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EDITORS' NOTE: The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship office in Atlanta told Baptist Press May 18 that CBF Coordinator Cecil Sherman, mentioned in the story below, was out of the office through May 20. (BP) will offer Sherman an opportunity to respond to this story.

ANALYSIS

Virgin birth said to reflect larger theological concerns

By Dave Couric

Baptist Press
5/19/94

DALLAS (BP)--Though it hasn't been much of a controversial issue throughout most of church history, the virgin birth of Christ has recently become an issue for Southern Baptists.

For both sides of the growing controversy, discussion of the doctrine that Jesus had no earthly father reflects a larger problem:

For the conservative leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention in general, the virgin birth question is a theological one, which leads directly to the heart of the gospel and Christ's atoning work on the cross.

For the moderate leadership of 3-year-old Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the recently raised virgin birth issue is simply another diversion in an ongoing battle for political power in the SBC.

The current controversy began when O.S. Hawkins, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, suggested in his church newsletter column that larger issues surrounding the firing of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Russell H. Dilday Jr. might be more theological than political.

Hawkins used as an example some comments CBF leader Cecil Sherman once made about the virgin birth. Citing a 1983 article in Christianity Today, Hawkins quoted Sherman as saying to the effect that the virgin birth is not necessarily an essential doctrine, so a Southern Baptist teacher should not be fired for not believing it.

Sherman sent a memorandum to Baptist Press and state paper editors on April 29, titled "Responding to O.S. Hawkins about the Virgin Birth." The six-page statement affirms Sherman's belief in the doctrine. He also classifies it as not one of the "big doctrines." He says doctrines like the virgin birth are "true" but "not so important" as ones mentioned more times in the Bible.

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The sudden interest in his decade-old statements about the virgin birth, Sherman writes, is a "diversion" to make the CBF appear liberal just because "I said at one time that I was not sure we ought to fire every professor who doesn't (believe in the virgin birth)."

The famous doctrine is serving as a catalyst for discussion of what appears to be a larger theological issue in the SBC reminiscent of the "fundamentalist-modernist" controversy early in this century: What is essential to believe about the Christian gospel, or what are the fundamentals of the faith? In the controversy of the 1920s the virgin birth was included as one of the five fundamentals, along with inspiration of Scripture, deity of Christ, the atonement and the resurrection/second coming.

Closely related to the content of the gospel, in the current controversy, is the question of what employees of Southern Baptist agencies and educational institutions should be required to believe.

Sherman described the issue, seen of course in a different light by each of the opposing sides, in his written response to O.S. Hawkins: "Some folks want to argue about a guy who is uncertain not about the virgin birth but about the hypothetical question of whether or not he would fire a professor who did not believe in the virgin birth."

Similar to the popular political position that starts out "I'm personally opposed to it, but . . .," the question from the conservative perspective is not what individuals believe as much as what individuals think is important enough to require that Southern Baptist teachers believe.

As William E. Bell Jr., dean of the religion department at Dallas Baptist University, sees the situation, "You don't have to deny the virgin birth to be a problem in the Southern Baptist Convention. All you have to do is say, 'I believe in it, but I think there's room for those who don't.' And at that point you open the door to heresy, and you're in trouble."

Although some theologians try to hold to the deity of Christ, while rejecting the virgin birth, Bell explains the theological significance of the doctrine in this way: "If Jesus was not born of a virgin, then when he was born, he inherited the guilt and sinful propensities of Adam and therefore could not have been our Savior because he would have been a sinner himself."

Bell goes on to sound a warning about further theological consequences in the controversy: "It is not an accident that those who deny the virgin birth, or don't think it's particularly important, also have no place in their theology for penal substitutionary atonement. The virgin birth makes possible the sinless Savior and thus the penal substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. If one does not believe that Christ died as our substitute, as our sacrificial lamb, then he has denied the essence of historic, biblical Christianity. So when someone says, 'I believe in it, but I think there's plenty of room for those who don't,' then what he's really saying is that there's plenty of room for those who reject historic, biblical Christianity. What this means is that the person who rejects the virgin birth of Christ simply does not accept the Christian faith."

Also involved in the debate, says Bell, is the integrity of Scripture. "If the virgin birth as described in Scripture is not true, how do we know that the incarnation is true? How do we know that the substitutionary atonement is true? How do we know that the resurrection is true? How do we know that any of Christianity is true if we can selectively eliminate those parts of the person and work of Christ that we don't care for?"

Another problem with not holding to the virgin birth, Bell points out, is finding an alternative to it. That Jesus was simply the son of Joseph and Mary is not the only alternative. In fact, those who deny the virgin birth frequently make the claim that Jesus was the illegitimate child of Mary and a Roman soldier. (Bell cites, for example, Nels Ferre's "The Sun and the Umbrella").

Historically, all main confessions of faith, such as the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed, and every major branch of Christendom -- Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox -- have affirmed the virgin birth. The Baptist Faith and Message also includes the doctrine.

Some, like Sherman, raise the objection that the virgin birth is not mentioned in Paul's writings. They also point out that the virgin birth is in only two gospels, Matthew and Luke. Therefore, the objection goes, the doctrine can't be that important or necessary to believe.

To this Bell replies: Paul never had occasion to deal with the virgin birth in the first place, the "argument from silence" is a weak one in logic, and Paul never said anything to conflict with the doctrine. As a matter of fact, Paul dealt more with the work of Christ than the person of Christ, Bell notes.

As for the gospels, Bell observes, Matthew and Luke are the only gospel writers who even deal with Jesus' birth at all. To the infrequency-of-mention argument he responds, "How many times does something have to be taught in the Bible before we are required to believe it?"

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Couric is a free-lance writer in Dallas.

CLC taps letter service to fight
abortion in health care plans By Tom Strode

Baptist Press
5/19/94

WASHINGTON (BP)--The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission has enlisted a letter-writing service to help individual Southern Baptists campaign against inclusion of abortion in health care reform.

Under its arrangement with the Christian Life Commission, USA Letters, a Washington-based company, provides personalized letters addressed to President Bill Clinton and members of Congress expressing opposition to abortion coverage in health care proposals.

The letter to members of Congress urges them to work against any health care plan which "includes abortion on demand or does not expressly forbid abortion coverage." The letter to the president asks him to remove abortion from his plan. The CLC already has announced its opposition to plans proposed by Clinton, Rep. Jim Cooper, D.-Tenn., and Sen. John Chafee, R.-R.I., because they do not exclude abortion coverage.

The letters, with envelopes, are pre-addressed to each person's United States representative and two United States senators, as well as the president. Each letter contains room for a written postscript as well as a signature.

Southern Baptists and others can receive the letters by calling 1-900-933-1776. The cost for the service is \$5.95.

Those who have a block placed on their telephone lines for calls to 900 services may send a check or money order for \$5.95 to: CLC/USA Letters, P.O. Box 9865, Washington, DC 20016-8865.

With this effort, the CLC is seeking to help Southern Baptists who want to participate but are too busy to write or feel intimidated by the idea of communicating with elected officials, said James A. Smith, the commission's director of government relations.

"We would certainly encourage people to do their own letters as the most effective way to communicate, but if they won't, this is the next best thing," Smith said. "We wish the cost could be cheaper, but we thought that to get four personalized letters with four envelopes, this was a reasonable expense."

Less than three weeks after the first promotion of the service, more than 240 calls had been received. In addition to a previous mailing, the project is being promoted in the current issue of Light, the CLC's ethics magazine. It also will be included in the next issue of Salt, the agency's public policy newsletter.

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"We are very encouraged by the initial results and believe this program is meeting a need among Southern Baptists," Smith said. "If the project is successful, we will consider using this technology in future public policy efforts."

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Draper expresses optimism
in midst of chaotic times

By Linda Lawson

Baptist Press
5/19/94

NASHVILLE (BP)--Jimmy Draper describes himself as an optimist -- one who sees a glass half full, not half empty.

In writing his new book addressed to Southern Baptists, Draper, president of the Baptist Sunday School Board, acknowledges the Southern Baptist Convention is going through a "chaotic time."

However, in "Bridges to the Future: A Challenge to Southern Baptists," scheduled for release in June by the board's Convention Press, Draper said his purpose is to offer a sense of "positive direction. I want to renew our vision for the future, our understanding of who we Southern Baptists are, where we came from, where we are headed and how we will reach that destination.

"I think the most important thing I am trying to communicate is the value of our cooperation, the effectiveness and strength of the cooperative way," said Draper.

He believes cooperation, historically a bedrock principle of Southern Baptists, will remain so, but "it may be altered. It may be reformed, reshaped in some way.

"A cooperative effort requires give and take," he said. "Nobody has everything they want in cooperation. That is true in any relationship. So the question becomes how we continue to share responsibility and opportunity."

The Cooperative Program, the denomination's plan for funding mission efforts, "will continue to be the way Southern Baptists move forward together," Draper predicted.

"I don't know what impact other plans being offered will have," he said. "But I think for Southern Baptists on a national scale, the Cooperative Program will still be our strength."

In other chapters of his book, Draper addresses the kinds of churches that will be effective going into the 21st century; unity amid diversity; and the local church as the pinnacle of the denomination.

"Dad (a Southern Baptist pastor and director of missions) always told me the local church was the Baptist headquarters. He jokingly said, 'I've got an agreement with Nashville and Dallas that if it ever changes, I will send them a change of address,'" said Draper, an Arkansas native who grew up in Texas.

"The autonomy, the dignity and responsibility of the local church is the keystone of Baptist thought and life," he said.

Emphasizing the importance of "stated parameters of our beliefs and practices," Draper said he believes Southern Baptists "can be as diverse as the Baptist Faith and Message is diverse." He noted the 1963 statement is "not a creed, but it is a statement of faith."

"As long as it is not a denial of biblical principles but an interpretation of biblical principles, each church has to be free to make decisions that relate to its polity and ministry," Draper said.

On the kinds of churches that minister well to people's needs, he said "an effective church is one that finds a way to minister where it is. We ought to encourage and help churches accomplish what they seek as their ministries.

"There are effective churches doing church all different kinds of ways," Draper said. However, he warned, "I think there is a terrible danger right now that churches focus in on just meeting the desires of their membership and become self-centered and detached."

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Churches that survive and thrive in the 21st century will have a global vision, he said.

"I'm talking about an Acts 1:8 mindset of taking the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. These churches will see themselves as global sending units, global partners," Draper said.

He said he hopes leaders at every level of the denomination will read his book as a source of encouragement, as a point of discussion and to help focus a vision for reaching the world with the good news of the gospel.

In the last chapter on revival and spiritual awakening, Draper acknowledges the burgeoning problems of violence, poverty and loneliness. He also points to encouraging signs of revival in some churches.

"We can blame the deplorable conditions in our nation on a number of contributing factors, but the truth is: the major problem with this nation is compromise and apathy in the churches," Draper wrote.

"Suppose the pastor and leadership of each Southern Baptist church earnestly prayed for inward revival, which resulted in their becoming involved in bold witnessing, ministering and serving," Draper suggested. "Then suppose that heavenly contagion spread throughout the church, into the community, around the area, across the state, to the entire nation and then to all the world. Would that not be glorious!"

Despite the problems, he concluded: "Our future is bright. God has given us all we need to build bridges to the future even in these perilous times. We have the foundation and the design. Now let us rise up and build."

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Draper: Society's stress
fueled by speed of change

By Linda Lawson

Baptist Press
5/19/94

NASHVILLE (BP)--It's not so much the changes people are experiencing that are causing stress and burnout.

It's the speed of change gripping today's world.

In his new book, "Bridges to the Future: A Challenge to Southern Baptists" scheduled for release in June by Convention Press, Baptist Sunday School Board President Jimmy Draper outlines some of the changes taking place in today's world. He challenges churches and individual Christians to meet the needs of people buffeted by change.

"We must grapple with these monumental changes if we are going to minister effectively in this period of upheaval," he wrote.

He highlighted changes in education and employment, technology, health, family, success and spiritual fulfillment.

In education and employment, Draper noted college educations no longer last a lifetime. The careers of young adults now graduating from college will include continuous education and several different kinds of jobs. Also:

-- Employers will offer less in traditional benefits such as retirement but, in return, provide greater flexibility such as flexible hours, job-sharing and sabbaticals.

-- The number of employees working full time and receiving full benefits will decrease while those working in temporary, part-time and self-employed positions will increase.

In technology, "virtual" reality, time and travel will make it increasingly difficult to differentiate between what is real and what is a product of technology, Draper said.

-- With computers and computer networks, time has become instant and programmable. People can shop from home 24 hours a day and the United States increasingly will become a 24-hour society.

-- Because technology has so greatly increased the volume of information to which people have access, some are becoming overwhelmed and disconnecting from so-called conveniences such as voice mail and car telephones.

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"The flood of technology can be a boon to humanity and used for God's glory, or it can result in disasters not even imagined," Draper said.

Health care will continue to be a concern in upcoming years as costs escalate beyond one trillion dollars a year.

"Could we be in for rationing health care; perhaps having to decide whether preemies, the aged, the terminally ill and the poor get maximum medical care?" Draper asked.

In the area of family life, the percentage of traditional families of mother, father and children sharing the same home will continue to decrease, he noted.

Also:

-- More fathers will be caring for their preschool children while their wives work.

-- More spouses will be separated by long distances as they each manage careers in a global marketplace.

"In the past, success was defined as owning property, being able to care for your family, amassing wealth, perhaps owning your own business, mastering the skills of your career and having money to invest and spend," Draper said.

"Today, success is defined as financial security, emotional and physical well-being and the ability to manage and utilize information," he said. Trends include:

-- People are beginning to save for retirement at younger ages than in the past.

-- Safety is becoming a more important factor than quality of education in parents' decisions to place children in private schools.

In another area, people are looking for spiritual fulfillment in many of the wrong places as evidenced by burgeoning cults, Draper said.

"No wonder many Christians feel like throwing up their hands and quitting, and that's exactly what the devil wants us to do. But we serve a God of sovereign wisdom and power, and he still rules over the universe."

He predicted churches that most effectively meet needs will be those that provide services on demand rather than having a set schedule of activities.

"Churches that only conduct activities and services at certain times of the week may find themselves out in the cold," Draper said. "The day may be approaching when many churches will operate practically 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."

He noted American society changed in the 1970s, from looking to churches to solve problems to looking to the government. Now cults and pagan religions are responding.

"Will we by default allow other traditional religious groups, government, cults, Eastern and Middle Eastern religions to meet the needs?" Draper asked. "My heartfelt prayer is that we Southern Baptists will refocus our attention and energies and will unite to meet these incredible challenges."

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Dilday, trustee reps discuss
severance package, restrictions By Art Toalston

Baptist Press
5/19/94

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--No agreement has been struck to modify conditions in the severance package for Russell H. Dilday Jr. stipulating his supportiveness of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which he led 16 years until his firing March 9.

The severance package was voted by Southwestern trustees as part of their March 9 firing of Dilday.

Trustee chairman Ralph W. Pulley Jr., a Dallas attorney, described the severance package as "generous," and noted to Baptist Press it was "adopted by the board of trustees ... (as) part of the motion to relieve Dr. Dilday of his duties. This is not something that he has to agree to."

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But the package nevertheless is troubles me, Dilday told Baptist Press, because it can be arbitrarily terminated by trustees.

At issue in the severance package -- which Pulley estimated at \$400,000 in value and Dilday estimated as lower, without listing a specific dollar amount -- are three conditions:

"a. To keep as his primary and ultimate purpose the well-being and good of SWBTS (the seminary) as an institution for training men and women for ministry and will let this be the basis for conferences, interviews, speeches, lectures, etc., in which he may be involved while drawing benefits from SWBTS;

"b. To refrain from any action or activity that may be deemed not in the best interests of SWBTS, specifically including (but without limitation) working with or promoting any entity not in harmony and cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention, while drawing benefits from SWBTS;"

"c. Should the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees of SWBTS deem that Dr. Dilday has not acted in good faith with regard to this agreement, the Committee may in its sole discretion terminate any benefits which have not been paid."

"There is no way I can move forward with plans for the future," Dilday said, "based on a provision that is so open to an arbitrary termination."

Saying the conditions affect decisions he must make about buying a house and securing new employment, he voiced hope that trustees would make revisions "to allow for fairness and some sense of security."

Pulley, meanwhile, said, "The application of these conditions is not difficult to ascertain. Dr. Dilday must not directly or indirectly, personally or collectively, criticize or attack the seminary, its faculty, student body, board of trustees or the Southern Baptist Convention which owns the institution. This has nothing to do with Dr. Dilday making appearances to speak or preach and freely discuss his theology. He certainly is entitled to his personal views, provided the public or private expression of those views does not violate the conditions and requirements described in the severance package."

Dilday and Pulley confirmed two meetings were held involving the severance package within a month after the firing between an attorney representing Dilday and Pulley and trustee vice chairman Lee Weaver, a Fort Worth businessman.

Pulley said the meetings and subsequent correspondence have not resulted in any agreement to recommend revisions of the conditions to the trustee executive committee.

Pulley told Baptist Press he and Weaver plan to recommend to the trustee executive committee "moving expense be paid up to \$2,500 and that the medical benefits after 65, which is in effect Medicare supplement, be provided."

The initial proposal from Dilday's attorney, Pulley said, would have entailed an additional \$160,000 in cost; a second proposal, \$50,000.

Dilday said the initial proposal called for continued compensation on par with what he was receiving at the time of his firing; the second proposal, he said, was scaled back to a request for the addition of moving expenses and inclusion in the seminary retirement health plan.

An Associated Baptist Press story on the Dilday-trustee negotiations May 17 quoted only Dilday and was devoid of any trustee viewpoint.

"I haven't heard one word from Greg Warner or Bob Allen about it," Pulley said, referring to ABP's executive editor and associate executive editor, respectively.

Allen, the writer of the article, contacted by Baptist Press, said, "I didn't think there was anything in Dilday's quotes that was disputable" and thus he did not seek any trustee comment. "It was a wrapup of several loose ends," Allen said of the story covering several recent developments in the controversy over the trustee's firing of Dilday.

**Jerry Vine boosts Wolfe,
defends Dilday dismissal**

By Art Toalston

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--Jerry Vines, co-pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., and 1988-90 president of the Southern Baptist Convention, has reiterated his support for Fred Wolfe for SBC president in a May 15 mailing of his church newsletter to 8,000 pastors.

Vines also stated Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary trustees "have made a decision which, in my personal judgment, was long overdue" in firing Russell H. Dilday Jr. as president of the Fort Worth, Texas, institution.

Vines noted three other former SBC presidents had authorized him to share that they also support Southwestern's trustees: Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, Tenn.; Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta; and Bailey Smith, an Atlanta-based evangelist.

Vines did not specify whether the three men were endorsing Wolfe as SBC president.

In the newsletter, Vines did not review his reasons for supporting Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala., who will be one of two nominees during the June 14-16 meeting for the post, the other being Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla., the convention's host city.

Asked in an interview with Baptist Press, he said, "I believe that Dr. Wolfe can best serve at this time to help us continue the conservative resurgence which began in 1979. Dr. Wolfe and Dr. Henry are both personal friends of mine. It's not a matter of personality. It's a matter of conviction of completing the job that was started in 1979," the year of the first conservative victory in an SBC presidential election.

Nor did Vines elaborate in the newsletter on his belief that the termination of Dilday was "long overdue."

He told Baptist Press, "It's not a matter of personality. It's a matter of philosophy. The denomination has made it very clear the direction they want to go, and the trustees are just moving in that direction. I am a strong believer in the trustee system. I believe that's the only way to effectively carry on the activities of our agencies and institutions. If you're unhappy with the direction of those agencies and institutions, then the thing to do is elect trustees who will bring about the kind of positive things you desire."

In the newsletter, Vines also gave affirmation to Southern Baptists' trustee system, stating: "Many, many years ago wise and godly people devised the trustee system. Trustees are elected to serve our denomination on the boards of our various institutions and agencies. The Southwestern trustees have made a decision which, in my personal opinion, was long overdue. We do not have access to all the information available to the trustees. Proverbs 18:13 says, 'He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.' I believe these people to be godly individuals. We must be willing to trust them to do what they feel is best for the institution and ultimately for God's work in the world."

Vines added: "In light of the wonderful things which have taken place at Southeastern Seminary (in North Carolina) as a result of changes brought about by the return of our Convention to a conservative position, I believe the days ahead for Southwestern Seminary are filled with promise."

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**Southwestern's Scott Collins
accepts Buckner p.r. post**

By Orville Scott

**Baptist Press
5/19/94**

DALLAS (BP)--Scott A. Collins, director of public relations for Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, since 1989, has been named director of public relations for Buckner Baptist Benevolences in Dallas, effective June 6.

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He will be responsible for public relations in the advancement department for Buckner's nine child care units and four retirement communities across the state, said Ken Cauthen, vice president for advancement.

"We feel Scott Collins is the person to help us do the best job of telling the statewide story of Buckner's Christ-centered ministry to people of all ages."

Collins was director of news and information for Southwestern from 1988-1989 and also was a part-time news writer there while earning his master of divinity degree at the seminary. Also, he holds the bachelor of arts degree in mass communications/journalism from Northeast Missouri State University in Kirksville.

As a Southern Baptist missionary journeyman from 1982-84, Collins was director of media in Botswana, Africa.

He was managing editor of the Macon (Mo.) Daily Chronicle-Herald from 1984-85.

Also, Collins has served as minister to youth at Western Hills Baptist Church in Fort Worth and has been pulpit supply and revival preacher and Bible study leader for churches in Missouri, Texas and Arkansas.

He is accredited with the Public Relations Society of America and is a member of Baptist Public Relations Association and other professional public relations/journalism organizations.

Collins is married to the former Judy Phariss, a chaplain with Community Hospice in Fort Worth.

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On the brink of giving up,
she gave this church a try

By Chele Caughron

Baptist Press
5/19/94

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (BP)--Kristina Rendar had had it with church.

The church Rendar was attending had just asked her and her friend not to return until after the unmarried friend's baby was born.

"That's it. If this is what religion is supposed to be I don't want any part of it," Rendar said she told her friend, who had convinced her to attend church in the first place.

Rendar vowed she would not go back to church, but then something caught Rendar's eye that changed her mind.

"I got a mailer from Mecklenburg (Community) Church that said, 'Are you tired of meaningless sermons?' And I said, 'Yes! Yes! YES!' So I said, 'OK, I'll give this place a shot, and if it doesn't work out, then I'll never go to church again.'"

At Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, N.C., Rendar found an atmosphere and attitude that was a shocking difference from the church she had left. There was drama, contemporary music and a relaxed dress "code." Even the sermon seemed different: "He was preaching about just how to get along in everyday life," Rendar said with amazement.

"With all my experience, I never thought that you could ever want to go to church," Rendar said. "It was always more of a chore."

Rendar went back, and on her second visit she was impressed pastor Jim Whit was able to remember her name. She kept attending and started asking questions.

"Why is this so different from what I was raised on?" asked Rendar, 21, who was raised in a Catholic home in Pennsylvania. "How can it be so contemporary and still be biblically based?"

White explained to her the message of Jesus Christ as Lord had not been altered, but the methods for presenting that message certainly had been updated.

What started with curiosity about a flyer grew into a search for life then intensified each Sunday. Then on a Sunday in December 1992; White spoke about trusting God.

"Everything just seemed to click that day," Rendar said. "Tears started streaming down my face. It all made sense. I just felt God's presence. He was with me."

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"It's made a phenomenal difference in me," she said. "It's an all-around change . . . I'm a very different person now than I was two years ago, and I'm glad for that."

The assistant day care director and University of North Carolina family psychology student who had written religion off finally chose to meet the Jesus Christ she had only heard about for so many years.

"The rest of my family is basically unchurched," Rendar said. "They don't go to church. It's basically a hassle for them."

Rendar's mother, whom Rendar described as the only "big churchgoer in the family," questioned what had changed Rendar while she was away at school.

"Her first concern was that it was a cult," Rendar said. So Rendar sent her mother some audio tapes of the church services, which calmed her mother's fears.

Rendar is praying her family will find the relationship with Jesus Christ she has found. "They're all receptive. They listen," she said. "(But) they don't understand this. There is nothing like this in Pennsylvania where we live."

Mecklenburg Community Church, only about 18 months old, targets the unchurched like Rendar, White said. While the church is a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, it is known for its interdenominational attitude.

"Kristina is a good example, I think, of someone who was very open to God but very turned off to church," White said.

The church, which meets in a school, draws about 400 to 500 people on Sunday mornings. Sunday services are designed for seekers, while Wednesday night services are geared more for Christian members.

"The whole service is designed from top to bottom to present Christianity to those who are unreached," White said.

Rendar now leads the drama team at Mecklenburg Community Church. She writes and edits scripts, selects the cast, works with the sound board team, organizes rehearsals and directs the dramas.

"We try very hard to make our dramas authentic -- something people can really relate to -- average people in real-life situations. And I do push for high standards."

Rendar never will forget the drama presented at Mecklenburg that December Sunday when she accepted Christ as her personal Lord and Savior.

The script was about a family who was expecting to adopt a baby, but they just had learned the baby's mother had changed her mind and decided to keep the baby herself. The husband in the drama remained calm and simply stated God knows best. The wife, on the other hand, reacted in anguish. "How can God dangle a carrot like this and then jerk it away?"

"I really could relate to her, because she was saying, 'How can I trust him when he's done this or done that.' That one hit me, because I had felt like that a lot of times," Rendar said. "You could put yourself right into the character. It was real to me."

Rendar learned firsthand the impact of drama and decided she wanted to be a part of it.

"I love to see what I'm doing help people and move people. I want to do the best job I can every Sunday, in every way, because I know I was sitting in those seats a year and a half ago as somebody who had completely given up on God. The drama at church was one of the elements that turned my life around and showed me what Christ can do. No one is expecting drama to preach to them. Drama can sneak in the back door."

The dramas at Mecklenburg always are carefully planned to work with the sermon subject, Rendar said.

"We raise questions, but we don't answer them," she said. "That's Jim's rule: Let them end with a bunch of questions, so you want to hear the sermon. The person says, 'Yes, I recognize this feeling, but what do I do now?' Lives change. People dedicate their lives to Christ. It all clicks together."

The difference Mecklenburg promised is not just drama, not just true-to-life sermons or contemporary music, Rendar said. The difference is the whole package is working together for the glory of God.

"We are acting for an audience of one, and that's God," Rendar said.

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Teresa Cain, a writer in Charlotte, N.C., contributed to this story.

3 Baptist workers escape serious injury in Tanzania

Baptist Press
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BUKOKA, Tanzania (BP)--Two Florida Baptists and a Southern Baptist missionary journalist escaped serious injury in a May 17 collision while returning from a Rwandan refugee camp in western Tanzania.

Their small pickup collided head-on with a 10-ton truck loaded with wet sand. The truck sped around a curve on the wrong side of the road. Both vehicles swerved the same direction toward an open field, where they hit. The impact knocked the smaller truck backward six feet and wrapped the radiator around the engine block.

Floridian Tom Harper, on-site coordinator for the Tanzania-Florida Baptist missions partnership, suffered a badly bruised and sprained elbow and several facial cuts. Hugh Cater, disaster relief coordinator for the Florida Baptist Convention who was in Tanzania assessing the refugee situation, escaped with a sore right calf and a bump on the head.

Missionary Craig Bird, who was driving, was bruised on his chest, shoulder and knee. Bird, based in Nairobi, Kenya, is the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's overseas correspondent for Africa. He was covering the refugee relief survey trip for Baptist Press.

None of the approximately 15 people, including a baby, riding atop the load of sand was injured.

The three Southern Baptists were part of a seven-man survey team. The team had just submitted a proposal to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to assist hundreds of thousands of Rwandans fleeing bloodshed in their country for the safety of neighboring Tanzania.

The other four team members, traveling in a separate vehicle, were Tanzania missionaries Rob Moor and John Crews, Rwanda missionary Larry Randolph and Foreign Mission Board staff member Jim Foster, who heads the board's human needs department. The large truck involved in the accident ran them off the road just seconds before plowing into the vehicle with the Florida volunteers.

After a three-hour police investigation, the seven men crammed into the undamaged vehicle for a four-hour drive to Moor's home in Bukoba, Tanzania, on Lake Victoria.

"Despite the damage to the pickup, it's probable that a head-on collision was the safest point of impact," Moor said.

"If they had hit either side the massive weight and speed of the truck could have ripped the side off or rolled the pickup. This way the impact was spread across the entire front of the pickup, which also kept the engine block from being driven back into the cab. Once again, God was very, very good and provided miraculous protection."

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