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NATIONAL OFFICE
SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355

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Government seeks to weaken
church-state separation test

By Larry Chesser

N-CO BGC

WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Department of Justice has asked the Supreme Court to replace its long-held strict interpretation of the First Amendment's ban against governmental establishment of religion with one critics say would breach the wall separating church and state.

In a brief filed Feb. 22, the Justice Department asked the high court to overturn lower court decisions holding that invocations and benedictions during junior high and high school commencement exercises at a Rhode Island school district violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The government's brief also urged the Supreme Court to "reconsider the scope and application" of the Lemon test, a three-part standard long relied upon to limit governmental promotion of religion.

Under the Lemon test, governmental actions are required to have a secular purpose, neither advance nor inhibit religion and avoid excessive entanglement with religion. The lower courts in the Rhode Island case held that the graduation prayers violated the second prong of the test by impermissibly advancing religion.

The Justice Department's friend-of-the-court brief argues the Lemon test was developed to assess the permissibility of government funding for plainly religious institutions and that it is inappropriate to apply the test across the board to Establishment Clause cases.

In cases involving what the brief described as "accommodation of religious heritage in civic life," such as the Rhode Island case, the Justice Department argued that the Lemon test should be replaced by a softer standard that would permit government-sponsored religion as long as the practice "is not coercive and not part of an establishment of an official church."

Two Baptist church-state attorneys said the Justice Department proposal represents a threat to the nation's long tradition of separation of church and state.

"The Justice Department has very shrewdly chosen to work its mischief in a case in which the result that it is seeking will be popular with most Americans," said Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Oliver S. Thomas. "If the department has its way, however, we'll be seeing a lot more than graduation prayers. Mr. Jefferson's wall of separation will, for many purposes, cease to exist."

The Justice Department's proposed test "would allow government aid to religion as long as it does not threaten to establish a single national church or force persons to participate in religion against their consciences," Thomas said.

"The department is asking the federal courts to take a hands-off approach to cases involving government aid to religion," he said. "And, as with last year's peyote decision, it would tend to subject people to the dominant religion in their communities."

Thomas challenged the government brief's contention that the Lemon test "has spawned persistent confusion in the lower courts, particularly in its application to practices with historical sanction."

"History alone is not an adequate guide to constitutional decision making," Thomas said. "Discrimination has a considerable history in this society but it still violates the Constitution."

The Justice Department also contends the Lemon test is unworkable and results in wide disagreements in federal courts.

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"The Lemon test isn't perfect, but the 'coercion test' which the Justice Department is offering will generate no less disagreement," said Brent Walker, BJC associate general counsel.

"These cases are inherently fact-sensitive. What the government really wants is to soften up the establishment clause to allow greater governmental support of religion," Walker continued. "The government's argument -- if adopted by the court -- would do to the establishment clause what Smith did to free exercise."

In the Smith case, the high court virtually abandoned its long-held requirement that government demonstrate a compelling state interest before it can limit free exercise rights.

In addition to expressing concern over the government brief's proposed new standard for weighing Establishment Clause cases, both attorneys took issue with the government's support of prayer in the public school ceremonies.

"One cannot imagine a more religious act than talking with God -- even when 'dumbed down' to avoid giving offense and shorn of sectarian verbiage," Walker said. "Any prayer spoken at a school-sponsored, teacher-organized middle school graduation ceremony on school property has the effect of advancing religion."

Walker said religious Americans should be horrified by the government's posture. "To employ the means by which we are privileged to communicate with Almighty God to solemnize an ordinary civil ceremony cheapens prayer -- not to mention Jesus' injunction against 'practicing piety before men.'"

The Rhode Island graduation prayer case is Lee v. Weisman.

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Volunteers start church,
lead crusades in Bombay

By Marty Croll

N-FMB

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BOMBAY, India (BP)--Southern Baptist volunteers and missionaries led 2,062 people to become Christians and started a church during a recent crusade in Bombay, India.

The evangelistic results came primarily from open-air preaching services in three locations in the city of 11 million people. The services ran simultaneously for five nights.

The new church represents part of an effort to broaden the focus of Bombay Baptists by working with Christians in a high-rise, middle-class area. Most past evangelism there has aimed at poorer areas, said Arnold Tanner, a Southern Baptist from Lubbock, Texas, who coordinated the mission trip.

To help the new church succeed, Southern Baptist mission representatives asked an Indian church planter to move into an apartment in the area. Worship services will be held there until the church moves onto its own property.

An affluent Indian businessman told Tanner he would donate money to buy property and pay construction costs for the new church. The project will be supervised by Southern Baptist missionary Jason Lee, who lives in Bangalore. As the growing congregation fills its new building, members will give money to start another church, thus beginning a continuing cycle, Tanner said.

Bombay is a city of contrasts. Some of the nation's richest citizens live there, and it holds much of India's wealth. At the same time, a huge population dwells in sprawling slums made of tin and cardboard.

During the evangelistic effort, 25 volunteers and three Southern Baptist missionary couples worked in phases to strengthen Christian witness in Bombay.

The first week of the project, 16 volunteers and a missionary couple traveled to a retreat center outside Bombay to train 102 Indian participants in church leadership skills.

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The volunteers split into three teams the second week and participated in personal evangelism and revival services at churches in Bombay. During the third week, nine volunteers helped lead outdoor preaching crusades. Total attendance of about 12,000 was a little lower than expected because of fears resulting from the Persian Gulf war, organizers said.

For Tanner, the greatest promise of the campaign lies in the church-starting effort. Formerly the owner of a chain of retail stores, Tanner now arranges travel for volunteer teams and coordinates leadership training projects in cooperation with overseas churches.

During the past several years Tanner has sold or closed down his stores and real estate interests to concentrate on evangelistic projects. Besides the trip to India, he has coordinated three projects to Brazil, two to Kenya and two to Great Britain since 1989.

Tanner planned the India campaign with Gollapalli Krupananda, an Indian Baptist who leads church-starting efforts in Bombay for National Indian Ministries, a ministry sponsored through the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. In cooperation with National Indian Ministries, missionaries unable to live in India make regular trips into the country to work with believers.

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Iranian Bible school in England
targeted by hate mail campaign

By Mike Creswell

N-FMB

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LONDON (BP)--The Iranian Bible Training School in London has been the target of a hate mail campaign in the neighborhood around a building the school is buying.

The school, which trains Iranian Christians for evangelism in Iran, receives partial funding from Southern Baptists.

Unknown people recently sent letters warning neighborhood residents and newspapers that an "Iranian/Iraqi organization" with "murderers and fanatics" was buying a former Salvation Army retirement home south of London. The letters, signed by "a friend from Shackelford," claimed the property was to be made into a "safe house" for "undesirables."

The Surrey Advertiser, a newspaper published in the area near the new school, denounced the charges made in the letters as untrue in a front-page story. Potentially damaging effects of the hate campaign were thought to be largely offset by the newspaper story.

"It could have been quite serious, but it appears the newspaper coverage will be a good job of introducing us to the local community," said Samuel Yeghnazar, school founder and director. "We have been able to assure the neighbors that we are a Christian group working for spreading the Christian gospel and certainly pose a threat to no one."

Security concerns about people of Middle Eastern descent run high in Great Britain these days because of the country's military involvement in the Persian Gulf war. Scores of Iraqis suspected of pro-Iraq activities have been deported; others have been detained in a series of highly publicized cases.

Bombings of two train stations in London in mid-February, the Irish Republican Army attack on the prime minister's residence in London and numerous bomb threats also have heightened security concerns. Terrorists have bombed British businesses overseas in several locations during recent months.

In such an environment, the letter campaign could have been especially troublesome, Yeghnazar said. But in the newspaper article, claims made in the letters were vigorously countered by local church and government leaders who spoke out in defense of the school. Tom Kitson, a diocesan secretary for the Church of England, described the letters as "deplorable."

"These (Iranians) are a group of people well known to the English Christian Church and the Church Missionary Society. We should be welcoming them into our community," Kitson said.

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The training school opened last year and currently has 12 students. They attend the center for two years of study in the Bible and evangelism techniques before returning to Iran. Students also spread the gospel among some of the estimated 300,000 Iranians living in Europe.

Yeghnazar was born in Iran in an Armenian Christian family. He made a personal commitment to Christ at age 11 and later entered full-time Christian service, working for 18 years with the United Bible Societies. He also is pastor of the Iranian Christian Fellowship, a congregation of about 100 members that includes many Iranians and people of Muslim background.

Yeghnazar's Elam Ministries office sends literature, cassette tapes, Persian-language Bibles and other materials to Iranian Christian workers and contacts around the world. Southern Baptists channeled hunger and general relief funds through the organization for Iranian earthquake victims in 1990.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board provided a \$25,000 grant to help get the school started and will contribute \$10,000 annually from 1991-93 for school operations. The board also financed the attendance of students and staff at a MasterLife discipleship training conference in England and the translation and testing of MasterLife materials in the Farsi (Persian) language. Several missionaries have taught courses at the school.

School classes have been held in Yeghnazar's home south of London, but space has been limited. Yeghnazar said purchase of the Salvation Army complex for \$1.2 million is a "venture of faith" for which he is still raising funds. The three-story building is a former country home refurbished as a group residence with 23 rooms, a dining hall and other facilities on an eight-acre site.

Yeghnazar foresees locating a literature production center, radio ministry and media work in the new facility as well. He also hopes to build a library of Christian books for students.

In 1990 Iran's government started a new round of persecution against Christians. The government clamped down on many church activities, closed a Bible society office and executed an Assemblies of God minister who had converted from Islam. But Yeghnazar maintains that Iranians, especially those outside Iran, are open to the gospel.

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Baptist church extension
workers receive awards

By Mark Wingfield

N- HMB

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CHICAGO (BP)--Eight individuals were honored with awards during the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's annual extension section leadership conference.

In a surprise presentation, HMB language church extension director Oscar Romo was honored by state language missions leaders for 20 years of service.

Romo moved from the staff of the Baptist General Convention of Texas 20 years ago to direct the language work of the convention. During his tenure, Southern Baptists have recorded their greatest advances in ethnic churches.

Harold C. Bennett, president/treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee, was honored for his support of language missions.

Charles Lee Williamson, state missions director in Texas, received the Jack Redford Award for achievements in church starting, given by the HMB's new church extension division.

Five men received Kaleidoscopic Missions Awards, given annually to state by the HMB's language church extension division for achievements in certain areas.

Anthony Ahaev of the California Southern Baptist Convention received the Kaleidoscopic award for new work.

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Mauricio Vargas of the Missouri Baptist Convention received the Kaleidoscopic award for deaf work.

Minor Davidson of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware received the Kaleidoscopic award for self-support.

Stanley Smith of the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania/South Jersey received the Kaleidoscopic award for refugee resettlement.

Glenn Igleheart of the Baptist Convention of New York received the Kaleidoscopic award for ethnic leadership development.

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SBC started 3 churches
every day last year

By Mark Wingfield

N-HMB

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CHICAGO (BP)--Southern Baptists started about three churches per day across America last year.

Statistics on 1990 church starts were presented to state missions directors and church extension directors during the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's annual leadership conference in Chicago.

The total number of church starts for the year is believed to be between 968 and 1,201. Reporting mechanisms for number of church starts annually have not yet merged into one definitive database. In the past four years, the HMB and Southern Baptist Sunday School Board have been working together to perfect a reporting system for new church starts.

Last year's starts bring the total number of SBC churches and missions to 43,419 according to Uniform Church Letter data compiled by the Sunday School Board.

Southern Baptists have set a goal of having 50,000 churches and missions by the end of this century as part of Bold Mission Thrust.

In an address to state church extension leadership, HMB extension section vice president Charles Chaney called on Southern Baptists to increase church starts to four per day to meet the challenge of Bold Mission Thrust.

In addition to new starts, HMB statistics indicate 309 missions constituted into churches during 1990 and another 226 existing churches affiliated with the SBC for the first time.

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Mega churches poised for growth,
conference participants are told

By Chip Alford

N-SSB

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NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptist churches that average 2,000 or more in Sunday school attendance have almost 50 percent more unchurched people in their Sunday schools than the SBC average, participants in a Feb. 21-23 conference at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board learned.

According to the 1990 Uniform Church Letter, 15.3 percent of persons over the age of 10 enrolled in mega church Sunday schools are not church members, compared to 10.5 percent conventionwide.

"That means you are really in a better posture for church growth than the average Southern Baptist church," Jim Fitch, manager in the Sunday School Board's Sunday school growth and administration department, told participants in the mega church minister of education Sunday school consultation. Religious educators from 25 of the SBC's largest churches attended the conference to interact with Sunday School Board leadership and discuss issues unique to larger churches.

Participants came from churches in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Indiana, Mississippi and Texas.

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Fitch said the number of mega church Sunday schools in the SBC is gradually increasing, rising from 17 to 38 in the last five years. Still, with a total membership of about 260,000, these churches represent only a small minority of SBC membership.

Fitch shared with conference participants several characteristics of mega church Sunday schools garnered from the 1990 Uniform Church Letter report. Statistics showed that the average Sunday school attendance in mega churches is 41.5 percent, compared to the SBC average of 48.1 percent. Other statistics revealed:

-- The average worship attendance in mega churches is 49.5 percent of their Sunday school enrollment.

-- Mega churches average 1,400 new members per year in Sunday school with an attrition rate of 1,200, leaving a new member growth rate of 200 people per year.

-- One person is baptized in mega churches for every 10 members who attend Sunday school regularly. The same one in 10 ratio exists was reported conventionwide.

-- The ethnic enrollment in mega church Sunday schools is 12.5 percent, much higher than the SBC average.

The UCL also showed that mega churches have far more single young adults (age 18-29) than the SBC average (13.9 percent to 7.6 percent respectively).

"This is rather easy to understand," Fitch told participants, "since most of your churches are in urban areas. Single adults gravitate to your kind of church," he said. Conference participants also mentioned full-time singles ministers and a variety of planned activities at their churches as an effective outreach tool to the single adult community.

In addition to hearing statistics related to mega church Sunday schools, conference participants formed work groups to discuss issues in nine areas: adult class size and space, alternate classes, curriculum, cell groups, multiple Sunday schools, baby boomers, enrollment, outreach and barriers to growth.

Among the recommendations from the work groups were suggestions for forming a consulting system to assist larger churches in reaching baby boomers, encouraging Sunday school enrollment with some kind of systematic follow-through as a basic tool for reaching people, allowing a variety of class sizes and an extension of adult class enrollment ceilings beyond 25 members and keeping the enlistment of co-teachers as the exception rather than the rule.

"This is the first time we have ever had a conference like this," Fitch said. "It was beneficial for us to get input from these leaders, and I think it was a good opportunity for them to have a chance to dialogue on issues unique to them."

Ben Pritchett, minister of education at First Baptist Church of Jonesboro, Ga., a suburb of Atlanta, described the conference as "one of the most enlightening meetings I have ever attended.

"We understand one another because we have similar problems," Pritchett said. "And it's always helpful to find out what other churches of our size are doing. I also came away from this conference with a much deeper appreciation of what the Sunday School Board leadership is trying to do and how they are trying to do it," he said.

Lisa Milne, program coordinator at Second Baptist Church of Houston, said she found the exchange of ideas and direction between participants and board leadership very helpful.

"I think that was the distinctive feature of this conference," she said.

'Key Church' program
proposed nationwide

By Jim Newton

N-HMB

CHICAGO (BP)--A new strategy proposed by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board could result in 20,000 new congregations across America.

The strategy calls for 1,000 "key churches" to start at least five churches per year for four years.

Church extension leaders from state conventions endorsed the strategy during their annual meeting in Chicago. The strategy has been approved by the HMB's administrative committee, but still must be approved by the agency's board of directors.

A similar strategy was pioneered by Texas Baptists, who have enlisted 43 "key churches" which have started 417 new church-type missions since 1984. Those 417 congregations baptized 5,906 new believers last year.

HMB President Larry Lewis said he sees the "key church" concept as a priority strategy, and said the HMB will do all it can to fund the project.

J.V. Thomas of the Texas convention and Charles Chaney, HMB vice president for extension, presented papers on the project to the state leaders.

Key churches would elect a minister of missions or director of missionary outreach to lead the key church strategy. When possible, the key church would pay the total salary of the staff member.

In some cases, the local church would pay at least half of the salary of the minister of missions and the state convention and HMB would share in the salary support based on individually negotiated agreements.

The big temptation, Thomas said, is for participating churches to expect the minister of missions to do all the church-starting personally, but the staff member's biggest job is to lead the church members to start new missions through a comprehensive missions program.

During discussion of the proposed strategy, almost all state missions directors and state church extension directors endorsed the concept, but said it would have to be adapted on a state-by-state basis. Directors in some states said they have only a few churches large enough to participate.

Fred Hill, director of church extension for the Baptist State Convention in Ohio, said Ohio's emphasis in the past has been enlisting a lot of churches to sponsor one mission, not one church sponsoring a lot of missions. "We need to do both," Hill said.

Leon Hyatt, church extension director for the Louisiana Baptist Convention, said the major obstacle he would face would be finding new sources of income to fund the project.

In response, Thomas said Texas Baptists had no funds to finance the project when they started, but discovered the strategy produces more mission financial support from larger churches.

Thomas pointed out that last year members of the 417 missions started in Texas through key churches gave an average of \$865,775 per month in total offerings. That is more than \$10 million a year that would not have been given otherwise, he claimed.

Harold Hitt, director of missions for the Northwest Baptist Convention, expressed concern about the name, "key church," saying he believes every church in the SBC is a key church, and that every church has a responsibility to be involved in church starting.

Thomas agreed, but explained the "key church" name was selected at the time the HMB was emphasizing "key cities" before the name was changed to "mega cities."

Several state leaders expressed concern about the title "minister of missions" for the church staff member.

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Thomas pointed out the title is determined by the church, not by the state convention or HMB, and that "minister of missions" has been the preference of most churches in Texas.

The role of the staff member is just as important as the role of the minister of education or minister of music, Lewis said. While there has been some concern raised by Brotherhood and Woman's Missionary Union leaders that the staff person might take over roles WMU and Brotherhood are already performing, Lewis said the staff member would seek to enhance and support the work of WMU and Brotherhood, not compete with it.

Thomas warned other state directors that the program has not worked effectively when a church hires a dual-role minister of missions with other responsibilities such as music or education.

The key to the success of the program, Thomas said, is the commitment of the local church to start new churches and missions. "You can't water that down and expect it to work."

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Cancer ends missionary career
but can't quench faith, smiles

By Craig Bird

F-fmB

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TANGA, Tanzania (BP)--"There's just so much to get done in our last two years here," missionary Charles Bedenbaugh kept repeating as he jolted over the roads of northern Tanzania last Easter, one eye on the potholes and another on the future.

"So many villages without churches, so many young pastors to train, so many people who haven't heard about Jesus ... so much to do."

Those churches may get built, those pastors educated, the gospel proclaimed to those people he prayed over and dreamed about.

But not by Charles Bedenbaugh.

Cancer shortened the "last two years" of a career launched in 1960 to a handful of months. Very likely it will shorten his life. The 62-year-old missionary now is back in his hometown of Greenville, S.C.

Bedenbaugh thought he'd beaten cancer with the same weapons he and his wife, Betty, used to battle other hard times and hurts during three decades in east Africa: faith in a God who loves them and smiles that seldom fade from their eyes or their lips.

Doctors in Tanzania and Kenya couldn't locate a reason for his rapid weight loss in 1988. After several months he reluctantly agreed to a medical trip to the United States. When the verdict was cancer -- common to his family -- he turned himself over to his Lord and his doctors, in that order.

And he unleashed his optimism against the rampant cells.

There was progress, apparent remission. In early 1990 Bedenbaugh was back in Tanga, Tanzania, planning to make his final two years before retirement as productive and faithful as possible.

Now productivity is limited by chemotherapy, weakness and pain. The missionary couple's trademark color-coordinated outfits don't match anymore unless she puts on the drab tints of hospital gowns. Faithfulness is in continuing to trust in God -- and in smiling.

Their optimism, although natural, has survived numerous heartbreaks over the years.

Bedenbaugh is one of 11 children. Twin siblings died at age 2 and a sister and two brothers died from cancer as adults.

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Church was a central part of his life from the time he was "a babe in arms," he recalled. "I was converted when I was 11 one night when J.F. Plainfield, a former Catholic priest who was a missionary to South America, was preaching. I can still remember exactly where I was sitting that night."

A year later his father's death drove him from religion. "I decided I didn't need Sunday school and church so I quit going," he explained. "My mother didn't pressure me, though. She had dedicated me to God when I was a baby so she was willing to be patient."

When he was 16, Christian friends helped him "forgive God" for the loss of his father and become active in the church youth group again. Soon he committed himself to preparing for the ministry.

No one in his family had ever graduated from college, but Bedenbaugh enrolled at Furman University in Greenville en route to being the first. The first year at college he also felt called to missions.

His love of life often conflicted with his mother's idea of what a preacher should do and look like. "I was in a college drama where I kissed the leading lady," he explained. "Some friends took pictures but mother wouldn't let me get the film developed."

Even after his years as a missionary she chastised him. His affection for bright colors clashed with the dark and somber dress of her ideal preacher. "She keeps telling me, 'Baptist preachers just don't wear purple pants!'"

By his senior year, Bedenbaugh was dating a freshmen girl (his future wife) regularly. "We had to sign out of the dorm and put down the name of our date," she said. "But I couldn't spell Bedenbaugh at first so the dorm mother just let me put down 'B.'"

His first attempt at seminary ended in 1950 when his health faltered. But he didn't stop and rest. His idea of a cure was to join the Marines and get married.

Even though he was armed with seminary training and a vocational call to the ministry, Bedenbaugh shied away from the military chaplaincy and opted for regular combat duty on the front lines in Korea. "I wanted to be where I could do the best job telling men about Jesus," he explained. "Chaplains only came up to the front once a week and only saw those who wanted to see them. I was with 16 to 18 men 24 hours a day and lots of others on a regular basis. We had a real good Bible study group and a lot of men were saved."

After his discharge in 1954, he returned to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, completed his degree and, with his wife, began praying about where they should invest their lives in missions. Africa kept coming up.

Three decades of labor in Tanzania began when the young couple got off the ship and asked if anyone was working in the capital of Dar es Salaam with the 30,000 people whose ancestors came from India. "No," the missionaries answered. "But we've prayed for two years for someone to do that."

For eight years the Bedenbaughs evangelized Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, nominal Christians and even some Buddhists. The first time the city's mayor met Bedenbaugh, he immediately commented, "Oh, you're the missionary working with the Asians."

"We had 75 to 80 young people coming to our house for Sunday school, were leading Bible studies on the beach and doing lots of counseling," Bedenbaugh said. "Many times in the morning I'd be shaving and look down and see four or five neighborhood children standing staring at me. They didn't even knock!"

When the Tanzanian government refused to renew their work permit to "work with Asians," the couple transferred to Arusha, Tanzania, to teach at the Baptist seminary.

The seminary was eight miles out from town, and "we were having problems figuring ways to have contact with folks there so we could share Christ with them," he said. "So I joined the Lions Club and Tom McMillan, another missionary, joined Rotary," Bedenbaugh said.

"The students pitched a fit, telling me I shouldn't associate with those club members because they smoked and danced and drank. I told them if the churches were doing what they should to meet the social needs of people there would not be a need for service clubs."

In June 1971 another tragedy struck. The Bedenbaughs were saying goodbye to their older children, who were returning to a boarding school in Kenya after a holiday. In the excitement, as her brothers loaded the bus, 6-year-old daughter, Joy, dashed into the highway in front of a truck. She was killed.

Joy's picture is still prominent in their home, her short life a natural part of their conversation. The pain of loss is still there, but they remember the happy times.

In 1983, leaving Joy buried in Arusha, they moved back to the coast. This time they went to Tanga and had -- they thought -- nine good years to finish up their missionary career. As if to show God's blessings, one of the first men they met in Tanga had been part of the youth group that crammed into their house in the 1960s.

People responded to their obvious love of life and Tanzanians. Churches were planted. Pastors were trained and Christians disciplined. But there was so much more to do.

Last Easter, as he reflected on his life, Bedenbaugh didn't leave out the hurts and the losses. But he did explain the philosophy that lit his smile.

"I'm afraid I don't know who I borrowed this from," he apologized. "But I try to live it out every day. If my heart gets broken the Lord will put it back together. If I'm frustrated I still know I'll win in the end. And if I fail it's not my responsibility anyway. God just tells me to be faithful."

By that criteria he has been highly successful. No wonder he smiles.

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

New building
aids growth

By Charles Willis

F-SSB

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RAWLINS, Wyo. (BP)--When in 1988 Monroe Huckaby considered a call to return as pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Rawlins, Wyo., he accepted on the condition that members agree to build a new facility.

"The church wasn't growing and had no room to grow because of a cramped building," Huckaby recalled. He had been pastor to the small congregation in the early 1970s, and when he left, he had felt the church would not grow without a larger building. The old building had only 13 pews and limited space for Sunday school.

Fortunately for Huckaby and the congregation, a step of faith to launch a building program has led the church to increase from an average Sunday school attendance of 35 to a new high of 80. Now in totally new quarters, Huckaby and the congregation have an enhanced image in the town of 9,000 people. Some residents, in fact, are discovering the church they had not known about.

The story of their journey from a make-shift building to a brick-veneer home suited to Southern Baptist programs and worship needs is impressive in itself.

"We wrote to the (Southern Baptist) Sunday School Board's church architecture department," Huckaby said, "and they were just super. They sent us several plans they thought would meet our needs."

"The plans for our church would have cost us \$40,000 to \$50,000 anywhere else, but the cost through the Sunday School Board was \$125, including a list of materials down to how many bricks and how many pounds of nails. Anytime we had a need, they were right there."

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The building plan includes a sanctuary with two classrooms at the back on either side of the vestibule and two classrooms on either side of the choir loft, offices and a wing including classrooms and a fellowship hall that subdivides into additional classrooms. A compact kitchen completes the education wing.

Construction of the church in 1990 was "the biggest project in Rawlins this past summer," said Huckaby. "At least 400 volunteers came to help us over a period of five weeks."

So quick was the construction of the outer walls that the congregation met on the poured concrete slab on a Sunday night, and the following Wednesday they were able to meet in the church. Huckaby said 200 persons worked the first week, raising the walls within 45 minutes after they had begun the project.

Debt on the building is a fraction of the facility's value. Adding to the \$56,000 from the sale of their old building and to donated materials and labor, the congregation borrowed only \$60,000 on a building valued in excess of \$250,000.

T.O. Upshaw of First Baptist Church of Snyder, Texas, lead the first week's volunteer construction team in what was Upshaw's 32nd such building project since 1978.

"It's a fun thing to do," Upshaw observed. "We sweat and get tired, and it's fun. There's just nothing on this earth like it. The lasting joy comes in knowing every Sunday the word of God is being preached in buildings that might not ever have been built."

Huckaby said he sees the faith of his congregation as the most important factor in making the building a reality.

"They didn't think they could afford it," he reflected. "But after a lot of prayer and commitments from others, they're still working to do it. The goal now is to add to the building or to start a second church in five years.

"We have so many people here who need the Lord," he continued. "The attractiveness of our building draws in people. It is accessible for the handicapped and older members, and it attracts young families because we now have facilities for all ages.

"It's amazing what the Lord can do and how he works."

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