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**BWA council boosts aid fund,
takes aim at world racism**

By Wendy Ryan

MONTEGO BAY, Jamaica (BP)--The Baptist World Alliance's general council approved a goal of more than doubling its worldwide relief and fellowship assistance fund during the council's July 4-12 meeting in Montego Bay.

A \$4 million BWAid goal has been set for 1992-93, up from the current year's goal of \$1.5 million.

The increase includes \$2 million to fight hunger from drought in southern Africa that is the worst in living memory, a resolution passed by council members states, with Zimbabwe being the hardest-hit. The resolution warns "millions of God's children are at risk of imminent starvation and death."

Racism worldwide also was a key topic during the general council meeting, as the BWA's newly appointed Special Commission on Baptists Against Racism held its first meeting. "It is to the credit of the BWA that our (Baptist) community throughout the world has decided not to run, but face the pain" of racism, one commission member noted.

Another member stated, "We want to do more than produce a paper. We want guidelines for local churches to use to attack this disease."

The commission is to bring proposals for action to the general council's August 1993 meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The general council's Montego Bay meeting was its largest-ever, with 530 registrants representing 45 Baptist unions and conventions on six continents. The Baptist World Alliance represents an estimated 70 million people in 200 nations.

BWA vice president Cora Sparrowk of northern California challenged the fellowship regarding racism, asking, "Are we playing church? Will we make pious pronouncements with pious cliches that say all the right things that require little of us?"

Sparrowk urged the BWA to "make the unexpected happen We must be on the cutting edge."

Washington pastor Wallace J. Smith in an address defined racism as "an evil endeavor which locates the blessedness of God not in justice, mercy or righteousness but in the texture of one's hair, the thickness of one's lips and the color of one's skin."

"Racism places salvation not in confession and repentance and grace but in phony anthropologies, fallacious genetics and delusive sociologies," Smith said.

The Special Commission on Baptists Against Racism heard papers and reports on racism worldwide and its effects as well as on efforts by Baptists against racism in their communities. Former President Jimmy Carter is the commission's honorary chairman but was unable to attend the meeting.

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The 25-member commission includes three Southern Baptists: Harold C. Bennett, outgoing president-treasurer of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee; Richard Land, executive director of the Christian Life Commission; and Russell Begay of Arlington, Texas, American Indian field staff member of the Home Mission Board.

The commission was created by Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary, after the California riots over the acquittal of police officers accused of beating motorist Rodney King. But Lotz assigned the commission with the broader scope of examining racism worldwide.

Jamaica's prime minister, P.J. Patterson, addressing the council's opening session, urged Baptists to join in condemning "the abhorrent system of apartheid" in South Africa and press for "the restoration of human dignity."

Patterson voiced praise for Jamaican Baptists for their contributions to the island nation. "Over two centuries of Baptist witness in Jamaica have brought profound moral changes in every area of national life," he said, noting three of Jamaica's seven foremost national heroes were Baptists. "They all met untimely deaths at the hand of the state," the prime minister added.

Jamaican Baptists trace their beginnings to 1783 when George Liele, a former slave, arrived on the island and hundreds were converted under his Baptist preaching. Today the Jamaica Baptist Union encompasses more than 40,000 members in 294 churches.

A rally during the general council meeting was held in a city square named for Baptist freedom fighter Sam Sharpe, who was executed in 1832 for refusing to become a slave. Luther Gibbs, the union's general secretary, said Sharpe was guided by three Scripture passages: No man can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24); if the Son of God sets you free, you are free indeed (John 8:36); and there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free ... in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

General council resolutions:

-- urged the 500th anniversary of the coming of Columbus and the Europeans to the Americas to be marked by "prayerful reflection and study and with actions of healing." The resolution was presented by Latin American Baptists.

-- urged Baptists to address environmental issues, "to continue to press upon governments the need for action in defense of tomorrow's world" and "to adopt responsible patterns of consumption and behavior which do not jeopardize the future of the created order."

-- urged removal of economic sanctions against Cuba and Haiti; voiced support for Christians living out their faith in the midst of political and economic turmoil in the Caribbean and the Haitian refugee crisis; and called for prayer that God will provide "a free and just future" for people throughout the region. The resolution stemmed from concerns presented by the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship.

-- committed to pray for efforts among the warring republics of the former country of Yugoslavia for peace and human rights.

-- rejoiced over the Jan. 16 peace accord between the government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Marti' National Liberation Front and "the faithfulness and courage" of El Salvador's Baptists during the years of civil war.

-- celebrated the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society 200 years ago in England, which provided impetus to William Carey's missions efforts and those of subsequent generations of evangelicals. The movement has given birth to churches in the non-Western world that are "equal and sometimes more lively partners in the ongoing mission of the church," the resolution added.

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The BWA general council approved a 1993 operating budget of \$1.3 million and an offering to be taken among BWA member churches once every five years.

The \$4 million BWAid goal, beyond the \$2 million to be devoted to famine relief in Africa, includes \$280,000 for Bibles, books, buildings and seminary efforts in the former Soviet Union; \$300,000 for Bibles in Cuba, Eastern Europe, Serbia, Burundi and Chile; \$100,000 for reconstruction in war-ravaged Liberia; and funds for long-term human needs projects in various countries.

The BWAid goal increase reflects efforts for new cooperative ventures with Southern Baptists and other Baptist bodies worldwide, BWA officials said.

The council welcomed 10 new member bodies: the Baptist unions of Croatia and Serbia; five from the Commonwealth of Independent States; and two from Zimbabwe.

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Mark Wyatt and Art Toalston also contributed to this report.

Texas partnership will bolster
unity, Romanian Baptist says

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DALLAS (BP)--Partnership between the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Romanian Baptist Union holds the potential of strengthening and unifying Baptist work throughout Romania, according to Nicolae Gheorghita, general secretary of the union.

Unity is the greatest need in Romanian Baptist life, Gheorghita told representatives of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and the BGCT during the recent Baptist World Alliance meeting in Jamaica.

"This can be facilitated best by strongly encouraging all participants -- both in Romania and in Texas -- to work through the channels of the Romania Baptist Union and the Baptist General Convention of Texas," Gheorghita said.

"This will provide more effective undergirding and growth of Baptist work in Romania than any other approach."

Foreign Mission Board representatives affirmed Gheorghita's statement and BGCT officials noted a primary goal of the Texas/Romania Partnership is strengthening Baptist work in general and unity of the Romania Baptist Union in particular, in addition to evangelism and discipleship.

The Romanian Baptist executive said members of his union "look with great anticipation" to the beginning of the partnership missions relationship with the BGCT in January 1993.

William M. Pinson Jr., BGCT executive director, echoed Gheorghita's sentiments as he indicated the Texas Baptist partnership missions office has been working throughout 1992 to get things under way for the partnership with Romanian Baptists.

Priorities for the partnership were discussed and procedures were outlined at the meeting in Jamaica.

Gheorghita will give sole direction to the partnership, in accord with the president and the Romanian Baptist Union's executive council which includes the presidents of all Romanian Baptist associations.

The general secretary informed the group he has established an office for the Texas/Romania partnership and his administrative assistant, Rodica Cocar, will work with him in the partnership.

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Currently, Texas Baptists, in coordination with the Foreign Mission Board, are seeking a Texas couple to live in Romania as liaisons with the Romanian Baptist Union. The couple, to be on the field by October, will work with Gheorghita, assist in planning and make preparations for partnership volunteers.

Gheorghita expressed the desire to move beyond controversy generated several months ago when Romanian Baptist Union officials publicly commended the Foreign Mission Board for its defunding of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland.

"We recognize that previous statements cited as coming from the Romanian union created confusion with both the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance," he said.

"We trust these have been adequately explained to both entities and we can move ahead. We would not have misunderstandings mar the prospects of our partnership with the Baptist General Convention of Texas."

Pinson and Gheorghita discussed the possibility of the partnership extending to all Baptist work in Romania. The Romanian general secretary encouraged BGCT representatives to talk with Hungarian Baptist churches in Romania to include those churches in the partnership.

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Seminary students learn
life lessons in Appalachia

By Marv Knox

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BEREA, Ky. (BP)--Seminary students from across the South and East have traded their ivory towers for mountain "hollers."

And, by their accounts, they're getting a life-changing education.

Forty-eight students from 17 denominations are participating in the summer program of the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center.

They're spending weekdays studying on the campus of Berea College in Berea, Ky., examining the culture, religion, economics and politics of the region, which includes parts of 13 states from Mississippi to New York.

On weekends, they're moving out into the villages and onto the small family farms of Appalachia, getting a firsthand look at life in one of America's most culture-rich, money-poor regions.

The purpose of the program is "to introduce students to the possibility of ministry in the Appalachian region or to ministry in a multi-cultural, multi-denominational situation," Bill Leonard, the center's academic dean for the summer and head of the religion department at Samford University, said.

Thirteen participants are students at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where Leonard taught church history until January. They recently set aside their books to talk about their experiences.

"We've had the opportunity to be with people from diverse backgrounds," Lea Alexander of Bamberg, S.C., explained. "My truth is one facet of truth; we can combine our perceptions. And we can expose and work through our preconceptions of both this region and people from other denominations."

"It's also a chance to deal with rural issues," Stacey Buford of Chattanooga, Tenn., added. "In seminary, we often focus on urban problems and the rural area almost is ignored."

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But ignoring the region is impossible for students in the center's summer program. The weekend visits bring Appalachians "up close and personal."

Students break into small groups to study Appalachian farming, small churches or community action, Leonard explained. They also examine those issues from the inside, living with Appalachian families for at least 10 days.

Even students who weren't sure about how that placement would work said they've found room to fit into the local society.

"I was apprehensive about what I could do. My background is media," Rick Forest of Clarksville, Tenn., confessed. "But I wound up at Appalshop, a nonprofit media collection that helps document and explain the region."

David Dillard of New Castle, Del., said he feels comfortable working with Save Our Cumberland Mountains, "a grassroots organization that works on everything from landfills to companies moving to Mexico and leaving large numbers of people unemployed."

Aside from the "work" of the field placement, the students learn from their weekend hosts, Buford noted. "We sit and listen to people's story and hear where they are," she explained. "Rather than come in with our seminary training and talk to them, we listen."

"One thing that has impressed me is that you go back into these hollers and find people like gems," David McNair of Kannapolis, N.C., reported. "They have so much to offer. They're committed to the land, the people and their communities."

"They're not dummies," he said, apologizing for citing a stereotype often attached to Appalachian people.

"The people are strong," Terri Farless of Ft. Valley, Ga., confirmed. "I sat with a family through a thunderstorm and saw their faith."

"I was surprised to see how much Appalachian people are doing" for their communities, Jon Buford of Birmingham, Ala., said. "There are many grassroots organizations helping people. It's something you don't see elsewhere."

And what students see in Appalachia is not just the past and present but also the future, Leonard said. "The culture is in transition because of the changes in the larger culture -- the M-TVing or Wal-Martization of America."

So, the focus of the study "is not just about ministry in Appalachia, but ministry in changing communities and a changing region," Brian Cole of Hayti, Mo., stressed. "It's something we will deal with wherever we minister."

Such a focus on ministry in Appalachia has helped students see the role of the church through new eyes.

"Churches can be a hindrance," Farless admitted. "We need to learn from grassroots movements. For example, women who exhibit tremendous skills in their communities can't use those skills in churches. And churches sometimes perpetuate the status quo instead of speaking out against the systematic evils in their communities."

"Even if we don't come back to Appalachia, we're taking with us the issues and the people," Forest added. "It will make us more sensitive to the areas -- the people, the issues, the needs -- where we do serve."

Leonard called the Appalachian Ministries Education Resource Center "a new way to network" among ministers. It allows ministry students to learn from each other and from resources unique to a particular region, he said, and it allows them to understand ministry from a perspective broader than the confines of one denomination.

In addition to the summer program, the center conducts winter travel seminars. It operates from Berea during the summer and from Charleston, W.Va., August through May.

The center was launched in 1985. It is affiliated with 37 seminaries representing 17 denominations.

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VBS contributed to growth
for Southern Baptist megachurch

By Frank Wm. White

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DALLAS (BP)--Thirteen years ago, a fledgling Prestonwood Baptist Church held Vacation Bible School in an un-air-conditioned elementary school gymnasium and cafeteria as the church struggled for a beginning.

This June, more than 2,700 children rumbled through the halls of the expansive Prestonwood Baptist Church complex in north Dallas for a one-week "Fantastic Journey."

The "Fantastic Journey" Vacation Bible School theme was complete with a sailing ship in the education building atrium and a skipper roaming the halls greeting children.

In rented school facilities, under a tent or in a multi-million-dollar church complex, Prestonwood always has relied on Vacation Bible School to create a visible profile in the community and involve unchurched children in Bible study, ministers said. With the sports programs, feature music concerts and other high-profile ministries for which the church has become known, the basic program of Vacation Bible School is a key part of the church's ministry plan.

"It would be a major setback for us not to have Vacation Bible School," said pastor Jack Graham.

The Vacation Bible School has grown as the church has grown. Some say the church has grown as the Vacation Bible School has grown.

Part of the church's strategy from the beginning was to build on a VBS as a primary source of evangelism and outreach in the community, Graham said.

Sondra Saunders, senior children's/preschool minister, directed each of the church's 13 Vacation Bible Schools. "Sondra and her workers have established VBS here as the premier of what it can be," Graham said.

While a strong leader for VBS is needed, the pastor must give leadership to VBS, children's ministry and workers, Graham said. "The pastor has to be extremely committed to it."

Many pastors began to discount VBS in the late '70s, said Bill Taylor, minister of education at Prestonwood since 1982.

"I saw pastors move away from VBS and thought it was a mistake. I believe our basic ministry needs to be basic. I'm not talking about staying old but using the basics," Taylor said.

Taylor said the same principles apply for a church of 50 or 5,000 membership. Prestonwood has 11,000 enrolled in Sunday school with an average attendance of more than 4,700.

Saunders said her goals for VBS have always involved reaching children who might not be involved in Bible study otherwise. The availability of facilities never altered the objectives, she said.

"We did it (VBS) when we didn't have anything. We have put up tents and awnings. One year classes met on a sidewalk," Saunders said.

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Even now, Saunders converts adult Sunday school departments into children's departments for Vacation Bible School. The choir rehearsal room, worship center, prayer room, dining room, fellowship hall and other facilities all are pressed into service for VBS.

"I've seen million-dollar teaching going on under a pine tree. I've seen poor teaching in million-dollar buildings," she said.

Making the community aware of the Vacation Bible School for children age 3 through the sixth grade involved delivering 80,000 fliers, mailing 10,000 brochures and hand delivering another 10,000 brochures, Saunders said.

Perhaps 70 percent of the children enrolled in the Bible school are not from church families. Of the 1,200 preregistered by phone, 40 percent were unchurched, Saunders said.

Mandee Willey, a 9-year-old, attended the VBS along with her brother and sister after her mother received one of the fliers distributed in the community.

Bible school was a new experience for Willey other than "once a long time ago when I was about 4 and we lived in another town," she said.

She said she was "learning about God and how much he loves us and cares for us." During Bible school, Willey said she highlighted things in her Bible that she wanted to remember about God.

Ministry teams from the church will visit unchurched prospects such as Willey's family within 10 days after VBS. Families of the 144 who made decisions during a Wednesday decision service will be visited within the week following VBS whether they attend Prestonwood or not. Names of those children who made decisions but attend other churches will be provided to those churches, Saunders explained.

To enlist the 425 workers for VBS, Saunders started contacting people the first week of January. As many as 85 percent of the workers are children's and preschool Sunday school workers, she said.

Training for workers begins in February. This year, a promotion committee used the promotion kit available from the Sunday School Board to develop the theme.

"Getting the artwork together would have taken forever (without the kit)," Saunders said. "The kit saved a month in planning time."

In addition to launching her own church's Fantastic Journey VBS, Saunders assisted another church in conducting VBS for the first time in at least 20 years.

Saunders conducted a training session for preschool and children's workers at Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, Tenn. The church used a hot air balloon to begin the first day of VBS with 2,300 children and workers, said Peggy Perkins, administrator of children's ministries.

Perkins said the success of the week makes it certain that they will continue to conduct VBS.

Like Prestonwood, Bellevue found that Vacation Bible School created excitement that spread into the community, brought unchurched children into Bible study and provided new prospects.