



**BUREAUS**

**ATLANTA** Jim Newton, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 898-7522  
**DALLAS** Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 333 N. Washington, Dallas, Texas 75246-1798, Telephone (214) 828-5232  
**NASHVILLE** Lloyd T. Householder, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300  
**RICHMOND** Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va., 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151  
**WASHINGTON** Tom Strode, Chief, 400 North Capitol St., #594, Washington, D.C. 20001, Telephone (202) 638-3223

June 26, 1991

91-95

Philippine men overpower  
missionary, steal her car

N-FMB

MANILA, Philippines (BP)--A group of men overpowered Southern Baptist missionary Doris Blattner in front of her Manila apartment house, then forced her into her own car and eventually stole it from her.

Blattner was getting out of her car at about 11 a.m. June 25 when three or four men appeared, snatched her keys and forced her into the back seat, according to a report she filed with local police. The men pressed her face down to the floorboard with her feet up, covered her eyes and drove around for about 20 minutes. Then they pushed her out of the car, saying they wanted to use it for a while.

Police were still looking for the mission-owned car the next day. Blattner, 57, sustained minor bruises but was generally unharmed, said missionary administrator Sam Waldron. Mission officials believe robbery was the only motive.

Blattner, of St. Louis, has worked as a religious education promoter in the Philippines since 1988. Before that she was a missionary to Indonesia for 24 years. She was the first in a string of 50 Southern Baptist missionaries to leave Indonesia after the government established a policy limiting resident visas for missionaries to 10 years.

--30--

Mark Wingfield elected  
Western Recorder news director

N-C KY

Baptist Press  
6/26/91

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Southern Baptist journalist Mark Wingfield has been elected news director of the Western Recorder, newsjournal of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, effective July 22.

Wingfield, 29, is associate director of news and information at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta. He has written and edited stories about the denomination's missions efforts in the United States for the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press since 1988.

Previously, he was director of news and information for Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He also was assistant editor of the Baptist New Mexican, weekly newspaper of the Baptist Convention of New Mexico, in Albuquerque.

"Mark Wingfield's byline already is familiar to Western Recorder readers," said Editor Marv Knox. "He is a prolific writer, and he particularly has focused on issues affecting church life and mission efforts. During the past year, his name has appeared at the top of more Recorder stories than any other writer's."

Wingfield will assume a newly restructured position with the newspaper, Knox said: "As news director, Mark will help the Recorder focus on news and feature stories that explain what being a Baptist Christian and doing church mean, especially in a changing, secular world.

"The board of directors and staff intend to make the Recorder a must-read paper for every Baptist family in Kentucky. We believe Mark has the skills to supply the articles our readers want and need to read."

Wingfield will manage the weekly production of the Recorder, working with the editor, statewide correspondents, staff interns and Kentucky Baptist leaders to secure comprehensive coverage of Baptist news in the commonwealth.

--more--

Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis commended Wingfield his contributions to Baptist life during his tenure at the board.

"Mark has done an excellent job serving the Home Mission Board and Southern Baptists," Lewis said. "His writing has always been accurate, fair and thorough.

"We will miss him at the Home Mission Board, but I am sure he will make a fine contribution to Kentucky Baptists."

Wingfield has won awards for his writing from the Baptist Public Relations Association, the national organization of Southern Baptist journalists and public relations specialists.

He has edited the association's newsletter for the past two years, served as a staff writer for the Southern Baptist Convention newsroom since 1986 and was newsroom manager for the SBC's 1987 Conference on Biblical Inerrancy.

He is a graduate of the University of New Mexico with a degree in journalism. He also studied at Southwestern Seminary and Oklahoma Baptist University.

He is married to Alison Lacy Wingfield. She also is a professional journalist and currently works in the public relations department of Northside Hospital in Atlanta.

Lifelong Southern Baptists, the Wingfields have been active in their churches' music ministries and leaders in young adult Sunday school programs.

--30--

Theology kept leader  
using Baptist hymnals

By Charles Willis

Baptist Press  
6/26/91

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (BP) -- Mervyn Reagin is a believer in Baptist hymnals.

From the 1926 "Modern Hymnal" to this year's publication, "The Baptist Hymnal," Reagin has used them all and has remained loyal because of theology.

"I've visited in some churches where the hymns in the hymnbooks were questionable," Reagin, a volunteer music director, said on a recent Wednesday night before choir practice. "I know in this book ("The Baptist Hymnal") there was a lot of effort put in to stressing the theology. If you are going to be a Southern Baptist, you have to care about that."

While "The Modern Hymnal" was not a denominationally-produced book, Southern Baptists of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s used Robert H. Coleman's hymnal, in part because it contained a number of hymns by B.B. McKinney and a large number of the gospel hymns that came from the urban revivals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1944 the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, publisher of the Broadman and, later, Baptist hymnals, purchased Coleman's songbook, under the leadership of McKinney who headed the new church music department.

As late as 1965, when Reagin moved with his job in the United States Air Force to Sacramento, Calif., Fourteenth Avenue Baptist Church, where he has now been volunteer music director for 26 years, was still using "The Modern Hymnal."

Earlier, Reagin had been part-time and volunteer director in Georgia and Alabama churches, where he had used the 1940 "Broadman Hymnal" and the "Baptist Hymnal," 1956 edition. So it was a logical move to recommend updating to the 1956 hymnal when he assumed the music leadership role in Sacramento.

When "Baptist Hymnal," 1975 edition, was published, he spent three months drawing up a page-by-page comparison between the new hymnbook and the 1956 edition "to convince church members this was a good deal."

At home from attending the Praising II unveiling of "The Baptist Hymnal," published in mid-March 1991, Reagin said he is "really tickled" with the newest Southern Baptist hymnal, in part, because of the hymnals that preceded it.

--more--

"The 'Leadman' was a great hymnal in the sense that it filled a broad need in the churches with gospel songs, special choir music and children's music. In small churches, like the one where I grew up, there wasn't a lot of money to put into hymnals," he recalled.

"By 1956, we had the 'Church Musician' magazine and others with children's music, so the hymnal was strictly a congregational book, as was the 1975 edition."

Southern Baptists' newest, "The Baptist Hymnal," has brought back things for the congregation that were originally choral works.

"The new hymnal incorporates the better aspects of all the previous ones. I think this has been one of the widest researched hymnals."

Reagin wasted no time in persuading church members to plan on purchasing "The Baptist Hymnal."

"As soon as we knew the new hymnal was in the works, we put a small amount in our budget for each of two years," he said. "Special campaigns to raise the last half of the needed money got us to the Sept. 30 (1990) deadline to get the 10 percent discount and free products the Sunday School Board offered."

For Mervyn Reagin, "The Baptist Hymnal" is an added volume in a lifetime of devotion to Southern Baptist hymnody.

--30--

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

First SBC black church  
celebrates 40th year

By Jim Newton

Baptist Press  
6/26/91

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (BP)--The first black church admitted into the Southern Baptist Convention in this century celebrated its 40th anniversary June 23, with the pastor saying the church is no longer wandering in the wilderness, but is entering a new era.

Greater Friendship Baptist Church in Anchorage was organized by 17 charter members on June 22, 1951, in the basement of First Baptist Church of Anchorage.

On the church's 40th birthday, Greater Friendship invited all Southern Baptists in the state to attend their anniversary at the 2,000-seat auditorium of First Baptist in Anchorage, where the church was born.

Pastor John Smith said it was not just a time to celebrate the past, but to mark the beginning of a new era of cooperation and good relationships between Baptists of all races in Alaska.

Emmanuel McCall, director of black church extension for the SBC Home Mission Board, presented a plaque to Smith, recognizing the church as the first black congregation affiliated with the SBC in modern times.

McCall compared the first 40 years of the church's history -- and the last 40 years of Southern Baptist work with black Baptists -- to the experiences of Moses, Noah and Jesus Christ.

Moses wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before being allowed to enter the promised land, McCall pointed out. Noah floated on the ark for 40 days before landing on dry ground to start a new era of civilization. Jesus fasted and was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days before he began his ministry, McCall said.

McCall cited the progress Southern Baptists have made in race relations in the last 40 years, but said the denomination still has a long way to go.

There are now more than 1,500 predominantly black churches affiliated with the SBC, McCall said. Nine state conventions have elected blacks as president, and 16 other black people have been vice presidents.

--more--

Although there were many predominantly black churches affiliated with Baptist associations in the 1700s and 1800s, most withdrew from the SBC when the National Baptist Convention was organized in the 1880s.

Greater Friendship Baptist Church was organized in June and admitted to the Alaska Baptist Convention on Aug. 10, 1951. The second black church to join the SBC was Community Baptist Church of Compton, Calif, in October 1951.

Last year, Greater Friendship Baptist Church led the Alaska Baptist Convention in baptisms, with 95 converts.

Smith, who came to Greater Friendship as pastor in 1986, said race relations in Alaska are probably much better than they are in the lower 48 states. There are no black ghettos or sections of the city where most residents are black. About 10,000 of the 240,000 people in Anchorage are black.

"We can't go knocking door-to-door and expect to find prospects for our church," Smith said. "Instead, we have to go to the shopping malls and look for black people."

Smith, a native of Montgomery, Ala., was stationed in Anchorage during an earlier military career, and was called to the ministry in 1977 when he was a member of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church (National Baptist) in Anchorage. There were only 20 active members at Greater Friendship when he became pastor in 1986.

Smith said when he became pastor, he asked the associational director of missions in Anchorage to teach him everything he could about Southern Baptist programs. "I was amazed at the curriculum, the resources, the programs that were available," Smith recalled. "I just never knew the denomination wanted to help churches like that."

Vanee Haywood, one of the 17 charter members, said the church has varied in membership from only a dozen to more than 425. Haywood is the only charter member still active at Greater Friendship.

Although she's been active under the leadership of eight pastors, Haywood said the church has never been stronger than it is now under the leadership of Smith.

Both Smith and Haywood are enthusiastic about the future, as the church celebrates the past and enters a new era on its 40th birthday.

--30--

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

What must a church be called?

'Baptist' is topic of debate

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press

6/26/91

ATLANTA (BP)--To "B" or not to "B" is a question new Southern Baptist churches face as they choose names for their congregations.

That's "B" as in Baptist, of course.

The question is whether to include the word Baptist in a church's name. When debated between traditional Southern Baptists and their children, it is a question of Shakespearean proportions.

Traditionalists argue a church should proudly identify its denominational affiliation in its name. Others counter they are not ashamed of their denominational affiliation but realize the word Baptist has negative connotations for some unchurched people.

Those opposed to dropping Baptist from church names contend the unchurched will like the label once they learn its significance. Those in favor of generic names counter that may be too late, that the name of a church may determine whether an unchurched person is willing to visit for the first time.

--more--

Earlier this year, a question about church names was posed to leaders of The Baptist Program, a publication of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee. The printed responses typify the debate.

Barry Watts, pastor of Columbia's Woodcrest Chapel in Columbia, Mo., wrote in favor of generic names for some churches. "If I were starting a new church in the South, I'd put Baptist all over it. But outside the Bible Belt, the words Southern Baptist conjure up too many questionable images.

"Some would argue that failing to put a denominational label on our churches is not being who you are," he wrote. "But the bigger issue is really reaching them where they are. If the words Southern and Baptist stand in the way of reaching people, then call yourself something neutral."

William Hann, pastor of Mid-Cities Baptist Church in Westminster, Calif., took the opposite view. "It may be more difficult initially to reach people in California with the name Baptist, but in my opinion it is a more honest approach.

"We need to expose people to the sound doctrines, rich history and vibrant mission program that the name Baptist represents and eliminate the negative aspects by modeling intelligent, biblical scholarship in the pulpit and reaching out into the community with creative approaches."

By most accounts, the debate about name dropping got its strongest impetus about 30 miles from Hann's church -- at Saddleback Valley Community Church in Mission Viejo, Calif. Pastor Rick Warren, a lifelong Southern Baptist, started that church 12 years ago with the specific goal of reaching Baby Boomers turned off by traditional churches.

Since that time, the Saddleback Valley church has become the largest Southern Baptist church in the state and now leads the state convention in baptisms. Warren has become Baptists' unofficial -- and sometimes controversial -- authority on how to reach Baby Boomers.

Contrary to what his critics sometimes claim, Warren does not advocate dropping the word Baptist from every church's name. "If I were in the South, I'd put Baptist in my name," he says.

"Labels have value and labels have detractions. You have to decide who you're trying to impress."

When focusing on the unchurched, especially in Southern California, the term Baptist carries more negatives than positives, Warren says. In door-to-door surveys before starting the Saddleback Valley church, he asked people what they associated with the term Baptist.

The answers surprised him, Warren says, because they were so distorted: "They're loud and they're negative. They're from the South. They're holy rollers."

The issue is further complicated by a nationwide decline in denominational loyalty. In 1950, seven out of eight Americans already had a church background when they went to find a new church, Warren found. But today, only one in eight have a church background.

"No denominational title attracts people any more. They look for a church that ministers to their needs," he says.

Church growth analyst and author Lyle Schaller admits he has agonized over how to respond to questions about contemporary church names. "Words like Presbyterian, Lutheran and Baptist are exclusionary words" to modern ears, he confesses. "This runs against what I feel in my gizzard, but it is a reality.

"I feel very strongly that you should accept and affirm your denominational affiliation," he says. "But if you're trying to reach people who have no church background, have left the church or have a different religious background, then the word Baptist is going to be more of a hindrance than a help."

Schaller compares the generic name approach to a strategy used by General Motors. "Saturn cars are made by GM, but nowhere on the car does it say GM. General Motors is trying to sell this car to people who would never buy a GM product."

Although the debate rages hottest on the West Coast, it has reached the South as well. The Church at Brook Hills, a congregation meeting near Birmingham, Ala., left Baptist out of its name for the same reasons as Warren's church.

"The primary reason for our name is that we want to be a church that reaches all the people, not only those of a Baptist mindset or culture, says pastor Rick Ousley. "It has nothing to do with being ashamed of Southern Baptists.

"There are people who have found the Lord here who never would have entered a Southern Baptist church. I don't want to let a seven-letter word keep people away."

Most denominational gatekeepers remain unconvinced. Although Baptist polity prevents associations, state conventions or national agencies from dictating what churches will call themselves, money still speaks loudly.

Several state conventions restrict loan funds or other financial support from churches without Baptist in their names. For example, in Arizona, churches started with any Cooperative Program funding are required to include Baptist in their names.

"To parade under an ambivalent banner is unethical," says Bob Warren, state director of missions in Arizona. "This is deceptive and contrary to the nature of the church.

"Whatever a church does to entice people to join, it must also do to keep them. It is difficult to help them be Baptist when you have impressed them that it is not important at the onset.

"If we want to preserve the doctrinal integrity of the Southern Baptist witness, to which we have been dedicated and defended at no small cost, then we need to clearly communicate who we are and what we stand for without apology. I have never found this a deterrent to reaching people in the churches I have started, but rather an advantage."

In the final analysis, a greater concern may be practice more than name, says Charles Chaney, vice president for extension with the SBC Home Mission Board. "I think who we are and what we practice are far more informative than what we call ourselves.

"There are some churches that have Baptist in their names that are Baptist neither in practice nor polity. For example, they may not practice baptism of believers. Then we have churches that baptize only believers and participate in our missions programs but don't have Baptist in their names.

"Does that make them any less Baptist? What makes a Southern Baptist is whether you participate in what Southern Baptists are doing."

--30--

(Sarah Zimmerman and Mark Baggett contributed to this story.)

What style must churches use?  
Some tinker with tradition

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press  
6/26/91

ATLANTA (BP)--Church veterans can walk into almost any Southern Baptist church at 11 a.m. on Sunday and know exactly what to expect.

In the next hour, they will listen to announcements, sing hymns, hear special music, pass the offering plate and listen to a sermon followed by an invitation.

"There's an element of security in knowing what to expect," says Karen Smith, assistant professor of church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. "It feels just like your church at home."

--more--

While Southern Baptists' style of worship is comforting to some, to others it is stagnant.

"We definitely have customs and traditions in the Baptist church," says D.G. McCoury, a Southern Baptist Sunday School Board consultant. "I don't think I knew you could start a worship service without the Doxology until I was in my 20s.

"My concern is that we put our traditions in the light of Scripture and ask, 'Are they biblical?' If they're not, then we ought to do something about them."

A growing number of Southern Baptist pastors are tinkering with tradition. They say it can be done without compromising biblical mandates, and it must be done to reach people who are not attracted to traditional worship services.

John Herrington is pastor of New Covenant Baptist Church in Lincoln, Neb. The six-year-old congregation has three vocalists and no choir, usually two guitars, drums and a piano. The 150 people who attend worship services meet at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday in a Seventh-day Adventist building.

The church offers short-term Bible courses, but does not call them Sunday school, because Herrington says people in that area are turned off by Sunday school. This Spring, courses included a doctrinal study and a Bible study on "God and the Thirtysomething Woman."

Though Herrington is committed to appealing to his audience, he says it is not a "cross-less brand of Christianity that just sells a product to consumers."

Members of New Covenant are reminded of the cross almost every week as they observe the Lord's supper. The pastor says frequent communions are essential in Nebraska where most people have Catholic or Lutheran backgrounds.

"Southern Baptists have always been a people who want to reach as many people as possible," Herrington says. "If we use only one narrow way to do things, we are only going to reach a narrow segment of our population."

In Lake Oswego, Ore., Westside Baptist Church is trying to reach the 80 percent of the area's population which is unchurched. Pastor John Kramp says first-time church visitors sit on the back row. If they perceive anything as threatening, they are quickly out the back door.

Therefore the church, which meets in a middle school, does not have an altar call. People who make decisions are asked to fill out cards and leave them in offering plates. Kramp says new Christians make their public professions of faith when they are baptized.

Southern Baptists' tradition of an altar call or invitation stems from the frontier revival movement of the 1800s, says professor Smith, whose specialty is 17th and 18th century Baptist life.

Smith says the altar call as well as most other Southern Baptist traditions have little or nothing to do with doctrine.

The most common example is the time for Sunday morning programs. When Southern Baptists were primarily rural people, the best time for Sunday school was after the cows were milked, hence the traditional 9:30 a.m. meeting. The best time for a revival meeting was August, the month after cultivating crops but before time to harvest.

Schedules for other meetings, such as the Wednesday night prayer service, stem from the time when "church really was the center of life. People were isolated and church served a social function as much as anything else," Smith says.

The sameness of church services can be directly tied to uniform literature used by Southern Baptists, Smith says. When people study the same material, they are likely to do it at the same time with the same format.

Church traditions are both good and bad, says Rodney Webb, director of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's language church starting department.

"Tradition enables the current generation to know how to live and respond in a community of believers. However, the danger with tradition is that it can become a filter prohibiting individuals from seeing truth.

"When tradition and culture become the focus in place of the Word of God, then the people of God move away from their relationship with him," says Webb.

If there are dangers linked to tradition, there are other dangers associated with innovative churches, says Darrell Robinson, vice president for evangelism.

First, innovative churches can become prideful about being different, he says.

"They can act like their way is the only way and that can alienate others. We need to remember that building a local church is important, but the great thing is kingdom building."

On the other hand, innovative churches may feel isolated from fellow Southern Baptists. Robinson's advice is for traditional churches to love, encourage and accept innovative churches.

"The biggest crisis we face in the Southern Baptist Convention is not political or doctrinal, but style," says Charles Chaney, HMB vice president for extension. "Are we going to permit churches to be different in style?"

Chaney notes Southern Baptists more readily accept departures from tradition in ethnic churches than in English-speaking churches. But avoiding the temptation to exclude innovative churches is becoming an increasingly important issue, he says.

"If people in a church sing choruses or praise music and raise their hands, that's a matter of style. I don't think a church ought to be excluded on a matter of style."

--30--

(Chip Alford and Mark Wingfield contributed to this story)

What must a church offer?  
programs tailored to needs

By Sarah Zimmerman & Chip Alford

Baptist Press  
6/26/91

ATLANTA (BP)--In the 1950s, Southern Baptist churches clamored to be "five-star" churches. Some now argue that in reaching for the stars, congregations missed the boat.

Five-star churches offered Sunday school, training union (now discipleship training) Brotherhood, Woman's Missionary Union and music programs.

All five are important, but "organization for organization's sake consumes energy, effort and resources," says Darrell Robinson, Southern Baptist Home Mission Board vice president for evangelism, who as a pastor in the 1950s led his church to be a five-star congregation.

Staffing the basic five-star programs requires at least 72 leaders, according to an inter-agency task force.

That model of church life is unrealistic for smaller Southern Baptist churches which have fewer than 72 adult members. It can be equally impractical for larger churches if the organizations do not help churches fulfill their mission, church leaders now contend.

The danger of zealous programming is "we can become more concerned about program success than about the effectiveness of the total church," says Gary Cook, Southern Baptist Sunday School Board vice president for church programs and services.

Churches must base their activities on resources and members' gifts, says D.G. McCoury, Sunday School Board pastoral leadership consultant.

--more--

"The reason programs exist is to help churches get their job done," notes the author of "The Southern Baptist Church Growth Plan." Defining the job of the church, then, is a key in determining what programs are essential.

Robinson offers a three-part description of the church's function: exalt the Savior, equip the saints and evangelize the lost.

"All three go hand in hand. We deceive ourselves if we say we worship God and are not involved in his mission," Robinson says.

"Primarily the church exists to worship and honor God," adds Joe Stacker, director of the Sunday School Board church administration department. "Out of a true worship experience comes our evangelistic thrust, our missions enterprise."

Stacker is not suggesting churches offer only worship services. He says Bible study to reach the lost and nurture and train believers is essential "because you never stop growing in your awareness of God."

"Whether these are done at 9:30 a.m. or 6:30 p.m. on Sunday is a moot question. They should be done when the church can do them best," Stacker says.

The same might be true for missions education, music and other programs. Both Woman's Missionary Union and the Brotherhood Commission are studying ways to adapt their programs to changing needs.

An obstacle to making changes is the assumption that the best way to do things is the way they have always been done.

"Because it worked, we tend to keep hanging on," says Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Mission Viejo, Calif. "The biggest detriment to change is our past successes.

"Structures aren't meant to last," Warren says. "No program works forever, and in a rapidly changing society, programs work for shorter periods."

Harry Piland, director of the Sunday School Board Sunday school division, says his motto is "rigid in principle; flexible in application."

It is important to keep the traditional base of Sunday morning services for people who expect that, Piland says. But he also sees the need to offer Bible study in different times and different places.

"All I see us doing is getting closer to the first century actions when we go out and establish Bible studies in apartments and homes, jails, businesses and offices and everywhere you can imagine. The more the better as far as I'm concerned."

Yet variety in church activities should be added without sacrificing foundational ministries, says Cook.

"I think a church can get by without having a discipleship training organization, but I don't think a church can really be a New Testament church without doing discipleship training."

The Sunday School Board is developing a plan to help smaller churches offer training on a short-term project basis rather than through on-going programs, Cook says. "We're Family: Help for Smaller Membership Churches," a forthcoming Convention Press book, will give churches practical suggestions for project-based training, he says. Supplemental information also will be available in the Sunday School Leader: Small Church Edition, available in October.

--more--

Whether the program lasts six weeks or yearround, Robinson says events should be judged by the church's mission statement. Weighing activities in light of clearly stated priorities helps determine if programs help the church fulfill its mission or its calendar.

--30--

(Mark Wingfield contributed to this story)

What is a church?  
people, not buildings

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press  
6/26/91

ATLANTA (BP)--For years, Southern Baptist children have learned to lock their hands together with index fingers pointing upward and quote the simple verse, "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and see all the people."

It isn't that simple anymore.

The New Testament model of a church, modern Christian leaders contend, has nothing to do with buildings and steeples but everything to do with the gathering of people.

Across America, Southern Baptists are facing the reality of this change in attitude. The denomination known in some parts of the country for its trademark brick buildings with white steeples now has congregations meeting in apartments, storefronts, mobile homes, school buildings and fire stations.

"I think the No. 1 problem in Southern Baptist life is that our people don't understand what a church really is," says Southern Baptist Sunday School Board consultant D.G. McCoury, co-author of "The Southern Baptist Church Growth Plan."

"They think church is something you go to, just like you go to a play or a movie or a ball game. The church is not a place to go. It's not buildings. It's not programs. It's the people -- the people of God."

"The overall view of the Bible is an emphasis on visible expression and designated places of worship, but we can become building-centered and lose our vitality," adds Darrel Robinson, vice president for evangelism with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

"Churches without buildings are a must, especially if we're going to reach cities where property is so expensive. Church starting would be impossible if each mission had to have a church building."

Yet in some associations, churches are not recognized until they purchase property or build a building. The confusion is especially prevalent among ethnic churches and innovative churches, which may remain in a perpetual "mission" status even though members consider their congregations churches.

Distinctions between chapels, missions and churches have arisen primarily in compliance with secular models, asserts Rodney Webb, director of the HMB's language church starting department. "We have allowed government to structure our concept that a church is not a church until it's incorporated.

"For a Baptist, that's not an adequate view. Once we allow facilities to dictate to us, then we are beginning to unempower the people of God."

Ethnic congregations were struggling with this issue long before the current debate, which has centered on innovative Anglo or multi-ethnic congregations, Webb says. He cites the example of a pastor who remarked of his church's ethnic mission: "They can't function as a church until they're incorporated."

"That is a cultural description of how a church operates," not a biblical one, Webb insists.

--more--

A related misconception is that smaller congregations are not actually churches, he says. "The term mission carries with it smallness, dependency. But in the Bible, if there were 15 people or 5,000 people it was called a church. Size did not determine whether it was a church.

"Jesus said where two or three are gathered he will be there."

The standard Southern Baptist definition of a church is "a group of baptized believers carrying on the Lord's work in a particular location," notes Charles Chaney, vice president for extension with the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board.

"That has nothing at all to do with having a building or a certain program," he says.

In researching churches of the late 1800s, Chaney discovered many Baptist churches did not have permanent buildings, but most strongly aspired to do so. The strong Southern Baptist mindset that every church must have its own building gained impetus after World War II, he believes.

"As we developed programs, we moved to a more Roman Catholic position of needing cathedrals. It's not necessary to have a building, but our complex program is built on the assumption that every church will have its own building with access all the time."

Today, churches "need to have an alternative approach to Bible study, discipleship training and whatever those functions are a church ought to do. We need to recognize that many churches in the future may not ever have a facility."

In recent years, some of Southern Baptists' greatest advances have come through non-traditional churches without buildings.

The more than 100 missions of First Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, illustrate this phenomenon. In addition to the 1,800 people assembled at the church's central location, satellite congregations meet weekly in apartment complexes, mobile home parks, retirement centers, a shelter for abused women and the city jail.

"The church is not simply a building and a central location," pastor Charles Wade says. "It's like a heart that beats and sends out blood throughout the circulatory system."

Wade notes apartment dwellers often walk by the apartment where they meet for Bible study and say, "That's my church."

However, in Tarrant Baptist Association, which includes Arlington, churches are not recognized by the association until they own property. Associational director of missions Larry Rose says that long-standing policy is under review and likely will be changed.

"This is an area that has a way of attracting a lot of religious kooks," Rose explains. "The fear has been that someone would come in and start an off-the-wall group and disguise themselves as Southern Baptists. One way to stop that was to require that churches own property, because it requires more of a commitment.

"Some would still agree with that," he notes, "but I've said we can't address it that way because we are saying a church cannot be a church unless it has property. That's not scriptural in any way. You can't deal with that in an urban setting."

Hope Church, an innovative downtown Fort Worth congregation in existence for more than a decade, remains a mission because members have not wanted to purchase property. Yet the congregation numbers several hundred every week and has been instrumental in starting dozens of other churches across America.

It's not safe to assume that congregations meeting in rented space will naturally evolve into owning property. Some modern congregations -- like Hope in Fort Worth -- have no intentions of owning property. And others that currently own property may be faced with needing to change.

In Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh Baptist Church is considering moving all its Sunday morning activities to a nearby school facility, even though the church just completed a \$700,000 educational building of its own.

The reason for the move is space and expense. "Our sanctuary now can max out at about 400 in two services," says pastor Danny Crow. "The school will allow us to grow to 1,200. We just have to have the space to grow."

Not meeting in their own building does not pose a problem, Crow explains. "That's not really our drawing card here. Our church is known more for the fellowship we have and the ministries we have. People know about our church fellowship who don't know about our building."

--30--

(Sarah Zimmerman and Chip Alford contributed to this story)