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Baptist Press

**Chairman says CP summit  
dialogue finds consensus**

**By Herb Hollinger**

NASHVILLE (BP)--A summit meeting of Southern Baptist leadership concerning the denomination's unified giving plan found "enthusiastic support for and commitment to" the Cooperative Program, says the chairman of the meeting.

Two dozen past and present denominational leaders at state convention and SBC levels were invited to the Jan. 20-21 meeting in Nashville by David E. Hankins, chairman of the SBC Executive Committee. Hankins appointed the special study group in response to action and concerns of the Executive Committee in September.

The agenda was reported to include a review of the history of the Cooperative Program, an analysis of the nature of it as it is now being interpreted and development of proposals for the future enhancement of the CP.

"I was very grateful to those who came," Hankins, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Lake Charles, La., told Baptist Press following the meeting. "We were helped greatly by the state convention executive directors and by our former SBC leadership. Their historical insights were particularly helpful to me."

The outcome of the meeting, Hankins said, was "enthusiastic" support by those attending for the support of and commitment to the cooperative concept of missions with state conventions and the SBC working as partners to promote missionary work on both levels.

"There was a good, affirming spirit for the leadership at the various levels," Hankins said. The group also expressed sympathy, he added, for the various struggles, economic and others, which have raised concerns in the cooperative effort.

"There was unanimous agreement to move ahead (in promotion and support of the Cooperative Program)," Hankins said.

Future small group meetings -- possibly regional gatherings -- between Executive Committee leadership and state officials also were suggested. The Executive Committee plans the national Cooperative Program allocation budget while state conventions determine the percentage to be channeled to the national CP from gifts received by churches in their states.

"We would hold smaller group meetings in order to further enhance the growth in Cooperative Program giving," Hankins said.

The consensus of the group is that while churches and individuals should be free to direct their funds as they wish, Hankins said, the best way to do "our work is through a unified giving plan from the churches to the state conventions, then to the national convention to be distributed to the various agencies."

Hankins said he appreciated, as well, the help of SBC Stewardship Commission officials at the meeting.

"There seemed to be an agreement that there is a need to further the education of Southern Baptists at the local level (about the Cooperative Program)," Hankins said. "The plans are already under way to implement this idea."

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Attending the meeting were state convention executive directors William M. Pinson Jr., Texas; James N. Griffith, Georgia; Reginald M. McDonough, Virginia; Cecil C. Sims, Northwest; Don Moore, Arkansas; John Sullivan, Florida; Roy J. Smith, North Carolina; Charles Sullivan, Indiana; and A. William Merrell, an Oklahoma convention officer.

Southern Baptist Convention leadership included President Morris H. Chapman of Wichita Falls, Texas; former presidents W. Wayne Dehoney, Louisville, Ky., and James L. Sullivan of Nashville.

SBC agency officials included R. Keith Parks, president, Foreign Mission Board, and Larry Lewis, president, Home Mission Board. Stewardship Commission officials were A.R. Fagan, president, and James L. Powell, vice president for Cooperative Program promotion.

In addition to Hankins, Executive Committee members and staff included Harold C. Bennett, president; Ernest E. Mosley, executive vice president; Mark Coppenger, vice president for public relations; Richard Rosenbaum Jr., vice president for business and finance; and Joe B. Warwick, Knoxville, Tenn., chairman of the program and budget subcommittee.

Also participating in the study were Cecil Ray, Georgetown, Texas, former state executive and special Cooperative Program consultant, and Stan Madden, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, professor who has expertise in the unified giving plan of Southern Baptists.

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Romania missionaries  
resign in protest

By Mike Creswell

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1/22/92

BUCHAREST, Romania (BP)--Charles and Kathie Thomas, Southern Baptist missionaries for 17 years, have resigned from service in Romania to express their opposition to what they term "a hostile takeover" of the Foreign Mission Board.

"The first fruit of this takeover was the defunding of Ruschlikon," the Thomases wrote in their resignation letter dated Jan. 11. They referred to the vote by Foreign Mission Board trustees last October to defund the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland.

Thomas, 42, better known by his nickname, "T," is from Atlanta. Mrs. Thomas, 43, was born in Cynthiana, Ky., and grew up in South Carolina. They said they would be off the mission field by May 1.

"First, we are saddened and grieved by the power struggle within the Southern Baptist Convention which has resulted in a 'hostile takeover' of the Foreign Mission Board," the couple wrote.

"Our resignation is foremost a protest against what we consider to be a distinctively unChristian strategy through which the conservative element of the Southern Baptist Convention is rapidly transforming much of what we have known as the Southern Baptist expression of the evangelical faith into something which is self-centered, self-serving and un-Christlike."

In their resignation letter, the Thomases noted the Romanian Baptist Union "has chosen to support the conservative movement" within the SBC and the mission board.

"This decision was motivated by promises of massive funding in return for their support," the missionaries charged. "This is both disgusting and immoral, and we cannot condone -- even in a passive way -- this action."

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The couple also objected to what they termed the "forced resignations" of FMB executives Isam Ballenger, vice president for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and Keith Parker, area director for Europe.

Ballenger, 56, and Parker, 55, announced their early retirement in a controversial press conference Jan. 7. They decried the defunding of the Ruschlikon seminary and charged Foreign Mission Board trustees are following a political agenda instead of long-held missions principles.

The Thomases cited the "worsening situation for the (FMB) staff in Richmond," explaining the departure of Ballenger and Parker means "that the people under whom we have worked and ministered for nearly 18 years will be replaced with persons with whom we are diametrically opposed, both in practical theology and life goals. Or, to state it more clearly, we prefer to work with men and women of God who are 'professional missionaries' and who have only the advancement of God's Kingdom at heart, and not a specific political agenda."

Foreign Mission Board trustee Steve Hardy of North Carolina said he regrets the resignations of the Thomases, whom he called "productive and faithful missionaries." Hardy is chairman of the trustee committee which oversees work in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

But he said, "I don't agree with their perspective and would remind them the trustees of the Foreign Mission Board are elected by Southern Baptists at their annual meeting."

Hardy said he "would be willing to review any documentation that (the Thomases) can present about promises of massive amounts of mission money to the Romanian union if (the Romanians) would support the defunding of Ruschlikon."

In December a letter was sent from Vasile Talos, Romanian union president, and Nic Gheorghita, general secretary, to the Foreign Mission Board. The letter stated "in the matter of defunding the seminary of Ruschlikon, the General Council of the Baptist Union of Romania, gathered in the meeting of Nov. 26, 1991, agreed to this decision of the FMB." It went on to outline concerns the Romanians have about the seminary's perceived theological liberalism.

Questioned about his statement on funding, Thomas said that after the Romanian letter was sent, Gheorghita told him, "Well, this puts us first in line to get all the money for Ruschlikon."

Gheorghita is traveling in the United States. Numerous attempts to contact him for comment have been unsuccessful. Baptist Press will continue to attempt to obtain his response.

Hardy also disagreed with the Thomases' statement on the departure of Ballenger and Parker. "I don't believe Dr. Ballenger and Dr. Parker were forced to resign," he said, "but instead preferred early retirement to continued working with the present trustee board.

"I would restate for all Southern Baptists that the strategy of the FMB is to present the gospel to every person and give them an opportunity to respond," Hardy said.

"I hope our missionaries in Europe will continue to do the excellent work they are involved in and patiently allow the smoke to clear from recent trustee decisions."

Speculation has arisen in the Southern Baptist Convention about a possible missionary backlash in response to developments following the Ruschlikon defunding. The Thomases are the first to make public a decision to resign in protest.

Questioned about future plans, the Thomases said they are resigning despite the practical considerations involved.

"With two kids in college and three more at home, this is a big step for us," he admitted. "We have no job offer and no employment on the horizon. But we felt like what is going on, we can't tolerate.

"My father-in-law, who is a retired pastor in South Carolina, said there come one or two times in your life when you have to make a stand for what is right, no matter what it costs you. And Kathie and I have decided this is one of those times. The Lord will take care of us; we're sure of that."

In a prepared statement, Mrs. Thomas said, "No one can know how difficult a time this is for me, the daughter of a Southern Baptist pastor, the granddaughter of a Southern Baptist pastor, the niece of Southern Baptist missionaries to China and the wife of a Southern Baptist pastor, as well as being a Southern Baptist missionary. All of that which the name 'Southern Baptist' has meant to me through the years I guess is no more. Perhaps after all it was only just a name and thank goodness my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ stands firm."

The Thomases worked as missionaries in France between 1976 and 1991, when they transferred to Bucharest, Romania. In France, Thomas started two churches and worked as director of the home mission board of the Federation of Evangelical Baptist Churches in France.

Since transferring to Bucharest last September, Thomas has been teaching missions and evangelism at the Baptist Theological Institute, the seminary of the Romanian Baptist Union. He also has started a new church and begun working with one of the first MasterLife discipleship training groups in Romania. Two other Southern Baptist missionary couples currently work in Romania. More workers are expected to arrive in the coming months.

Thomas made headlines last October when he went into the midst of a violent demonstration by coal miners near their home in Bucharest in an attempt to share the gospel message.

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Mississippi Baptists open  
truckers' welcome center

By Anne W. McWilliams

Baptist Press  
1/22/92

MOSS POINT, Miss. (BP)--"Are you going to have a chain of these all over the country?" one trucker asked. "I've traveled all over the United States," another trucker said, "and I've never seen another like it."

Since Jackson County Baptist Association opened its Truckers and Travelers Welcome Center Dec. 15, truckers have responded to its ministry with enthusiasm. Already one has returned to say he has received Christ as Savior.

Located at exit 69 on Interstate 10 in southern Mississippi, it is open daily from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday mornings, short worship periods are alternated with Bible study from 6 to 9 on the hour. Daily devotionals are presented early morning, midday and evening, with music at 3 and 6 p.m. Five or six truckers daily have visited thus far.

Complimentary refreshments and coffee are available, plus road maps, games, television and grooming supplies. Also truckers are furnished with a place to use a washer and dryer, take a shower, use a pay telephone or copier, get counseling or find a quiet place to rest.

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The building, mostly the work of volunteers from various churches, was begun in the fall of 1989; planning began even before then. Furniture and equipment have been donated by churches and individuals. Presently Bob Storie, director of ministries for the association, is at the building each day. However, he hopes to staff the center with volunteers from the association's churches -- and from across the state. Two bedrooms at the center were planned as a place for volunteers to stay. Also there is a kitchen where they can prepare their own food.

To let truckers know about the ministry, doorknob hangers printed with pertinent details are hung on rearview mirrors at a nearby truck stop every morning. Also Storie talks to truckers on his CB and plans to have a small station at the center. Also, truckers leaving for distant destinations are given calendars advertising the ministry and asked to drop them off at stops along the way.

A family of 10 Romanians spent Christmas Day at the center. They were traveling from Cincinnati, where the father is in the scrap metal business, and asked to use the kitchen to prepare a meal. "We held a special Christmas service with them and helped make the day special for them," Storie recounted.

"Also we minister to hoboes and hitchhikers who stop by," with food and a place to wash their clothes, he said.

"We owe a lot to truckers," noted J. Ray Grissett, director of the cooperative missions department of the Mississippi Baptist Convention board. "They bring us food and clothes and other products from across the country. They have a heavy responsibility and they live under the constant pressure of abiding by the rules of the road. ... It is our responsibility as Christians to help lighten their load. This place will be a light post where many can plug in."

Grissett listed qualities volunteers who work at the center will need: "love for God and people; sensitivity to truckers and their needs; flexibility; a non-judgmental attitude; a desire to cooperate with everybody and to get the job done."

Mona B. Nolf of Escatawpa has written a tract especially for the truck ministry, titled "Point of No Return."

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GLC's Land commends ABC-TV  
for program on moral decisions

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NASHVILLE (BP)--ABC-TV should be commended for asking James Dobson's "Focus on the Family" to produce a new series on Christian values for children, said Richard D. Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"We desperately need wholesome, value-affirming programming such as Dr. Dobson's on network television," Land said. "I applaud ABC for broadcasting the programs and Dr. Dobson's organization for producing them. More such programming is urgently needed but this is an important beginning."

The first episode of Dobson's "McGee & Me" is scheduled to air Saturday, Jan. 25. The exact time will vary from city to city, so interested Southern Baptists should contact their local ABC affiliate for the information.

Focus on the Family has said if the first broadcast receives enough of an audience on ABC-TV, other episodes of the series will be aired later.

"McGee & Me" is a real-life drama featuring a boy named Nicholas and his cartoon-character friend McGee. Nicholas is shown in day-to-day life situations where he has to make moral decisions.

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"Our children, set adrift in a relativistic, values-neutral world and living in families ravaged by divorce and moral decay, are in deep trouble," Land said. "They desperately need an antidote to the sexually explicit, violence-dominated, materially obsessed programming which currently characterizes network television."

Land said recent studies about the moral status of American children are "horrifying."

"In-depth surveys of our nation's youth reveal that 54 percent of our high school students are sexually active, including 72 percent of 12th graders," he said. "Other studies tell us both the suicide and homicide rate tripled among 15- to 19-year-olds in the last three decades. Over the same period the number of births to unwed mothers doubled."

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Furman prof: Dead Sea Scrolls  
reflect lively religious era

By Don Kirkland

Baptist Press  
1/22/92

GREENVILLE, S.C. (BF)--The Dead Sea Scrolls, first found in 1947 in the desert of southern Israel, have been called the "greatest manuscript discovery of modern times." Scholars and others, meanwhile, have argued over who may have access to the ancient documents, which are kept in Jerusalem and controlled by Israel's antiquities department.

But what do these manuscripts of mostly leather and papyrus say to the Christian of today? Plenty, according to Jeff Rogers, instructor in religion at Furman University in Greenville, S.C.

Rogers, a former Baptist pastor in North Carolina, assisted in editing biblical scrolls from one of the caves at Qumran, where the documents were discovered. He also has studied the scrolls at Princeton (N.J.) Theological Seminary, where he is working toward a doctorate.

"The scrolls are a whole library, really," Rogers said, "with remains of approximately 800 documents. I say 'remains' because there are only 10 complete scrolls. The rest are pieces."

Among the scrolls, Rogers said, are multiple copies of books of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. "For instance, there are 27 different copies of the book of Psalms, 25 copies of Deuteronomy and 18 copies of Isaiah," he explained.

These copies are 1,000 years older than any other Hebrew scriptures available before the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, Rogers said.

"And what we see," he said, "is that no two copies of these books are exactly alike. That means the Hebrew Bible then looked a lot like the Bible now, in its many different English translations."

By comparing the various copies, Rogers said, "we have learned a lot about how the Bible came to us in the form it did."

The scrolls also give a picture of how books of the Bible actually looked during the times of Jesus and such Jewish sages as Hillel and Gamaliel, he said.

Most of the scrolls, however, contain early Jewish writings that are not biblical. But their importance is considerable, according to Rogers. "They give us a much better picture of what Judaism was like around the turn of the first century.

"What we see," he emphasized, "is a vital, lively, contentious religion in which people were arguing about and living out many different ways of being Jewish." It was as if there were different "denominations" even in that day, he said.

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Some people, focused their religion on life in the temple while others were more concerned with daily piety, Rogers noted.

While some concentrated mainly on the expectation of a coming messiah, others thought mostly about the end of the world and even withdrawing from it "to try to live isolated, pure lives."

Many early Jews, Rogers noted, simply tried to live in harmony within the Roman system of empire while others talked about armed resistance.

"It was a remarkable religion in a remarkable time," he said, "and the scrolls help us to understand better who some of these groups were and how they thought and lived."

That is important, Rogers said, because "that was the formative time for the Judaism and Christianity we know today. Both grew out of that vital, lively and contentious setting of Judaism in the first century."

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Jack Lowndes retires from GBC;  
elected Lord's Day Alliance head

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ATLANTA (BP)--Jack P. Lowndes, director of the church/minister relations department of the Georgia Baptist Convention, has announced his retirement from the convention to become executive director of the Lord's Day Alliance. His retirement is effective Feb. 15.

The Lord's Day Alliance is an organization which works to have legislation passed supporting "Blue Laws" prohibiting retail sale on Sundays.

James P. Wesberry, executive director of the Lord's Day Alliance and former member of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, announced the organization's board of managers elected Lowndes to succeed him upon his retirement. "Nothing could give me greater joy than to welcome my longtime unfailing friend, Jack Lowndes, to succeed me," Wesberry said.

Lowndes has been pastor of several churches, executive director of the New York Baptist Convention, a member of the boards of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and Home Mission Board. More recently he was editor of The Christian Index, newsjournal of the Georgia Baptist Convention.

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CLC supports state regulation  
of gambling on Indian lands

By Tom Strode

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1/22/92

WASHINGTON (BP)--The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission has expressed support for proposed rules enabling state governments to regulate gambling on Indian lands.

The Christian Life Commission opposes the legalization of gambling but supports government regulation when such games are allowed, James A. Smith, director of government relations, said in a letter to the National Indian Gaming Commission. The NIGC has proposed regulations to implement the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988.

"As long as gambling is permitted, the highly detrimental nature of this enterprise dictates sufficient governmental regulation," Smith said in the letter. "The Christian Life Commission supports vigorous regulation of Indian gaming to ensure that neither the spirit nor the letter" of the law is violated.

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The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act prevents a tribe from sponsoring otherwise illegal gambling on Indian lands unless it receives permission from the state government. The proposed regulations define such games as Class III gaming, which would include casino games such as roulette and craps, card games such as blackjack, slot machines, house banking games, pari-mutuel wagering on horse racing and dog racing, and electronic and electromechanical facsimiles of games of chance.

Class II gaming consists of bingo and games similar to it. The Indian Gaming Commission and a tribe dually would regulate such games. Class I gaming consists of social games played for small prizes and traditional Indian games played at tribal ceremonies. The tribe has sole jurisdiction over Class I gaming.

The CLC specifically expressed support for the definitions of Class II and Class III gaming.

"We believe the regulations that have been issued will ensure the proper level of citizen involvement in states where Indian tribes attempt to expand gambling outside of what state law currently allows," Smith said.

Included with Smith's Dec. 30 letter was a copy of a 1987 Southern Baptist Convention resolution opposing gambling and endorsing its regulation on Indian lands by state governments. Also included was written testimony in support of such state authority presented to the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs in 1987 by former CLC General Counsel Larry Braidfoot.

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Church in transition area  
faces realities, possibilities

By David Wilkinson

Baptist Press  
1/22/92

ARLINGTON, Va. (BP)--On a wintry Sunday in Arlington, three-congregations-in-one at First Baptist Church of Clarendon read Scripture and voice their gratitude in song and prayer -- in three languages.

Once a quarter, deacons and pastors of Clarendon's Anglo, Hispanic and Vietnamese congregations lead a joint worship service highlighted by baptism and the Lord's Supper.

At the center of a 2.5-mile stretch of mushrooming commercial development, the Clarendon community struggles to make a comeback. Once among Washington's premier commercial districts, Clarendon tumbled into decline in the early 1960s. By 1970, the community was left for dead, its abandoned buildings casting ghostly shadows on what had been the proud downtown of a northern Virginia suburb.

Two decades later, Clarendon hopes to transform itself into a thriving urban village with an attractive blend of residential and commercial redevelopment.

For First Baptist Church of Clarendon, the seismic changes in the surrounding landscape have created a formidable challenge. Within a three-mile radius of the church lives a diverse and fluctuating population mix of hard-to-reach young professionals, senior adult residents, homeless people and a variety of ethnic groups.

The congregation operates with limited financial resources, the result of dramatic losses in membership in the wake of community transition. Membership peaked at 1,700 in the heydays of the 1950s and early 1960s. By the mid-1980s, however, the congregation had dwindled to fewer than 250 people dotting the 700-seat sanctuary for Sunday worship.

Pastor Timothy Townsend, 50, a third-generation Southern Baptist minister, understands the problems facing the church. He came to Clarendon in 1986 with his eyes open to the realities -- and the possibilities.

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A lanky 6-footer, Townsend has an engaging smile and a relaxed style that puts new acquaintances at ease. At the wheel of his 1985 Toyota, Townsend zips along neighborhood streets, waving at people he knows.

Only a few yards from the church, the long-awaited Clarendon Metrorail station connects residents to the Washington metroplex. An estimated 700,000 people board at the station annually. On the opposite side of the station, the 3100 Clarendon Boulevard building, a striking office and retail highrise, stands as a majestic symbol of the new Clarendon. The Clarendon Alliance, a coalition of business, civic, residential and non-profit organizations, is working to create a 25-acre oasis of established neighborhoods surrounded by exceptional ethnic restaurants and businesses.

Although redevelopment will add new residents, "these are not people who move in and then show up for church the next Sunday," Townsend explains. "Most of them come from unchurched or non-Baptist backgrounds. They are secular and very hard to reach. Even so, you'd be surprised by how many show up on Sunday. I think that says people are searching for meaning. They have real needs."

To meet those needs, the church has created a strategic plan for evangelism, discipleship, worship and community ministries that analyzes the community and assesses the church's strengths and weaknesses. One strength is Clarendon's large, debt-free facility, and the church is determined to make maximum use of every square foot. The building is alive with activity seven days a week. Much of that activity is generated by the two growing language congregations.

When pastor Reyes Rodriquez came in 1983, the Hispanic congregation was a small, 24-member mission. Since then, membership has more than tripled, and around 130 people pack Clarendon's chapel each Sunday. In 1989, after 24 years as a mission, the congregation was constituted as the first Spanish-speaking Baptist church in Virginia.

Church members represent about a dozen Central and South American nations. Because many stay only two or three years before returning to their home country, "it's difficult to have an established congregation," Rodriguez says.

Nevertheless, he is pleased with the progress, including the relationship with Clarendon's English-speaking congregation. "Sure, the ideal would be to own our own facility, but with the cost of property, that's impossible," he says. "Right now we couldn't survive without the assistance of the Anglo church and the Home Mission Board."

The Vietnamese congregation meets on the third floor, using the same space for Sunday school and worship, furnished with folding chairs and a small white pulpit.

Pastor Peter Nguyen, a diminutive, soft-spoken father of four, came to the United States in 1975 after working in the American embassy in Vietnam. Like Rodriguez, Nguyen is grateful for the "wonderful spirit" among the three Clarendon congregations.

"To me, this is the way older churches in many urban areas can be reborn," Townsend says. "In a sense, it's church-starting with a different twist. Our church could never afford to start a mission at another location in this area, but we can help support two language missions right here in our own facilities.

"At the same time, neither the Vietnamese nor the Spanish congregations have adequate resources by themselves to buy or maintain a facility like this.

"I'm convinced this is something we're going to have to face as Southern Baptists," he continues. "Do we start churches only in new areas where there is population growth or do we find ways to help churches in urban areas in the midst of transitional communities?"

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In its own changing neighborhood, Clarendon plans creative approaches to evangelism among an anticipated influx of young professionals. These include an expanded emphasis on young adult ministries, changes in worship style and plans for Bible studies in residences of church members in highrises.

At the same time, the church plans to continue ministries ranging from food distribution to child care. Every week, a coalition of church volunteers bag and distribute nearly 200 sacks of groceries to families referred by social service agencies. They also drive and make telephone calls for a program that delivers emergency food kits. Five days a week, the church provides sack lunches for homeless people. Each morning, rows of brown paper sack lunches line the counter in the church office, ready for distribution. Each Saturday morning, a clothing center located in the church distributes items to the needy.

The number of requests has increased significantly during the past year, explains church secretary Sylvia Long. "Supplies that would have lasted us six weeks a few years ago now last up to two weeks."

Another avenue of ministry at Clarendon has been the Child Development Center, a virtual United Nations of children. Begun 22 years ago, the day-care program provides for 142 children representing 25 nations and a variety of cultures and religions. The center enjoys a reputation as one of the largest and best preschool programs in the community.

Although Christian in philosophy and practice, the center pressures no one to join the church. "These children are going to remember some songs and stories they learned here," says Caron Clark, a former public schoolteacher and a seminary graduate. "We may not be the ones who see the results but we're responsible for planting the seeds."

Seeds also are planted in the lives of parents. "Just last week we had a parent who had brain surgery," Clark says. "Neither parent goes to church but the husband told me, 'I know it's because the church was praying for Missy that she's going to be OK.'"

"Our church has been remarkably open to change," Frank Essex, chairman of the long-range planning committee says, "but Tim's style has helped us through the painful parts. We know we're not your typical white, Anglo-Saxon, median-income, nuclear-family church . . . . The community has changed, and so have we."

Townsend, says Essex, "challenges people, but he's careful to move at a pace that he feels is good for the church. He's not your rah-rah cheerleader type; he leads by example. He rolls his sleeves up."

As a neighborhood resident as well as pastor, Townsend has gotten to know the people of Clarendon: retail and restaurant owners, community planners, developers, managers of residential highrises and homeless living on the streets.

On his way to the Clarendon Alliance offices across the street from the church, Townsend stops to talk with Bobby, a homeless man dressed in a tattered, oversized green-and-gold jacket, and reeking of alcohol. Following a brief, cheerful conversation, Townsend recalls his introduction to Bobby a few years earlier.

Townsend was studying in his church office when someone rushed in saying a man had just bashed in a window in the child care center, frightening both children and workers. Townsend called the police and then went to investigate. He encountered an inebriated man clutching a large piece of glass from the broken pane. The man threatened to cut his own throat if Townsend came closer. Townsend talked calmly to the man until the police officers arrived, when Bobby -- suddenly and furiously -- began slashing his neck.

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After being subdued by police, Bobby, on his knees, blood gushing from his wounds, looked up at Townsend and asked him to pray with him. Townsend dropped to his knees beside Bobby and placed his arm around the man's quaking shoulders. Together they prayed. It turned out to be only the first and most dramatic of many occasions that Townsend has sought to help Bobby. "He's like a lot of others," says Townsend thoughtfully, "trapped in a vicious cycle. But every time I want to give up on him, I remember what the grace of the gospel is all about."

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This story first appeared in MissionsUSA, monthly journal of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. (BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press