBC voted last summer to cut its share of the BJC budget by about 80 percent. Some moderates began designating funds for the BJC, and some threatened to push for it to have a line item in the KBC budget. Some conservatives condemned the designations, and many of them vowed to fight a line-item proposal.

The proposal failed, 834 to 921.

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Electronic wizardry allowed all the messengers to participate in the debates and votes. Since the crowd overflowed the auditorium at First Church, messengers participated via TV monitors at Immanuel and in two other rooms at First Baptist. In fact, part of the discussion was conducted from Immanuel, and messengers' comments there were broadcast back to a TV monitor at First Baptist.

The record 2,262 messengers eclipsed the previous mark by 255.

In other business, messengers approved a 1991-92 Kentucky Cooperative Program operating budget of \$17,894,462, the same as the current budget. Of that amount, 61.237 percent will be earmarked to support KBC causes, and 38.763 percent will go to SBC causes, a change from the current 61.25/38.75 split.

However, the SBC will get 40 percent of the total if Kentuckians reach a \$1.3 million challenge budget. They also passed resolutions urging churches to increase their gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for foreign missions by 15 percent; challenging them to "give strong support to and work diligently with the Temperance League of Kentucky and ... engage in educational programs that oppose the evil of legalized gambling;" and deploring the taking of hostages as a violation of human rights while promising to pray for hostages, their families and world leaders working for the release of hostages in the Middle East.

The 1991 KBC annual meeting will be held at Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington, Nov. 12-13.

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Louisiana messengers  
re-elect Lowery president

By C. Lacy Thompson

N<sup>(10)</sup>  
(la.)

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

SHREVEPORT, La. (BP)--Louisiana Baptists side-stepped possible controversy during their 143rd annual state convention while agreeing to work together to reach their world and state for Christ.

Fred Lowery, pastor of First Baptist Church of Bossier City, was elected by acclamation to a second one-year term as Louisiana Baptist Convention president last week. Mark Sutton, pastor of Brookwood Baptist Church in Shreveport, was elected first vice president, and Bendell Johnson, a physician from Fort Park Baptist Church in Shreveport, was elected second vice president.

The issue of abortion was at the forefront of convention business. On that issue, messengers overwhelmingly approved their strongest statement in history. The resolution asserts "abortion for reasons other than to save the life of the mother is a destruction of innocent human life contrary to the laws of God and leads to a contempt for all human life." The resolution also instructs the convention's committee on moral and social concerns to make abortion a top priority in its work.

Lowery said he was encouraged by how the resolution was handled. "There was such strong feelings. And yet, when it was settled how the majority felt, we came back and basically unanimously approved the whole resolution. And that was tremendously encouraging."

A record 1,895 messengers crowded into a main auditorium and overflow room at Summer Grove Baptist Church in Shreveport, seemingly set to battle over two items of tension.

One involved a proposed charter restatement for Louisiana College, which was the result of a two-year study and consultation with college and convention counsels. School leaders said the restatement was needed as a matter of updating documents and was designed to strengthen convention-college ties. However, critics insisted the proposal was an effort to move the school from state convention control.

The second concerned a 10-year employment contract recently signed between Louisiana Baptist Message trustees and Editor Lynn Clayton. Supporters said the contract was needed to ensure continued freedom of the press in the state. Critics decried the move as unnecessary and unprecedented.

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At the last minute, however, leaders of the two agencies in question acted to remove the items from convention consideration, both citing a hope to foster peace and harmony. Louisiana College President Robert Lynn delayed consideration of the charter proposal for one year, pending dialogue with Louisiana Baptists in the next 12 months. Clayton and newspaper trustees agreed to restudy their contract and also seek to dialogue with and receive input from Louisiana Baptists in the process.

Later, messengers voted to have Lowery appoint a five-member committee to dialogue with the college concerning the charter amendment and report back to the 1991 state convention.

The decisions to withdraw and restudy came amidst speculation that critics would attempt some sort of move -- possibly financial -- against the agencies.

But Lowery refused to characterize the decisions as a victory for anyone. "I'd much rather say this was a first step towards rebuilding trust."

Messengers to the annual convention voted without opposition to enter into a three-year missions partnership with Hong Kong Baptists. The partnership is set to begin in January and is seen as a strategic effort to train leaders and grow churches before 1997, when control of the colony will revert to the Chinese and ministry opportunities may be curtailed.

In addition, messengers approved a \$16 million state Cooperative Program budget for 1991, which represents an increase of \$700,000 (4.6 percent) from the current goal. Of that amount, 35 percent will be forwarded to the SBC Cooperative Program. They also agreed to forward all receipts above the \$16 million mark through the national Cooperative Program, which funds worldwide Southern Baptist ministries and programs.

Convention participants also focused on the 1990s as a "decade of destiny," to borrow the term used by Lowery in his president's address. Most of the focus fell on VISION 2000, a four-pronged plan to start churches, grow churches, strengthen Baptist work in New Orleans and increase Cooperative Program support in the 10 years leading up to the new century.

As in previous years, messengers also approved strong resolutions on a variety of concerns, such as AIDS, drug use, Christian education, gambling and pornography. Other than the abortion issue, only the resolution on the separation of church and state drew any debate or opposition.

Louisiana Baptists will meet Nov. 14-15 at First Baptist Church of Lafayette for their 1991 annual meeting.

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Ohio Baptists elect  
first black president

By Theo Sommerkamp

N-10  
(Ohio)

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

PARMA, Ohio (BP)--Gary L. Frost, 36-year-old pastor of Rising Star Baptist Church in Youngstown, is the first black man ever elected president of the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio. He was elected during the annual convention at Parma, a Cleveland suburb.

A Youngstown native, educated in Ohio, Frost was earlier a first vice president of the convention, and also had preached the convention sermon another year.

The church he leads is in the top three churches in its association in Cooperative Program unified budget giving. The church also is believed to be the first black church in the SBC launched through a home missions planter, who preceded Frost.

The Ohio convention this year showed none of the lengthy debate over budgets and programs that it experienced a year before.

It adopted a total budget of \$5,735,451, of which \$3,587,009 is the goal for the Cooperative Program receipts from the churches. It will send 41.25 percent of Cooperative Program income to support Southern Baptist Convention missions and education endeavors.

The convention also adopted a Baptist Student Union study report which reaffirmed the metro concept of student ministry under which it already operates. Full-time area directors located in four major cities, and volunteer student directors serve on local campuses.

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The pre-convention executive board meeting agreed to maintain the present circulation method of the state Baptist newspaper, The Ohio Baptist Messenger. It is sent to every church family in Ohio, funded through the Cooperative Program. The paper will keep its twice-monthly publication schedule. It has a circulation of about 32,600.

The 1991 convention will meet Nov. 5-7 in suburban Cincinnati.

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New Mexico convention  
has smooth sailing

By J.B. Fowler

*N-CP  
(M. Mex.)*

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

ROSWELL, N.M. (BP)--The 78th annual meeting of the Baptist Convention of New Mexico met Nov. 13-15 at First Baptist Church of Roswell. Total attendance was 755, with 444 messengers and 311 visitors.

Dean Mathis, pastor of Taylor Memorial Baptist Church of Hobbs, was elected new convention president. Charles Wilson, a layman from First Baptist Church of Carlsbad, was elected first vice president. Hilcias Barrios, pastor of Santa Fe Spanish Baptist Church, was chosen second vice president.

In business transacted during the annual meeting, a convention bylaw was approved to create a Christian Life Committee to deal with moral and social issues in the state; and adopted a total operating budget of \$5.3 million. Of that amount, \$2.6 million will be given by New Mexico Baptists.

The basic budget receipts will be divided on a 69.5-30.5 percent ratio with 69.5 percent of the budget going to causes in New Mexico. The remaining 30.5 percent will be given to SBC causes to fund the convention's missions and educational endeavors. This is the same ratio on which the convention operated last year.

The 1991 convention will be Oct. 29-31 at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center.

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Gregory named permanent  
Baptist Hour speaker

*N-Texas*

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--Joel Gregory, pastor of Travis Avenue Baptist Church of Fort Worth, Texas, has been named permanent speaker on The Baptist Hour, Southern Baptists' longest running radio program. Produced by the Radio and Television Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, The Baptist Hour will celebrate its 50th anniversary of broadcasting in January 1991.

Gregory, 42, has been pastor of the Fort Worth church for five years. Previously he was preaching professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is former president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"The responses we have received from listeners reveal that Joel Gregory's Baptist Hour messages strike a responsive chord," Jack Johnson, president of the commission, said. "We are fortunate to have Dr. Gregory, recognized as one of America's outstanding gospel preachers, begin as Baptist Hour speaker in the year this premier broadcast celebrates its fiftieth birthday," Johnson added.

The Baptist Hour, which is carried on 450 radio stations across the nation, features an inspirational, Bible-based message each week. "Dr. Gregory's ability to capsule a powerful message in a brief period of time makes him a logical choice for this important assignment," Johnson added.

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So. Baptist-produced documentary  
to air on ABC-TV next month

*N-Texas*

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--"Winds of Freedom," a Southern Baptist-produced television documentary about Christianity in Eastern Europe and Russia will be aired nationally over ABC-TV Sunday, Dec. 2. David Hartman, former co-host of "Good Morning America," hosts the program.

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Although the broadcast's national kickoff is set for Dec. 2, some stations will air the documentary later.

Readers should check their local television listings for time and date the program will be shown in their area.

"Winds of Freedom" was videotaped on location in Russia, Romania, Hungary and East Berlin by Radio Television Commission production staff members.

It is one in a four-part series of religious documentaries presented by the Interfaith Broadcasting Commission. Other programs in the series, titled "Vision and Values," were produced by the National Council of Churches, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the United States Catholic Conference.

"Winds of Freedom" explores the role individual Christians and some churches played in moves toward democracy in countries where new freedoms offer opportunities for individual Christian growth and innovative ways of spreading the gospel.

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Billy Graham crusade to  
boost Hong Kong churches

By Kathie Chute

N.F.M.S

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

HONG KONG (BP)--High winds and rain failed to keep people in Hong Kong from coming in droves to hear evangelist Billy Graham proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

During Graham's Nov. 14-18 crusade, more than 300,000 people attended services held at Hong Kong Stadium. Overflow crowds filled nearby sports fields. When all the seats were taken, people sat on plastic bags on muddy ground.

The rain, which came from a monsoon over the South China Sea, continued for three of the five days, but people came with umbrellas, some hours early to make sure they got a seat.

The Hong Kong services were carried by satellite and video extension to 30 countries throughout Asia and the Pacific, including areas with unreached people groups in countries like Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan. Termed "Mission World Asia," the extension included national television telecasts and satellite crusades in churches, auditoriums and stadiums. Films of the services will be shown later in areas too remote for television reception.

Graham called the effort "his largest single outreach in over 40 years of international ministry."

The crowds attending the Hong Kong services resulted, at least in part, from Operation Andrew, a program initiated by the Graham organization staff in which local Christians recruited non-Christians to attend the crusade. Baptist churches and Southern Baptist missionaries have participated in Operation Andrew for several months.

"There were a great number of Baptists involved in the crusade," said Southern Baptist missionary George Wilson, president of Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary and a member of the crusade executive committee. "We had 900 volunteers from our church, which has 4,000 members. The church gave over \$77,000 (to the effort).

"Just from evidence of the number of Baptist pastors I saw participating in the crusade, our work here will benefit," Wilson continued. "Their sense of unity, their concern for other people and then getting those people in touch with others is bound to affect ministries in the churches."

For Christians in Hong Kong to be part of something so large is a definite boost to evangelical work, added missionary Dick Lusk, pastor of Kowloon Baptist Church. About 10 percent of Hong Kong's 5.8 million people are considered Christian.

"In view of 1997 (when control of Hong Kong will be returned to China), it has been an encouragement to all the churches," he commented.

On the opening night of the crusade 4,000 people, many of them old and disabled, left their seats to declare their commitment to God.

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"More than twice the average number we would expect at a crusade in the United States came forward to give a commitment," said Larry Ross, director of media and public relations for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Counselors registered 23,810 spiritual decisions during the five-day crusade. All of them were referred to local churches for follow-up and Christian nurture.

"There has been a greater sense of expectation from people in Hong Kong for this crusade over the one held in 1975," said Hong Kong pastor Tong Shukee, local crusade general chairman. Much of this came from anxiety about 1997 and Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty, he said. People came for answers.

A choir of 5,000, dressed in white, sat behind the giant white pulpit from which Graham told the crowd, "Many of you are worried about the future, but when you get into the future you will find God already there."

Nightly attendance figures ranged from around 40,000 on opening night to more than 100,000 at the final service. But thousands more were turned away at the gate when seating reached capacity. They lined fences around the stadium and sports fields, as well as streets leading to the stadium. People who gathered on the fields sat on the ground and watched services on a giant video screen.

Baptists were involved in nearly every phase of planning for the crusade and will actively participate in follow-up, according to missionary Christine Hailey.

"Missionaries have been in counselor, follow-up and nurture training," she explained. "Of course, there's no way of knowing how many Chinese Baptists worked with the 6,000 counselors, 3,000 nurture group leaders and the choir." Churches also conducted prayer groups for the crusade, she said.

Hong Kong Baptist College conducted special services for Christian Emphasis Week, held in conjunction with the crusade.

"All the numbers aren't in yet, because we still have one more service," said missionary Benny Petty, who teaches English at the college and works with students on campus. "But so far there have been about 60 decisions during this special emphasis. We're also doing a survey to determine how many of our students made commitments at the crusade."

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EDITORS' NOTE: Following is the fourth in a six-part series.

Evangelism, Sunday school  
called basics to growth      By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

ATLANTA (BP)--Once a church and its pastor renew their vision for ministry, the road to growth is paved with hard work, church growth specialists say.

Research shows churches which grow off the plateau don't usually do anything extraordinary, they just do the basics better and harder.

The first step to growing off a plateau is to renew vision and pastoral leadership, according to Kirk Hadaway of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and Jere Allen of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

Beyond that, there are a variety of ingredients commonly found in breakout churches:

-- Evangelism. "If breakout churches do any one thing better than plateaued churches, that thing would be evangelism and outreach," Hadaway said. "Most churches talk about it, but breakout churches do it."

This renewed concern with evangelism usually includes an emphasis on spiritual growth and prayer, he found. "We are not dealing with quick fixes instituted by fly-by-night evangelists. The renewal which takes place tends to produce a well-rounded church with a rare mix of evangelism, spirituality and social concern."

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Joe Finfrock, pastor of First Baptist Church in Gentry, Ark., said his church has baptized 400 people in five years with a basic approach to evangelism. "I believe the pastor has to be willing to set the example in personal soul winning," he said. "He must encourage people that they can win others to Christ."

Using this approach the rural Arkansas church has grown from 100 to nearly 400 in average Sunday attendance.

-- Sunday school. Hadaway's research shows that breakout churches also tend to have better Sunday school programs than churches which remain on a plateau.

"We just came back and did nuts and bolts Sunday school," pastor Anthony Jordan says of the growth at Northwest Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. In eight years the church has grown from an average Sunday attendance of 690 to 1,000 despite its location in a transitional neighborhood.

This is a key element of a joint commitment of the Home Mission Board and Sunday School Board in fostering church growth, said Sunday School Board President Lloyd Elder.

"We are committed to sound, holistic church growth," he contended. "Churches reach people most effectively through the Sunday school. They receive personal contacts and ministry. The Sunday school program is our point of thrust onto the mission field of our communities."

In rural Franklin, Ky., pastor Steve Curtis has proved that concept true. By emphasizing Sunday school, Providence Baptist Church has grown from an average attendance of 50 to nearly 450.

"I tell my folks I'd rather them come to Sunday school than come to preaching," Curtis says. "We now have 30 people coming to Sunday school on a regular basis who are lost. That is our evangelistic base."

-- Positive worship experience. Worship services in breakout churches have a different character than worship services in plateaued churches, Hadaway discovered.

In breakout churches, worship is more often described as "celebration" and includes variety, spontaneity and informality. "Growing churches tend to be flexible," Hadaway said. "They often change things from week to week and are not upset when the worship service does not happen exactly as stated in the order of service."

This finding is affirmed by Dan Yeary, pastor of University Baptist Church in Coral Gables, Fla., which has grown from 300 to 1,300. "I believe in a very positive worship experience. I believe in the gospel of affirmation. You don't browbeat people into action.

"I preach about sin, but always couched in grace. I never saw anybody scared or fought into the kingdom of God. They're loved into the kingdom."

-- Goal-setting. "Stagnant churches keep doing the same things year after year because the programs have always been done," Hadaway found. On the other hand, breakout churches report an increased emphasis on strategy-planning and goal-setting.

Curtis attributes much of his congregation's increase to goal setting. Although located on a rural highway seven miles from the nearest town, Providence Baptist Church has set a goal of averaging 1,000 in attendance by the year 2000.

When asked if that goal might be unrealistic, the pastor quickly replies, "We're almost halfway there already."

-- View toward the future rather than the past. Church growth author Lyle Schaller says he can gauge a church's growth by asking this question: "What is the one event that everyone in the church recalls and says, 'Ever since then, we've never been the same?'"

Growing churches have dreamed a new dream and don't constantly look to landmarks in the past, he says.

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Jordan found that to be true at Northwest Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, where fire destroyed the church building in 1965.

"When I came here in 1982, everything was dated by the fire. If you would talk to our people they would talk about the fire," he said. "Today they wouldn't be talking about the fire. They have redreamed the dream."

-- Laity deployed in ministry. Too often churches get caught up in the process of doing church to the point of not doing anything at all, noted Charles Chaney of the Home Mission Board.

"Our people have so many hours a week they can give. If we have them in committee meetings a couple of nights a week, they have no time for outreach," he said.

As an example of where this leads, Chaney told about a church council meeting he once attended where more than an hour was devoted to discussing how to keep one Sunday school class from using crayons that belonged to another class.

-- Perseverance. "Don't get discouraged when some things don't work," cautioned pastor Gary Baldwin of Westport Baptist Church in Denver, N.C. Westport Baptist Church grew off a plateau of about 100 people to average more than 300 currently.

"We try 90 things, and maybe one of them works," adds pastor Jim Summers of Northwest Baptist Church in Miami, which has grown from an average attendance of 260 to 1,100. "Some of the things we do, when they work, we are amazed."

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

EDITORS' NOTE: Following is the fifth in a six-part series.

Church starting may also  
include church restarting By Mark Wingfield

F-HMB

Baptist Press  
11/20/90

ATLANTA (BP)--Is it easier to start a new church or revive an old one?

Few pastors or missionaries would disagree: starting a new church is easier than reviving an old one. But what's easiest may not always be best, some argue.

While Southern Baptists have emphasized church starting in recent years, many plateaued and declining churches feared their plight would be forgotten. Yet getting the majority of Southern Baptist churches growing is a priority of Bold Mission Thrust alongside the goal of starting new churches.

"Our convention seems to be so excited about the new babies that we're letting some of the old babies lay on the table and die," said Jim Summers, pastor of Northwest Baptist Church in Miami. "Some of them could be revived."

Unless the flow of plateaued and declining churches is abated, the next frontier for church starting will be in the graveyard of Southern Baptists' past victories, Summers said.

Southern Baptist Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis agreed: "If a church declines or dies, then we have to go in and plant other churches to take up the slack. So we would much rather see our existing churches become vital and viable rather than have to expend resources and time to start another work."

Lewis and other missions leaders are particularly troubled by the number of plateaued and declining churches in America's inner cities and transitional communities. The problem is that the weakest churches are closest to the largest concentrations of unchurched people.

In suburban areas, where Southern Baptist churches grow more easily, people inside the church are usually similar to people outside the church. However, in transitional communities, growth is stymied because the few people remaining inside the church have little in common with the surrounding population.

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Miami illustrates on a large scale the problems increasingly faced in urban centers across the nation. The city which was once predominantly populated by white Southerners is now a melting pot of racial tension where there is no majority ethnic group.

As Latin American Catholics have migrated in from the south and Jews have relocated from the Northern U.S., white Southern Baptists have fled the inner cities and the churches they once established there. The few older church members remaining in the changing neighborhoods resist drawing the newcomers into their fellowship.

In this cycle, the church becomes the last refuge from change, explained Doyle Wetherington, director of missions for Miami Baptist Association. "The church is the one familiar point of stability in a life that is wrecked by change and instability."

This creates an insider-outsider mentality that prevents growth, Wetherington said. For this reason, Miami Baptist Association has lost 27 churches in the past 26 years.

"It has to do with their inability to minister to the new population around them, their inability to comprehend the cultural expressions of a common faith in Christ."

In the days of the old Miami, Northwest Baptist Church was the largest Southern Baptist church in Florida, averaging about 1,700 in attendance.

After a plateau and subsequent decline, there were 260 people seated in the sanctuary to hear Jim Summers' first sermon in 1979.

However, Summers perceived his role more as a church planter than as a pastor. "I am a church planter," he said. "I just happen to be planting a church in the same building where we used to have another church 20 years ago."

The church planter-pastor began with a decision to allow the church to reflect the make-up of the surrounding community. "This is a tremendous decision, one which I believe every church in our major cities will have to make within the next 10 years," Summers said.

"I decided, God help me, that I was going to let the church take on the complexion of the community and let nature take its course. And I knew there was going to be some blood-letting in the process.

"I decided we could not succeed if the church became a little island of exclusivism and segregation in the mix of a microcosm of cultures. I decided to let the blood flow."

After 11 years, "all those who felt like it was their church and didn't want outsiders coming in have basically moved on up to Georgia," Summers says only half in jest.

Northwest is now a multi-racial church averaging nearly 1,200 in Sunday attendance. But continued growth is a constant battle, he says. "We've probably lost a thousand people in the last 11 years, mostly due to white flight. We have to take in 150 people a year just to hold our own."

Summers and his church have embraced not only new people but new methods of reaching those people. For example, traditional door-to-door evangelism does not work, he says.

"We've had people mugged and robbed on visitation. The church down the street lost five cars from the parking lot one Sunday evening."

Northwest has not grown by transfers from other Southern Baptist churches either. "We've had approximately 20 Southern Baptists join my church during these years. This is not a Southern Baptist city."

To grow a church in Miami, Summers challenges his people to take the Great Commission literally. "I challenge people to be visiting every day, in the workplace, in the marketplace. I preach that soul-winning is something you do every day."

Making these changes is usually easier after a community has experienced transition than during transition, says John Vaughan, a church growth professor at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo.

"When a community is changing and people are leaving, you're going to have not only plateau, you're going to have decline," he said. "Once the community has transitioned, you've got a new mission field. It may literally be a mission field rather than a church field as we have known it."

The lessons of Miami are important to all Southern Baptists because every community is in some kind of transition, Vaughan explained. "There needs to be a generation within our convention with a fresh vision for the changing community, who can go in and reclaim territory."

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

EDITORS' NOTE: This is the sixth and final part of a six-part series.

Senior adults can be key  
to reaching young families

By Mark Wingfield

F-HMB

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ATLANTA (BP)--Churches desiring to reach young families -- considered essential to church growth -- do not have to send older church members packing.

In fact, graying members can actually help a church grow, contended B.J. Dier, a recently retired home missionary who specialized in senior adult ministries. "The greatest asset most churches have is the senior adults, if they will get them in the harness and give them a place of service."

Research confirms that plateaued and declining churches have a higher-than-average concentration of older adults in their membership.

In a study of churches in Memphis, Tenn., John Vaughan discovered that churches with more than 18 percent of enrollment age 60 and above were plateaued. Churches composed of more than 20 percent senior adults were declining, the professor at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., found.

"The message is you've got to continue to attract and reach young families, and that means teenagers," Vaughan said. "A mark of a growing church is that it will have 12 to 15 percent youth. Youth don't stay around a church that's dying."

An often-repeated principle of church growth is that a church can either grow younger and larger or older and smaller. The problem commonly faced by pastors of plateaued and declining churches is how to retain the senior adults and attract younger families at the same time.

How it turns out depends upon the attitude of the senior adults and on the attitude of the pastor, experts say:

-- If senior adults are willing to accept change for the sake of growth, the church will succeed. But if senior adults insist on running a church in the 1990s the way it was done 30 years ago, the church will decline.

-- On the other hand, if a pastor embraces older adults as partners in growth, he will be successful. But if he disregards older members in an all-out effort to recruit younger members, he faces an uphill battle.

"To keep the older people worshipping and satisfied, you have to have things different from what the newer and younger people are going to want," explained Ebbie Smith, professor of missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. "It is a dilemma. But we must be very careful not to forget the old people and set them aside in order to meet the new people. We've got to reach the new but we've got to care for the old."

The solution is challenging older adults with meaningful ministry instead of just forming social groups, Dier believes. "Instead of putting senior adults to work in ministry and missions, most churches organize them into something different. It becomes a go-go club, and they're not really involved in what the church is."

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Pastors with a vision to reclaim a plateaued or declining church can harness the power of senior adults by making them part of the "dream team," added Jay Johnston, a senior adult consultant with the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

Senior adults are open to reaching younger families, if the pastor will equip them for the task, Johnston said. "The senior adults can be challenged to go out and reach that high school student or that young adult. They just have to regroup and find out how to do it."

Pastors must spend time with their senior adults and "find out what gifts and talents they have to offer instead of just writing them off," he suggested. Rather than being the wall that keeps a church from growth, senior adults could be the walkway that leads to growth, he says.

Bringing young families into a church with a concentration of older adults can benefit both groups, Johnston said. The senior adults like to be around children, and the young parents want their children to be around older adults.

With an increasingly mobile society, young families often live thousands of miles away from grandparents, and senior adults live far away from their own grandchildren.

For too long Southern Baptists have looked at senior adults as saints who shouldn't be disturbed, Johnston contended. "If we make the senior adults aware of what potential is out there and equip them, they can make a difference. They can go claim that mountain."