

March 18, 1991

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EDITORS' NOTE: Following are two stories concerning Manuel Noriega. Though the stories are lengthy and somewhat similar, Baptist Press has chosen to run both of them together for your information.

Noriega professes Christ
in Miami prison cell

By Greg Warner & Mark Wingfield

N-CG (Fla.)

MIAMI (BP)--Manuel Noriega, the man Americans love to hate, says he has found the love of God in an American prison.

The deposed Panamanian dictator testified to his Christian conversion in documents written and signed from his isolation cell in Miami, where he has spent the last 14 months awaiting his June trial for conspiracy to smuggle cocaine.

"I received Jesus Christ as my savior the 15th of May of 1990 at 11 a.m. in a small room, like unto a cave, in the Metropolitan Correctional Center of Dade County, Fla.," Noriega wrote in Spanish.

Noriega's spiritual conversion, which has been kept quiet for 10 months, has been substantiated by his attorney, a paralegal aide, a Miami Baptist layman, and the two Southern Baptist evangelists who led him to profess Christ. The five are among the handful of people permitted to visit Noriega, who is held in virtual solitary confinement in the prison's four-room hospital annex.

The layman, Tony Ponceti, has been Noriega's spiritual tutor since August, visiting the general weekly and leading him through a program of intensive Bible study.

After spending about 100 hours with Noriega in the one-on-one teaching sessions, Ponceti is emphatic about the convert's sincerity: "I am fully persuaded."

Noriega reportedly has asked to be baptized but he must wait until wary prison officials approve the request and find a way to have the general immersed without compromising the air-tight security that surrounds him.

Noriega's trek to faith started with a New Testament that was mailed to his prison cell by Texas evangelist Clift Brannon in January 1990. His profession of faith four months later culminated a lifelong spiritual odyssey that reportedly included dabblings in voodoo and the occult.

"We did not have an antagonistic prospect we won to Christ. We had one who was seeking God," said Brannon, who visited Noriega in his prison cell May 15-16, with fellow Texas evangelist Rudy Hernandez serving as translator. "He was reaching out to God, and we were there to tell him about the forgiveness through Jesus Christ," recalled Brannon.

The visit was requested by Noriega, whose background is Roman Catholic, after he received the New Testament in January 1990 from Brannon.

After a series of phone calls and letters over the next months, Brannon and Hernandez were approved for a visit to Noriega's tightly guarded cell. According to Noriega and the evangelists, the group spent a tearful three hours in a room adjacent to the indicted dictator's cell May 15.

While prison chaplain Hiram Irizarry looked on, the two evangelists reportedly led Noriega through the basic tenets of the Christian gospel, ending with Noriega praying in Spanish for forgiveness.

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. Duri a second visit July 19, in the presence of Brannon and Hernandez, Noriega wrote and signed a brief testimony.

The four-paragraph statement begins, "Before Christ came into my life, the realities of the materialistic world had the priority in my daily living." Noriega cited "illusions of grandeur and a heart hardened to the gospel," and added, "Jesus was to me only an image of that which was learned from traditionalism."

Now, Noriega wrote, he believes Jesus "is the son of God who died on the cross for our sins, who arose from the grave and is at the right hand of God the Father and who above all things is my savior and has mercy on me, a sinner."

Although the testimony has been circulated in a few churches since July, Noriega has not been allowed to speak to the press since he surrendered to American agents in Panama Jan. 10, 1990, and was whisked to jail in Miami.

Only recently did Noriega's attorney, Frank Rubino of Miami, give permission for his story to be told to the Florida Baptist Witness, newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention, and Baptist Press. Although Noriega could not be interviewed, details of his conversion were corroborated by several of the people with access to the imprisoned dictator.

Brannon and Hernandez, who each have witnessed thousands of Christian conversions during their long careers, said they are convinced Noriega's turnaround is authentic.

"Anyone who has spiritual discernment could say this is not jail-house religion," said Brannon, a former attorney.

"We could be fooled," conceded Hernandez, "but based on our personal experience, the two of us feel the evidence substantiates his conversion."

Since Noriega's profession of faith last May, the two evangelists have visited him four times, usually with Ponceti along. The visits were authorized by Stephen Pontesso, warden of the Metropolitan Correctional Center.

Pontesso, in a letter to the Florida Baptist Witness "regarding the religious conversion of Manuel Noriega," confirmed that he approved the visits at Noriega's request.

"I was convinced," Pontesso wrote, "that he (Brannon) was sincere, that Mr. Noriega was sincere, and that these visits would give Mr. Noriega the opportunity for spiritual growth and for visitors other than his legal defense team."

Pontesso said he approved the visits on the condition the evangelists not seek publicity for their involvement with Noriega -- an agreement Pontesso said they broke by cooperating with this story.

Prison officials, fearing a flood of publicity, have been reluctant to discuss the spiritual life of MCC's most famous prisoner. Even Irizarry, the Protestant chaplain who witnessed Noriega's profession of faith, has declined to talk. Noriega's faith, as one prison official put it, "is a private matter."

However, correspondence from Noriega indicates he has been anxious to tell Christians and others about his experience.

One of the first people he told was his wife, Felicidad, who is living in the Dominican Republic. Immediately after the evangelists' visit last May, Noriega reportedly called her from the phone outside his cell, which is handed to him through the bars after a guard places the call.

At Noriega's request, Hernandez later visited the general's wife and children, who have been denied visas to visit the United States. According to Hernandez and others, Mrs. Noriega and two of Noriega's three daughters -- Sandra and Thays -- professed faith in Christ during the evangelist's trip Nov. 16.

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Ponc said an elated Noriega called him at home one night last November to share the news of his family's spiritual decisions.

Such calls, though rare, are part of the deepening personal relationship between the former dictator and Ponceti, a Cuban immigrant who operates a print shop in Miami. "When you both are seeking after the same Father, you have a tendency to grow close together," said the 46-year-old layman, who was asked by Brannon to become the general's tutor.

Last July, Ponceti received permission from the warden to visit Noriega weekly. During the visits, which usually last three to five hours, Ponceti leads Noriega through the Spanish version of MasterLife, an in-depth discipleship curriculum developed by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

David Fernandez, a paralegal aide who often acts as courier between Noriega and his attorney, has participated in some of the Thursday morning Bible studies and attests to Ponceti's influence on the prisoner.

"He really cares about the general," said Fernandez, who visits Noriega about once every other week. "We really appreciate everything he's done. The general likes him as a friend. They've gotten close over the past year or so."

The Bible studies are held in the hospital annex, which has been modified to provide for the elaborate security that envelops Panama's former leader. Noriega, the building's only prisoner, is housed in a standard 6 feet by 8 feet cell. To protect him from revenge-minded former associates, he has no contact with MCC's other prisoners. His only time outside the building is when all other inmates are locked in their cells.

Ponceti meets with Noriega in one of two rooms on either side of the former dictator's cell -- a slightly larger conference room set up for private visits from Noriega's attorneys or a smaller cell-sized room that his guards use for storage and other purposes. It was the smaller room which Noriega likened to "a cave" -- the scene of his conversion.

Fernandez, a Roman Catholic, said he believes "100 percent" in Noriega's profession of faith. "He's always been a religious man, even before finding Christ," he added. "It's very true. I believe it."

"To me he seems like a very nice man," Fernandez continued.

"All the bad things I've heard -- I couldn't picture them."

Fernandez said he's convinced Noriega's conversion is not a ploy. "I don't think it has anything to do with the trial," he said. "If the circumstances were different he would have done it anyway."

Noriega's lead attorney, Frank Rubino, who has earned his reputation as a hard-nosed -- some say ruthless -- attorney by defending accused cocaine dealers, said he's not qualified to pass judgment on his client's spirituality. But Rubino, who was hand-picked by Noriega to defend the general prior to the U.S. invasion of Panama, said he too has noticed a change in his client during his captivity.

"I see a difference," Rubino said cautiously. "I see a more warm man. I can only guess and speculate that maybe it's got something to do with the fact that he's been incarcerated, he's been cut off from the outside world. Based upon that, he's had the time to maybe take a look inside himself and maybe take the time to look at Christ."

Asked if Noriega's newfound "warmth" is attributable to the general's reported religious experience, Rubino replied: "I'd attribute it to something."

"I can tell you this," he offered. "I knew him when he was in Panama as the leader of the Republic of Panama. And I see him now in jail. I might not say he's a humble man, but he's a different man and a better man."

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Rubino conceded some people will accuse Noriega, who some say is a master manipulator, of faking his conversion to get public sympathy or judicial mercy. "There are people who are just cynical about everything," he said.

But Rubino said he does not expect Noriega's conversion to come up in court -- an opinion shared by federal prosecutors.

"It would be outside the scope of the evidence in the trial," Rubino explained. Neither he nor the prosecutors can introduce information beyond the scope of the indictments, which were issued three years ago, long before the general's alleged change of heart.

After the conversion becomes public knowledge, however, it could become a factor in jury selection, Rubino said.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami, which will prosecute Noriega, said he will pay for his crimes, if convicted, regardless of his religious experience.

"We do not prosecute based on religious principles but on violations of federal law," said Diane Cossin, executive assistant to the U.S. Attorney. "In Gen. Noriega's case, he is charged with drug conspiracy and trafficking in illegal narcotics."

Prosecutors say Noriega was a key link in illegal drug traffic from South America to the United States. In addition, he allegedly supervised an elaborate network of government corruption in Panama. He reportedly faces 165 years in prison and more than \$1 million in fines if convicted.

But critics say the government's case is fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is the general himself.

Noriega is expected to argue that his involvement with alleged drug dealers was part of his assignment as an informant for the CIA, which was led at the time by George Bush.

Meanwhile, prison recordings of supposedly private conversations between Noriega and his attorney reportedly were given to a key government witness and later broadcast on CNN.

However, the federal judge hearing the case, William Hoeweler, says such abuses won't prevent a fair trial.

Ramon Navarro, considered a key prosecution witness, was killed recently in an apparently unconnected traffic accident in Miami. But Cossin said Navarro's death will "not impede" the government's case.

Still such difficulties with the case have led some in the Miami legal community to speculate that Noriega will never come to trial.

If that happens, it will test the nerve of justice-minded Americans, who defended their government's invasion of Panama as necessary to bring Noriega to account.

Noriega has long been a favorite target of American hatred -- long before Saddam Hussein stole center stage for a time.

Although Americans, including many Christians, have celebrated the elimination of one troublesome ruler, Iraq's Hussein, they likely won't relish the thought of turning another one loose so close to home.

And now that Noriega has claimed a conversion, he confronts Christians with another dilemma -- one that is causing a stir among believers in Miami even before the story makes headlines.

"I've had a lot of people upset about this, because a lot of people don't want him to be saved," said Leon Essex, pastor of Gladeview Baptist Church, where Ponceti is a member.

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To the arrest of Panama's dictator represented a victory in righteousness over rampant corruption. While some Christians are rejoicing over news of Noriega's conversion, others admit to a high level of skepticism and even a little disappointment.

But those who want Noriega to pay for his past needn't worry, suggested Cossin, herself a professed born-again Christian.

"In the United States, we are free to have beliefs," she said. "All of our beliefs are protected but not all of our actions."

"Sin is endemic in the trafficking of illegal narcotics, and American Christians, as well as most Americans who are not Christians, have a concept of responsibility for one's acts," said Cossin, a member of University Baptist Church in Coral Gables, Fla., until her recent marriage.

Essex, chairman of the Chaplaincy Advisory Council for the Florida Baptist Convention, said Noriega's conversion appears genuine, but he suggested that won't divert the cause of justice. "Just because he's saved doesn't mean his debt (to society) has been paid."

Although the debate over Noriega's sincerity likely will rage for some time, one thing seems certain. God may have forgiven Noriega, but the American government apparently has no intention of doing so.

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

New Testament led
to Noriega's conversion

By Mark Wingfield & Greg Warner

Baptist Press
3/18/91

MIAMI (BP)--A small New Testament sent through the mail opened the door for two Southern Baptist evangelists to lead Manuel Noriega to profess faith in Jesus Christ.

Noriega, deposed leader of Panama, says he became a Christian May 15, 1990, while imprisoned in the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Miami. Noriega remains in the Miami prison pending trial on charges of drug trafficking.

Documentation of the conversion -- mostly handwritten letters signed by Noriega -- was provided to the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press and the Florida Baptist Witness, newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention, by Texas evangelists Clift Brannon and Rudy Hernandez, who have visited Noriega in prison four times.

Their testimony has been confirmed by Tony Ponceti, a Miami Baptist layman who has been training Noriega in weekly discipleship sessions for seven months, and by Noriega's attorney, Frank Rubino.

The story begins Jan. 4, 1990, when Brannon watched on national television as Noriega was led into the federal courthouse in Miami. The night before, Noriega had emerged from hiding in the Vatican Embassy in Panama, carrying a toothbrush and a Bible. The Bible was reportedly a souvenir given him by a priest as he left the embassy.

"I saw that scene and it touched my heart," recalled Brannon, 79, who lives in Longview, Texas. "I thought, here is a man searching for God. God spoke to my heart and told me to send the General a Soul Winner's New Testament."

The Soul Winner's New Testament is a marked testament with chain references and brief notes explaining basic Christian truths. It was developed by Brannon in 1972.

"I wrote him a little note and told him where to start," Brannon said. After searching through pages of directories for the address of the courthouse, Brannon mailed the package to Noriega, not knowing if the deposed ruler would receive it in prison.

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Six days later, on Jan. 10, Noriega wrote Brannon: "I have received by mail your inspiring and spiritual communication. I have carried out the first and initial instructions from page 186. I thank God for his presence in my pathway. I have signed the decision on page 382."

The decision Noriega signed is a commitment to read the Bible daily and study the four chains of references contained in the Soul Winner's New Testament.

"That is very significant, because we believe the Bible is what led him under conviction," Brannon said. "He continued to read and study it."

Then on Jan. 15, Noriega called Brannon, with the help of David Fernandez, a paralegal aide working for Rubino. At the same time, a gathering of pastors in Dallas was praying for Noriega at Brannon's request.

Brannon recalled beginning his first conversation with Noriega by getting right to the point: "General, God loves you and gave his son for you. Your mother was inspired when she named you Emmanuel. Emmanuel means God with us. But you can never say God is with you until you open your heart to him."

After that phone conversation, Brannon realized he needed assistance because of the language barrier. Noriega speaks Spanish; Brannon does not. So Brannon contacted Hernandez, who has a international ministry among Spanish-speaking people.

A series of letters transpired over the next weeks, culminating in a request by Noriega for Brannon and Hernandez to visit him in Miami. With the permission of the warden and the chaplain, and after background checks and reference, arrangements for the May 15 visit were made.

Brannon and Hernandez agreed to strict conditions of confidentiality before they were allowed to see Noriega. "We were cleared by the FBI and everybody else before we could get in," Hernandez said.

On May 15, the chaplain chaperoned the two evangelists into the prison. Noriega's first words upon seeing them, Hernandez recalled, were, "Este es un milagro" or, "This is a miracle."

Noriega, Brannon, Hernandez and the chaplain sat almost knee-to-knee in a small room inside the prison. Brannon did the teaching, with Hernandez providing interpretation and adding appropriate illustrations.

Hernandez said he and Brannon began by establishing some ground rules with Noriega, including a commitment to leave whenever Noriega was ready for them to go. "You can tell us when to stop and when to go," they said. "We don't want to give you anything you don't want or won't receive."

About an hour and a half into that session, the two men led Noriega in a prayer of confession and commitment to Jesus Christ, they said.

"It was a such a sweet, solemn moment," Hernandez recalled. "We were all crying."

Afterward, Brannon asked Noriega, "Where is Christ?" Noriega's reply, Brannon said, was, "En mi corazon" or, "In my heart."

The evangelists said they stayed another hour and a half that day, teaching Noriega basic Christian truths.

The next day, Brannon said he asked Noriega, "If your lawyer, Frank Rubino, should walk through the door at this moment, would you tell him that you have received Jesus Christ as savior?"

Brannon said Noriega replied, "When you left yesterday afternoon, I immediately called him and told him I had trusted Christ as savior."

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That all was later confirmed by Rubino.

At the end of that session, realizing they would have no evidence of their visit beyond their own testimony, Hernandez asked Noriega to write a note to Hernandez's grandson, who had requested an autograph. Noriega complied, writing a note not only to the grandson, but to Hernandez and to Brannon as well.

The note to Hernandez reads: "Memento of your spiritual assistance as I received Christ Jesus the 15th and 16th of May 1990."

Hernandez and Brannon visited Noriega again in July, September and November of 1990. In the meantime, they enlisted Miami layman Tony Ponceti to train Noriega in the Christian faith. The Cuban-born Ponceti, who speaks fluent Spanish and had known Brannon in Texas, began weekly MasterLife sessions with Noriega which were still ongoing as of March 1991.

On Nov. 17-18, 1990, Hernandez visited Noriega's wife, Felicidad, and two of his daughters in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. During that visit, the three Noriega family members also became Christians, he said.

That information has been confirmed by Southern Baptist missionaries Mark and June Smith, who serve in the Dominican Republic and had contacted Mrs. Noriega prior to Hernandez's trip. Smith and missionary Bill Hagewood visited Mrs. Noriega at her request, then Hagewood returned with Hernandez to visit the family.

Mrs. Noriega has attended Templo Bautista Central and shared Thanksgiving lunch with the Smiths last November. The missionaries remain in contact with Mrs. Noriega, although she is not able to attend services regularly.

"By her name and her husband's exposure, she is not free just to go and do as she wants," Smith explained. "She tries to keep a low profile."

Mrs. Smith, who has become a friend to Noriega's wife, said Mrs. Noriega shows evidence of a spiritual conversion. "She's very eager to learn. She has a real desire to know more about the Lord and trust him with what her life has become."

Brannon and Hernandez attempted to visit Noriega again March 11, 1991. That visit was pre-empted because Noriega was moved temporarily and without notice to the downtown courthouse to prepare for part of his trial.

Brannon, Hernandez and Ponceti report that Noriega has asked to be baptized. They had hoped to perform the baptism during their March 11 visit. Instead, they met with warden Stephen Pontesso to try to get permission for the baptism at a later date.

Where to baptize Noriega is a problem. There is no suitable facility in the building where he is held and no chance of transporting him elsewhere.

One possibility is to use a small lake within the prison compound. Noriega walks around the lake late a night when all other inmates are locked in their cells.

The trio of Baptists continue to work out details, noting the baptism would be just another miracle in a 14-month episode fraught with miracles. They claim their entire mission has been fueled by prayer and a belief that the impossible can be possible.

If there has been a theme of their work, it is taken from (the Old Testament book of) Jeremiah 33:3, a verse they have each quoted repeatedly and even Noriega quoted in a public courtroom during a pre-trial hearing: "Call to me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things which you do not know."

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New Orleans Seminary trustees
agree to hold second meeting

By Lacy Thompson

N-NOBTS

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary trustees approved a statement regarding political activity, agreed to hold a second meeting this year and received a report of presidential goals for the 1990s during their annual meeting.

Trustees also adopted a \$7.2 million budget for the 1991-92 fiscal year, approved various changes in seminary documents and elected board officers for the new year. The March 13-14 meeting was marked by a full agenda but few divided votes.

In a unanimous vote, trustees responded to a motion referred from the 1990 Southern Baptist Convention. In the motion, Cactus J. Cagle of Texas asked trustees of all denominational entities to "determine whether their entity, its facilities, assets, or personnel were used during the year 1989-90 to engage in any political activity with the Southern Baptist Convention." Trustees were asked to respond to the motion in writing.

The New Orleans Seminary board laid the groundwork for its response at the outset of its meeting by providing a copy of the seminary's articles of faith and the Baptist Faith and Message for trustees to sign. Chairman Charles Wood of Kansas noted seminary bylaws call for all seminary staff, faculty and trustees to prescribe to the faith statements.

"We have not had the privilege of fulfilling that (in the past)," Wood said. "By signing today, we will fulfill what is in our bylaws."

Later, trustees approved a response to the Cagle motion that makes note of the signing. The response reads:

"The matter of the stance of the seminary in regard to possible political involvement of faculty in the Southern Baptist Convention controversy was thoroughly discussed by the trustees on a least two specific occasions (June 20, 1989, and September 14, 1989). This is documented in the minutes. The consensus of the discussions was that faculty members, administrators and trustees be ask to refrain from political activities (on either side of the SBC controversy). Though all are free to express their opinions, none should promote divisiveness. All faculty members and administrators (and all trustees present at the March 13, 1991 meeting) have affixed their signatures to the Baptist Faith and Message Statement and the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's Articles of Religious Beliefs. These are the doctrinal parameters within which the seminary operates."

Board minutes indicate discussion of political activity arose with questions about a faculty member's address to a gathering of Southern Baptist moderates in Louisiana. At their June 1989 meeting, executive committee members tabled a motion to apprise the faculty member of the discussion of the matter.

In September 1989, the board's executive committee again discussed the matter and agreed that it "be put away for good, not ever to be brought up again."

Following last week's trustee meeting, seminary President Landrum Leavell said he did not see the approved response to the Cagle motion as setting any new direction for the seminary and the school would continue to focus on theological education rather than controversy or politics.

In another unanimous action, trustees agreed to a bylaw change that allows them to schedule a second full meeting during the year. Trustees have discussed this idea at past meetings.

The new bylaw maintains the annual March meeting while providing for a second meeting, "based upon need, at the discretion of the board of trustees."

Later in their meeting, trustees acted on the new bylaw by agreeing to meet again in November or December at a date to be determined by their executive committee.

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In making the motion for a second meeting in 1991, trustee Fred Lowery of Louisiana noted the second meeting will provide a chance for trustees to get to know each other better and should facilitate seminary business.

In addition to conducting various business, trustees received an extensive report on Leavell's goals for the seminary. As presented by the president, the over arching goal for the school is to "maintain and develop a biblically-centered, denominationally-vital and continuously-growing theological seminary."

Leavell stressed the importance of adequately training students for ministry throughout his presentation. He also praised trustees for their work, noting they are "one of the highest expressions of volunteerism in our country today."

Leavell reviewed what he called an "outstanding fall semester" for the seminary and outlined 21 goals in areas of academics, development and business affairs. These included such things as increasing "full-time equivalency" enrollment, developing a doctor of ministry degree in Christian education, implementing an ongoing process for institutional effectiveness, continuing various fund-raising activities, increasing financial resources, maintaining an ongoing commitment to operate "in the black" and upgrading the New Orleans campus.

Later, trustees approved a 1991-92 budget of \$7,220,398, an increase of 3.2 percent from the current year. However, Cooperative Program revenue is projected to increase only 1.6 percent during the year. The seminary also anticipates additional revenue from increased student and rental fees.

In other action on seminary documents, trustees approved restated articles of incorporation for the school. The restated articles offer little change from the current document, except in language. In one place, however, it provides for growth of the trustee board from 50 to 60 members, if needed. Also, the articles continue the practice of including 10 local members on the seminary board. Several other convention entities have moved to eliminate local seats on their boards.

The restated articles must be approved by a majority of messengers to the 1991 Southern Baptist Convention.

In other action, trustees:

-- Re-elected Wood as board chairman and Glynn Rhinehart of Louisiana as secretary-treasurer. Trustees also elected J. Roy McComb of Mississippi as vice chairman. All three also were elected officers of the board's executive committee.

-- Approved promotion of three faculty members: Robert B. Barnes to professor church history; James L. Minton to professor of youth education and recreation; and Linda P. Shipley to associate professor of music theory and piano. In addition, trustees approved giving Paul E. Robertson rank as associate professor of theology, "contingent upon clarification of his belief of the Holy Spirit and admonition as to class procedure." Trustees also approved designating Paul W. Gericke as associate professor of communications.

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1990 Lottie Moon giving to drop
below '89, projections show

By Marty Croll

N-FAB

Baptist Press
3/18/91

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--For the first time in 53 years, Southern Baptists will fail to surpass their giving from the previous year to the annual Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for foreign missions, according to projections.

A projected 1.4 percent downturn in Lottie Moon receipts from 1990 -- instead of an expected 7 percent increase -- will leave the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board with about \$79 million, or \$7 million less than it had planned to spend in 1991.

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"It's hard to decipher what's happening as far as giving among Southern Baptists is concerned," said Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks. "The truth is, we don't know the reasons (for the shortfall). We don't have any kind of actual, statistical, scientific data."

Parks listed such possible factors as the approach of the Persian Gulf war late last year, an unsteady economy and uncertainties in the denomination.

The projection is based on a survey of selected state conventions. "We wish that somehow we could be way off on this and we'd go over what we are projecting," Parks added. But in the past the survey has proven correct to within about a percentage point, and "we think it's pretty close this time."

Depending on how trustees allocate funds, effects of the shortfall on existing mission work could be limited. What might be more directly affected are capital needs such as new construction, equipment and mission vehicles.

Such a shortfall probably means that of \$8.2 million in Lottie Moon funds earmarked for capital projects, only about \$1.3 million would be available. This "would sure be discouraging to our missionary force," said Parks.

The Lottie Moon offering, generally collected by Southern Baptist congregations during December, was expected to account for nearly half of the \$182.7 million budget for foreign missions in 1991.

But when the Foreign Mission Board closes its books on 1990's offering at the end of May, Southern Baptists will have given about \$1.1 million less than in 1989, projections show.

The 1991 budget approved by FMB trustees last October reflected a 4.5 percent increase from 1990, built largely on the expectation of \$86 million in Lottie Moon receipts. That would represent about 47 percent of the board's expected receipts for 1991.

Despite the projected shortfall, Parks said it is still remarkable that Southern Baptists give as much as they do in "the largest single offering of its kind that we know of in Christendom."

Lottie Moon giving growth has shown a fairly steady increase, even during recent periods of economic instability. As it has grown, it has accounted for an increasing portion of support to Southern Baptists' foreign mission budget.

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Southern Baptist Alliance
strengthens ties with American Baptists

By Robert H. Dilday

N-FMB

Baptist Press
3/18/91

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Southern Baptist Alliance members have strengthened relations with American Baptists and eliminated a reference to the Southern Baptist Convention in their statement of purpose.

The action was taken during the group's March 14-16 annual convocation at Grace Baptist Church in Richmond, Va. It was the fifth national meeting of the organization of moderate Southern Baptists since its founding in 1987.

About 500 members registered for the three-day meeting and appeared ready to abandon confrontation with conservative leaders in the SBC and seek a new, though still unspecified, future.

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Additional ties with the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. (ABC), estranged from the Southern Baptist Convention since 1845, was one widely-discussed option. SBA Executive Director Stan Hastey said he expects a married couple or two single persons financially supported by the Alliance to be appointed as missionaries by the American Baptist board of international ministries as soon as next year.

Discussions with American Baptist leaders concerning Sunday school curriculum are continuing and Alliance representatives meet regularly with a task force created by the ABC to monitor changes in the SBC, said SBA President Richard E. Groves of Winston-Salem, N.C.

A recommendation from the SBA board of directors that members at the convocation "affirm cooperative ventures in ministry and missions" with the ABC was approved without dissent, as was a move to eliminate a constitutional provision dedicating the Alliance to "the continuance of our ministry and mission within the Southern Baptist Convention."

The phrase was replaced by one which commits the group to "the expression of our ministry and mission through cooperative relationships with other Baptist bodies and the larger Christian community."

Yet a reluctance to sever all ties with the SBC was apparent. Despite their constitutional change, members accepted a committee recommendation they retain the word "Southern" in their name.

"One thing we have going for us is name recognition," reported Betty Winstead McGary of Beaumont on behalf of a committee requested to study a name change. It seems unwise to introduce a new name during the current "chaotic" time in SBC life, she said.

The lure of the Baptist Fellowship, another moderate organization within the SBC formed last August, also proved hard to resist. The interim steering committee of the Fellowship, which plans a national convocation in May, recently named a committee to initiate dialogue with the SBA. Groves reported plans to appoint a committee of Alliance members to respond.

Hastey told SBA members in his annual address that much of the action undertaken by the Fellowship "has been shaped by Alliance people assigned to the responsible workgroups of the interim steering committee."

"Our participation in this process has been vigorous," he said, noting "some two dozen" Alliance members serve on the Fellowship's 70-member steering committee.

Hastey described the Alliance's role, like John the Baptist's, as that of "forerunner," embodying a willingness "to decrease for the sake of the increase of others."

However, Hastey insisted that "the need for the Alliance as a self-standing group remains . . .," dispelling hints that the SBA might disband soon.

In addition to cooperating with American Baptists in missionary appointments, the Alliance has developed a partnership with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba. The group consists of about a dozen congregations recently excluded from the larger Baptist Convention of Western Cuba.

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The Alliance assists three Cuban churches through its 1991 budget of \$300,000 as well as through its Global Mission Offering. Earlier this year a group of SBA-affiliated pastors visited the congregations on a preaching tour. Representatives of the Cuban fellowship, including President Francisco Rodes Gonzalez of Matanzas City, spoke during the March convocation.

Robert Fulbright, chair of the SBA publications committee, updated participants on plans for SBA-created Sunday school curriculum. Adult Bible study materials are being edited for December 1991-April 1992, said Fulbright, minister of Christian education at Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis.

He said negotiations are underway for the materials to be published by Smyth & Helwys, a Greenville, S.C., publishing house established last year by moderate Southern Baptists.

Thomas H. Graves, president of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, told the SBA audience classes will begin this September with seven faculty members. The Alliance authorized the seminary in 1987 and remains a sponsoring body. However, it does not own or govern the school, housed at Northminster Baptist Church in Richmond. The seminary's board of trustees is self-perpetuating.

In other action, the Alliance:

-- Re-elected Groves, pastor of Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, to a second one-year term as president. Also re-elected were McGary, interim minister of education at Calder Baptist Church in Beaumont, as vice president, and William H. Puckett Jr., a Raleigh, N.C., travel agent, as secretary.

Also, 13 persons were elected and three re-elected to the 40-member board of directors. About one-third of the board's members rotate off each year.

-- Heard a report from finance committee chair Brooks Wicker of Tallahassee, Fla., that the Alliance had 69,353 members and 126 affiliated churches at the end of February. Of its members, 42,434, or 61 percent, live in North Carolina or Virginia, while 85, or 65 percent, of its churches are located either in those two states or Maryland.

-- Referred two motions to panels for further study. One requests the SBA church-ministry relations committee to consider the feasibility of establishing an alternative to the Southern Baptist Annuity Board.

A second asks the board of directors to create a task force to be charged with starting new churches committed to "the spirit of the SBA covenant," the organization's statement of faith.

-- Learned about \$19,000 had been contributed toward the \$55,000 goal of its 1991 Global Mission Offering. The offering assists churches and social ministries in the United States and Cuba, as well as the Richmond seminary and the International Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland.

-- Participated in a closing worship service that featured communion, liturgical dancing and a sermon by Linda Jordan, pastor of Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Other speakers during the three-day meeting included Nancy Tatom Ammerman, associate professor of the sociology of religion at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta; J. Samuel Escobar, professor of missiology at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia; and John W. Kinney, dean of the School of Theology at Virginia Union University in Richmond.

The Alliance's next convocation will be during March 1992 at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C.