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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Vietnam's open markets  
stop at church doors

By Don Martin

Baptist Press  
3/17/94

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Improved relations between Vietnam and the United States have opened doors to markets -- but not churches.

"Vietnam is a country that's run with tighter controls on religion than China," said a Christian observer who regularly works in Vietnam. "It's too early to tell what all will change as Vietnam opens to the United States."

When the South Vietnamese government fell to the communists 19 years ago, 35 Southern Baptist missionaries and journeymen were working with nearly 50 churches and congregations. Today only one Baptist church exists in the country: Grace Baptist Church in Ho Chi Minh City, formally Saigon.

Hanoi's tight controls on religion aren't likely to change significantly despite market reforms, said the observer, who requested anonymity. Still, restrictions on religious freedom have eased somewhat in the past year.

"We're seeing changes in Vietnam because of the gradual normalization of relations with the United States, but it's far from clear what's to come in Vietnam. For now, it's still very illegal (for foreigners) to do religious work in the country."

Government restrictions bar foreigners from starting churches or evangelizing, but opportunities do exist for Christians to work legally in the country. American Christians teach English as a second language in universities, work in agricultural development projects and offer medical treatment.

In seeking an end to the United States' 19-year-old trade embargo -- which was lifted by the Clinton administration Feb. 3 -- the Vietnamese government released a number of Christian leaders from prison. And in recent months, Vietnamese officials have allowed local Christians to begin importing from 10,000 to 12,000 Bibles a year.

Government officials also have given the Roman Catholic Church permission to begin printing Bibles inside Vietnam -- the first such permission in 20 years.

"Of course the country could use 1 million copies, but this is nevertheless progress that Christians can build on," the observer said.

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES  
Historical Commission, SBC  
Nashville, Tennessee

Deaths of dad, uncle fuel  
his war against alcohol use

By Louis A. Moore

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Claude Witt of Louisville, Ky., knows personally the high cost of human tragedy caused by the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

In 1941, an accident caused by a drunken driver killed his uncle, for whom he was named. Witt was 6 at the time.

Seven years later, another accident caused by a drunken driver killed his father. Witt was 13.

Neither Witt's uncle nor his father consumed alcoholic beverages. "They were victims of alcohol," he says.

"I have seen firsthand the impact of alcohol on families and the destruction of human life to the point that I feel God has called me to focus my ministry on this moral problem. One of the most tragic things in America is to see people whose lives have been destroyed by alcohol," says Witt, a trustee on the board of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

And focus on the issue, he has. The Louisville Courier-Journal once said The Temperance League of Kentucky, which Witt has headed since 1986, is the strongest nonpartisan organization in the state.

The league focuses its attentions on two areas:

- the state legislature.
- local wet-dry elections.

Anytime a Kentucky county or a city has a local-option election on whether to allow the sale of alcoholic beverages within its jurisdiction, Witt and his team engage the battle and usually are victorious.

Seventy-seven of the 120 counties in Kentucky remain dry. Each year about seven counties or cities in the state hold wet-dry elections. Witt and The Temperance League have defeated the pro-alcohol forces in all but two instances in the past five years.

At the same time, Witt and the league keep a sharp eye out for any maneuvering in the Kentucky Legislature that might signal a change in favor of the pro-wet forces. And when they sense something brewing, they leap into combat.

"We see ourselves as watchdogs over the legislature," he says.

The league's goal is clear and simple: expose the danger of alcohol and drugs.

"Alcohol makes alcoholics," says Witt, who rejects the notion alcoholism is a physical disease.

"It is a sin disease," he says. "People become sick because of the sin of drinking alcoholic beverages.

"If it were true that alcoholism is a (physical) disease, then it would be the only disease that we bottle and advertise and that is self-induced."

Does he sound like a Prohibitionist?

Absolutely, Witt says.

"People who say Prohibition didn't work need to look at the statistics. Prohibition lessened by more than half the total consumption of alcohol per person.

"Just think," says Witt, "how many health care costs could be eliminated in the United States if we could reduce alcohol consumption. One-fourth of the people in hospital beds today are there because of an alcohol problem."

Besides cirrhosis of the liver and other physical ailments alcohol causes, alcohol also plays a role directly or indirectly in psychiatric illnesses, Witt says.

"Every alcoholic touches at least six other people," he says.

"To me, it's the No. 1 moral problem, or cancer, in America."

Witt says churches should get tougher on social drinkers as well as alcoholics in their midst.

"It saddens me that this problem receives so little attention in our churches," he says.

Does he think Southern Baptist churches ought to disallow members who consume alcoholic beverages?

"That would be too harsh," he says. "But I would require people to be educated about what the consumption of alcohol does to their testimony.

"I go into churches all the time where the pastors tell me to be very forceful in my stand against consumption of alcohol because if they did themselves they would have to leave the church."

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'Christy' TV character akin  
to Baptist school pioneer

By Kim Medley

Baptist Press  
3/17/94

NASHVILLE (BP)--When the new TV series "Christy" debuts Easter Sunday, many Southern Baptists will be drawn to the story of a young woman who brought her love for learning to the mountains of Appalachia.

Catherine Marshall's mother, Leonora Whitaker Wood (on whom the book Christy was based), was not alone in her work. About the same time Wood was a school teacher in the Great Smoky Mountains, a Southern Baptist mountain man was hard at work setting up almost 30 schools and missions across the Southern Appalachian Mountains and the Ozarks.

His name was Albert Erskine Brown.

His story can be found in "Role Models of Southern Baptist Service," the January 1994 issue of Baptist History and Heritage, published by the Southern Baptist Historical Commission. The article was written by H. Page Lee, Bost Professor of Religion at Mars Hill (N.C.) College.

Brown, a native of Mossy Creek (now Jefferson City), Tenn., attended Carson-Newman and Judson colleges. While attending Carson-Newman, Brown was converted and immediately entered Christian work.

Upon graduation from college, he taught at Fairview (N.C.) Collegiate Institute for about eight years and married Lamanda Whitaker in 1885. Ordained to the gospel ministry in 1889, he spent the next 10 years as pastor of four churches in the Buncombe Baptist Association based in Asheville, N.C.

During these years, while serving as secretary of the mission board of the Western North Carolina Baptist Convention and president of that convention, Brown met John E. White, corresponding secretary of the North Carolina Baptist Convention. White had influenced both the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention to undertake mountain school work. White also helped Brown see the need for mountain schools.

Brown also helped North Carolina Baptists see the need for a new organizational structure.

In 1897, Brown and two other men presented a recommendation to the Carolina Baptist Association at Hendersonville to dissolve the Western North Carolina Baptist Convention and consolidate with the North Carolina Baptist Convention. Brown believed the Baptist cause would be better served if there were one Baptist convention in North Carolina.

At the state convention meeting in 1898, North Carolina Baptists were united. The reunited convention met in 1899; at this same convention meeting, Brown was appointed general missionary for mountain schools. Though mountain mission work in North Carolina had suffered because of the separation, the united convention brought Brown the support of Baptists across the state.

Public education in the mountain region was in serious trouble when Brown began his work in 1899. The average school term in North Carolina was less than three months. Many communities had no schools of any kind. Most of the schools closed during the Civil War and were not able to reopen after the war.

In 1901, Brown was selected by the Home Mission Board to be the superintendent of Mountain Missions and Schools, and the North Carolina Baptist State Convention transferred its own work in the mountains to the administration of the HMB.

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Brown was a mountain man who knew the problems of the region. But his pioneer spirit pressed on. His challenge was to not only develop schools in the mountains of North Carolina but also to be of service to the mountain people of Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri. His assigned territory would cover 86,000 square miles.

The goal of mountain missions and schools was both to provide educational opportunities and to prepare the youth of the mountain regions for college, vocation, citizenship and usefulness as Christians.

Brown set a pattern of encouraging self-reliance among the people in the school communities from the beginning of his work. His encouragement to the mountain people to depend on their own resources for the schools became the guiding principle for the Home Mission Board's work in the mountains.

While Brown was superintendent of mountain missions and schools, the number of schools increased from six to 35. A biographer noted Brown "exposed himself to rains, floods, and wintry blizzards to build the 35 schools into strength." He persuaded people to give money, time and materials for the buildings.

Of Brown, J.W. O'Hara, his successor as superintendent of schools for the Home Mission Board, said, "... over well-nigh impassible roads, ... meeting every difficult situation with courage, with limited means, (Brown), with large vision and definite purpose, pressed forward ... ." A.E. Brown helped develop schools and improve life for the mountain people of Southern Appalachia and the Ozarks.

"Role Models in Southern Baptist Service" also features stories of Elizabeth Morse, a missionary to the American Indians, and Owen Cooper, chemical corporation CEO, bivocational missionary and former SBC president. For more information on how to obtain a copy of the January 1994 issue of Baptist History and Heritage, call the Historical Commission at 1-800-966-BAPT.

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L.A. churches tackling  
post-quake ministry

By Clay Renick

Baptist Press  
3/17/94

LOS ANGELES (BP)--Disaster relief teams saw a genuine openness to the gospel among California's earthquake and fire victims.

"I've had multi-millionaires standing in front of me crying like a baby," said Ed Adams. "Everything was gone but what they had on their back."

Adams is a church planter with Gold Coast Southern Baptist Association in Oxnard, Calif. But he also coordinated disaster teams at the Malibu fire and Northridge earthquake.

"Your first job is to minister," Adams told volunteers who helped with relief efforts.

At the fire, crews used chain saws to remove brush and helped residents sift through the wreckage.

"I heard a lot of people say, 'At least we're healthy,'" Adams said. "At least we escaped with our lives."

"They just didn't feel they needed anything or anybody," Adams continued. "But now there's vulnerability."

Malibu is an area with no Southern Baptist churches.

Arriving at the fire scene, Adams and his team saw flames in two directions. Fire units crowded the streets. The heat came like a storm.

"It was incredible," Adams added. "I've seen cars two feet high that were melted down to that level."

Pastors near Northridge report increased opportunities for witness and ministry as a result of the earthquake.

"Many people wanted to know why God allows earthquakes," said Steve Pope, who leads Royal Avenue Baptist Church in Simi Valley, eight miles west of the epicenter.

"Most churches have experienced an increase in attendance," he said.

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Repairing damage to the church building has cost \$3,000 so far. But one end of the structure lifted an inch in the earthquake. The repair estimates could reach \$10,000 or more.

Tim Logerquist, director of missions for Gold Coast Association, helped set up a disaster relief center nearby. Southern Baptist volunteers came from several states and helped prepare more than 1 million meals.

"People are so receptive," Logerquist said. "Most of us had churning stomachs and sleepless nights for weeks. We're still having aftershocks."

The earthquake also shook up inner-city attitudes in south-central Los Angeles, according to Luther Keith.

"It brought people together," said Keith, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Inglewood. Despite the distance from the quake's epicenter, many homes in south-central L.A. sustained damage from the temblor.

Afterward, Keith said, "people stayed together. They ate together ... the rich and the poor.

"A lot of these folks will never forget this."

One of the best outcomes happened at Shepherd of the Hills Church in Porter Ranch. Damage to church property surpassed \$100,000. But more than 100 quake victims became Christians through the ministry of the church and disaster relief crews stationed there.

"This earthquake made people think about their future and what's important," said Carmen Robaina, receptionist at Shepherd of the Hills. "We came in contact with a lot of people who may not have known we were here."

One of the victims recently had moved to California after losing her business in Arizona. For her, the quake was yet another setback.

"She lost everything in the earthquake," Robaina said. "She was in a daze."

The church helped by providing gas for her car and directing her to a shelter.

"I believe that out of this, many churches will be started," Logerquist said. "Many people will come to the Lord.

"Once the crisis is over, the work is still to be done."

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She asked for a miracle  
to convince New Age friend

By Clay Renick

Baptist Press  
3/17/94

LOS ANGELES (BP)--Barbiann Schmeiser knew it would take a miracle to stop the disastrous fire in the Malibu hills last fall. A teacher for the Los Angeles Public School District, Schmeiser lived in a small rented house near Malibu.

"I never experienced a terror like this in my life," Schmeiser said. "The fire cloud was one quarter of a mile thick."

Her landlady lived nearby and believed in New Age ideas. "Let's pretend there's blue flames around us that will protect that property," the woman advised.

"The fire was coming up the mountain toward us," Schmeiser recalled. She suggested prayer instead. The landlady, a millionaire who had had little previous contact with Christianity, agreed.

"Lord," Schmeiser prayed, "we don't deserve this. But we ask for a miracle. Please protect the property."

Schmeiser drove back to L.A. to finish some work at the school district. That night the winds died down.

But when she called her landlady, Schmeiser learned the fire was still burning and the property was surrounded.

More than 6,000 firemen and 900 trucks were fighting the blaze. Ten thousand acres and hundreds of homes were already lost.

Still, the landlady stayed with her house and Schmeiser's cottage nearby.

"We need to be careful to thank Jesus Christ when he saves your property," Schmeiser added.

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When night came, Schmeiser's landlady went up to a ledge that overlooked Malibu. She found 14 firemen and 20 mansion owners there also.

Then a mist came up from the ocean and put out the fire.

"It was a total act of God," Schmeiser said. "They all stood there and praised the name of Jesus Christ."

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Luther Rice Seminary names  
Flanagan as 4th president

Baptist Press  
3/17/94

LITHONIA, Ga. (BP)--The board of regents of Luther Rice Bible College and Seminary of Lithonia, Ga., has named James L. Flanagan, 45, as the school's fourth president.

Flanagan joined the Luther Rice faculty in 1982 and has been vice president for academic affairs since 1985 and interim president since April 1993.

The inauguration ceremony will be May 13 at Rehoboth Baptist Church in Tucker, Ga., in conjunction with the seminary's graduation ceremonies.

Flanagan holds the master of divinity and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He is a graduate of Southern Illinois University and has studied at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary.

Flanagan follows James Bryant, who had been president two years who left to return to teaching, and, earlier, Gene Williams who was president 10 years and Robert Witty, founder and president of LRS its first 20 years.

Luther Rice Bible College and Seminary was founded in 1962 in Jacksonville, Fla., as a conservative, evangelical school of higher education. The school remained in Florida until July 1991, when it was relocated to the metro-Atlanta area.

Flanagan said he is asking the Lord to help him fulfill the institution's purpose "to glorify God and assist the church by providing education from a conservative biblical position for spiritual growth, Bible knowledge and Christian ministry."

He also indicated he "seeks to continue the innovative spirit in distance education that has always been associated with Luther Rice Seminary." Luther Rice has more than 2,300 students involved in theological education through home studies worldwide. The seminary employs 10 full-time faculty members and numerous adjunct faculty.

The namesake of the school, Luther Rice (1783-1836), was a missionary volunteer associated with the well-known missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson. Rice was an organizer who spent his life uniting churches to support missions. He also had a strong belief in education. He established Columbia College (now George Washington University) in Washington.

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(BP) photo available upon request from Luther Rice Seminary, (404) 484-1204.

SBC stats, new teaching helps  
added to services on SBCNet

Baptist Press  
3/17/94

NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptist Convention statistics for 1993 and teaching helps for Convention Uniform Series adult Sunday school lessons are the latest additions to SBCNet, the data communications network for Southern Baptists.

The 1993 statistics, posted in both Microsoft Excel and Acrobat formats, are located in the publications section and include a state-by-state summary of key indicators such as resident membership, ongoing Sunday school enrollment and total receipts. Baptisms categorized by age group and state, along with enrollment of Sunday school, discipleship training, music, Brotherhood and Woman's Missionary Union.

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Tom Carringer, denominational statistics specialist in the Baptist Sunday School Board's strategic information unit, said, beginning with 1993, the statistics will be available electronically each year. SBCNet users needing to compare 1993 figures with earlier years should refer to the 1993 Southern Baptist Handbook which is available through the board's customer service center or Baptist Book Stores.

The first posting of life application helps to accompany adult CUS materials will be March 24 for the April 3 lesson.

SBCNet, which may be accessed by using a computer, modem and a membership kit distributed by the Sunday School Board, is continuing to add resources for use by church staff persons and lay leaders, according to David Haywood, SBCNet coordinator. As services have increased, membership in the network has grown, he added. Membership has grown to approximately 1,700, up almost 1,200 from February 1993.

Other services available on SBCNet include Baptist Press, the official Southern Baptist news service; News Room, offering news and feature stories from Southern Baptist agencies and state conventions; Facts & Trends, the Sunday School Board's newsletter for church and denominational leaders; and Facts & Trends Information Service, news briefs from the Sunday School Board, Home Mission Board and Foreign Mission Board with usage suggestions for church newsletters; supplemental teaching helps for adult and youth Sunday school lessons in Life and Work, Bible Book and Convention Uniform series; life application handouts in the Acrobat format for fifth- and sixth-grade children using "Bible Searchers."

Also included is Clip Art, a collection of ready-to-use art pieces; Bold Mission Prayer, requests for prayer from home and foreign missionaries; DiscipleLife Plus, a youth discipleship supplement; "Powerline;" Innovative Ministry Library; and Minister's Corner, a collection of sermons and illustrations.

Kits are available in DOS, Macintosh and Windows versions and may be ordered by calling 1-800-458-2772. Additional information about SBCNet may be ordered by calling Haywood at 1-800-325-7749, ext. 2895.

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