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January 26, 1994

94-14

FLORIDA -- Correction.
DALLAS -- Baptist relief workers begin mass food production in Calif.
ATLANTA -- Surgeon general urges churches to health care leadership role.
ATLANTA -- L.A. pastor says silence contributes to violence.
FLORIDA -- Florida church will appeal judge's ruling on records.
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ARKANSAS -- Mississippi River Ministry church reaches needy kids; photo.
VERMONT -- Samaritan Connection's 230 vols bring aid, smiles in New England;
photo.
NASHVILLE -- Correction.

CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "SBC officials approve Disney, specials for SBC in Orlando," dated 1/25/94, please replace the 7th paragraph (Ticket order forms ...) with the following paragraph:

Ticket order forms are available by writing the SBC Executive Committee, 901 Commerce St., Suite 750, Nashville, TN, 37203 or calling 615-244-2355 to ask for the order form.

Thanks,
Baptist Press

Baptist relief workers begin
mass food production in Calif.

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press
1/26/94

DALLAS (BP)--Texas, Oklahoma and Mississippi Baptist disaster relief teams were preparing 50,000 meals Jan. 25 for earthquake-stricken Southern Californians, and the American Red Cross had requested 80,000 meals for the next day.

After four days of working at far below their food serving capacity in Santa Clarita, Calif., Texas Baptist volunteers were asked by Red Cross to join forces with Oklahoma and Mississippi workers at the ARC mass care headquarters at the Van Nuys, Calif., airport on Jan. 25.

Red Cross officials wanted the Baptists in a single controlled, secure area where they could mass produce meals that then could be distributed by ARC emergency response vehicles throughout the quake-ravaged area, according to Jim Burton, national off-site disaster relief coordinator for the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission.

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The Texas Baptist Disaster Relief Mobile Unit -- a specially equipped 18-wheeler -- has a field kitchen capable of producing more than 35,000 meals per day.

Since setting up emergency food service Jan. 20 on a Kmart parking lot in Santa Clarita, about three miles north of a collapsed section of Interstate 5, Texas volunteers had averaged cooking about 5,000 meals each day -- all that five Red Cross emergency response vehicles could deliver.

Red Cross had 50 ERVs available to work out of the Van Nuys center on Jan. 25, and 30 additional vehicles were on their way, Burton said.

Louisiana Baptist volunteers -- en route to California on Jan. 25 -- were expected to continue the small-scale food service at Santa Clarita begun by the Texans.

Missouri Baptists were expected to continue working out of the Junior High School in Fillmore, Calif. The California Baptist Disaster Relief Mobile Unit was stationed at the Valley Red Cross Center in Van Nuys, and a smaller regional California rig was at Shepherd of the Hills Church in Porter Ranch.

Two tilt skillets from Arkansas Baptists were being sent to California to increase food service capacity.

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Surgeon general urges churches
to health care leadership role By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
1/26/94

ATLANTA (BP)--Integration, not separation, of church and state is needed to resolve America's health care problems, the U.S. surgeon general told 150 religious leaders.

"You've got power, prestige and positions of influence. We've got scientific knowledge and no power. We need your leadership to get things done," Joycelyn Elders said during an interfaith meeting in Atlanta Jan. 23-25.

The meeting was sponsored by the Interfaith Health Program of the Carter Center, an Atlanta-based public policy institute led by former President Jimmy Carter.

Elders said her brother, a United Methodist minister, made her aware of an informal network of ministers when she tried to start school-based health clinics in Arkansas. She credited the ministers' support, in part, for changes in the Arkansas health system, including a reduction in teen pregnancies.

Churches can be involved in preventive medicine by becoming partners with public health agencies, Elders said.

Fred Loper, physician and Southern Baptist home missionary, affirmed the need for churches to cooperate with other groups to provide health care. Most churches do not have the professional staff or the financial resources to independently address health needs, noted Loper, a conference participant.

During another session, participants discussed potential conflicts in church and health department partnerships. Two examples were church support of sexual abstinence outside marriage and criticism of drug abuse while some health departments distribute condoms and promote needle exchanges to lessen transmission of the virus that causes AIDS.

Congregations should wrestle with the issues to develop their response, said Dwight Jackson, pastor of Webster Groves Baptist Church in Webster Groves, Mo. If churches do not address health concerns, "solutions will be based on economic rather than moral principles," he said.

Jackson, a former Southern Baptist foreign missionary, works with the Interfaith Partnership of St. Louis which represents 1,300 congregations in more than 35 denominations. "We don't identify a response that everybody has to follow," Jackson said. "We're never going to agree on everything. We just agree that there's a problem."

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Churches don't have to support controversial programs to address health concerns, said Joni Goodnight of Health Ministries Association in Los Angeles. Churches can offer health screenings, education programs and assistance for people seeking health care, she said.

Elders challenged religious leaders to "develop an action plan that's right for your community" and to minister to people in the "5-H Club." The club includes "the hungry, the healthless, the homeless, the hugless and the hopeless."

The hugless, Elders said, are people with no one to care for them. "It's easier for them to find drugs than hugs. It's easier to find a gun than a friend."

The healthless, she said, are the nation's millions with no access to health care. She promoted President Clinton's health care reform proposals by saying, "... if every criminal has the right to a lawyer, why shouldn't every sick person have the right to a doctor?"

Speaking to the group 24 hours before Elders, Jimmy Carter predicted Congress will water down Clinton's proposals, leaving gaps in health care that churches can fill.

"Be ready to move forward," Carter said. "There couldn't be a more propitious time for you to be involved in health care and to serve God through the alleviation of suffering of fellow human beings."

Some ways Carter suggested for churches to be involved are making childhood immunizations more accessible, caring for the elderly and offering basic examinations in their facilities. Carter said he favors an increased tax on tobacco products and he also urged church leaders to speak against behaviors that cause health problems.

The Christian Life Commission has developed two documents to help Christians judge health care reform proposals. The documents will be distributed to all Southern Baptist pastors and are available from the CLC in Nashville.

The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board offers resources to churches wanting to begin programs ranging from respite care for the disabled to after-school programs for children. For information, call the HMB church and community ministries department at (404) 898-7401.

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L.A. pastor says silence
contributes to violence

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
1/26/94

ATLANTA (BP)--When someone is killed, murder may not be the only sin that occurs, said Romie Lilly, associate minister at Central Baptist Church in Inglewood, Calif.

Communities that keep silent in the midst of violence also are at fault, Lilly said during an interfaith conference on health issues in Atlanta Jan. 23-25. His comments were underscored by statistics from the Center for Disease Control that show 20,000 people die from homicides every year.

"We need to combat the mind-set that lets the church keep silent on domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse," Lilly said. "By our silence, have we to some degree been responsible for the violence?"

Murder is a common event in Lilly's community. Two days before the Atlanta meeting began, Lilly helped conduct the funeral of a man who led an anti-gang movement in the Los Angeles community of Watts. The man was killed in a drive-by shooting.

Lilly works with the Southern Area Clergy Council, a group of 70 churches promoting a concept called "Keeping It Good in the Hood." He also was instrumental in developing a Southern Baptist Home Mission Board manual for ministry in gang-influenced areas.

More than 2 million people are injured annually in violent conflicts, said Mark Rosenberg, director of the CDC's National Center of Injury Prevention and Control.

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"Violence as a public health problem is a crisis. The danger is epidemic," Rosenberg said. Most homicides occur between people who know each other, rather than random killings, he added.

In 1988 for the first time, more teen-agers died from firearm injuries than all diseases combined, Rosenberg said, and firearms are now the second-leading cause of death for children ages 10 and up.

"Our children are killing our children," he said. "Kids are not fighting more, their fights are just more likely to be fatal due to access to firearms."

Guns intended for protection are 43 times more likely to be used to kill someone living in the home than an intruder, Rosenberg said.

Rosenberg urged churches to focus on violence prevention by addressing contributing factors such as discrimination, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of education and lack of jobs. "Intervene before there are victims," he said.

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Florida church will appeal
judge's ruling on records

Baptist Press
1/26/94

SANFORD, Fla. (BP)--A Florida church will appeal a ruling by a circuit court judge which ordered the church to open its financial records to a woman who, the judge ruled, was improperly removed from the congregation.

According to William "Bob" Parker, pastor of First Baptist Church of Markham Woods in Lake Mary, the church plans to appeal Circuit Judge Newman Brock's ruling based on an understanding of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Parker said he felt lower courts sometimes rule on church-state issues which are then overruled on appeal because higher courts understand that church disputes are not the province of the judicial system.

Ann B. Haynes filed suit Aug. 27, 1993, asking to inspect church financial records. However, Parker claims Haynes was removed from membership prior to her request on Aug. 17.

Haynes questioned whether the pastor had properly spent a \$416,000 bequest, had received interest-free loans from the church and used the church's tax-exempt status to avoid property taxes on his home by transferring the title to the church.

Parker claims an audit of the church records revealed nothing to substantiate those charges. In fact, Parker told Baptist Press, Haynes has already seen the records but wants the church to pay her attorney's fees.

"Our men felt that wasn't right," Parker said.

Haynes' membership was terminated Aug. 4 in a deacons meeting. She received a letter, dated Aug. 19, informing her she was no longer a member but she contends the church's constitution requires terminations to be voted on at regular church meetings. However, the church claims an amendment allows deacons to remove members.

In its response to the lawsuit, the church said Haynes was ousted because of poor attendance, unchristian conduct and a refusal to work out conflicts within the church.

"This (termination) was preceded by the leadership of First Baptist on numerous occasions making attempts to reconcile with plaintiff (Haynes). Most of these efforts were through plaintiff's husband, since it is a doctrinal belief of First Baptist that the husband is the spiritual leader of the home," John Campbell, one of the church attorneys, wrote in the response.

A member of the SBC Executive Committee, Parker said the church has 30 days from the date of the judge's ruling to file an appeal.

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Portions of this story were taken from a story by reporter Beth Taylor of The Orlando Sentinel.

Radio 'shock jock' tells
story of regeneration

By James Dotson

MACON, Ga. (BP)--Many in the audience knew the voice, if not the face. But few would ever have believed the words coming from the mouth of David Paul Staves, known to hundreds of thousands of listeners to Atlanta talk radio as David Paul.

After detailing a career spent pushing the limits of aggressive shock radio -- including regular hateful diatribes against Christians -- Paul told Georgia Baptist evangelism conference that about a year ago one man began telling him what Christianity was actually about for the first time in his life. And Paul told how that consistent witness and testimony, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, had led him to regeneration through faith in Christ.

"On May 6, 1993, I became a Christian," said Paul. "That was a very good day," he added, with characteristic understatement.

The testimonies of Paul and Bob Hughes, the man who introduced him to Christ, were highlights of the mid-January evangelism conference in Macon focused on reaching people like Paul, people who know little or nothing about the Bible and therefore have no basis for believing it.

Paul's testimony was a classic case study in how individuals can share Christ through lifestyle evangelism, defined by Hughes simply as "walking the walk before, during and after you talk the talk."

Paul, by his own admission, was a man consumed by money. In his business, he said, the way to get money was to get top ratings, and the way to get ratings in the 18-35 age market he was targeting was to be outrageous. He told of bringing in dancers, who would strip in front of him while he described their action on the radio. Other times he would have prostitutes as guests on the air. And his ratings were No. 1.

"I was feeding the public what I thought they wanted," he said. "... I would do whatever it took."

His attacks on Christianity also were notorious. "One year ago I believe if I were to enter this church, I would have made some of you nervous," he said immediately after taking the pulpit. "I used to say that the only time I would enter a church was to blow it up."

He told of advising young people to steal from the offering plate, because Christians were supposed to "turn the other cheek" and if they were punished it would merely expose the church as non-Christian. He also encouraged young teens to sue parents who forced them to go to church, citing constitutional rights to freedom of religion.

But in late 1992 Paul's life began to change. As he was reaching the peak of his professional popularity with an appearance on the Joan Rivers Show in New York, his personal life was in shambles. His wife -- who was a Christian and embarrassed by his behavior -- divorced him. He ultimately left WSB-AM in a contract dispute and took a job as a car salesman in Lawrenceville while he searched for another position.

It was there that he met Bob Hughes, a lay member of Bethany Baptist Church in Snellville.

Paul said he had been turned off by Christians because of the way he saw the church portrayed.

"I thought their sole motivation in life was to take 10 percent of everybody's money in their congregation and live the good life. That's what I believed," he said.

In Hughes he saw something different. Unlike the others in the dealership, Hughes did not have coarse language or behavior. On Hughes' desk was a Bible and he listened to Christian music.

"Bob Hughes was just a good guy. And I realized he was consistent with what he preached. He never deviated from it," Paul said. The two became friends, and Hughes began using what he later said were lifestyle evangelism techniques learned through Southern Baptists' Building Witnessing Relationships course.

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"Bob started asking me questions, just asking me things: 'Have you ever heard of Saul, the apostle Paul?' I had heard of Paul, but I didn't know the connection between Saul and Paul," he said. "I had never read the Bible, ever. ... The only thing I knew was what I conjured up in my mind from hearsay, what I had picked up and pieced together." Paul had always assumed it was fable and fairy tale, Hughes said later.

"I looked at Bob, and I said Bob has got something there that I want," Paul said. "... I was a confused person. But I always knew, no matter how much money I had, that something was missing in my life. But I had no idea what it was," he said.

Paul began reading the Bible. He read the New Testament through twice, talking with Hughes about parts he didn't understand. "It fascinated me," he said. "It was the most interesting story I had ever read."

Over lunch at a Lawrenceville restaurant one day, Paul prayed to receive Christ.

"Has it changed me? My wife forgave me," he said, flashing his wedding ring. "I take my kids to church. I sit around with my wife and I discuss the Bible, which I never would have done before. I would never think of embarrassing my wife. My wife is a lot more important than my job."

Paul, who now also is a member of Bethany Baptist, is now working part time in a media sales-oriented position, with no plans to return to radio -- at least not in the immediate future. He said his main goal right now is simply being with his family. "I'm just so thankful now that I have such a good marriage and a happy life, that that's where my attention goes. What I do is kind of secondary," he said in a later interview.

Paul closed his remarks by seeking prayer for a common struggle, the strength to live for Christ while rejecting the temptations of an old existence.

"This is the new me, and this will be the rest of my life. But it will be tough," he told the group. "I know what I want to be. I want what you have. ... I have some of it, but I'm not as strong as you. ... Please put me on your prayer list, that I might find Christ's will in my life."

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'What do I need to do?'
boy asks about Jesus

Baptist Press
1/26/94

MBABANE, Swaziland (BP)--The children filed into the brightly lit school auditorium in Swaziland, where Southern Baptist missionaries Wayne Myers and Sonny Sweatman had been invited to show the "Jesus" film.

The two Foreign Mission Board workers were expecting only the primary-age children, but the entire school showed up, including administration -- about 600 in all. A buzz of excitement and anticipation grew among the children as the missionaries hurriedly prepared the film.

When the projector began rolling, a sudden hush fell over the auditorium. The children sat mesmerized by the story of Jesus unfolding on the screen. The brightness of the day created less than ideal conditions for viewing a movie, but the children strained to see, hanging on every word.

Returning the next day to complete the film, the missionaries recruited secondary students to help them cover the big windows with blankets and black trash bags. Again the children eagerly watched as the life of Christ appeared on the screen. The vividness of Christ's last days brought strong reactions from them; it was as if they were there. As the Resurrection took place, the auditorium rang with cheers.

The movie ended. Before leaving, Myers told the students why he was a Christian and the two missionaries introduced special evangelistic literature they had brought.

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They expected the students to depart in orderly files as they had the previous day. Instead the missionaries stood in shock when the teachers simply dismissed the students, who rushed in mass to receive the literature, pushing and shoving to get copies.

As the last of the children left and the two missionaries gasped for breath after the near-riot, Sweatman felt a light tug on his shirt sleeve. Turning around, he saw a small 10-year-old boy.

"What do I need to do?" the boy asked.

Since the boy was holding an enrollment form for a Bible correspondence course, Sweatman assumed he needed help with it. "Let me help you fill it out," the missionary replied.

"No!" the boy responded immediately. "What do I need to do to know Jesus?"

Stunned by the child's sense of urgency, Sweatman took him to a quiet corner of the auditorium. There the boy invited Christ into his life.

"It's truly a privilege to be serving in Swaziland and to see God working in the lives of people in this small corner of southern Africa," Sweatman said. "Thanks to Southern Baptists for providing evangelism tools such as (copies of) the 'Jesus' film -- it's making a difference!"

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His cold greeting hid
warm heart for Bible Way

By Craig Bird

Baptist Press
1/26/94

GULU, Uganda (BP)--The teacher on duty at Gulu High School curtly announced: "These people are from Bible Way Correspondence School and they have a presentation for us."

Then he sat down -- facing away from the Christian visitors.

Southern Baptist missionary Linda Rice wasn't shocked. A little irritated perhaps, but not shocked. She had encountered unenthusiastic teachers before and felt he was making it very obvious he'd rather be doing anything else than listening to a Bible presentation.

So Rice and four Ugandan Baptists went ahead with an explanation of the program, signed up interested students, shared their Christian testimonies and asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior.

After two girls came forward to pray with the visitors, the teacher stood to dismiss the meeting. Or so Rice thought.

Instead he shocked the restless students -- and the visitors.

"This is not my first time to meet Bible Way," he declared. "None of you students know it, but in 1986 I was in Luzira prison where I was given these courses. I completed all the books and I have all the certificates which you have seen today."

As the students stared, he concluded: "I can tell you this: These courses can change a life."

Rice was stunned, partly by the unsolicited testimonial but mostly because she had so completely misjudged the man's aloofness. "His agitation was with the memories of prison and his struggle about if he should tell the students about his hidden past," she said.

His comments gave Rice something to take back home to Kampala, Uganda, and to other schools and cities where she will promote Bible Way.

"Sometimes we get discouraged with our prison students because we know a lot of copying of answers goes on and we suspect many of our books are just torn up to be used for cigarette papers," she explained. "But now when we get down, we'll remind each other of the chemistry teacher at Gulu and remember how God is at work all the time."

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**Seniors' class finds way
to give to foreign missions**

CAMDEN, S.C. (BP)--How do you give generously to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering when you do not have much to give?

The women of the Esther Bible Class -- a class of senior adults, all retired and most on fixed incomes -- of Wateree Baptist Church in Camden, S.C., has found a way to help undergird Southern Baptist foreign missions efforts.

Elizabeth Lyles set the standard in 1992 by putting aside \$1 each week. It added up to \$52 by the end of December and she happily stuffed the bills into her special mission offering envelope and dropped it into the plate.

The class was impressed, intrigued, challenged. Last year they did it as a class project. With 21 people on the roll and an average of 13 people present, they excitedly watched the fund grow.

And in December they counted and gave \$825.

They are now inspired and busy on the 1994 offering, starting their \$1-a-week giving Jan. 2.

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**Mississippi River Ministry
church reaches needy kids**

By Russell N. Dilday

Baptist Press
1/26/94

MARSHALL, Ark. (BP)--A sky blue church van picks up Bobby, 12, in front of his house in Marshall, Ark., early Sunday morning. "Searcy County Baptist Church" is airbrushed on the side of the van in bright colors. Bobby (not his real name) is wearing his Sunday best, jeans and a sports shirt under a denim jacket. His straight brown hair is neatly combed and he carries his Bible in his left hand.

He likes this new house better than the old one, a travel trailer under a hay barn awning. His parents slept in the trailer while he and his siblings slept on hay bales. County housing officials made them move into the new HUD house.

He is hungry. His mother cooks one hot meal a week, serving cereal or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches during other meals.

It's cold outside, and as he looks out the van window, he notices thin patches of snow still visible in areas shaded by trees or building overhangs. The van pulls up to the church building, a steel siding structure that was once a Ford dealership. The church's name is attached in bold white letters where the Ford logo once hung.

Entering the glass-encased former showroom, he is greeted by a bulletin board reading, "To God Be the Glory" and a table lined with trays of biscuits, gravy, ham and bacon, eggs, pancakes, jellies and syrups. His eyes light up and he grabs a plate.

Bobby is just one of the dozens of children from lower-income families who members of Searcy County Baptist Church have targeted in their ministry. "We have a real kid emphasis," explained church member Lygia Treat. "The children need to be taught about Jesus. The parents may not come, but they will send them (the children)."

Searcy County church is an Arkansas Baptist congregation listed as a Mississippi River Ministry (MRM) project. MRM is the Southern Baptist Convention's emphasis on the seven-state Mississippi River delta region. The project is designed to commit Southern Baptists to provide ministries to existing churches and starting new ones in the region.

Because of its status in the MRM list, the church is a priority project for Southern Baptist churches wishing to help with ministry efforts through MRM.

The church was started as a mission of First Baptist Church of Marshall, Ark., in 1987 and seed members were provided by First Baptist volunteers. It constituted a year later and membership grew rapidly. The church now has an average Sunday school attendance of 85.

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Member Rena Treat, also a member of the state convention's Mississippi River Ministry committee and Lygia's mother-in-law, said the idea for the church came out of an associational missions emphasis.

"We attended a missions meeting and learned there were 8,500 people in the county and statistics showed that 73 percent of them were unchurched or lost," she said. "As a result of that meeting, First Baptist members voted to begin a mission that would reach those unchurched people."

Explaining the need for a special ministry in the county, Rena noted, "They want something they're comfortable with. You need to have a service that people are comfortable attending."

Ronnie Warren agreed. "We're casual here," he explained. "We're real comfortable and have a warm atmosphere. I'd never come to church before, and now I can't keep from coming." Warren, like most of the members, is wearing jeans.

Sunday worship services are informal. Participants have a choice of sitting in pews or remaining around the breakfast tables. Members do not pass an offering plate, but keep one at the rear of the worship center.

Hymns are accompanied by guitars. "The type of people we reach are rednecks," said Rena. "I don't mean that ugly, but the folks like guitar music better than (piano or organ) music."

"We're poor people and this is a poor community," added Lygia. "We don't stress fancy things. We stress Christ and what is on the inside. There have been 200 people saved here."

"This is one of the best examples of a New Testament church I've known about," remarked Tommy Goode, an associate in the Arkansas Baptist State Convention missions department. "They started the church from a ministry perspective through the Mississippi River Ministry and are reaching second- and third-generation unchurched people."

Social ministries are the hallmark of the church. The breakfast, said Rena, "started as a promotion, but it worked so well, we kept it. We can feed them breakfast, then feed them the Word."

In addition to breakfast, the congregation has reached out to the community with other social ministries. "Operation Warmth" provided winter clothes free to the community and the church maintains an ongoing clothes and food closet. Church members, with the help of Texas Baptist volunteers, built a playground on church grounds for neighborhood children.

"When we see a need in the community, we try to reach out, because it's what the Lord wants," Lygia pointed out. She said although Searcy County Baptist Church was constituted, "This is a mission and in my heart I know we are a mission to do mission work."

Willis Hinkson of Small Church Support Ministries has served the congregation as pastor the last year. He and a team of SCSM staff consisting of a music leader, piano player and three Sunday school teachers have provided essential leadership to the church. He said the church is focused on its ministry objective.

"The church has a real compassion for people who tend to fall through the cracks," he said. "In the case of Searcy County, they're mainly the lower-income, not-as-educated people ... who for one reason or another don't feel comfortable in a normal church setting.

"Many," he continued, "are kids from families that are not particularly supportive or encouraging and the people of the church have a real heart for those kids. They do more than just bring them in. The breakfast is not just something they do to be different. It's meeting those kids' needs for food. That's the strength of the church: They're focused on those kinds of people."

Not only do members believe the church is still a mission, but they believe in starting new missions. Goode said one of Searcy County church's goals "is to be the mother church for six other congregations in the area." It already has revitalized a church in Morning Star and established a Bible study in Pindell.

Like many new churches, Searcy County church is experiencing growing pains. Hinkson said a weakness of the church, "and I think they recognize this, is the need for leaders."

"Virtually all of the leaders are overloaded," Hinkson explained. "That's not unique to a church, but the kind of people they reach and bring in don't have a church background. That makes for a slow process for assimilating them into church life and teaching them to be leaders."

The goals, plans and problems of the church may not mean much to Bobby, but he has seen the love and felt the ministry of the congregation. "He was saved at camp last summer and wants to be baptized, but his parents won't let him. They have a Jehovah's Witnesses background," Rena noted. "But we'll keep trying. If it means having a circus to win them to the Lord, let's have one every Sunday."

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Samaritan Connection's 230 vols
bring aid, smiles in New England By Dan Nicholas

Baptist Press
1/26/94

BURLINGTON, Vt. (BP)--Mike Cunningham has a simple philosophy of ministry: Where there is human need, fill it as quickly, lovingly and cheaply as possible.

Lucy's story is a good case in point. The 63-year-old Vermonter, recently confined to a wheelchair, could not leave her home because it lacked a ramp, and relatives could not carry her.

Just days before the first major snowstorm was expected, Cunningham received an urgent call at his Samaritan Connection office. A 26-foot wooden ramp was needed as soon as possible at her home in Williston.

"The call came to us on a Friday, and by Wednesday the ramp was built" for just \$310, says the 60-year-old Samaritan Connection director.

Typical of the informality and effectiveness of the grass-roots volunteer network, started in 1988, the construction permit was obtained only after the ramp was in place. The snow would not wait for a permit.

Work was completed by Samaritans Tom James, who chairs the Samaritan Connection's interfaith board, Bruce Venner, and Gary Godbout. Lucy, who like most recipients prefers her real name be kept confidential, received more than a ramp for Christmas. She also found a renewed opportunity to live independently, to maintain a sense of freedom.

Cunningham, Vermont's only Southern Baptist Home Mission Board-endorsed chaplain, who is based at Fanny Allen Hospital in Colchester, would be the first to admit he's not a miracle worker. But the 230 volunteers under his direction perform unheralded miracles each day for Chittenden County's neediest, transforming life and bringing long-forgotten smiles to thousands of weary faces.

More than 11,000 people last year received transportation to medical appointments, home maintenance and repair, assistance with routine chores, budgeting advice, surplus food or short-term crisis intervention from the Samaritan Connection.

The "program of last resort," as it has been dubbed, is a place where people turn when all other options have been exhausted.

"We just go ahead and do the things that are needed," Cunningham explains. "If someone's hungry, you feed them; you don't call a committee meeting."

The purpose from the beginning has been to assist elderly, disabled, handicapped and any others in need and to "improve the quality of life of those we serve," he notes.

The Samaritan Connection sometimes reaches hundreds of miles, pointing out the need for similar programs throughout New England. Donna, a Massachusetts resident, received a quality-of-life boost in December when her brother called Cunningham, explained the many struggles Donna was facing and asked for assistance.

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Cunningham utilized his Baptist Convention of New England contacts. To help Donna, Cunningham asked his own pastor, Steve Seipke of New Covenant Baptist Church in South Burlington, Vt., to send \$50 for "current needs" via D.J. Omarkhail, pastor of Hope Baptist Church in North Falmouth, Mass.

More often, though, a linkage of need with resource is made within the northern Vermont region.

When 81-year-old Mary was discharged from a hospital with breathing trouble, she turned to the Samaritan Connection to replace a dusty old rug and to do her laundry and grocery shopping.

Of equal value, Mary benefited from the regular visits of a caring neighbor, companionship that gave her a reprieve from a nursing home move.

Some beneficiaries are too young to appreciate the Samaritan Connection, even while benefiting from the services provided. Kathy, just 4-and-a-half years old, needed \$1,650 worth of infection-reducing dental surgery before a third open-heart surgery.

Insurance would not cover all of Kathy's dental work and her parents could not cover the bill.

When they turned to Cunningham for assistance, he negotiated a reduced fee with a dentist; the balance was raised through the Samaritan Connection.

Housed in a tiny basement office donated by Fanny Allen Hospital, the Samaritan Connection survives from month to month on the good will of friends and beneficiaries. A \$50,000 annual budget does not allow for the luxury of cash reserves like most service organizations.

"There have been so many times we have come close to having to close for lack of funds. But the Lord provides," Cunningham says. "He does things in his time and in his way. We're doing it on faith."

Cunningham considers young Kathy to be the Samaritan Connection's greatest success story.

When asked to name his greatest failures, always present in a ministry that aims at human misery, the eternal optimist says, "I don't think I have any. We're underfunded and understaffed.

"There are some struggles we lose, but I don't remember them now."

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(BP) photo to be available from the Baptist Press central office. Nicholas is news editor for the New England Baptist newsjournal.

CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "Church bulletins threatened by new postal regulations," dated 1/24/94, please make three corrections:

-- In the second paragraph, insert the word "nonprofit" before "... publications with less than"

-- In the third paragraph, insert the word "Nonprofit" at the beginning of the first sentence, to now read, "Nonprofit organizations"

-- Substitute the following for the sixth paragraph: "The proposals require nonprofits to use the third-class for-profit rate, not the third-class nonprofit rate, for publications that contain any advertising not substantially related to the purpose of the organization. Ads need not be paid under the U.S.P.S. definition."

Thanks,
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