



-- BAPTIST PRESS
News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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91-188

**New freedom in Ethiopia
spurs church growth work**

By Donald D. Martin

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (BP)--A year ago, a Christian conviction in Ethiopia meant serving time in prison, not church.

But since the collapse of the African nation's communist government last May, Christians and missionaries have enjoyed religious freedoms unimaginable under former President Mengistu Haile Mariam's dictatorship.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front took power in Addis Ababa and ended 30 years of civil war. Before that, Christians often had to worship in secret to avoid arrest for holding illegal religious services, said Southern Baptist missionary Sam Cannata.

About a year ago some members of the Baptist church in Debre Berhan were arrested for illegal worship, said Cannata, a veteran missionary doctor to Africa who is from Houston.

Later, government officials offered to release the Christians if missionaries would pay about \$100 for each person.

"We thought, prayed and sought the Lord's will," Cannata said. "We felt in the end that it was not his will to pay these so-called fines. First, it implied guilt. Second, it would probably precipitate mass arrests of other Christians and the demands for other ransom payments."

Instead of money, the missionaries sent the jailed Baptists food and worked for their release through the legal system.

However, after a few days the Christian prisoners asked the missionaries to drop efforts to free them. "They told us they had won so many fellow prisoners to the Lord that they needed time to disciple them," Cannata said.

Christians now can evangelize and worship openly, Cannata explained. Missionaries may travel freely and visit churches outside the capital, Addis Ababa. Before, the missionaries often were hindered by tight government travel restrictions.

"Christians in Ethiopia are praising the Lord that they have newfound freedom to travel, to study the word of God openly and to worship without fear," he said.

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The rapid changes in Ethiopia have expanded the focus of Southern Baptist ministries. For years, the missionaries justified their presence to the Ethiopian government through relief work. At one time they operated several feeding stations with medical clinics. But fighting between government and rebel troops forced them to pull back to the safety of Addis Ababa.

The change in government has allowed the 15 Southern Baptist mission workers to shift to more direct forms of evangelism and become more aggressive in church-planting work. Although the threat of starvation for many of Ethiopia's 53 million citizens still lingers, the missionaries believe they need to take advantage of the new openness to start churches.

And although the civil war is over, the threat of violence is still part of life in Ethiopia. "Outbreaks of lawlessness are increasing. Armed robbery plagues parts of the country," Cannata said.

Gunmen frequently disrupt distribution of relief food supplies bound for refugee camps. Armed robbers have shot at food convoys; two convoys from the port city of Djibouti were hijacked. Because of this, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said thousands of tons of food are rotting on arrival piers.

Similarly grave reports about Ethiopia's desperate financial condition and growing ethnic tensions appear regularly in news reports from the country. But the resilience of the local church continues to sustain Cannata's optimism for the future.

"Yes, the Christians of Ethiopia have had times of severe persecution," Cannata said. "But they've found in those times great spiritual blessings."

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Missionary doctor Sam Cannata, quoted in the story above, is a veteran of Africa medical missions. Appointed in 1957, he worked in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) before transferring to Ethiopia in 1968. He was charged with being a CIA spy when the communist government first came to power in Ethiopia in 1974, jailed for a time and kicked out of the country. He wrote a book, Truth on Trial, about that experience. He and his wife, Ginny, returned to Ethiopia in 1990 after serving in Sudan, Kenya and Tanzania during the intervening years. The following piece is his perspective on how God is moving in Ethiopia.

Communism, war, suffering
aid church development

By Sam Cannata

Baptist Press
12/13/91

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (BP)--As Ethiopia picks up the pieces after 17 years of communist rule, Southern Baptist missionaries here entertain mixed emotions.

While we all agree those years were filled with persecution, religious repression, economic decline and hunger, it still seems clear the Lord has again proved the truth of Romans 8:28. All things do work together for good for those who love the Lord!

Despite the opposition of the government, during those terrible days God brought into being many new Baptist congregations and hundreds of people were baptized and disciplined in the famine-devastated areas of the Ethiopian highlands. Nor were the converts "rice" Christians -- these churches remain strong today, reaching out in new evangelistic efforts.

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In pre-communist days that kind of evangelical church growth was considered impossible because of the domination of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

In Addis Ababa itself, many evangelistic church buildings were closed by the communists and turned over to secular operations. The result? Hundreds of house churches formed and gospel outreach expanded tenfold.

The communists agenda was to destroy the church. But God's printed agenda says the gates of hell cannot prevail against his church! Can we say that God used atheistic communism to enlarge his kingdom? In Ethiopia it is being said!

However, even though 15 years civil war ended last May, another type of tragedy continues in Ethiopia.

When the ruling communist regime collapsed May 21 after the departure of strongman Mengistu Haile Mariam, bloodshed and chaos was minimal. But the newfound peace has been marred by the terrible plight of hundreds of thousands of displaced and hungry people.

The old army itself was 500,000 strong. Many of these men found themselves far from home -- tired, defeated, penniless and without hope. Many still suffer from unhealed battle wounds. Missionaries in Ethiopia, using donations from Southern Baptists, have underwritten transport costs enabling many of them to go home.

Additionally, an ever-increasing number of civilians have been displaced because of regional tribalism and factionalism. Thousands have made their way to the capital, Addis Ababa, where the Baptist mission offices are located. The mission, along with other non-governmental organizations, has undertaken the feeding of these helpless masses.

The latest wave of refugees live in temporary camps, veritable tent cities. But the persistent Ethiopian rainy season turns the site into seas of mud and misery -- especially when the muck flows into the tents.

In one of the main camps the Baptist feeding team -- one of several aide groups at that location -- already has distributed more than 400,000 small loaves of bread to help stave off starvation.

There is one bright spot in this dismal picture. Many people also have become hungry for God's word and are responding gratefully to the witness brought by team members. And since the Baptists have been diligent in getting out of bed early in the morning to buy the best and freshest bread available -- and have been so patient and kind when distributing it -- everyone clamors for "Baptist bread."

In an attempt to be fair, government officials schedule the Baptist team to rotate to a different camp section each day. That means the missionaries and Ethiopian Christians have the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ to everyone in the entire camp.

Once again God, in his sovereignty, is allowing a tragic situation to become an opportunity for witness.

Baptists visit Republic of Georgia,
find religious liberty unsettled issue

By Louis A. Moore

MOSCOW (BP)--As the republics break away from the former Soviet Union, either going their separate ways or joining in new coalitions, religious liberty is becoming a recurring concern.

In Moscow, the Russian Republic's parliament has a committee studying human rights including religious liberty. Committee member Vera A. Boiko says her group is struggling with concepts more akin to those in the United States, where religious liberty is viewed as both freedom to worship as one pleases as well as freedom from a state church.

In the Ukraine Republic battle lines for dominance are forming between the majority Orthodox and minority Roman Catholic segments of the population. Catholics say the Ukraine Orthodox Church is seeking a position of dominance.

And in the Republic of Georgia, leaders say the words "religious freedom" but they give them meanings different from how most Americans understand them. On a recent visit to the Republic of Georgia, a six-person delegation of concerned United States Christians, including four Southern Baptists, witnessed firsthand some of these differences. Included in this delegation were Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission Executive Director Richard Land and Director of Media and Products Louis Moore. Also participating were Lynn Buzzard, director of the Church-State Resource Center at Campbell (Baptist) University in North Carolina; and John Rogers, pastor of Buies Creek Baptist Church in Buies Creek, N.C.

The delegation visited with various governmental and religious leaders, including the republic's president and minister of justice, the deputy mayor of Tbilisi, the patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the pastor of the Georgian Baptist Church in Tbilisi.

The group traveled to Georgia to check on reports Baptists in Georgia still are being denied certain religious freedoms, including the right to publish their own printed materials, the right to secure adequate meeting space and the right to assemble peacefully without harassment.

Each of the Georgian leaders visited promised the delegation each would take steps to resolve the areas of concern. The Georgian minister of justice also asked the delegation to become involved in the process of writing religious guarantees into a new constitution for the Republic of Georgia.

After returning to the United States, Land called the trip a success because of progress that was made on specific issues, such as a new building permit for the Tbilisi Baptist Church and a new newspaper for that congregation. But he noted much work needs to be done to educate Georgian officials about the broader concepts of religious liberty.

Delegation members attended worship services Sunday, Dec. 1, at the Georgia Baptist Church in Tbilisi where they observed overcrowded conditions due to inadequate facilities. Afterward, Tbilisi Baptist leaders told the delegation their requests for permission to build a new building have been frustrated for years by a lack of government cooperation. They also said they have been denied the right to publish their own newspaper and other religious materials. Other Georgian Baptists told of harassment from some local Orthodox priests outside of Tbilisi who look disdainfully on Georgian Baptists.

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The delegation expressed serious concern about persistent comments by Georgian government leaders that Georgia Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II must approve any new building and printed materials.

In a meeting Dec. 1 at the presidential office, Georgian President Eviad Gamsakhurdiya told the delegation Ilia II must approve the request for the Baptists' new building site. Tbilisi Deputy Mayor Sergo Gotsiridze also told the group, in a meeting on Dec. 2, Ilia II must OK the Baptists' building proposal.

The group met with Ilia II Dec. 3 in his office at the former residence of the last tsar of Georgia. He expressed surprise at the president's and deputy mayor's statements, but said he would make the appropriate phone calls to ensure the Tbilisi Baptists get a new building site.

Land and delegation co-chairman Buzzard told the patriarch, the Georgian president and Tbilisi deputy mayor such power of one religious group over others is difficult for Christians in the West, particularly Southern Baptists in the United States, to understand. They said such a denial of religious rights could lead some U.S. Christians to oppose U.S. diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Georgia.

In their meeting with Ilia II, the patriarch denied there are strained relations between the Orthodox and Baptists in Georgia. "I think our faith is the same," the patriarch said. "We believe in our Lord Jesus Christ. There are not considerable differences between us."

Georgian Minister of Justice Jonnie G. Khetsuriani told the delegation he would check into reports the Baptists in Georgia are being denied the right to publish their own printed materials. He said that should not be occurring.

Khetsuriani also told the delegation, "We hope you will participate in the political process here for our new constitution." He said Georgia is in the process of publishing copies of the U.S., French, Japanese and other constitutions in order to prepare for the writing of the new Georgian constitution.

Buzzard noted the warmth with which the delegation was received by Georgian government and church leaders. "We are encouraged with the willingness of the leaders to face these problems, and their commitments to work toward an immediate resolution consistent with principles of religious liberty." The delegation expressed particular thanks to Dzhambakur Bakradze, president of the Georgian Bar Association, who hosted the delegation, and who has been retained by it to assist in assuring the problems are promptly addressed.

The delegation also visited Moscow, where members informed leaders of the U.S.S.R Baptist Congress, which was meeting there, and a representative of the U.S. Embassy about their concern and findings regarding religious liberty in Georgia.

Other members of the delegation were David Dixon and Samuel Morris, law students at Campbell University's law school.

Jess Moody still nominee
for SBC presidency

By Herb Hollinger

VAN NUYS, Calif. (BP)--California pastor Jess Moody, an announced candidate for the Southern Baptist Convention presidency, said he has received encouragement for his candidacy and is "committed to do it."

Moody's candidacy was announced in August by an ad hoc committee led by Don Letzring, a Tampa, Fla., pastor. At that time Moody said, although a reluctant candidate, he would be available but would not actively pursue the nomination.

Moody, 66, also said he would "bow out by December" if he felt there were not an enthusiastic response to his announcement.

Contacted by Baptist Press Dec. 13, Moody said the response to his announcement was "quite good and from some very interesting sources." He did not comment on the sources.

"My feeling is if there is hope for reconciliation in our convention, then one last ditch stand ... it ought to be done," Moody said. "I believe every word of the Bible. As far as the Bible goes, I am as conservative as you can get. I, also, believe in freedom."

"I love my denomination," Moody added. "I want to bring us together."

Pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Church in Chatsworth, north of Los Angeles, Moody said his theme is still "a million more in 1994." The million, he said, means one million baptisms -- worldwide -- by 1994.

Another hope, Moody said, is 1,000 teams of laymen could be sent to the Soviet Union.

"They would first share the concept of free enterprise, that's what the Russians want to hear, and then in large meetings the gospel could be shared with them," he said. "I just want the world won to Jesus Christ."

Moody said he has not actively campaigned for the presidency. A new building campaign has taken two and one-half years of time where it should have taken six months, Moody said. The congregation just recently entered the new building and Moody said attendance is up 50 percent and on a recent Sunday there were 20 persons "saved" and 37 additions.

Moody was president of the SBC Pastors' Conference in 1965 and an unsuccessful candidate for president in 1966. He went to the California pastorate in 1976 from Florida where he was pastor of First Baptist Church of West Palm Beach. He also founded and was president of Palm Beach Atlantic College, now a part of the Florida Baptist Convention.

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Cuban pastor's radio
sermon first in 28 years

Baptist Press
12/13/91

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--A Cuban Baptist pastor's Christmas day sermon will be the first evangelical message heard on Cuban radio in 28 years, according to the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

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Raul Suarez, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist church in Marianao, Cuba, will preach the sermon on Cuban radio, a rarity since the Castro revolution in 1959.

Suarez has been involved in long-term dialogue with the government of Fidel Castro, according to a news release from BPFNA in Memphis, Tenn. He is a past president of the Cuban Council of Churches.

"There's no question that the Cuban government's view of the Christian community is changing," said Ken Sehested, executive director of BPFNA. The fellowship is a network of Baptists involved in justice and peace issues throughout North America. Its board of directors is composed of members affiliated with 12 Baptist conventions and five racial/ethnic groups in Canada, the U.S., Puerto Rico and Mexico.

Sehested traveled to Cuba in April with a delegation from the Progressive National Baptist Convention, which has formed a partnership with Fraternidad de Iglesias Bautistas de Cuba, one of four Baptist conventions in the country. Suarez' congregation, in metropolitan Havana, is affiliated with the Fraternidad and also houses Cuba's Martin Luther King Jr. Center.

A Cuban Baptist representative to the Baptist World Alliance, Elmer Labastida Alfonse, told Sehested Cuban Baptists are grateful for new freedoms for Christians in Cuba.

"Cuban Christians have been struggling for three decades to witness to our Lord Jesus Christ as we share day to day responsibilities in the construction of a new social order," Alfonse said. "The hard work, honest, faithfulness and joy of Christians has won a hearing. We only ask for your prayers that we might be faithful disciples if new opportunities open up for witness and service. This is a decisive decade and we feel the Lord is preparing the way for a spiritual awakening throughout the land."

A special focus on Cuba is a part of the 1992 work of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

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Piland encourages innovation
to develop Sunday school

By Frank Wm. White

Baptist Press
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NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptists must build upon the strong traditional base of Sunday school and be innovative with new approaches to achieve continued growth, Harry Piland told Sunday school leaders meeting in Nashville for annual December planning meetings.

"We must have a degree of flexibility to use means that work to reach people," said Piland, director of the Sunday school division of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

While trying new approaches, Sunday schools must maintain the traditional foundation. "Don't throw out the tradition, but add some new approaches. Don't give up on the proven just to try the unproven," he said.

Some churches leave the basic structure for a time to try something else with the intention of returning to the basic structure later, Piland cautioned. "What happens when the trend passes or they lose interest in the new idea is that they drop it but fall into disorganization without going back to the basics," he said.

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Piland encouraged churches to take Bible study outside the church walls to locations unsaved persons are more likely to attend such as offices, apartment complexes, homes, community centers and other areas. He also encouraged ongoing Bible study at times other than Sunday morning.

He suggested use of direct mail, telephone contacts, newspaper advertising and other marketing approaches to get the church's message to non-Christians.

The approaches and organization can be flexible if Sunday schools maintain an understanding the purpose is to reach people, teach the gospel and make disciples, Piland said.

"We understand the mission; it's how to do the mission that we want help in," Piland said.

Special interest conferences during the three-day planning meeting reviewed trends that will impact churches in the 90s and church models that are working for reaching baby boomers.

Changing political structures, demographic trends, technology, family life and culture are impacting the church, Art Criscoe, director of the management support section in the board's discipleship training department told Sunday school leaders.

Criscoe pointed out 40 percent of the U.S. population is part of the baby boomer generation. However, he cautioned, baby boomers are not a homogeneous group.

In a conference on models that are working for reaching baby boomers, Ken Marler, Sunday school growth consultant at the board, said churches must change methodologies to meet needs.

"The church that succeeds today will be the church that knows why they are there and is finding a way to make a difference in the community," he said.

The meeting was the first gathering of state Sunday school leaders since churches began using improved Sunday school curriculum in October.

An informal survey of state leaders indicated high initial satisfaction with the improvements.

Of 97 responding, 83 percent said comments from Sunday school workers in their states indicated users were satisfied or very satisfied with the attractiveness of the improved curriculum.

Quality of Bible content was also rated high with 81 percent saying people in their states were satisfied or very satisfied.

The lowest rating was for price with 51 percent saying users in their states were satisfied or very satisfied with the price. A high number of participants, 39 percent, responded with the middle of the five options on the scale from very satisfied to very unsatisfied on the question of price.

The highest unfavorable rating was the 12 percent who said users in their state were unsatisfied and 4 percent who marked very unsatisfied on the question of size and format of teacher books.

"Anytime you make a change there is a noticeable negative. In six months, the size won't be a concern," predicted Bruce Hose, Sunday school director for the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

The size has allowed more space for more Bible content, Hose pointed out. "I am tickled to death with what I've heard folks say about the increased Bible content," he said.

The attractiveness is "light years ahead of where it was" but still has room for improvement, Hose said.

State leaders were told Bible Book Series materials for adults and youth will have a four-color cover beginning in April 1992 rather than the trademark black-and-white cover.

Comments on attractiveness have far outnumbered comments on quality of content, said Bill May, director of church growth and development for the Arizona Baptist Convention.

May said price has not been an issue one way or the other in his state. In a discussion group, state Sunday school leaders indicated price was not a general concern but the increased costs of providing the supplemental WorData notebooks for youth had created some concern with cost.

Despite the cost factor, users are very pleased overall with the improvements in the youth materials, according to the state leaders.

People are pleased with the improvements because "they feel like what was promised has been done," said Frank Foutch, associate Sunday school director for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

A formal research survey of users will be conducted in the spring of 1992 after the materials have been in use for two quarters.

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Pastor's 50 years at same church
a 'witness of faithfulness'

By Scott Collins

Baptist Press
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HOUSTON (BP)--It was August 1941.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was still three months away, and President Franklin Roosevelt was trying to keep the United States out of a world war.

The Yankee Clipper, Joe DiMaggio, was in the middle of a consecutive-game baseball hitting streak.

And on a hot and humid Sunday in Houston, a young Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary student named Travis Lamar Mathis accepted the call as pastor of Faith Memorial Baptist Church.

World War II came and went and DiMaggio's streak stopped at 56 games, but 50 years later, Mathis' streak as pastor of Faith Memorial is still going.

"My secret is being right with God and being faithful to doing the will and the work of God," Mathis said.

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That faithfulness was recognized this year when church members honored their pastor with a 50th anniversary celebration and invited Southwestern Seminary President Russell Dilday to preach the morning message. The theme they chose for the occasion was "A Witness of Faithfulness."

"They said the thing that stands out in our minds about you as our pastor is your faithfulness," Mathis said.

In a denomination where the average tenure of a pastor is around two years, Mathis' streak is extraordinary.

"I think the reason that he has been able to stay is he genuinely loves people," said James Herrington, director of missions for the Union Baptist Association in Houston. "That's not something that he gets paid to do. He really loves it."

That love for people is evident on Sunday mornings, when Mathis arrives early to meet and greet church members of all ages, including nearly 150 people (mostly children) who ride Faith Memorial's four buses every week.

It is also Mathis' faithfulness and love for the church that have kept him there for 50 years. "I've had chances to leave," he said, "but the Lord wasn't in it."

Instead, he stayed. Through the 1950s, when the church grew from 97 members to 2,800 and an average attendance of nearly 1,000, to the 1960s and 70s, when the Denver-Harbor area surrounding the church became mostly Hispanic. Today, about 93 percent of the community is Hispanic.

But rather than abandon the area, Mathis led church members to reach out to their own mission field. Today, the congregation is a mixture of Hispanics, Anglos and African-Americans. Mathis has led the church to adapt to its changing neighborhood.

The acceptance of other races was not immediate for Faith Memorial.

"When they first started coming into our church back in the 50s we had some leaders in our church who said 'We don't want them. We want just the Anglos.'

"But I said 'They are human beings. They are souls and we're gonna open our doors to them.' It was the same thing when blacks started coming. We treat everybody the same regardless of his or her color."

Mathis believes the role Faith Memorial has given to evangelism and door-to-door visitation helped the church grow. During his tenure, the church has baptized more than 3,250 people.

"We go out and knock on doors and ring doorbells. We contact the people," he said. "By phone, by personal visit. We stay with it. You've got to contact the people. That's your lifeline."

The church's growth, along with the number of individuals Mathis has personally led to accept Christ are two important barometers for his success at the church, he said.

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Another measurement of his success is the 20 people who have gone into full-time Christian service from the congregation. For those ministers and others like them, Mathis' advice is to "believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, live the obedient Christian life" and learn to witness.

At 78, Mathis has learned some lessons of his own. "When I came here, I was really strict," he said. "I was hard on everybody. Boy, they had to toe the line.

"We did not recognize divorced people. Anybody who was divorced could come and sit and listen, but they could not be workers. They could just come and warm a bench.

"I prayed about it, studied on it, and asked God's leadership and the Lord revealed to me from the Bible that divorced people are human beings -- they're souls and who have gotten messed up by divorce. God wants me to reclaim them and to bring them back and let them live for God in spite of their divorce," he said.

"I've become more mellow, more considerate, more forgiving, more humble. I believe we have to salvage people. We have to pull them out of the fire, so to speak."

And while his approach to people has softened, Mathis' zeal for the ministry has remained.

Even though a bout with throat cancer and radiation two years ago left his voice permanently hoarse, Mathis still expresses himself with rousing "amens" during services.

"I feel in my heart I should say it (amen) because I have enjoyed something. It just comes out kind of spontaneously."

Mathis credits his knowledge about ministry to his years of experience, but he is quick to point back to the years when he commuted by train to Fort Worth to study at Southwestern Seminary.

"When I started preaching, I didn't know much about the Bible," Mathis admitted. "But I got a biblical background from the seminary."

Another thing he didn't know when he started preaching is that he would still be at Faith Memorial 50 years later. But he has no plans to stop now.

"The people want me to stay as long as I can do the work, and I'm happy doing it."

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Southwestern Seminary

Louisiana Baptists lie to
preacher, who doesn't care

By Gary W. Griffith

Baptist Press
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JONESBORO, La. (BP)--A group of more than 250 Louisiana Baptist pastors and church members recently lied to Pastor J.W. Kennedy, but he doesn't mind.

They led him to believe they wanted to hold a song service just to hear his Southern gospel tunes. And they did listen to about 30 minutes worth of his music, but then they presented him with a new Mercury Sable.

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The 68-year-old pastor is "well loved" in several rural areas of the state where he has served in at least 16 different Louisiana Baptist churches in a bivocational, interim or full-time capacity, says Truman Leach, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Jonesboro, La.

Kennedy grew up in Ebenezer Baptist Church and was licensed and ordained there. He also was the congregation's interim pastor prior to Leach's call to the church field. Kennedy currently is pastor of Hurricane Creek Baptist Church in Dodson, La.

Leach says he learned earlier in the year Kennedy desperately needed a reliable automobile to make the trip from his home near Jonesboro to Hurricane Creek Baptist Church in Dodson.

"Bro. Kennedy is 68 years old, has had triple by-pass surgery in the past year, has no annuity and had no possibility of buying a new car," Leach notes. "For him to continue to serve, he needed a car. By God's grace, the people he has served provided him one."

Leach challenged Ebenezer church members to start a car fund to purchase a car for their former pastor.

"We had a committee that got in touch with eight other churches he had pastored and a couple of others where he has good friends. And there was just no problem at all raising the money because he is such a well loved man," Leach says.

About 30 minutes into the Nov. 17 song service at Ebenezer church, Leach and others began a "J.W. Kennedy, This Is Your Life" presentation and climaxed the program by giving him the keys to his new car.

The two words Kennedy uses to describe his reaction are "shocked" and "grateful." He says he never dreamed the gospel singing organizers were planning to give him a car.

"My old car was worn out," Kennedy admits. "I'm on a restricted income, and I didn't see any possibility of buying another car."

"One of the folks from my church asked my cardiologist if he thought it would be all right to give me a car. He said it would be good therapy for me and gave \$100 to help them."

The total cost of the new vehicle was \$14,161.55, but \$15,563.97 was collected. The extra \$1,402.42 is being used to purchase an extended warranty on the automobile and to help pay the car insurance, Kennedy says.

Leach describes most of Kennedy's former pastorates as being "small church fields" that required him to "work as a plumber and other things to help support his family much of the time. He could not have lived off of the salaries most the churches paid him, and there was never enough funds to pay for his annuity. He understood that."

Leach and Kennedy agree there are many older or retired pastors in the state and throughout the Southern Baptist Convention who have similar financial needs that could be met if Southern Baptists and churches would work together.

"There are folks out there that have a need. Maybe it's not a car, but they have a need," Leach says. "I hope Southern Baptists will investigate the situations of the men who laid the foundation of ministry for us. They deserve our love and our ministry."

Kennedy says he has known several retired ministers who were in difficult financial situations at the time of their deaths. "Those ministers just didn't have anything. But it would be a blessing if some of the churches of those still living would get together and do something for them," he says.

Leach sums up the fund raising effort by acknowledging: "Bro. Kennedy has given his life in a very needy area of ministry. He deserves it (the car) because he has given so much. Now it was time for him to receive a little ministry back."

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(BP) photo available upon request to the Louisiana Baptist Message (Griffith is the Louisiana Baptist Message state news editor.)

SBTS student leads
growing deaf ministry

By Pat Cole

Baptist Press
12/13/91

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--The hands of Brance Long are a conduit of good news for deaf people in Danville, Ky.

Long, 25, has been pastor of Danville Deaf Baptist Mission since January. The 30-member congregation has baptized 15 people and finished second among Kentucky Baptist churches in 1990 in per capita baptisms.

Every Sunday, Long preaches to about 60 people crowded into the chapel at Lexington Avenue Baptist Church in Danville for worship. During the week, he is a student at Boyce Bible School, a division of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., that provides ministerial training for people who do not have college degrees.

Freedom to worship in their own language has created an inviting atmosphere for deaf people, he said. "They feel confident to relate to God," said Long. "Many deaf people have felt like God is a white, English-speaking God. They weren't sure that God understood or shared their values or even knew their sign language."

The mission began with a nucleus of people who had attended interpreted services in churches in the South District Association. Part of Long's task has been to mold the group into a unified church.

"They tended to group themselves by the churches they had come from," he said. "Now we are beginning to blend and develop a spirit of unity."

The mission was constituted in April 1990 under the association's sponsorship. Director of Missions Bill Willham said he believes it is the only deaf mission in the United States sponsored by an association.

"They (deaf people) had limited opportunities for leadership in hearing congregations," he said. "Few of them had served on a committee or even taken up the offering."

Now, he noted, the congregation works at self governance and has been paying its own expenses. The association and some churches contribute regularly to a fund which will help the congregation find a larger meeting place.

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Long makes the 90-minute drive from Louisville to lead the congregation's services on Sundays and Wednesdays. His weekend ministry begins with visitation on Saturday and includes an overnight stay. Saturday visits are mostly contacts with persons who are not church members.

He also tries to attend social events in the deaf community in Danville. Relationship building is a key part of evangelizing deaf persons, he said: "The deaf like to talk and they like to talk to each other. You don't have to call ahead and ask if its OK (to visit). They like surprises."

At Boyce, Long studies in one of the few programs in the country which offers theological classes in sign language. He and several other deaf students have been associated with Deaf Opportunity Out Reach, a ministry for deaf persons which moved its headquarters from Texas to Louisville in 1989. DOOR's relocation and the availability of classes at Boyce were an answer to prayer, he said: "When we moved I knew God had a purpose for our being here."

His pastorate gives him a chance to try many of the concepts he learns in the classroom.

"Sometimes when I'm facing a crisis there I can remember that we had talked about this (problem) at Boyce," he said.

Long stressed the need for deaf congregations to make their own decisions. Leaders in the deaf community have been reluctant to join churches dominated by hearing people, he said: "Deaf people need to recognize their own identity and realize that God can use them as deaf Christians. They can be their own kind of Christian."

The Danville group is seeking a larger building to house its burgeoning congregation. Meanwhile, Long looks forward to watching the church mature further: "If it's God's will, I'll stay in Danville after I graduate from Boyce."