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NATIONAL OFFICE
SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Herb Hollinger, Vice President
Fax (615) 742-8919
CompuServe ID# 70420,17

BUREAUS

ATLANTA *Martin King, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 898-7522*
DALLAS *Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 333 N. Washington, Dallas, Texas 75246-1798, Telephone (214) 828-5232*
NASHVILLE *127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300*
RICHMOND *Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va., 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151*
WASHINGTON *Tom Strode, Chief, 400 North Capitol St., #594, Washington, D.C. 20001, Telephone (202) 638-3223*

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LOUISIANA -- This comic's career fueled by how short life can be.

NEWS ADVISORY: Russell H. Dilday, 63, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1978, was dismissed by trustees March 9 during an executive session at the Fort Worth, Texas, campus, effective immediately. Trustees took the action in an 11 a.m. session on the final day of a three-day meeting. Dilday emerged from the session after an hour. More than 500 students gathered outside the conference room where trustees were deliberating. With more than 5,000 students, Southwestern is the largest of Southern Baptists' six seminaries. Trustees had scheduled a 2:30 p.m. news conference March 9. Baptist Press will post a story on the dismissal March 10. A story on earlier trustee action is posted today.

Southwestern trustees withdraw
Keith Parks commencement invite By Herb Hollinger

Baptist Press
3/9/94

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--Trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary voted to withdraw an invitation to R. Keith Parks as the seminary spring commencement speaker, despite President Russell H. Dilday's recommendation to keep Parks as the speaker.

The action came during the Mar. 7-9 meeting of the trustees on the Fort Worth, Texas, campus.

Some trustees said they were not aware that Parks' had been invited until Dilday mentioned the fact in his report to the trustees March 8. Parks, former president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, is the missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The CBF is an organization of moderate Southern Baptists who are critical of the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention. After Parks left the FMB in 1992 after disputes with trustees, he accepted a similar position with the fledgling CBF which was setting up its own missionary sending agency.

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Dilday told the trustees the invitation to Parks was issued in 1991, when Parks was still FMB president. H said he continued to support the invitation because of Parks' many years of Southern Baptist missions service and support.

"I couldn't believe Dilday brought it up (in the trustees' meeting)," Charles A. Lawson II, told Baptist Press. Lawson, an electrical engineer in Linthicum, Md., made the motion to withdraw the invitation following Dilday's report.

"He (Dilday) should have withdrawn it a long time ago," Lawson said.

Lawson said Dilday should have known how trustees feel about the CBF and Parks.

Lawson's motion was approved on an overwhelming voice vote by the 40-member board although at least one "no" vote was heard. Later in the meeting Lawson also evidenced strong misgivings about accepting money from the CBF, calling it "tainted" money.

Southwestern received more than \$180,000 from the CBF last year.

That fact was alluded to by Cecil Sherman, CBF coordinator, who said in response to the vote, "... they will take our money but they won't take Dr. Parks."

"They'd be hard-pressed to find someone who so well models what it means to be a missionary in our time and to do missions in a Baptist way," Sherman said.

Parks told Baptist Press, "I just regret we've reached the point in Baptist life when nearly all the decisions are made from a political standpoint. That really is regrettable to me, because apparently that's the only issue involved. It's not whether (the speech) would be an appropriate speech or whether it would be biblical, but that, 'This guy doesn't support the conservative resurgence and we can't let his views be heard by graduating seniors.' I don't think that's really Baptist."

The SBC Executive Committee, meeting last month in Nashville, decided to study whether SBC agencies should continue to accept funds from the CBF. A recommendation to the SBC annual meeting in Orlando in June could come from the study.

Robert C. Burch, trustee and Knoxville, Tenn., pastor, cited an experience of his own in suggesting to trustees that even though the invitation had been withdrawn that an honorarium might still be paid to Parks. He did not offer a motion to that effect and trustees did not appear to be interested.

Dilday told Baptist Press he would not offer an honorarium, "it's not much anyway," and might even be taken as an insult. Dilday said he would give a charge to the graduates at commencement rather than find an alternate speaker.

Southwestern has had a policy of rotating the commencement speaker invitation between Southern Baptist agency heads and state Baptist convention and agency officials, among others.

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Rancher's estate establishes
\$2.7 million fund for China

By Don Martin

Baptist Press
3/9/4

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--The estate of the late Roy Cotulla, of Cotulla, Texas, has established a \$2.7 million fund at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board for ministries in China.

Cotulla, who died in July 1992 at age 86, asked the board in his will to use the money for work in China. The board has created a fund with proceeds from a liquidated stock portfolio that had grown from \$5,000 to more than \$3 million in the last 40 years.

The fund, named after Cotulla and his late wife, Lucille, should surpass \$3 million in the coming months, when a final settlement of the estate releases additional money, explained Carl Johnson, the board's vice president for finance.

"We are so thankful for these resources which are a testimony to the meaningful lives of Roy and Lucille," added FMB President Jerry Rankin.

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The couple own d a ranch in Hugo, Okla., and another in Cotulla, a town of about 3,700 people between San Antonio and Lar do, Texas. The town of Cotulla is named after the late Cotulla's grandfath r, a Polish immigrant who founded it in 1881.

The Cotulla fund allows the board to invest the multi-million dollar gift and use th interest from the principal for appropriate ministries in China. However, the board has the leeway to use part or all of the principal if the need arises.

William Cotulla, the nephew of the couple and executor of the estate, said his uncle became deeply concerned about China after several trips there.

The late Cotulla's connections with China surpassed those of a tourist, explained his nephew. In 1975 Cotulla, who had studied grassland cultivation, accompanied U.S. agricultural specialists to China to help in agricultural development.

"He left China with a deep burden for the Chinese. This gift is just a natural outgrowth of that concern and his commitment to Christ," said the nephew, who delivered a \$2.7 million check to the board March 7.

Although the size of this gift ranks in the top tier of donations made to the board, the Cotullas themselves were not generally known as wealthy people, said William Cotulla.

"I doubt if many people realized Roy's wealth," said the nephew, who described his uncle as a private man of simple tastes. The couple lived in a modest home and grew most of their own food.

"It was not unusual at their home to sit down to a meal which consisted of both vegetables and meat raised by them on their land," he said.

Mission board officials have not determined details of how the money will be used in China. However, William Cotulla said his uncle had expressed interest in supporting the printing of Chinese-language Bibles.

Board officials said they will look for ways to honor this interest, possibly channeling funds to the Amity Press, owned and operated by the Amity Foundation in Nanjing, China. Since 1987 the press has printed more than 4 million Bibles and New Testaments.

The Cotullas were members of First Baptist Church of Cotulla for many years and later moved their membership to First Baptist Church of Hugo. In both churches, Cotulla was a deacon and the couple taught Sunday school. Mrs. Cotulla died in September 1990 at 82.

When funeral services for Cotulla were held at First Baptist in Hugo, the family continued his commitment to China by asking friends to donate, in lieu of flowers, memorials to the board's work in China.

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(BP) photos (two vertical, one a studio portrait of the couple) mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Richmond bureau of Baptist Press.

Yemen hospital cleared
of charges against Islam

By Marty Croll

Baptist Press
3/9/94

JIBLA, Yemen (BP)--A court in Yemen has cleared Southern Baptists' hospital in Jibla of charges that workers committed crimes against Islam.

Southern Baptist representative Bill Koehn, hospital administrator, has received a copy of the newest verdict. The faction that brought the charges has 40 days to appeal.

Last August, after a highly publicized hearing by a judge running for th legislature, Koehn, from Cimarron, Kan., was ordered to close the hospital and leave the country. But the orders were never enforced. The hospital remained open while lawyers filed an appeal.

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The case stems from accusations 15 months ago that two men tore up the Koran and threw it in a toilet because a doctor directed them to do so. Accusers said hospital workers were trying to force people to abandon Islam in favor of Christianity.

The hospital opened in 1968 under the leadership of now-retired Southern Baptist representative James Young. He and his wife, June, of Ruston, La., originally came to Yemen to start a medical service, but the government asked them to build a hospital.

The people of Jibla provided a 99-year lease for a 22-acre hillside, now the site for the hospital, outpatient clinic and residences for about 60 internationals, including 30 Southern Baptists.

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12-year pastor Goodwin leaves
First Baptist, Washington, D.C. By Art Toalston

Baptist Press
3/9/94

WASHINGTON (BP)--Everett C. Goodwin, pastor of First Baptist Church in Washington the past 12 years, has left the church under what is called a "mid-career sabbatical." The 49-year-old minister's salary and benefits with the church will end Dec. 31 of this year.

The church, which counts 838 full and associate members, is seeking an interim pastor, said Charlotte Straight, the church's moderator. Goodwin was unavailable for comment; he currently is leading a tour of Israel and Egypt.

Church leaders have issued a three-page statement concerning Goodwin's departure, which was effective Jan. 1. The sabbatical and departure from church staff and the statement were agreed to last fall by Goodwin and about a dozen church lay leaders, according to Stan Hastey, one of several church members listed on the statement for media inquiries. The agreement was ratified by the church last November.

The statement did not report any specific actions by the congregation to prompt Goodwin's sabbatical.

However, a meeting was held after the church's Jan. 23 morning worship during which members supportive of Goodwin were given opportunity to bring various motions to the floor, Hastey said. Their first motion failed by a 35-65 percent margin. It proposed to rebuke the informal process by which Goodwin had been asked to leave the church and issue him an apology. After its defeat, no subsequent motions were made, though one had been drafted to give the pastor a 72-hour period to accept anew the pastorate. The meeting lasted more than three hours.

Hastey noted there has been no suggestion of immorality or improper conduct, only leadership and administrative differences concerning Goodwin among members of the church.

At least for now, a number of younger, able members have left the church, Hastey said.

The official statement said, "In giving a reason for the sabbatical, Dr. Goodwin cited the spiritual and professional value of pausing at mid career in ministry to review his professional goals in ministry, and to focus more clearly on the next stage of his leadership and professional service."

The statement commended Goodwin for his part in maintaining the church's membership base during a time of population decline in central Washington; increasing the church's budget and endowment; launching child care ministry; and for his preaching, teaching, personal counseling and worship innovations.

Goodwin became the church's pastor just after former President Jimmy Carter left the White House.

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'Shadowlands:' faith shaping relationships, scholar says

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (BP)--"Shadowlands" does more than dramatically tell the story of renowned Christian author C.S. Lewis and his romance with poet Joy Gresham, according to Baptist college professor and Lewis authority George Musacchio.

It offers, he said, the rarest of motion picture portrayals -- a fair, sympathetic depiction of mature Christians whose lives and relationships are shaped by their "honest, tough-minded faith."

"Joy Gresham was an intellectually dynamic and honest woman whose Christian faith was central to the developing of her friendship with Lewis which eventually became love," Musacchio said.

He applauded the film's treatment of the relationship between Gresham and Lewis -- a friendship based on mutual respect that gradually developed into romance -- and its portrayal of intellectually honest faith and unsentimental love in the midst of tragedy. "The honest toughness seen there contrasts with a lot of the soupy stuff we get into," he said.

Musacchio's interest in the author of the "Chronicles of Narnia" children's books and modern classics of popular theology such as "Mere Christianity" dates back more than 15 years.

During his quarter-century of teaching at California Baptist College in Riverside, Calif., Musacchio joined the Southern California C.S. Lewis Society and served four years as founding editor of its quarterly journal, "The Lamp Post."

He now is professor of English and Frank W. Mayborn Chair of Arts and Sciences at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas.

Musacchio has taught courses on Lewis as a visiting professor at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., and Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich.

"Shadowlands," the movie directed and produced by Richard Attenborough, is vastly superior to the 1988 BBC teleplay of the same name, according to Musacchio.

Both productions overly dramatized Lewis' "crisis of faith" following his wife's death from cancer, he said.

"They presented Lewis experiencing a faith crisis different from the normal grieving process," Musacchio said. But while the BBC version left the implication Lewis never regained his Christian convictions, Musacchio maintained the big-screen treatment "effectively resolved" the issue in a scene where Lewis reassures his stepson of heaven's reality.

Ironically, both the BBC production and the movie were scripted by William Nicholson, who has been nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. Debra Winger, who portrays Joy Gresham, received an Oscar nomination for best actress.

Though Lewis undoubtedly grieved deeply for his wife and may have been angry with God privately for a time, the scene in which he raged against God's injustice was "out of character" for him, according to Musacchio.

"In fact, there is evidence that Lewis carried on with friends and conducted business very stoically and calmly right after his wife's death," he said.

The film is likely to spark a renewed and deepened interest in Lewis' writings, Musacchio predicted, which will allow readers to learn more thoroughly the basis of the author's deep faith.

The movie "doesn't carry a heavy religious message," but Musacchio praised it in that regard. Rather than preach to the audience, Nicholson and Attenborough simply present an honest and ultimately tragic love story involving two mature Christians.

"I suppose the message of the film might be put: 'Love can hurt, but it's worth it,'" he said.

"Seen simply as a middle-aged love story, it is very touching in itself. You don't have to be a fan of Lewis to enjoy that."

But, he suggested, bring a box of Kleenex.

**Handshake with the homeless
helped him face his prejudices** By C. Lacy Thompson

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Tobey Pitman's first face-to-face encounter with a homeless person also brought him face-to-face with himself.

"He put his hand out to shake mine, and I wasn't prepared to deal with that," says Pitman, who was a New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary student at the time and had just begun working part-time at a homeless shelter. "Here I was working at this place (operated to help homeless people) and I wasn't even able to shake this man's hand."

The experience led Pitman to do some soul-searching, to face his own attitudes and prejudices about the homeless and others in need. He took time to talk to homeless people, to hear their stories and to face his own fear.

"You really realize the truth of the saying that 'there but for grace of God go I,' that you really could be homeless," Pitman says, noting through the years he has encountered people from all walks of life on the streets -- people with doctorates, people who once held prestigious jobs.

Those kind of encounters bring people face-to-face with their own fears that homelessness could happen to them, Pitman says. "Nobody expects to be homeless. ... But many people live in danger of that every day in Louisiana."

Pitman knows. He no longer is a seminary student and no longer works part time at a homeless shelter. He is now a Southern Baptist home missionary and director of the Clovis A. Brantley Baptist Center in New Orleans, the site of his first direct encounter with a homeless person and the largest homeless shelter in the state of Louisiana.

These days, the Brantley Center stays full "virtually around the clock," Pitman says. One should expect as much. Reports estimate there are as many as 8,000 homeless people in New Orleans. The Brantley Center has 270 beds.

Last year, the center set an all-time record by registering 82,112 people, 4,000 more than in any other year. The center also served more than 137,000 plates of food for the homeless and saw 747 professions of faith in Jesus Christ as a result of daily worship services and other efforts.

Despite such success, however, much more remains to be done, Pitman and others note.

A true accounting of the number of homeless people in the United States is difficult. Estimates range from 600,000 to 6 million. Some trends are apparent about the group -- the average age is 35, four-fifths of the homeless are males, a little more than half are non-Caucasian, about one-third of homeless males are military veterans, the number of homeless children who run away and those who end up on the streets with their families is on the rise.

Arguments go back and forth about the other supposed trends -- the number of homeless who are drug or alcohol addicts, who suffer from mental illness, who are in their state of living by choice. But this much is certain -- homelessness is becoming a more visible and urgent problem in America of the 1990s.

Studies indicate there is not nearly enough emergency food and shelter available to the homeless. History indicates much of the responsibility for responding to the problem always has fallen on the church and its members. In the 1990s, then, it seems apparent the church will have to lead the way in attacking the problem of homelessness and meeting the needs of those living on the streets.

As with any effort, however, there are barriers that must be overcome, Pitman says.

The first is ignorance. So many people remain unaware and unknowledgeable of the problem of homelessness, Pitman explains. "We don't know as much as we ought to about homeless people and what's important to them, what the issues are in their lives."

Pitman suggests a book that offers a good look at the situation -- "A Nation in Denial: The Truth about Homelessness in America" by Alice Baum and Donald Barnes.

A second barrier to be overcome is attitude, Pitman says. We tend to place ourselves above homeless people. ... We tend to analyze the need instead of meeting it. We're so concerned about being 'taken.'

A final barrier is inaction, Pitman says. "Even when we know we should be doing something, even when we know the facts, we're too often plagued by inaction."

Pitman's answer to overcoming barriers includes gaining knowledge and taking action, of course. And he makes a point of the importance of all action -- however small -- related to meeting the needs of the homeless. But he emphasizes the key for a person may be the one out of his own life -- direct encounters with homeless people, sitting and talking with them; hearing their stories.

Others agree. One writer suggests that without such firsthand understanding, the homeless face a double burden -- that of their own situation and that of the negative sentiment that seems to be growing against them in the country.

Even politicians understand the need. In a recent news article, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros recalled how an encounter with homeless people convinced him of the extent of his need. "I decided that you had to go beyond offering passive services like shelters and actually reach out. ... It's never as simple as just housing. It's going to require some real skill in outreach."

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Pastors answer survey of what they wish their churches knew By Harriett Hickey

Baptist Press
3/9/94

BURLINGTON, N.D. (BP)--Pastors need some time with their families.

That was the response most pastors gave in a 1993 survey conducted by Tammy Kraft, a member of the Burlington (N.D.) Baptist Church.

As phrased in her findings of the survey of pastors in North and South Dakota: "A desire for their churches to understand their need for time to spend with their families."

Summarizing other oft-mentioned responses, she noted:

-- "We need our churches to realize pastors are human and sometimes need ministered to by their congregations."

-- "Many pastors are living far away from their families and sometimes need to be included in non-church fun things."

Kraft became concerned for the special needs of pastors' families when a former pastor and wife lost a child.

"I hurt so badly for them," she said, "but I didn't want to bother them because I felt everyone in the church was probably calling and visiting them. I learned later everyone in the congregation also felt that way and no one was contacting them."

Because of the incident, Kraft began to sense ministers and families were very much like their church members but yet had very unique and special needs. Over a period of time, she heard of various accounts in the religious news media voicing her same concerns.

As a result, she conducted a survey of Southern Baptist pastors in the two states.

From the survey, Kraft has prepared a conference designed to help church members discover for themselves how they might support their pastor and family emotionally, physically and spiritually, as well as monetarily.

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EDITORS' NOTE: The following three stories focus on Christian humorists.

Christian comic says

I can be a whole number

By Leigh Neely

NASHVILLE (BP)--One of the sheets in Mark Lowry's press pack contains a familiar quote of his. "If I weren't doing this, I'd be working somewhere where I'd have to ask, 'You want fries with that?' because what I do is all I know how to do."

What does he do? "I get paid to tell silly stories about my life. I sit n a stool, people buy tickets, people come to hear me."

Actually, he makes what he does sound simpler than it is. With 40 concerts a year with the Gaither Vocal Band and 120 solo performances, he stays busy enough. And he writes songs and prose and really does tell people funny stories about his life.

His concerts are a mixture of singing and comedy. Though the atmosphere f his shows may be lighthearted, Lowry's ultimate goal is sharing the message of Jesus Christ.

With all this going on, how does Mark Lowry, single adult, feel about his life? Overall, he says he feels satisfaction, though he readily admits his biggest struggle is with loneliness. "I'd like to get married someday. I'm midlife -- 35. How many people do you know live to be 100? But I've put all my energy into my career. Since 1980, I've done nothing but this."

Growing up in Houston, Lowry was part of the typical American family. He did have his challenges, though. Less than athletic, he claims no games could start at school "until somebody picks Mark."

One of his most famous stories involves his sixth-grade teacher, Miss Barth. He wrote her a note expressing his doubt about her intelligence. It got him three days suspension and a good spanking from his father, who gave him some advice he still remembers, "If you write another note like that, don't sign it."

Lowry was a hyperactive child, claiming he brought notes home from teachers every day. Many teachers felt he was impossible and wouldn't do much. His mother, however, believed differently and worked at finding something to keep her energetic son busy.

When he was 9, she took him to the Houston Music Theater for an audition. His performance was outstanding enough to get him every young male lead in the plays that came to town. Lowry claims it was just because he could sing on pitch and was a ham.

It was obvious, however, he had talent. Tommy Tune, who was also originally from Houston, came down from New York to choreograph "The Music Man" and tried to persuade Lowry's parents to let him go to New York and Broadway. According to Lowry, his mother immediately began praying, but not because she wanted him to go. "Heavens no," he deadpans. "We were Baptists! Daddy was a deacon, and he wouldn't let me dance."

But this wasn't the end of young Lowry's career in music. When the local theater went bankrupt, his mother got him an audition with what is now the National Quartet Convention. Two standing ovations later, Bob MacKenzie signed him to a recording contract. The two albums released by "Mark Lowry and the Impacts" are collectors items now. Once again, though, his career came to a halt when his sister found out she had diabetes and Lowry came off the road.

While conducting the singing at a church camp, Lowry made a life-changing decision. "I asked Jesus into my heart that week. I had always known the plan of salvation, but I didn't know the Man of salvation." That decision has guided every choice he has made since. Still, he had no ministry career plans at that point. His aspirations ran more to being a business administrator like his father.

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While attending Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., he decided God had different plans for his life. He switched his major to youth ministry, "crammed four years of college into five and was paroled in 1980." Once again, he started traveling and singing in churches.

During these performances, his talent for storytelling slipped in. He felt he had to do something to fill the silence while sound tracks were being changed. He had always shared stories of his childhood with his travel companions. Now he shared them with audiences and congregations. The more he talked, the more people laughed. It wasn't long before he was as popular for his stories as his singing.

In 1988, a brief performance once again changed his life. At the Christian Artists' Singing in the Rockies, in Estes Park, Colo., the crowd loved his warmth, energy and loving spirit. He received a thundering ovation that resulted in being pursued by several record companies. Lowry settled with Word, Inc. He recorded two live concerts and a comedy video. His latest video venture, "The Last Word," was recorded at the historic Tivoli Theater in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Just before he signed with Word, the Gaither Vocal Band invited Lowry to join the group. Friend Bill Gaither says, "Mark Lowry has been a wonderful addition. He brings an excellent voice and a terrific sense of humor to the group. I've seen his storytelling win audiences over."

And Lowry appreciates Gaither's friendship. He says, with a serious face, "Some of my best and favorite jokes are about Bill's hair."

Though he's known for his own giving spirit and encouragement, Lowry can be frank when the situation warrants. He recalls a time when friends asked if he ever got lonely. He was astonished at their question because, as he says, "Everybody gets lonely, even when you're with lots of people."

After going home, he sat down and wrote an article for his newsletter about loneliness, pouring his heart into it. He very much believes people want to marry a happy, whole person. That's why he's so adamant that a single person can be a happy, fulfilled person. He says if you get married because you're lonely, you'll just end up a lonely, married person. "Some of the loneliest people in the world are sleeping with someone tonight."

Then, of course, he can't resist speaking with some humor about the subject. "I've got some single friends, and we've all made a pact that we're gonna take over a nursing home someday if we don't ever get married. You know, we'll spin around in our wheelchairs. But don't forget," he says, getting serious, "one is a whole number."

Lowry is frank about the stress of his career, saying there are times when he gets tired of it, but he just reminds himself why he started doing it in the first place.

"You gotta, at some point, quit looking inside. You look outside and find somebody that's more depressed than you are and go help them."

He has no plans to change anything. Right now, he is touring with "Mark Lowry Presents Comic Belief," which also includes the comedy of Mark Steele and Chonda Pierce, as well as his music.

"I think God loves to hear people laugh," he muses. "There's not a father anywhere who doesn't love to hear his children laugh."

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Neely is assistant editor of Christian Single magazine, a publication of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's discipleship and family development division. (BP) photo available upon request from Baptist Press' central office.

'Rocking Chair Philosopher'
adding message for seniors

By Ruth Robinson

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (BP)--Clean country humor has always been a trademark for Eddy Nicholson, who is billed as America's "Rocking Chair Philosopher." Since his early days as a full-time music evangelist, beginning while he was still at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Nicholson joked along with the music.

So successful was his humorous patter, he decided to leave the music evangelism field and strike out on his own as a humorist and inspirational speaker.

There are calls across the country for a clean-up of blatant sex and violence in television, books, movies and magazines. Nicholson thinks it also is time for those in his profession to do the same.

While his performances have never relied on off-color and suggestive jokes, he said, he now is more deliberate about it.

His stories and one-liners are what you might have heard told on the porches of country homes back in the days before TV, when there were porches and rocking chairs to rest in and visit with neighbors after the day's chores were done.

Now, while continuing his civic club organizational circuit, Nicholson also is branching out to include church groups, particularly older people who remember those porches and rocking chairs.

Nicholson has just come out with the first of a projected five-volume series of books, "Squeaky Clean Humor," each of which will have 100 "funny stories, tall tales, yarns, common sense philosophies and 'pure dee ole lies.'"

He has collected these stories over many years on the entertainment circuit as people have come up to him after his performance to share humorous stories with him. He has selected the best -- and cleanest -- to include in his printed collection.

Nicholson is a natural humorist. His conversation is sprinkled with humorous illustrations of his performances. In speaking of his book, which is just out, he said, "It's in its seventh printing." Pause. "The first six were blurred."

Once at a banquet he was sitting next to a woman writer who later included a chapter on him in a book she wrote about humorists.

When he told her he lived in Ooltewah (a suburb of Chattanooga) and she asked where that was, he told her "Ooltewah is so small we had to shoot a man to start a graveyard." That one made it into his book too.

Nicholson readily agreed a near-fatal stroke some two years ago helped nudge him in a new direction. There was concern at first that he would even survive. During rehabilitation, which included learning to walk and talk again, he had time to think about his life and his future.

He made a career decision. While he still continues with lectures to civic and business groups, he also is branching out to senior adult church groups.

In the months since he made that decision, he has booked appearances far in the future.

"Senior adults have made a fantastic contribution throughout their years. They may not of had many pats on the back, but they have given of themselves freely. They had different values and priorities from today. Now they are up in years and they need to laugh."

A native of Chattanooga -- "I was born at home and they took one look at me and rushed my mother to the hospital" --, Nicholson grew up in Cleveland, Tenn., attended Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn., with a major in psychology and a minor in foreign language. From there he went to Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and did graduate work at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where he worked on a master's degree in composition and opera.

He had drifted into the field of evangelism and music when he graduated from Carson-Newman and for the next 22 years worked in that field with some of the top evangelists in the nation. He also had a radio program and found he liked to work in words as well as music.

He returned to Chattanooga, where his mother still lived, and 10 years ago met and married his wife, Phyllis. They have an 8-year old daughter.

In 1984 McKee Baking Co. in Collegedale, Tenn., became his national corporate sponsor. This means McKee picks up part of Nicholson's speaker's fee and also sends along Little Debbie products to sweeten up his audiences. It's good publicity for McKee and good for a reduced fee for those Nicholson speaks to.

His "rocking chair philosophy" stems from a long-felt conviction "that we need a more personal approach, an I-thou approach rather than an I-it approach. This chair is an it. A lot of things people treat like its. We are a Social Security number, an it," Nicholson said.

"People don't like to be treated on an I-it basis. We are made so that we like an I-thou relationship. That's the way the Good Lord made us."

Nicholson said he constantly has to fight the desire to "get heavy" in his presentations.

"There are many others better qualified to do that. I have a burning desire to get in somebody else's field and preach to them, but people don't need that. People need serious stuff about like Tammy Faye Baker needs another layer of makeup."

--30--

Robinson is a free-lance writer in Chattanooga, Tenn. (BP) photo available upon request from Baptist Press' central office.

This comic's career fueled
by how short life can be

By Raymond Daye

Baptist Press
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SHREVEPORT, La. (BP)--At first, Christian comic Chris Elrod wanted to use his ability to make people laugh, release their tensions and just have fun in a Christian environment.

That aim changed two years ago when back-to-back tragedies caused Elrod, 27, a licensed Southern Baptist minister from Shreveport, La., to realize how fleeting life is.

"A friend of mine who went out on the road with me and worked the sound system was killed in an accident the night before we were to do a concert," said Elrod, who at the time had just begun doing his comedy full time. "Even though he was a Christian and I knew he was with Christ, it forced me to realize how quickly life can be over.

"A few nights later, a young man was killed in a car accident and he had been at one of my concerts," Elrod said. "Nobody knew whether he was a Christian or not. That's when I realized that it wasn't enough to tell a few funny stories and some jokes, say, 'Jesus loves you. God bless and good night,' and then leave.

"Every opportunity you have to tell the gospel should be taken, because it may be the last opportunity someone in that audience may have to accept Christ."

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