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Black churches contribute
to Southern Baptist growth

By Chip Alford

Baptist Press
6/2/93

NASHVILLE (BP)--Though African American churches represented less than 3 percent of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention in 1992, they accounted for more than one-fourth of the SBC net gain in number of churches and almost 10 percent of its increase in ongoing Sunday school enrollment, a report from the Baptist Sunday School Board shows.

According to statistics compiled from Uniform Church Letter reports, there were 990 black churches in the SBC in 1992, up 62 from the previous year, or a 6.7 percent increase. The convention as a whole increased by 237 churches.

Ongoing Sunday school enrollment in black churches increased from 110,538 in 1991 to 118,216 last year, an increase of 7,678 or 6.9 percent. In comparison, ongoing Sunday school enrollment for the SBC at large increased by 78,720, or 1 percent.

"These statistics are not surprising to me; this is a continuing trend," Jay Wells, manager of the BSSB black church development section, said. "Black churches as a whole are experiencing growth and are definitely making a positive contribution to the SBC."

Wells credited the increase in Sunday school enrollment to "a tremendous interest" in Christian education in black churches.

"We've kind of swapped areas of focus with Anglo churches. In the past, we focused more on worship and celebration -- that's been our strength. Anglo churches gave more attention to education. Now it's the other way around. Hopefully, we'll both realize what we need is a healthy balance of the two," he explained.

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Black churches showed gains in seven out of eight other major reporting categories in 1992, posting a decline only in the number of baptisms. In 1991, 13,142 baptisms were reported, and that number dropped to 12,924 last year, a decrease of 218 or 1.7 percent. But even that decrease was well below the SBC decrease of 7.3 percent.

In other categories, SBC black churches posted increases in:

- church membership, from 296,020 in 1991 to 312,483 in 1992, up 5.6 percent.
- discipleship training enrollment/participation, from 59,658 in 1991 to 67,194 in 1992, up 12.6 percent.
- ongoing music ministry enrollment, from 39,630 in 1991 to 43,533 in 1992, up 9.8 percent.
- ongoing WMU enrollment, from 27,491 in 1991 to 27,804 in 1992, up 1.1 percent.
- Brotherhood enrollment/participation, from 16,439 in 1991 to 18,079 in 1992, up 10 percent.
- total tithes, offerings and special gifts, from \$56,182,390 in 1991 to \$58,487,120 in 1992, up 4.1 percent.
- mission expenditures, from \$3,966,463 in 1991 to \$4,192,948 in 1992, up 5.7 percent.

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Eritrean, Ethiopian Christians
find healing at Texas retreat

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press
6/2/93

DALLAS (BP)--During the week Eritrea officially declared its independence from Ethiopia, about two dozen Eritrean Christians met at Mt. Lebanon Baptist Encampment near Dallas for training, fellowship and revival.

What they unexpectedly found was healing.

Sponsored by the church extension department of the Texas Baptist State Missions Commission, the retreat originally was intended for members of the two Southern Baptist Eritrean congregations in Dallas and Houston.

But as word spread about the meeting, Eritreans from missions and house churches in a half-dozen states and Canada came to the Dallas area for the retreat May 26-28.

Zelleke Alemu, Texas Baptist catalytic missionary to Ethiopians, led a Bible study during the final morning session of the retreat.

Texas Baptists provide financial support for Alemu and for multi-ethnic missions activities such as the Eritrean retreat through their gifts to the Mary Hill Davis Offering for State Missions.

Alemu, an Ethiopian who moved to the United States 10 years ago, used the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah as his text to bring a lesson on repentance, confession and restoration.

Speaking in his native language of Amharic, the dominant language in Ethiopia, Alemu candidly recalled the history of torture and bloodshed inflicted by his country, particularly during the Eritreans' 30-year struggle for independence.

In an emotionally charged moment, he confessed the sins of his countrymen and asked the forgiveness of his fellow Christians. The Eritreans responded with a spontaneous outpouring of tears, hugs, prayers and praise hymns.

"I didn't plan it for that purpose. The Lord just did it," Alemu said. "We need that kind of healing."

It especially was significant for the Eritreans, whose first language is Tigrinya, to hear honest confessions and heartfelt apologies in the language of their former oppressors, according to Ghebre Abraham, pastor of Emmanuel Eritrean Fellowship in Houston.

"For him to stand up and tell us, 'You are special. I love you. I want to serve you.' It was powerful," Abraham said.

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Although most Eritreans understand Amharic, they refuse to speak it because of its association with the hated Ethiopians. And the division between Eritreans and Ethiopians that existed in Africa carries over to North America, even among some Christians, Abraham said.

"There is a very powerful, very strong division. There has been so much bloodshed in our country," Abraham said. "That is why I was emotionally so very touched.

"Zelleke said he wants to be a missionary for us. He wants to be a servant for us. It is more than my mind can understand -- how one person can break down the barriers. It is the Lord who is healing us, gradually. It is the Lord moving among our people."

Hatred and bitterness is not an option for disciples of Jesus, according to Solomon Beraki, pastor of Gospel Light Eritrean Baptist Church in Dallas, who shared his testimony at the retreat.

Beraki was beaten mercilessly by Ethiopian authorities on several occasions and arrested four times for preaching the gospel, spending a total of two years in Ethiopian prisons.

"The first thing in my heart is a burden for lost souls. If I do not love the Ethiopians, I cannot preach the gospel," he said.

"It is true. The Ethiopians killed my brothers, burned our cities, even ripped the babies from the wombs of our pregnant women with bayonets. But they did it because they don't know Christ."

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Southeastern expands commitment
to schools in former Soviet bloc By Jon Walker

Baptist Press
6/2/93

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--For the third time in less than a year, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary has announced involvement with an educational institution in a former Soviet-block country.

Southeastern President Paige Patterson signed a pledge May 24 to cooperate with and mutually support the Emmanuel Baptist Bible Institute in Oradea, Romania, the largest theological institution in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Earlier in May Southeastern committed limited support to the St. Petersburg Theological Academy in Russia and in January began sending professors to teach courses at the International Academy of Modern Knowledge in Obninsk, Russia.

"We wanted to be linked with those educational institutions that have a real vision for reaching the lost people of the world, especially that part of the world that has been under the grasp of communism," Patterson said. "I believe Emmanuel Bible Institute will eventually be the most important stepping stone to the evangelization of Europe."

Southeastern's support of the Emmanuel Baptist Bible Institute will include sending professors on short-term teaching assignments, similar to the current agreement with the Obninsk academy, and to offer gifted Romanian students a place to complete their graduate-level work, Patterson said.

Students at Southeastern will benefit from this relationship because it will give them "an experience in Europe with a group that is very aggressive evangelistically," Patterson said.

Having just returned from Romania, Patterson said the churches there were "full and overflowing. In spite of the hardships they have endured, the Romanian people have maintained a sense of humor and a marvelous confidence and faith in the Lord."

Phil Roberts, co-director of the Drummond Center for Great Commission Studies at Southeastern, said there is a tremendous amount of enthusiasm for this agreement among the Romanian theological students, evidenced by their spontaneous standing ovation after the agreement was signed by Patterson and Joseph Tson, rector of the institute.

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"They were encouraged to know that a school like Southeastern would take the time to pray for them and to help them," Roberts said. "A lot of people come to Romania; they take pictures and make speeches, but they don't do a lot beyond that. This is the first time that an institution has gone on record saying, 'We will be a partner alongside of you.'"

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Ministry in Cajun region yields
pockets of committed believers By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
6/2/93

GOLDEN MEADOW, La. (BP)--Herman Callais keeps two nets in his truck. The Cajun commercial fisherman's first net is made of green nylon; his second is paper with a leather cover.

"This is my other net," Callais explains, holding out a French-language Bible. "With one I catch fish and the other I catch men."

The Southern Baptist pastor has preached the gospel in the French-culture region of southern Louisiana most of his life. Raised as a fisherman, he continues that work to support his ministry.

A pastor with another job is unusual here because the Catholic priest is the only familiar religious figure to many residents. But Southern Baptists have about 200 churches in the 22 parishes that make up Acadiana, Louisiana's French-culture region.

Long before Cuban migration to Miami made south Florida culturally distinct, southern Louisiana was already different from the rest of the country. With its pervasive French language and culture, much of Acadiana feels more French than American -- only with bayous and alligators, not rolling hills and farmland.

"This area, since 1700, has never melted in the melting pot," says Elie Woerner, language missions director for the Louisiana Baptist Convention and a native of France.

About one-quarter of the state's 4.2 million residents claim at least some French ancestry, says Marc David of the state's Council on the Development of French in Louisiana. "You've still got roughly 6 percent of the population that speaks French in the home."

In addition to unique music and cuisine, David notes that the rural lifestyle results in tightly knit families, with land passed down through generations.

Callais says, "You fight mosquitos; you fight gnats. But in spite of all that, for these people it's home."

Catholicism is strong here. Gov. Huey Long's education program of the 1920s and 1930s gave textbooks directly to children, not public schools, so students in Catholic schools could also benefit.

The Catholic influence and strong family ties make Southern Baptist work more difficult, says Woerner. "They may not be very strong Catholics, but it's a part of their culture."

Mission pastor Louis Charrier says, "We've seen some decisions but it's very hard to get them baptized."

Some believe their infant baptism by the Catholic Church is sufficient, says Charrier, who was raised in a French-speaking home. Others know they will be rebuked by their families if they are baptized into a Baptist church, he said. "My dad told me, 'We think you've been brainwashed.'"

The first Baptist missionary to the area was Adolphe Stagg, appointed by the Louisiana Baptist Convention in 1884.

Baptists' entry into traditionally Catholic areas caused turmoil, Woerner recounts. "In one town, there was a city ordinance stating that the only religion allowed in that town would be the Catholic religion. Now we have a strong Baptist church (there) with several missions."

In the 1930s Baptists started two schools for the Houma Indians. Lonnie Dardar, a 69-year-old Houma, recalls going to one of the schools at age 14 because he could not attend public school.

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After the Baptist schools arrived, a Catholic school opened for the Houmas, Dardar says. "Most people did stick with the Baptists," he says. "The way I see it, the Baptists have a free spirit for everyone."

Dardar made a profession of faith in school and in 1970 was licensed to preach.

In the 1960s, the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission bought a boat called "Brotherly Love" for a missionary so he could visit Ile de Jean Charles, an island inaccessible by car.

"When he got at the bend he would blow the horn and the people would know that he was going to the mission church to have a service," Woerner says.

Today, church starts in Acadiana have fewer resources than those elsewhere in the state. The 22 French-culture parishes have 30 percent of Louisiana's population but less than 15 percent of the state's Southern Baptist churches, according to U.S. Census and Uniform Church Letter figures.

"When you start a new French work, there's nothing," says Woerner. "You can't go to another church and use their building. We start in a home and then move into a rented building."

Newcomers are hard-pressed to gain acceptance from Acadiana residents, Woerner says. "They're very, very cautious of the foreigners. It'll take a year or two just to get them to look at you."

Another barrier to Baptists is summed up in the common phrase, "Laissez les bons temps rouler," or, "Let the good times roll."

"Many of them think if you become a Baptist you can't have a good time," Woerner says. "What really affects the way we present the gospel there is conveying the feeling that through Jesus Christ we can have the joy of life that every Cajun person wants to have."

Despite difficulties, the work pays good dividends when someone is reached for Christ, Charrier reminds. "The Cajun people are very hard-working, very industrious. Usually when they get saved they're very committed to their church and soul-winning."

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(BP) photo (vertical) of Callais and a graphic of the Acadiana region mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines available on SBCNet.

48 storefront ministries aim
to reach hurting adults, teens By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
6/2/93

JONESVILLE, La. (BP)--The hymns are traditional Southern Baptist as is the sermon from Romans. The location of the service and Tuesday morning timing, however, are less typical.

Instead of filing out the front door of this former hardware store after the closing prayer, visitors line up for their monthly bag of groceries at Breadcrumb Baptist Ministry Center.

More than 1,000 people visit here each month for programs ranging from after-school tutoring to food distribution, says director Jennie White.

Breadcrumb is one of 48 storefront ministry centers Louisiana Baptists use to reach primarily low-income residents. Almost one-quarter of the state's residents live in poverty, according to the 1990 U.S. Census.

Operated almost entirely by volunteers, storefronts recorded 1,089 professions of faith in 1992, says Arnold Norsworthy, director of Christian ministries for the Louisiana Baptist Convention. "It might not look like much, but it's church to those who come."

Combining Christian love with such social ministries as food closets and literacy lessons, Southern Baptists across the state have found a way to share Christ with those who would not darken their churches' doors, he says.

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"I think we have neglected this part of the population for a long time because we didn't know what to do with them," Norsworthy says. "I think every community in Louisiana has a pocket of need that's not being met by established churches."

Driven by that desire to see churches minister to all parts of their communities, Norsworthy began crossing the state in 1982 seeking churches to start storefronts

"They're not going to come to your church door, so why don't you provide a place for them to worship?" he recalls asking at countless pastors' conferences and WMU quarterly meetings. "We need to target those who wouldn't feel comfortable in your building but aren't reached."

In Jonesville, Breadcrumb started with White, a former third grade teacher who was taking seminary extension courses about weekday ministries. The center began with tutoring for children and has expanded to offer food, clothing, adult literacy classes, counseling and seminary extension classes.

"We want to provide the physical food, but we also want to provide the spiritual food and expect them to get both," says White.

In Epps, Tammy Sims was inspired to start The Care House after a mission trip to southern Louisiana.

"Jesus met the (physical) needs of the people and then he met their spiritual needs," she said. "That's what we're trying to do here."

The Care House offers clothes distribution, literacy training and Saturday morning Sunday school lessons. Last summer, the center attracted 75 kids to Big A Club, a WMU program for children not involved in church, and workers expect more this year.

"If I could do one thing it would be to put my arms around all those children," Sims said. "I want them to know that Jesus loves them, and we do too."

Not all storefronts target people in poverty. The Right Choice Teen Center in New Iberia, for example, offers support and encouragement to drug- and alcohol-dependent teens.

Called "the white angel" by drug dealers who remember her addiction days, director Amy Tessier says churches in other communities can also offer storefront centers to meet their residents' needs.

"There's not a reason that there can't be a center like this wherever there's a Southern Baptist to open the door," she says. "If we don't have the courage to take on the devil, he's going to win."

A brochure detailing how to begin a storefront ministry center is available from the Louisiana Baptist Convention. Information about particular ministries is available from state Baptist conventions or the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

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(BP) photo package of storefront ministry workers mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines available on SBCNet.

Mission church tries to reach,
then lose its 'captive' members By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
6/2/93

PINEVILLE, La. (BP)--Calling members of Beauregard Baptist Mission Church a captive audience is an understatement.

As inmates at Work Training Facility North, a minimum security prison, they have limited choices, including where they can worship.

Yet this facility has more than a chaplain and weekly Bible studies. Work Training Facility North has a full-fledged Southern Baptist mission church, complete with gospel choir, baptisms, discipleship and outreach.

"We don't have a big turnout for homecoming," jokes pastor Gregory Griffin. "Most pastors try to keep their members. We want ours to go home and never come back."

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The mission started more than three years ago, after Louisiana Baptist officials asked a prison director about starting a ministry to inmates. "All we wanted was the freedom to come in and offer worship services, and she said why don't you start a church?" says Arnold Norsworthy, Christian ministries director for the state convention.

Griffin, 32, was a truck driver before he began working with the inmates in 1989. "The warden told me that the most we could ever hope to have was 14 percent of the population," he recalls. "At times we've had 25 percent."

Sunday attendance averages 45 people, Griffin says, but that doesn't reveal the group's true impact. "Over the course of a year we reach at least 300."

Worship is a vibrant and learning experience, Griffin says. "They take the messages and they apply them to their lives," he says. "They come because they find strength here, they find peace here and Christian fellowship."

Members say the Beauregard mission church differs from chapel services at other facilities.

"The knowledge that you obtain here is greater than any you would obtain at any other facility," says Sam. (Prison officials asked that inmates' last names not be used.) Outreach among members is encouraged, he adds. "It's not unusual for us to go out on the yard and minister the Word of God."

New Christians are assigned a big brother to help with discipleship. Bible studies often last an hour and a half, Griffin says. "They put the average Sunday school class to shame."

Beauregard's choir also visits local churches, he says. "We set a lot of churches on fire when we go in them."

Paul, one of two members licensed to preach by the sponsoring Faith Baptist Church in Tioga, admits church members are sometimes ridiculed by other inmates, but he counts it as the cost of being a Christian.

"If we don't get any grief or persecution, I feel we are not doing the will of God," says Paul, who preached a three-day youth revival at Faith Baptist. "If the devil is not bothering me, something's wrong."

Most prisoners come here with less than two years remaining on their sentences, and Griffin says that's one reason the mission is successful. "When they get here, I think they're looking at getting their life together."

Griffin says he wants members to leave the prison and be able to transfer their church letter to another Southern Baptist church. "Since this is a transitional facility, I try to make it a transitional type of church."

The congregation will never outgrow mission status, Griffin says, but that hasn't deterred him from thinking long-term about the ministry here.

"If it was up to me, this would be my ministry for life," he says. "I call it a church with a hole in it, because we can't keep 'em in here, and I'm glad."

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(BP) photo (vertical) of Griffin mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines available on SBCNet.

Former prostitution house
belongs to house of worship

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
6/2/93

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--New Testament Baptist Mission turned a former lounge and house of ill-repute into a house of worship.

With the help of volunteer construction crews, the mission transformed the lounge into a sanctuary, complete with baptistry, offices, Sunday school rooms and a steeple.

The adjacent motel is boarded up but plans call for ministries to be housed in the rooms that used to rent for \$12 a night, said Emanuel Gumms, the mission pastor who remembers when the Red Carpet Motel and Lounge was an eyesore for the community.

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"Before, it was pure hell. Police used to have to come here, sometimes two, three times a night," he said. "This was one of the largest houses of prostitution on the west bank."

The mission church began in 1989 and purchased the property last June. Owners originally asked \$150,000 for the buildings and several adjacent lots, but the church eventually bought the complex for \$18,000, Gumms said. "It was all a miracle of divine grace."

Campers on Mission began work on the lounge in early January, and Bethesda Northside Baptist Church, near Baton Rouge, donated a steeple, he said.

After the mission church pays for the property and renovations, members hope to renovate the hotel to house a Christian day school and ministry center for the elderly and homeless, Gumms said. "Now that we have a church here, I've had people tell me they're going to move back."

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(BP) photo (horizontal) of Emanuel Gumms mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines available on SBCNet.

New Orleans church
bursting at the seams

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
6/2/93

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Every Sunday in the eighth ward of the city, people park as far as five blocks away to come to Franklin Avenue Baptist Church.

In a sanctuary that's bursting at the seams, members and guests occupy every available seat for two Sunday morning services at one of the state's fastest-growing Southern Baptist congregations.

"We can cram about 550, 600 people in the sanctuary," says pastor Fred Luter, who came to the predominately black church in 1982 when it was a mission congregation with 65 members.

Those arriving too late to sit in the sanctuary go to one of two overflow rooms, where the service is seen via closed-circuit television. Two years ago, members began a children's service, partly to free up seating space for adults, Luter says.

"In both our services, we're running approximately 1,400. If we had more room we'd probably have more," he says. "I do see us continuing to grow because I see us offering something unique in the black church."

Luter came to Franklin Avenue two years after the few remaining members of the Anglo congregation there gave their building to the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans for reaching the transforming community.

Although the mission targeted the growing black population, it wasn't having much success, Luter says.

"The membership dwindled and they'd been without a pastor for more than a year," he says. "They (association leaders) told me to go bury it or resurrect it."

Luter says he has three priorities for Franklin Avenue:

-- making the Bible the final authority. "I'd rather be right than popular," he says. "The Bible is the only thing that's going to make a difference in our lives."

-- emphasizing the accountability of leadership. "In a black church, they look at the pastor as this far from God," he says, holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

Luter says he has seen leaders at other churches "who are living a lie," and he reminds assistant pastors and other leaders at Franklin Avenue they are viewed by members as examples of how Christians should act. "If you get the head right, the body's going to follow."

-- discipling and developing black men. "When I got there, you couldn't count the black men on my hands. That's including deacons and everything," he says.

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"I figured that if we were going to be the church God wanted us to be, we were going to have to develop the black men," he continues. "If you have a spiritually strong man, you're going to have a spiritually strong family. If you have a spiritually strong family, you're going to have a spiritually strong church. If you have a spiritually strong church, you're going to have a spiritually strong neighborhood."

His first outreach tool to men was an invitation to watch pay-per-view boxing matches at his home. "They got to meet me away from the church and they got to see, 'This guy is real.'" The church now has a large number of black men attending.

Franklin Avenue became autonomous in 1988 and now sponsors three mission congregations. It baptized 141 people last year and could lead the state this year, says Richard Farley, church planter strategist for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans.

Members offer 23 ministries that change as necessary, says Luter. "Whenever we find a ministry that will meet a need in people's lives, we do it."

The church bought land recently for a new building, he says. "We want to build a facility that will seat anywhere from 2,500 to 3,000."

The church's success hasn't been without tension, he adds, citing criticism from black pastors of other denominations for belonging to the predominately white Southern Baptist Convention.

"I've been called Uncle Tom. I've been called a puppet on a string," he says. "I just recognize the hand of the enemy Satan just trying to divide the people of God even more. In my conscience, I know that I'm doing what I think God wants me to do."

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(BP) photo (horizontal) of Luter mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines available on SBCNet.

Cowboy-turned-church-starter
doesn't want a parsonage

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
6/2/93

GOLDEN HARVEST, Wash. (BP)--Residents around here probably don't know the difference between Southern Baptists and Lutherans. But church starter Cliff Billings says that doesn't stop them from being spiritually hungry.

"They're not interested in being a good Baptist, they're interested in being a good Christian," says Billings, 45, a former cowboy who "backslid" from God but returned to start two Southern Baptist works in nearby Roosevelt and Patterson.

Both towns along the Columbia River have about 100 residents, mostly farmers and ranchers with a strong sense of independence, mixed with a healthy dose of skepticism, Billings says.

"These little communities in the Northwest do not trust, do not like outsiders," he says. "They pride themselves on being self-reliant."

But they are interested in the Bible, even though neither had a church before he arrived, Billings says. "People in Patterson and Roosevelt are excited about God moving in their midst."

Billings represents the kind of indigenous leaders needed to reach the Northwest's lonely farming and ranching communities for Christ, says Bevan McWhirter, director of new church extension for the Northwest Baptist Convention.

"He's one of them," McWhirter says simply to explain the receptiveness of these usually reclusive towns. "Beyond that, God's just doing something we can't explain."

Billings used to be a jail chaplain, but he says the pressures got so rough he took time off to do cowboy work and never went back. He says he considers a ranching accident as a call from God.

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"On my way to the barn, I felt like the Lord was talking to me, asking me when I was coming back," he recalls. "I told him I wasn't coming back, and the moment I did that I remembered distinctly what it was like not to have the Holy Spirit in my life."

Later that day, a roping accident caused his horse to fall on him, shattering his pelvis. Despite the pain, Billings says he knew God was still with him.

"I realized that God was still dealing in my life, and I started rejoicing," he said. "I was happy to even have an angry God working in my life."

He left cowboy work and returned to a former trade as a carpenter, but he found no churches in the towns where he worked.

"I was a little bit angry with God that he had brought me to repentance and didn't have an avenue to express it," he said. "I couldn't get it out of my mind that they didn't have a church or Bible study, and then it became obvious that God wanted me to do it."

Last September, he started services in Patterson and Roosevelt, with mixed results.

The Patterson service has done well, averaging 35 people during the first six months, he says. Roosevelt's service started with about 14 and dwindled to a handful before Billings changed the format to a Bible study.

"Once we started on the Bible studies on a personal level, we started getting real results," he says. "They're getting excited about discipleship, soul-winning and about serving the Lord."

Convention officials have been pleasantly surprised in what McWhirter calls a refreshingly simple approach.

"I think Cliff's been a little amazed that we've been amazed," McWhirter says, recalling a time when he asked Billings why he started the new works. "He looked at me like I wasn't too smart. And then he just said, 'God told me to.'"

Billings says a highly structured approach to church starting, with building programs, a paid pastor and parsonage would be too complex for the small towns of the Northwest.

"It wouldn't take me long to outpace Christianity in Roosevelt or Patterson," he says. "If we're going to reach the Northwest, we're going to have to reach them in a different manner than we've been trying."

Cowboys can come to the services in the summer but are too busy in the winter. For farmers, it's vice-versa, Billings says.

"What we have in these two towns is a moving target," he says. "If I just let them go 'till next fall, I'll probably lose half of them at least."

Billings talks of training leaders at each ranch or farm to conduct Bible studies. "Just because they cannot make it to the assemblies should not mean that they're not having church. It shouldn't mean that they're not being disciplined."

Being bivocational is vital to his ministry, he adds. "If I went as a full-time paid pastor, that's all they would see. They know that I'm not out here to get their money. I'm out to see Christ change their hearts."

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(BP) photo (horizontal) of Billings mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines available on SBCNet.

Missouri delegation meets
with atheist religion chief

By Philip Poole

Baptist Press
6/2/93

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BP)--Religious freedom has come to the republic of Belarus -- along with some of the potential problems of such freedom, according to Aleksei Zelske, chairman of the Council of Religions for the Belarussian republic.

Zelske, a professed atheist responsible for developing relationships between the government and church groups in the former Soviet republic, told a Baptist delegation, "The time for religious freedom is very good in our country."

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"For so many years the church was restricted but that time has passed and will never return. The freedom that was announced was very good, but now we must know to use the freedom and to put it into practice."

The Baptist delegation, which included representatives of the Missouri Baptist Convention and the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, the Belarussian Baptist organization, met with Zelske in April.

Zelske, who has developed a positive working relationship with Ivan Bukatyi, president of the Baptist union, said Baptists are not alone in taking advantage of the newfound freedom. "Some Western 'missionaries' have created problems because of their false teachings," he said. "All officially recognized organizations come to us for answers, but we must say that we can't do anything because of the religious freedom."

Zelske said it is difficult to respond to people when they ask, "What good is the freedom if it does damage to us?"

He said his goal is to develop some laws to restrict the influence of groups with "false teachings" without undercutting the religious freedom of officially recognized religious organizations.

"We must spend a lot of energy to put the old behind us and to develop fresh ideas for the future," Zelske said.

The religion minister praised Bukatyi and Belarussian Baptists for their initiatives in social ministry. Bukatyi has announced plans for a Baptist complex to include a training center and housing for senior adults and orphans.

"We agree with this good idea," Zelske said. "This is the first time when a church has decided to take care of these problems."

Zelske also affirmed the concept of a proposed partnership between Missouri and Belarussian Baptists.

"I know this is a short-term project," he said, "but we believe our difficulties are short-term. We hope that with the help of the world, we will overcome our difficulties."

Zelske acknowledged any religious reformation would experience problems. "Our desire is to have good relationships with other countries and to be included in the religious work of world society," he said. "We don't want always to be beggars."

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Potential U.S. link could boost
Belarussians' ministry efforts By Philip Poole

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BP)--As the doors of religious freedom have swung open, Baptists in the republic of Belarus have taken their first steps of religious freedom in nearly seven decades.

But, unlike those of a small child first learning to walk, their steps have become almost a gallop to make up for lost time.

Their pace was evident to six Missouri Baptist Convention representatives who visited the former Soviet republic for a series of listening and planning sessions with Belarussian Baptist leaders in April -- the first step in developing a multi-year partnership mission project.

The Missouri group used Minsk as a base of operations to learn more about Baptist work in Belarus and needs the proposed partnership might target. The city is the capital of the republic and central seat of government for the Commonwealth of Independent States, a loosely formed alliance of former Soviet republics.

During the visit, the Missourians met with representatives of the Evangelical Union of Christians-Baptists and with Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board workers Dan and Libby Panter, Mississippi natives who transferred from Togo to Belarus two years ago.

Panter said Belarussian Baptists are "excited and supportive of Southern Baptist missionary work because they have become disillusioned with groups that come and stay a week but then are never heard from again."

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At least 800 different religious groups, sects and cults currently are working in the former Soviet republics, Panter said, making them a "highly competitive market."

The Missouri group saw a new "Baptist complex" being developed under the leadership of the union's president, Ivan Bukatyi, to include offices, a training center and housing for senior adults and orphans.

Workers have gone into forests to cut trees for lumber for the Baptist facility. Other building materials have been purchased and are stacked around the construction site. Workers were busy with temporary buildings for people who will construct the new complex when funds are available.

Don Wideman, Missouri Baptist Convention executive director, in meetings with Belarussian Baptist leaders, emphasized Missouri Baptists' role in a partnership: "We consider you our equals in every way, inferior in no way and superior in some ways. We do not intend to come as supervisors or directors to take over the work of Belarussian Baptists. If there are ways we can help, we are interested in working with you."

Several Belarussian representatives reviewed the work in their regions and talked about specific needs. Each shared stories of unfinished church buildings, new congregations and turning children away from overcrowded Sunday school classes.

The Missourians said they never sensed the Belarussians were expecting assistance in any way. In fact, the senior pastor of the Grodno region emphasized that point.

"The problems and needs we have, we must solve on our own," said Paul Rudoy. "But we are glad that you have chosen to come here."

Joseph Rachkovsky, assistant pastor of the Minsk church and a union vice president, cited the need for expanding Sunday school to reach older youth and young adults. "With the freedom we have experienced since the coup, we would like to embrace everything and everybody but we don't have enough facilities and financial support," he said.

Rachkovsky also targeted use of mass communications as an evangelistic outreach tool but said funds and equipment are not available. "If we delay this project, groups with false teachings will take over," he said. "Baptists need to be the first with this project."

Alvin Rachkovsky, senior pastor in the Gomel region in southern Belarus, told the group about the effects of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster on his region.

"People in my area receive the gospel message better because they know their life is in danger," Rachkovsky said. "We don't dare to try to solve the physical problems of Chernobyl because we are busy with the spiritual needs."

Although some medical assistance is coming to the region, it is not being funneled through churches. "Medical help will help us reach people in an evangelistic way," he said.

Focusing more on the need for Sunday schools and church buildings than the effects of Chernobyl, Rachkovsky said people are being turned away because of a lack of space.

"I have a desire for Missouri Baptist churches to help us finish our church buildings," Rachkovsky said. "We are very glad that you came to us with this same desire. Your support can do a lot here and a lot of souls can be gained for the kingdom of God."

"What I thought about us doing before we went to Belarus was affected by our going," Wideman later said in an interview. "Our priorities were not their priorities."

During June, MBC leaders will discuss the visit's potential impact on a Missouri-Belarus partnership, Wideman said, and strategies will be developed for ways Missouri Baptists might meet the multiple needs of Belarussian Baptists. Formal recommendations for the partnership will be presented to the MBC executive board in July. If approved, they will be presented Oct. 26 for ratification by messengers to the 1993 MBC annual meeting.

S.C. editor Jones
dead at age 92

GREENVILLE, S.C. (BP)--Samuel Hovey Jones, 92, died May 23. He was editor of the Baptist Courier, newsjournal of South Carolina Baptists, from 1948 until his retirement in 1966.

Jones was president of Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., from 1943-48 and also had taught religion at Judson College in Marion, Ala.

He was a graduate of Furman University in Greenville, S.C, studied at the Yale Divinity School and received the doctor of theology degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

He was president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention in 1955 and of the Southern Baptist Press Association in 1962.

He published his autobiography, "Four Score and More Years," in 1982.

Survivors include four children, 10 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

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