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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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October 7, 1993

93-169

MOSCOW -- Russian officials assure Baptists of bright future.  
OKLAHOMA -- Oklahoma business team witnesses Russian struggle.  
MISSOURI -- Quarter-mile of pennies fulfills deceased boy's wish.  
MISSISSIPPI -- Gambling opponents form new national coalition.  
MISSISSIPPI -- State WMU's relief team ready for the next disaster.  
IOWA -- Even without carpentry skills, she aided rebuilding project.  
ATLANTA -- Television series making impact on nation's youth.

Russian officials assure  
Baptists of bright future

By Marty Groll

Baptist Press  
10/7/93

MOSCOW (BP)--As the Russian Parliament building still smoldered five miles away, officials loyal to President Boris Yeltsin assured Russian Baptists Oct. 5 that their churches will play a key role in creating a new, free society.

The government overtures to the 29th Russian Baptist Congress came as a marked departure from recent rebuffs to Baptists and other evangelicals by another branch of the government -- the now-defunct Parliament.

"We are now trying to overcome our past ideology, and we now stand before great possibilities," said Vladimir Shumejka, first deputy prime minister of Russia, in a prepared statement to the Baptist congress.

"Great changes in our society have created equal rights for all (religious) confessions in the nation. Christianity is a great support and a great hope," he said.

While soldiers, tanks and armored vehicles still roamed the streets of Moscow hunting down snipers the evening of Oct. 5, Kremlin representative Michailov Genrich helped open the congress of 1,000 Russian Baptists in Moscow by telling them Baptists were well-known within the government.

Russia is "becoming a civilized nation with great effort," he added. "Your contribution for spiritual revival and for social service is great."

The deputy prime minister's statement, read by Genrich, promised Baptists they would "make a big contribution in ... the spiritual revival of society. We know your spiritual activity. But we know your social activity will help those who need it."

In another prepared statement, Yeltsin adviser Sergei Stankevich asked that "members of your churches ... continue to work for the benefit of our country and for democracy. I share with you hope for the revival of Russia.

"Your work in hospitals, and in homes for the elderly and handicapped, find full support from the government and from society," he added. "On behalf of the leadership of the Russian Federation, I tell you that we highly appreciate your contribution."

The expression of appreciation heartened Baptists, who had little success in trying to influence former government leaders.

Since April, Parliament had brushed off attempts by evangelicals to change a proposed law that would have limited their right to worship and kept them from inviting foreign missionaries to help spread the gospel.

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The law would have helped the Russian Orthodox Church retake some of the power it held before communists overran the country in 1917 and began attacking the church by murder, exile and KGB infiltration. The Parliament committee that drafted the law and its revisions squelched Baptist input.

The officials' remarks to the Baptist congress, in contrast, signal the winding down of an era of persecution and recognition by power brokers that Russian Baptists -- who number in the hundreds of thousands -- are here to stay.

Until now, Kremlin officials have been boxed in by an alliance of sorts between the powerful ruling class in Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. Orthodox leaders threatened to publicly oppose Yeltsin if he refused to agree to the religious liberty limits, first proposed in April.

But Yeltsin finally put the lawmakers out of business by force Oct. 4 after Parliament hard-liners mounted an armed insurrection, using their chambers in the Russian White House as a command post.

Earlier Yeltsin had suspended the constitution and dismissed Parliament -- both holdovers from the former Soviet Union. Rebel lawmakers led by Chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov responded by impeaching Yeltsin and electing Vice President Alexander Rutskoi in his place.

Anti-Yeltsin forces in Parliament and the court system -- representing a power structure of communists, military fascists and voices calling for a restoration of the Soviet Union -- had ruled invalid a people's referendum in April to elect a new Parliament and write a new constitution.

The new constitution, being drafted by representatives outside Parliament, reportedly will establish free-market economics and the right to free thought. Both ideas threaten the ruling class in Russia, which, before the demise of the Soviet Union, controlled the nation's money supply, the government and the Russian Orthodox hierarchy.

In conjunction with the congress, Baptists celebrated the realization of two long-held dreams: a new seminary and a new Baptist center in Moscow.

After years of broken promises by government agencies under communism, the Moscow Baptist Theological Seminary finally became official with the presentation of its first 17 students Oct. 3 and the first meeting of its board of directors Oct. 5.

Dedication officially took place during the Sunday evening service Oct. 3 in the Moscow Central Baptist Church. There, for many decades, Baptists uttered tearful prayers for such a school to train Baptist preachers. In the 1960s Baptists began filling the need through a correspondence course program.

Classes will meet for the first two years in the new five-story building of the Russian Baptist union. About 300 people attended the dedication ceremonies for that building, a long-time dream of Vasily Logvinenko. Congress members recognized Logvinenko, who is retiring after a long term as president of the union.

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Stanley Crabb, in Moscow for the Baptist congress, contributed to this story. He directs European Baptist Press Service.

Oklahoma business team  
witnesses Russian struggle

By Marty O'Gwynn

Baptist Press  
10/7/93

SHAWNEE, Okla. (BP)--Ten Southern Baptists working under the auspices of Oklahoma Baptist University-Global Options saw the latest chapter of Russia's continuing political struggle unfold before their eyes.

The group's Moscow apartments are only three blocks from Russia's White House, the scene of unrest in recent days.

"Our people are safe. They are using a lot of good judgment," said John Cragin, OBU-GO coordinator. "They are in good spirits and acting as a team."

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Speaking from his office at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Cragin said OBU-GO officials keep in daily contact with the team in Russia. OBU-GO and a Russian educational organization are partners in the creation of the Moscow Economics School, a K-12 private school dedicated to teaching free market economics that opened in the Russian capital this fall.

The OBU-GO representatives, who have made long-term commitments to work in Moscow, arrived in Russia in late July. In addition to operating the school, OBU-GO personnel are establishing a business consulting center in Moscow.

Cragin said the Americans "could feel the gunfire" as they stayed in their apartments during the Oct. 4 battle in which Russian President Boris Yeltsin's troops took control of the parliament building.

"Our people are well stocked with food and supplies, and they are in contact with the U.S. Embassy four to six times a day," he said. In addition to their personal observation and embassy contact, the OBU-GO representatives are receiving frequent updates from their Russian colleagues.

Meanwhile, OBU-GO officials in Shawnee keep in regular contact with the U.S. State Department. Cragin said he tries to keep communication with the Moscow team to a minimum to avoid tying up communication lines. The team had communicated with him three times Oct. 4, twice by phone and once by fax. Cragin talked with a team member shortly after Yeltsin's opponents had surrendered to army forces.

OBU-GO representatives were prepared for possible unrest in Russia before they departed Oklahoma.

"We knew that the Russian situation was unstable," Cragin said. "We had procedures in place for dealing with a situation just like this. Now we are using that training."

In addition to following their own guidelines, Cragin said the team is relying on broad-based prayer support stateside.

"We have Global Partner groups in five states who are providing financial and prayer support for OBU-GO," Cragin said.

Cragin accompanied the group to Moscow in July to coordinate arrangements for opening the Moscow Economics School. The school's curriculum includes free enterprise education, teaching English as a second language and Christian studies.

OBU-GO was established in the summer of 1993 to manage international service and missions projects that would be staffed primarily by Oklahoma Baptist University students, faculty, staff and alumni. The university's growing international involvements has resulted in increased requests for service by OBU faculty and graduates. That increased demand led to creation of the separate OBU-GO nonprofit corporation.

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Quarter-mile of pennies  
fulfills deceased boy's wish    By Susan Thornsberry

Baptist Press  
10/7/93

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BP)--Twelve-year-old Grady Duncan would have been thrilled to see his idea accomplished. His church laid out a quarter-mile of pennies collected as missions offering during this summer's Vacation Bible School.

Just days after sharing the idea with his pastor last May, and only two days before he was to take part in state Children's Bible Drill, the sixth grader was killed when he stepped from behind his school bus to get the mail and was hit by an oncoming car.

During funeral services at Pleasant Hill Baptist Church near Jefferson City, pastor Glenn Scott eulogized Grady as a very caring young man who, together with a friend, had thought of a unique way to encourage VBS giving to missions -- collecting pennies to lay out a quarter-mile of the coins.

"It seems fitting from a boy who would always go the extra mile to help others," Scott said.

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Word of the missions project spread, and the idea was embraced by many others in the surrounding Brazito-Eugene area who began collecting pennies and sending them to the church in memory of Grady.

During the church's week of Vacation Bible School, the missions offering, exclusively from the children and youth, totaled 52,500 pennies -- \$525. That was more than twice what was needed to make the quarter-mile of pennies possible.

VBS Family Night featured church members working together to lay out the course of pennies, just like Grady and his friend, Tre Scott, had envisioned.

The project also helped Grady's friends begin to work through the grieving process, noted Tre's mother, Jane Scott. "It made it easier to talk about Grady's death, because we were all working together toward something."

Grady's mother said he would have been pleased.

"If Grady could have been here to see all these pennies, I think he would have been speechless and excited," said Pam Duncan. "Like all 12-year-olds, he was always looking for ways to make some money."

"When Grady and Tre came up with the idea to collect money for Vacation Bible School, the first thing Grady did was to come home and ask what he could do around the house to make money. His only stipulation was that he be paid in pennies. Grady's pennies were put in with the rest of the pennies. That's what he would have wanted."

The quarter-mile course consisted of 21,120 pennies. When it was completed, pastor Scott presented Tre with one of the pennies in memory of his good friend.

Grady's mother received the final penny, fixed as a pendant, so she could wear it, remembering what a caring son she had to care about people and missions.

Nearby, large mounds of pennies sent to the church surrounded a pear tree given in memory of Grady and planted by the Royal Ambassadors boys earlier this year. The community donated \$1,341.50 toward a Grady Duncan memorial scholarship fund to be used to help send children to church camp.

Mike Duncan, Grady's father, also appreciated the significance of the project.

This "means a lot ... that the community, churches and schools have all sort of banded together to make Grady's dream come true," he told interviewing television crews that evening.

"You never know what kind of impact your Christian walk can have on the people around you until something like this happens," Mrs. Duncan said. "Grady was a Christian young man and loved the Lord, and all his friends knew it. To me as a mother, that says it all."

"We are very proud of our son and the things that he accomplished while on this earth. He is in a far better place now, but we miss him very, very much."

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Thornsberry is a correspondent for Missouri Baptists' Word & Way newsjournal.

Gambling opponents form  
new national coalition

By William H. Perkins Jr.

Baptist Press  
10/7/93

PASS CHRISTIAN, Miss. (BP)--The wave of gambling fever that seems to be overtaking the country has prompted the birth of the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling.

Anti-gambling forces from across the country gathered at the behest of the Mississippi Baptist Convention's Christian Action Commission Sept. 24 to organize a solid front against the rush to legalize gambling in virtually all areas of the United States.

A steering committee of the new coalition will meet Nov. 1 to: 1) formalize a point of contact for other anti-gambling groups, inviting them to join the coalition, 2) to provide a clearinghouse of materials and 3) to discuss further meetings to address different ways gambling is being pushed across the country.

Also, the coalition scheduled its next annual meeting Sept. 22-23, 1994, at Pigeon Forge, Tenn.

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Larry Braidfoot, academic vice president and provost at William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Miss., battled gambling for years while working at the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. He warned of the long-term consequences of turning to gambling for short-term solutions, and he named two major villains.

"One is the gaming industry that siphons off dollars, and the other is the state, which is engaging in 35-40 percent taxation on leisure spending. Sooner or later, ... businesses will realize they are the losers," he said.

Braidfoot described the state of mind that allows legalization of gambling to gain a foothold in local areas and said legalized gambling is "an enormous lie perpetrated to take advantage of victims."

"People are deluded; they think this an opportunity, when they have been selected as a dumping ground. This is a 'sucker' mentality," he said.

John Landrum, who gave up a Southern Baptist pastorate on the Mississippi Gulf coast to start the Chaplain to the Mississippi Beach ministry, and his wife, Linda, minister to casino workers and the gamblers themselves at numerous casinos that have opened since gambling there was legalized several years ago.

Expressing strong disapproval for gambling in any form, Landrum said, "Don't mistake our enthusiasm for this ministry as acceptance of the industry. If you set up this kind of ministry, you will be misunderstood."

Churches have varying perspectives on gambling because of diverse traditions, and many have "turned their backs" on people involved in the gambling industry, according to Landrum.

Critics have even questioned his motives in starting the ministry, he added.

Landrum said he has developed a special technique for ministering to casino employees and gamblers. "If you attempt to tell them they are wrong, you've closed the door. Christians already know they're wrong, and non-Christians don't have any idea they are doing wrong," he explained.

Landrum said he is not allowed to distribute tracts but does hand out a lot of business cards from which many follow-up calls come.

Many of the calls are referred to Gamblers Anonymous, which was once struggling to maintain one chapter on the Mississippi Gulf coast but will soon open its fourth chapter because of the spiraling number of problem gamblers, he said.

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State WMU's relief team  
ready for next disaster

By William H. Perkins Jr.

Baptist Press  
10/7/93

JACKSON, Miss. (BP)--They're trained, equipped and ready. All they need now is a disaster.

Actually, they aren't wishing for disaster to befall anyone, but members of the Mississippi Woman's Missionary Union disaster relief team are ready to hit the road whenever the call does come -- and they know it will.

"This is the dream of many women across the state who want to go in the first wave of disaster relief volunteers but have not been able to do so because there were no sleeping and support facilities for women," said Marjean Patterson, WMU department director at Mississippi Baptist Convention Board.

All that changed earlier this year with WMU's acquisition of a new 32-foot Itasca motor coach, fully self-contained and optimized for the demands of long-term disaster relief. The unit -- likely the first purchased by a state WMU organization -- can accommodate up to 10 workers and includes a trailer that can be towed behind the motor coach to hold luggage, support equipment and supplies.

Patterson said the women's unit will work in tandem with the Mississippi Brotherhood department, which has lead responsibility for disaster relief by the state convention. Women workers have been trained by Brotherhood personnel and are on call for the next disaster, she added.

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"We've been on standby twice -- during the Midwest flooding and Hurricane Emily," Patterson said. Women volunteers are needed in all areas, including but not limited to nursing, child care, counseling, clothing distribution and food service, she pointed out.

Numerous other state WMU organizations, while not owning a vehicle, also have been involved in such relief ministries.

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Even without carpentry skills,  
she aided rebuilding project

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press  
10/7/93

WEST DES MOINES, Iowa (BP)--Janice Smith went to Iowa with everything volunteers need to rebuild homes. Everything except carpentry skills.

Smith, an instructor at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Wash., had time off work, the desire to serve, prayer support from her home church, an eagerness to share her faith and a first aid kit.

Although fellow workers laughed at her purple tool box, she cleared debris and removed household furnishings destroyed by the flood. She cleaned up after the skilled workers so they could spend time on other projects. She also learned to install insulation.

The work was tiring, Smith said. Mosquitoes were everywhere and the air smelled of mildew and backed up sewers. In some ways winter will help volunteers, she said, as it kills mosquitoes and hardens the mud.

Smith said she was motivated to stay at the task because she had numerous opportunities to share her testimony with shopkeepers and people on the street.

She also knew fellow members of Community Baptist Church in Bellingham were involved in "serious prayer" on her behalf during her entire trip. Church members showed their concern by loading her car with linens to give people in Iowa.

This is the third summer Smith has spent time in mission projects. She described the trips as "sobering" experiences when she re-examines her priorities, as well as times "when God really blesses."

Others question why she doesn't spend her vacation time resting. She says being a volunteer is "the right thing to do. The thought that I didn't go lay on the beach somewhere didn't occur to me."

Smith was assigned to West Des Moines through the Home Mission Board's disaster relief office. To volunteer, call 1-800-4SBC-AID. The office is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time.

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Television series making  
impact on nation's youth

By James Dotson

Baptist Press  
10/7/93

ATLANTA (BP)--The profiles in a new TV series, "The Winning Edge," begin with an introduction of a successful young athlete by a well-known personality, followed by an interview and video of the athlete in action. The segments could be standard fare on a Saturday afternoon sports magazine television show, focusing on the importance of dedication and perseverance in achieving goals.

But the profiles also include a different twist: The "winning edge" alluded to in the series title is none other than a saving faith in Jesus Christ. And the young athletes and other achievers proclaim the message proudly, serving as a role model for children and youth in an age when positive Christian role models are all but absent from television.

The 13-part series, created by Diane Preston-Reilly of Atlanta, now has a nationwide audience every Saturday afternoon at 2 p.m. on the Trinity Broadcasting Network. But Preston-Reilly said the difficulties she has encountered in getting the series aired on secular cable networks illustrate the need for more Christian involvement in using television to plant a positive message in impressionable young minds.

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"It's not just faith in the Lord," she said of the program's impact, "but there are values there for kids to hang on to, to construct their life around. It shows the discipline and hard work it takes to achieve one's goals, and it emphasizes the specific talents that God has given these kids."

Preston-Reilly, a member of Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Atlanta, is president of Challenger Films, a small Atlanta-based company that is home for The Winning Edge.

Preston-Reilly said she discovered the power of television in influencing young minds while teaching school in the early 1970s.

"As the kids were coming to the classroom, all they were talking about was what was on television the night before," Preston-Reilly said. So she began using the medium as a learning tool. "I decided in order to reach these kids, the best way to get the message across is through the media. And I decided the messages I wanted to get across to them, I would put in the media format."

Her doctoral research in the late 1970s focused further on the impact of television, proving the strong link between television and moral development. "The research was just so indicting with respect to television," she said.

In 1980 she formed the nonprofit Challenger Films as a vehicle for applying what she had learned. She then settled on the basic format for The Winning Edge: a celebrity host introducing a relatively unknown young high achiever, often, but not always, an athlete. In this case, the moral development would be positive.

The first profiles aired on the Christian Broadcasting Network in 1982. She also developed a 12-week discipleship program for use in churches that used the profiles to drive the points home. The program was another application of her research, which she said had demonstrated that "a short film following a discussion brings more learning retention than just showing a film or just lecturing."

Later, the concept for the TV series began to develop. From discussions with a former top network executive, she learned the best approach would be independent cable networks. But because the message of her programs was unique, she was advised to line up all of her sponsorship ahead of time. She did, eventually securing commitments from such top names as Domino's Pizza, Coca-Cola and Wrigley's chewing gum. But finding a network to air the programs was not so easy.

Her first attempts were with Turner Broadcasting System, where officials told her in 1989 that although they were impressed with the production value of the series, they were not sure it meshed with the "Turner philosophy." After a nationwide letter-writing campaign of support for the series, the network agreed to schedule the program at 11:30 p.m. on Sundays, she said, but the earliest opening would be in 1991, two years away. She began looking elsewhere.

She approached most of the major cable networks with little success, then finally settled on ESPN, which agreed to air part of the series. Eventually, the network chose to air six of the profiles re-edited into two episodes. (Each episode has three profiles.) But Preston-Reilly said it became clear the network was avoiding profiles with the strongest Christian testimony. Meanwhile, another two years had passed and attempts to get further episodes aired were unsuccessful.

It was then that she turned to Christian networks. The Inspirational Network, (formerly the PTL network) was the first to air the series this summer. But the big break came with the scheduling on TBN, which has a large network of broadcast stations and cable affiliates reaching most of the country.

But Preston-Reilly said she has not given up on the secular TV market; she recently began attacking the problem from a different approach. Instead of dealing with the networks, she now hopes to have programs aired on individual TV stations in the 16 major U.S. television markets. Several cities already are committed with sponsorships, and in each state she has local representatives working to secure the programming in their areas.

After the years of struggle, she said she is happy to see the programs making an impact.

"I just turn on my television and it's there, and it's in every major market. I just praise God for it," she said.

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