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HOUSTON -- Grassroots affirmation of WMU sought by 5 Baptist leaders.
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Grassroots affirmation of WMU
sought by 5 Baptist leaders

By Herb Hollinger

Baptist Press
4/8/93

HOUSTON (BP)--A campaign to seek grassroots affirmation of the national Woman's Missionary Union was unveiled by five Southern Baptist leaders in a news conference held April 8 in Houston.

The teleconference call with Baptist state paper editors and other Baptist news media was hosted by Daniel Vestal, pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston.

Vestal and the four others representing the group said the aim was simple: to rally Southern Baptists to express support for the WMU, which they said is under attack by the conservative leadership of the SBC, in written forms which will be presented to national WMU leadership at its annual meeting in June in Houston.

The suggested four-paragraph resolution affirms the more than 100 years of WMU involvement in Southern Baptist missions and calls the WMU's "integrity of commitment ... unquestionable."

"Recently WMU has been subjected to alarming pressure to alter that which has served God so wonderfully well for more than a century," the form reads. "Further, it is shocking that abusive remarks made against the WMU have been spread on the pages of the nation's newspapers, both in secular and Baptist publications."

The form calls it "inconceivable" that anyone would question the WMU's intent or ability to expand its mission support. In January, the national WMU voted to expand its services to other evangelical groups but stopped short of promoting any mission offerings other than the SBC Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for Home Missions.

WMU's action resulted in a resolution in February by the SBC Executive Committee calling for WMU to rescind its action and affirm its historic "auxiliary" position with the Southern Baptist Convention. The Home Mission Board voted in March to affirm the Executive Committee's resolution and several conservative SBC leaders have publicly decried the new direction of the WMU.

Morris H. Chapman, president of the Executive Committee, while on a trip in Texas, contacted by Baptist Press, said the committee's resolution was "nothing but affirmation of the WMU's historic relationship with the SBC."

"The resolution expressed profound appreciation for the enormous contribution which the WMU has made to Southern Baptist mission efforts. I believe most Southern Baptists would wholeheartedly agree with that," Chapman said.

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"It (the resolution) further requests the WMU, as an 'auxiliary' to the SBC, to continue in a very workable, mutual partnership. If we place our complete trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, even in uncertain times, he will see us through. We must strive to honor his name at all times."

Vestal said his group is composed of "concerned Baptist people" and is not tied to any organization, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an association of moderate Southern Baptists critical of current SBC leadership. Nor, Vestal said, has the group been asked by the WMU to start the campaign on its behalf, although Vestal said he did advise Dellanna O'Brien, national WMU president, of the group's plan.

Participating in the teleconference call, in addition to Vestal, who is a leader in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, were: R. Quinn Pugh, executive secretary of the Baptist Convention of New York; Ellen Teague, president of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and on the special WMU committee which brought the recommendations adopted by the national WMU in January; P. James Flammig, pastor of First Baptist Church in Richmond, Va.; and J. Richard Maples, a Bryan, Texas, pastor and president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

All of the participants, except Teague, said they were speaking as, and for, concerned individual Southern Baptists and not for the organizations they lead. Teague said the D.C. convention's executive committee and executive board both have passed resolutions affirming the WMU action.

Although all five of the participants in the news conference gave glowing affirmations of support for the WMU, Flammig likened the current situation to when the WMU was formed in 1888 "here in Richmond." He said the men attending the SBC meeting in 1888 would not let the women participate so they went down the street to a Methodist church and formed the WMU.

"The issue (with the men in 1888) was control back then. And now it seems what the male-dominated, fundamentalist-dominated SBC leadership can't control, they want to destroy," Flammig told Baptist Press in a later telephone interview. He suggested recent published remarks by Adrian Rogers, Tennessee pastor and one of the leaders of SBC conservatives, that criticized the new WMU direction and suggested male leadership of the mission emphasis in local churches, were too critical.

"The WMU is doing a superb job and we need to leave them alone," Flammig said.

Rogers was unavailable for comment to Baptist Press April 8.

Vestal said a suggested form of affirmation or tribute is available through a toll-free number although he encouraged individuals, churches, associations and state conventions to submit personalized affirmations as well.

The toll-free number is 1-800-580-7729. Any written affirmation or tribute can be sent, care of Vestal, at Tallowood Baptist Church, 555 Tallowood, Houston, TX 77024, or the fax number is (713) 932-8843.

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Housing projects hungry
for gospel, speaker says

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
4/8/93

ATLANTA (BP)--Inner-city public housing is a "wide open mission field," according to the director of a Baptist ministry planting churches in the projects of New Orleans.

Public housing communities are hungry for the gospel and churches cannot afford to neglect these areas, said Marshall Truehill, director of Faith in Action Ministries.

"In leaving them to Satan, we are dooming these people to a life of destruction and eventually to eternal damnation," Truehill told pastors, missionaries and Baptist association workers at the Home Mission Board's "Starting Churches Through Ministry" conference.

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Faith In Action offers kids' camps, tutoring, food, counseling and other services to the residents of New Orleans' 10 public housing communities, Truehill said.

In the process, the ministry seeks to plant mission congregations. They currently have missions in more than half of the communities, he said.

"In everything we do, evangelism is the bottom line," said Truehill, who is also pastor of Faith in Action Baptist Mission, a mission of First Baptist Church in New Orleans. "If evangelism is not the bottom line, we're just another social ministry."

Ministries such as Faith in Action develop core groups within the communities for home Bible studies, prayer groups or other congregational expressions, said Harold Wilcox, director of the Home Mission Board's church and community ministries department.

About 65 of the 78 Southern Baptist community centers in the United States have congregational expressions, he said. More than 11,900 professions of faith were recorded through ministry projects last year, according to the church and community ministries department.

Not only caring for the body and soul, people ministering to public housing residents hope to bring the transforming power of Christianity to those who need help most, said Truehill, who lived 17 years in a public housing neighborhood as a child.

"You know, the gospel just has a way of helping people be upwardly mobile," he said. "After Jesus Christ came into my heart, then the teacher had a better student to work with."

The work remains tough, he admitted, because residents who clean up their lives move away and usually don't support the ministry and community church.

"They want to get far away from the nightmare they've been living in," Truehill said. "There are always going to be people to work with, but you're always going to be starting at ground level, almost."

Despite residents' receptiveness, Satan uses fear to prevent churches from trying to make a difference, he said.

"You will find that the projects are nowhere near what the media is painting," he said. "Yes, there's high crime, but usually it's confined to one area."

More dangerous, he said, are the consequences of being inactive in those neighborhoods.

"If these communities are not touched by the church, we're going to have large seedbeds of sin in the middle of our cities," he said. "It's going to spill right out of those communities into the rest of our neighborhoods."

Faith in Action started in 1973 as a street ministry. Armed with public announcement speakers, workers preached from the streets near neighborhoods, mosques and public housing communities, Truehill said.

"We were full of zeal and no knowledge those first four years," he said.

Often they were run out of the neighborhood or the police were called, he said, but residents in the projects were eager to listen. "We got the idea that the Lord was saying, 'Go here.'"

Wilcox said Southern Baptists must return to the inner cities. "Someone has got to go to where the people have been left when most of our churches went to the suburbs."

Truehill agreed. "The Lord calls us out of the world, cleans us up and then sends us back into the world to send other people to him."

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(BP) photo of conference attenders visiting residents of the Techwood public housing community mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press.

**Inner-city ministry offers
former drug seller new life**

By David Winfrey

ATLANTA (BP)--Asked about the scar on his left cheek, Bo Render shrugs and says "just one of those things." But it hints at the life he lived before finding Techwood Baptist Center and becoming a Christian.

"I'm an addict in God's hands now," says Render, 29, who spent more than eight years in jail on drug trafficking charges before going straight.

Render was leaving a courthouse last year because of a burglary charge when his brother, a city drug investigator, told him to clean up his life and go see Terry Moncrief, a Southern Baptist home missionary and director of the center in downtown Atlanta.

Planted in the middle of the nation's oldest housing project, Techwood Baptist Center offers job training, family counseling and a host of other ministries to more than 6,000 residents.

"I'd come in here and I'd feel nothing but Christianity through the services," Render said.

Workers helped him get admitted into a Christian drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, after which he worked with the Techwood Baptist Center and Christos, a dependency support group.

Although he was cleaning up his life, Render says he still lacked the joy he saw in other people at the center. "I was always seeing Christians mostly smiling and I was wondering why I wasn't smiling."

He said he accepted Christ a few months ago, giving him a reason to smile. "I wake up in the morning and I'm happy about myself."

Old friends have noticed a difference, Render said. On the streets, customers with debts promise to pay, only to hear that Render doesn't want their money anymore. "I just feel good doing the Lord's will. I never thought I could feel this way, but I do."

His new life has also given him a burden to help others. Looking around the community, Render says he sees kids with no hope who believe the only way to be important is to sell drugs and wear gold jewelry.

"They don't have anything to look forward to," he says, adding he is starting a leather workshop so youth can make things with their hands, stay out of trouble and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Render acknowledged public housing isn't the safest place for Christian ministry but said that shouldn't matter. "You shouldn't be afraid to come work here because this is God's house.

"There are problems here, but why should we go where there aren't any problems?" he asks. "I think we should be right here where God's needed."

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(BP) photo of Bo Render mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press.

**Drama ministry in Kazakhstan
needs volunteer performers**

By Beth Sammons

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4/8/93

ALMA-ATA, Kazakhstan (BP)--Southern Baptist volunteers are urgently needed for a drama ministry in the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan.

Four current drama team volunteers -- engaged in mime, street theater and dance and music performances -- will complete their assignments in 1993. Members of a group called "Company International," they are stationed in Kazakhstan's capital city, Alma-Ata.

Drama training is not necessary but a college education and a willingness to perform are. Musical ability is helpful, though not required. Team member Kathy Abshire of Ringgold, La., said volunteers should be willing "to be stretched, to learn to do things they never did before, never thought they could do and maybe really don't want to do."

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Company International director Joel Heard of Lexington, Ky., has called the drama ministry in Kazakhstan "one of the greatest undeveloped ministry tools that we have."

Over the past year and a half the team's dramatized message has been well-received. "It gives people a point of reference. They can relate; they can feel what the characters on stage feel," Heard said.

Originally working with a secular Kazakh theater troupe, the team assumed ministry through building relationships would be the extent of their assignment. "When we first came we thought things were very closed," Heard said. "But when we saw doors were wide open and all we were doing was theater games and sketches with no meaning, we decided to explore other avenues."

Company International has performed for benefit concerts and cultural programs. The group performed for "Tomisha," a televised Kazakh celebration seen by about 30 million people.

The drama group's main project has been "The Tune," a 50-minute pantomime based on the Bible. New volunteers, the group hopes, will continue performing the pantomime, taking it to frontier regions throughout Kazakhstan.

The group has already performed the unique mime in various theaters throughout Alma-Ata. "We needed something to perform that was culturally sensitive, would cross language barriers and would present the gospel in a non-threatening way. And God gave us 'The Tune,'" Abshire explained.

"It tells a story," Heard said. "It's written so that if someone is a total atheist or hard-core Muslim they can enjoy the story."

The performers think the drama's main strength lies in the way it meets and reaches large numbers of people. They have received about 700 response cards. Individuals wanting more information are invited to more in-depth studies led by team members.

James Atherton, team member from Lexington, Ky., said the focus of their work has shifted. "Drama is no longer the focus," Atherton said. "The focus is discipling those who respond. You never do what you think you're going to do here. God is always full of surprises ... what God has led us to do is infinitely better than anything we could have dreamed of."

During their assignment in Kazakhstan, the team members have worked toward quality performances.

"Because we're American, it's assumed we're Hollywood professionals or something," Heard said. "Expectations are very high, so opportunities are high. Rarely does a group of amateurs sing on national television."

Although they are not professionals, team members try to be good ambassadors as they perform for a variety of audiences, from local school children to television viewers in the remotest parts of Kazakhstan.

Team member Patti Robertson of Orange County, Calif., will never forget one Kazakh college student's response to a performance.

"He said, 'Watching "The Tune" cleansed my soul.'"

Robertson said the team prays that God will give the Kazakh people "dreams and visions of his son" and that "The Tune" will confirm the "truth that God has already revealed to them."

Heard added: "If nothing else, it causes them to think about spiritual things ... which they do willingly."

New volunteers will continue performing "The Tune" but will also develop new material for cross-cultural outreach, discipleship and congregation-starting efforts.

For more information about the drama team request and other volunteer opportunities in Kazakhstan, contact Cooperative Services International, P.O. 6841, Richmond, VA 23230.

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