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BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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October 27, 1994

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TENNESSEE--Correction.

Brotherhood trustees take steps
to relocate, boost capital campaign

Baptist Press
10/27/94

By Steve Barber

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--Trustees of the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission approved a process for relocation of the agency's facilities and took steps to boost its \$10 million Opportunity Now capital campaign during their Oct. 21-22 meeting. The trustees also approved organizational changes that included the naming of Michael Day, previously associate to the president, to the position of executive vice president.

A recommendation brought by a trustee committee to sell the agency's facilities at 1548 Poplar Ave. to the city of Memphis for \$1.25 million was approved unanimously. The recommendation also included plans to enter into contract with the Belz Corporation of Memphis for the construction of office and warehouse space totalling 70,000 square feet on a five-acre tract in the Goodlett Farms Corporate Park in suburban Cordova for roughly \$3.75 million.

The contract to build would be contingent upon securing funding for the project. The trustee action authorizes the president to request capital funds from the Southern Baptist Convention's Cooperative Program capital needs budget and a low-interest loan for a period of five to seven years until funds can be provided by the SBC. Meanwhile, the city of Memphis, with plans to use the agency's facilities for a small-business incubator program, must apply for a federal grant.

"I'm confident that if God wants us to have this, he's going to put all the pieces together," said James D. Williams, Brotherhood Commission president. "There's a lot to be juggled here, but we are confident that the SBC Executive Committee will respond favorably to our request."

The request will go to the Executive Committee's program budget subcommittee next February.

To expand the fund-raising campaign for Opportunity Now, the trustees approved a new position of development officer. Salary, benefits, travel and administrative costs would come from the agency's "funds provided from operations" budget and from trustee pledges to Opportunity Now.

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The development officer's work would focus on appeals to individuals and corporations, while Resource Development, Inc. (RDI) of Springfield, Mo., will continue to take the lead in reaching foundations.

Williams said RDI's work in cultivating foundations was "proceeding in an orderly fashion," adding "we're confident that in the next two or three years, we'll have some other significant breakthroughs. We will continue to approach individuals, corporations and foundations who have an interest in who we are and what we do, but we will not make direct appeals to our SBC churches."

The new executive vice president, Day, 42, will provide staff assistance to the president's office and take a larger role in the day-to-day operation of the agency. He will continue to direct the functions of corporate planning, research and denominational relations. Day has served as associate to the president since 1991 and came to the

Brotherhood Commission in 1985 as an editor of materials for children and youth.

The organizational changes also resulted in the designation of Grace Atchley, administrative assistant to the president, as executive assistant to the president. Other senior secretaries were designated as administrative assistants.

In other business, the trustees:

- heard a report on the 1993-94 budget year, which closed with a gain over the \$4.8 million budgeted income, resulting in the agency's highest-ever annual income.

- adopted a resolution that endorses the Colorado-based Promise Keepers ministry for men as a "movement of God with significant impact on the lives of many men and churches" across the country. The resolution, a response to a motion passed at the Southern Baptist Convention in Orlando, also calls on the Brotherhood Commission to "continue development" of its own church-based Men's Ministries programs "that build upon the strengths of the current men's movement," of which Promise Keepers is considered a part.

- viewed presentations on the agency's involvement in relief efforts in Zaire and construction projects in Japan, both done under a new cooperative agreement with the SBC Foreign Mission Board.

- voted to "respond affirmatively" to the SBC's instructions regarding the acceptance of funds from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and encouraged those churches who gave through the GBF to "continue their support of our missions through traditional Cooperative Program channels."

- approved the agency's request of \$1,061,726 from the basic SBC Cooperative Program budget for the year 1995-96, representing a 10 percent increase over the 1994-95 allocation.

- were surveyed regarding the possibility of a name change for the agency.

- elected new officers. They are Donley Brown, retired military management analyst, Jefferson City, Mo., chairman; Kenneth King, director of missions, San Marcos Baptist Association, New Braunfels, Texas, vice chairman; and John Whitman, retired state Brotherhood director, Springfield, Ill., recording secretary.

- welcomed new trustee Bill Prince of Georgia.

The next meeting of the Brotherhood Commission trustees is scheduled April 21-22, 1995, in Memphis.

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(BP) photo specials of new officers and trustees mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Brotherhood Commission.

Graham: 'Maybe God is getting us prepared'

By James Dotson

Baptist Press
10/27/94

ATLANTA (BP)--The United States is in the midst of one of the greatest periods of revival in its history, Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham said during a news conference kicking off the five-day Atlanta Billy Graham Crusade Oct. 26-30.

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In response to a question on how people in the future would look at this era, Graham said it will be viewed as a time of "great spiritual awakening."

"I do not recall any time in American history when there were so many people who go to church and so many people who say they believe in God, by all the polls that we have," he said. He noted U.S. forefathers in Revolutionary War times are often thought to have been great Christians, but many actually only believed in God and not "the redemptive work of Christ on the cross to the extent that we hear it today and understand it today."

He also noted for some reason great revivals are often preceded by great troubles. Rwanda, for instance, is known as the location of a great revival in the late 1800s that has left a legacy of strong Christian influence today.

"Why that is I don't know," he said. "Maybe God is getting us prepared for something. But I think we are in the midst of somewhat of a religious revival now. The fact that the press is talking about it, the people are talking about it ... everybody knows of the need. Well, that's the first step. Then what we need is real repentance."

Frank Harrington, pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church and co-chairman of the crusade, agreed with the assessment, noting the tremendous influx of young people in their 20s that Peachtree Presbyterian has seen recently.

"Never in my life as a minister have I seen a yearning in the hearts of people that I see today," he said. "And I see that in this city because I have been at work here for Jesus Christ for 23-plus years now."

The Atlanta crusade, which has been in preparation stages among area churches for more than a year, has been seen as a tool for uniting the races in a city where racial tensions are not uncommon. Leading white and black pastors in the city were chosen as co-chairmen, and efforts have been made to involve black churches in all stages. In 1973, the Graham crusade in Atlanta was criticized by some blacks for catering primarily to whites.

Graham himself has been a leading advocate of racial reconciliation, desegregating white and black seating areas personally in his crusades as early as 1952.

"The answer to racism is the love of Christ ... and that is only available from being born again," Graham said. "The first fruit of the Spirit is love, and that love has to come about by God being in our hearts."

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(BP) photos available upon request from Georgia Baptists' Christian Index.

Cooperation council has failed,
says Virginia Baptist leader

By Robert Dilday

Baptist Press
10/27/94

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--A committee seeking ways for conservatives and moderates in Virginia to work together has failed, says a Baptist leader in the state, and conservatives are to blame, he adds.

Ron Crawford, president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, cited recent actions taken by an organization of conservatives in Virginia as the reason the presidential council on cooperation "has not produced the breakthrough we all prayed for."

Crawford's assessment, however, was disputed by Howard Baldwin, a vocational evangelist and interim executive director of the newly formed Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia.

Crawford named the 15-member council -- composed of equal numbers of moderate, conservative and non-aligned pastors -- last November in response to growing tension among theological factions in Virginia. Moderates -- who have maintained solid control at the state association's annual meetings -- have led the state to adopt a variety of giving plans which permit churches to direct funds away from the Southern Baptist Convention and its conservative leadership.

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In response, the state's conservatives -- coordinated by the new Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia organization -- are contributing less to BGAV ministries and more to the SBC.

The council was directed to "explore ways to enhance cooperation, trust and mutual respect in Virginia Baptist life."

But "events beyond the council's control made its task virtually impossible," Crawford told members of the Virginia Baptist General Board earlier this month. "Events in (the SBC) certainly impacted the council's work. ... Yet the council's greatest obstacles came from within the BGAV family."

Those included, he said:

- The refusal of Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia to accept a proposed giving option in the Virginia budget designed to appeal to conservative churches.

- The resignation for personal reasons of Virginia Beach pastor Tommy Taylor as co-chair of the council. Taylor, a conservative leader, was a strong advocate of the council's aims.

- The election of Howard Baldwin, a vocational evangelist, as interim executive director of SBCV.

- SBCV's sponsorship of an alternative evangelism conference about three weeks after the state association's annual evangelism conference.

Baldwin, in a statement released following Crawford's comments, disputed the charges.

A conservative giving option was unnecessary because the state association permits churches to design their own giving plans while remaining full-fledged members of the BGAV, he said. His election as interim executive director was an attempt to seek "cooperation without compromise." And the alternative evangelism conference was sparked by the inclusion of an unnamed "controversial speaker" on the program of the BGAV evangelism conference. Although the speaker was subsequently canceled, plans for the alternative conference already had been finalized, he said.

"When (evangelism and missions) becomes our priority, there may no longer be any need for such an organization as the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia," said Baldwin, "for we will have returned to our Virginia Baptist heritage."

But Crawford said the time may have come to move beyond negotiations.

"As president of the BGAV, I insisted that we give cooperation a chance. We have. Everything that could be done has been done. ...

"For too long we Virginia Baptists have been paralyzed by the fear that someone somewhere will get their feelings hurt. We have waited long for the most hesitant traveler to board the bus. ... If we wait for everyone to get on the bus and be happily settled into a seat, the bus will never leave the station. ...

"It is time to be captivated by a dream of evangelism and missions. It is time to get on with being Virginia Baptists."

Despite Crawford's assessment of the council's work, the panel is expected to make recommendations within the next few weeks. Since it was created by the president -- not the state association -- the recommendations will be given to him. It is unclear whether he will present them for action at the annual BGAV meeting in Salem, Va., Nov. 15-16.

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Southern sees record year
of \$7.5 million in gifts

Baptist Press
10/27/94

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Southern Baptist Theological Seminary received a record amount of contributions during the 1993-94 fiscal year.

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Donors provided the seminary approximately \$7.5 million which topped the previous record of \$5 million given during the 1988-89 fiscal year, according to Thomas F. Mabe, the Louisville, Ky., seminary's vice president for institutional advancement. Of that total, approximately \$3.8 million was received in current gifts. Another \$3.7 million was given in the form of irrevocable trusts.

Much of the money is designated for campus capital projects and endowments, Mabe said. Currently, the seminary is securing funds to construct a conference center, the third and final phase of the Honeycutt Campus Center.

A major portion of the deferred gifts, Mabe noted, is set aside for the seminary's new Billy Graham School of Missions Evangelism and Church Growth.

"We are grateful for the friends of Southern Seminary who gave generously during a year of presidential transition," said seminary President R. Albert Mohler Jr. "Their gifts represent a valuable investment in the future of theological education in the Southern Baptist Convention through its flagship seminary."

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Their 'something else to do'
soars to 41 million tracts

By Toby Druin

Baptist Press
10/27/94

LONGVIEW, Texas (BP)--When Jack and Marnell Rose moved from Tyler, Texas, to Longview in 1974, their two children were grown and gone and Marnell said she needed "something else to do."

Both were active Christians and became members of First Baptist Church, Longview. Jack had been a leader in Texas Baptist Men and was involved in the Rio Grande River Ministry and Marnell had a ministry to shut-ins.

Before they moved to Tyler, however, they had met Barnard Franklin in Kaufman Baptist Association and had become familiar with his tract ministry. Marnell said she wanted to combine her ministry to shut-ins with a tract ministry.

They adapted one of Franklin's tracts, "4 Things God Wants You to Do," into letter form and began mailing it to shut-ins and others. They made a commitment to mail 1 million tracts.

Over the last 20 years that "something else" has stretched from Longview to ... well, eternity, for countless people around the world.

That first tract has grown to a collection of about 300 and their initial commitment of 1 million was exceeded by July 7, 1977, said Jack. The total through this year will approach 42 million, many of them used by Southern Baptist missionaries. The Foreign Mission Board gave special recognition to the Roses at its meeting in Fort Worth in April.

People in at least 139 countries -- 12 million have been sent to Nigeria alone -- have gotten tracts from "The Masters' Enterprise," the name Jack and Marnell gave to their effort. The "Masters," of course, are God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The tracts are simple, all quote Scripture and cover a variety of topics. "Could You Possibly Be On Your Way To Hell?" "Things You Must Accept To Go To Heaven," "Are You 100% Sure?" and "If You Died Today Would You Go To Heaven?" are a few of the titles.

Many of the tracts are tailored for individual churches, carrying the church's name and address.

"We have no restrictions on who gets them," said Jack. "We will work with all groups."

They don't print Bibles but have been the distribution point for more than 40,000 over the years.

Their effort is an example of what can be accomplished by two people determined to serve. They started out with tracts in letter form, sending them out to people in the Longview telephone directory. Women from the church helped. When they exhausted the telephone list, they moved on to voter registration lists.

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The first year they mailed 65,000 tracts, 127,000 the second and 350,000 the third. In four years they had mailed 70,000 of the "4 things" tract alone. Soon people began to write, asking for the free tracts.

The ministry grows out of the Roses' deep commitment to the Scripture and its power.

"I believe the Bible is inerrant in its totality," said Jack.

They are also committed to the belief that "God does, has and will -- he will reward a little bit of faith."

"We have never run out of paper or money," he said, "even though our postage has been as much as \$1,000 monthly and has cost more than \$100,000 over the years. We have never worried about it. Philippians 4:19 pays the expenses."

Jack admitted, however, that when he told the Lord they would print tracts on all the paper he would provide, he had failed to note that he owns the trees as well as the cattle on a thousand hills.

Paper usually comes from paper salesmen who give them discontinued lines. A warehouse provides free storage space.

When they began the operation in their dining room and garage, a printer friend offered to find them a press and teach the Roses to operate it. Then he and his wife came every Thursday night for seven years to help them.

A two-story addition to their home was made in 1981 and now houses the operation.

With Jack now retired after 43 years with Southwestern Bell and AT&T, they need fewer volunteers, but students from Letourneau University -- as many as 15 on many Thursday nights -- lend their assistance during school terms, and volunteers still come from their church, First Baptist, Longview.

They have received confirmation over the years of the value of the tract ministry. When Jack gave one to a man in a Longview store several years ago, the man asked him, "Who is the Masters' Enterprise?" He said he had gotten one of the tracts in his mail in February and June of the previous year and had torn both of them up.

When he got one the following February, he read it and accepted Christ as his Savior, he told Jack.

In 1988 they began asking recipients of the tracts which ones were the most effective.

"We have had people from 40 countries write and tell us of many thousands of professions of faith that have resulted from the witness of the tracts," said Jack. More than 625 have written personal letters about their salvation experience. "It's the biggest blessing we have ever received," he said. "It's been fun seeing what the Lord will do and how he does it."

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Annuity Board announces change
in prescription drug procedures

Baptist Press
10/27/94

DALLAS (BP)--Participants in the Southern Baptist Annuity Board's Comprehensive Medical plans soon will be able to save money with enhanced outpatient prescription drug benefits. On Jan. 1, 1995, the new benefits will be available in the comprehensive plans, according to Joel Mathis, head of the insurance division.

"The new benefits not only will save money for the participants," Mathis said, "but the process will be simplified."

Participants who use their new PCS Health Systems card at a participating pharmacy will be able to buy up to a 30-day supply of a generic prescription drug for just a \$5 copayment. If a doctor prescribes a brand-name drug, the copayment will be \$12 for up to a 30-day supply of the drug. Participants who choose a brand-name drug when the doctor will allow a generic must pay an additional charge, Mathis said.

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PCS will pay a first-dollar benefit, meaning participants will not have to meet a deductible for this benefit.

Participants who do not use the PCS card, for whatever reason, will probably pay more at the drugstore, but will still be able to receive a benefit; however, the new benefit will be paid after a claim is filed through PCS, not Prudential, Mathis said.

"Participants will have to deal only with PCS for their benefits when they buy prescription drugs at a local pharmacy," Mathis said. "That should help simplify the process, and the new copayment structure will save money for most people."

The current prescription drug benefit allows participants to pay a special PCS price at the pharmacy and then file a claim with Prudential for reimbursement.

Prudential will not process claims for outpatient prescriptions filled after Dec. 31, 1994, Mathis said. Beginning Jan. 1, 1995, Prudential will cover claims only for medication included as part of a hospital admission, he said.

Also effective Jan. 1, 1995, copayments paid under the PCS program cannot be applied to the deductible for the health coverage administered by Prudential, Mathis said.

The comprehensive plan's mail service prescription drug benefit is also being enhanced on Jan. 1, Mathis said. If a participant orders through Health Care Services, up to a 90-day supply of generic maintenance medication will be available free of charge, he said. If a doctor prescribes a brand-name drug, the prescription will be available from HCS for a 20 percent copayment, up to \$30 maximum.

Mathis pointed out HCS will bill participants directly for brand-name drugs, which will avoid any filing of claims.

The current benefit for mail service prescriptions requires a 20 percent copayment for all orders, with a \$5 minimum and a \$100 maximum. Participants will receive details about the new benefits along with new PCS cards later this year, Mathis said.

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Race chaplain keeps ministry on track

By John D. Pierce

Baptist Press
10/27/94

WOODSTOCK, Ga. (BP)--"Gentlemen, start your engines" is not the first message heard on race night at Dixie Speedway.

With every engine silent and the crowd of race fans still, Johnny Hunt offers a brief devotional and prayer. "I never speak until every engine stops," says Hunt, whose weekly minute-or-so presentation marks the beginning of another Saturday night at the track.

For a second season, Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Ga., has voluntarily served as chaplain to the drivers, crews, families and fans who gather each week for dirt track racing at the venerable Dixie Speedway. "If I'm in town, I'm here," says Hunt.

Hunt's involvement with what he calls "the race track family" began with a simple invitation to attend a race.

Mike Swims, whose family owns and operates the speedway, invited his pastor to stop by. Aware of the dust and his need to maintain his voice for preaching, Hunt declined the invitation. Swims and his wife, Debra, had become active leaders in the Woodstock church. A couple of weeks later they asked Hunt to join them in one of their enclosed booths for a race.

What began as a one-time visit soon evolved into long-term ministry. "What people really want to know," explains Hunt, "is if I come here to minister or do I just pray and get out, and try to get people to come to our church." That concern is easily answered as he relates personally to those who gather at the race track. Hunt often hears from drivers or crew members when they have family crises. He insists "they don't care what you've done, but how much that you care!" As designated chaplain, Hunt remains available to those who approach him seeking prayer or sharing other concerns.

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There is no need to pity Hunt's wife, Janet, because of the long hours at the speedway. She is the real race fan in the family and says joining her husband at the weekly races is enjoyable. She grew up watching her uncle race on the dirt tracks of coastal North Carolina. Hunt, jokingly, confesses: "We really do enjoy it. I guess we've got enough 'redneck' in us."

While seeking to minister to those gathered at the speedway, Hunt is sensitive not to interfere with the racing operations and sponsorship activities. He insists on being available, but never in the way. It is through caring that he "earns the right to give them the gospel." Hunt points out one night during warm-ups several fans thought the race had begun and were motioning to the press box. They were concerned that the prayer and Scripture reading had been omitted.

Track announcer Johnny Clark speaks well of Hunt's contributions to the race track. "Of all the things that have happened here, he's one of the best!" Hunt's biggest surprise is the lack of opposition to his role at the speedway. He points out church mailings and other attempts at outreach usually result in a few negative responses. Yet his reception at Dixie Speedway has been one of deep appreciation and affirmation.

"These old boys," Hunt says, motioning to the drivers, "may not go to church, ... but they still believe in God." He sees their openness to his presence as a ripe opportunity to share the Good News. He also notes mothers of the drivers appreciate a prayer for their sons' safety.

The Swims family -- Mickey and Martha, their son, Mike, and his wife, Debra, and their daughter, Mia -- are praised for creating this wholesome environment at their family owned operation. They keep Hunt informed of ministry opportunities, such as one driver who receives treatments for cancer. "They are precious people," says Hunt with pastoral pride. "My coming to speak and to pray is a priority to them," he adds. The Swims say they regularly receive calls thanking them for including prayer at the races.

The speedway provided for a crusade in May which drew a high attendance of 3,500 and resulted in numerous commitments. Last year, a special "First Baptist Woodstock Night" at the races brought in 3,000-plus members and guests. Hunt was invited to speak at an annual Christmas party for the drivers, at which time awards were given for points earned during the past racing season. Each driver was given a cassette tape of Hunt's personal testimony of conversion, titled "From the Poolroom to the Pulpit." The cassette cover features an aerial view of Dixie Speedway.

Future plans include mass distribution of the tapes to those who visit the race track and would like to take one with them.

Bruce Springer, the new pastor at nearby Holly Springs Baptist Church, is a race fan who appreciates the atmosphere at Dixie. "This is one of the few tracks with no alcohol. The Swims family offers a great sport in a family environment," says Springer, who first met Hunt at a race track in Wilmington, N.C. Springer left a career as an insurance executive to attend college and seminary in Kentucky in preparation for ministry. He has been a fan of stock car racing since his youth in Minnesota.

One particular September weekend was the biggest in the 25-year history of Dixie Speedway, as more than 100 drivers from the United States and Canada competed for over \$100,000 in prize money. Additional stands were added to accommodate the nearly 20,000 fans in attendance. "This is the big race, the main event," said Hunt from the announcer's booth to the quietened crowd, "and I'll give you the main event text." After reading and briefly commenting on the words from John 3:16, the racetrack chaplain led in prayer.

As the noise of the car engines begins to rise, Hunt moves to an observation area to enjoy the races with his wife and to be available to "the race track family." Occasionally, someone comes by requesting prayer for themselves or others.

Visitors from outside the area seek directions and the times for Sunday worship. The folks seem comforted by the quiet presence of their race track pastor.

For Hunt this is an extension of his call to minister to the community. "We (First Baptist, Woodstock) draw the largest gathering in Cherokee County, except for this (Dixie Speedway)," he says. "Now God has given me this (place) to be pastor, too."

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Alleged apparitions of Mary
making news in the Bible Belt

By James Dotson

Baptist Press
10/27/94

CONYERS, Ga. (BP)--From across the country and around the world, they gathered 25,000 strong on the small farm north of Conyers, Ga., -- busloads of the faithful from Mexico, cars from Texas, Ohio, Virginia and elsewhere. They call themselves pilgrims, on a quest to witness a modern-day miracle.

They were there Oct. 13 to hear the words of Mary the mother of Christ, as relayed through the woman they believe is her visionary, Nancy Fowler.

What began as a small gathering in 1991 on the 13th of each month has become one of the most well-known alleged apparitions among Catholics worldwide. And it is the first brush with such a phenomena for many Georgia Baptists who, unlike in other areas where such apparitions have been reported, are the dominant religious group.

To the pilgrims, their presence is a sign of devotion to their Loving Mother. But to most Southern Baptists it is another incident of excessive veneration of the mother of Jesus Christ -- a woman worthy of honor, according to Scripture, but not the degree of adoration practiced by the pilgrims.

"I think we need to understand that we respect the biblical person Mary," said William Gordon, an associate in the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's interfaith witness department. "We respect Mary the mother of Jesus. We honor her. She was a holy woman, a devout Christian, and deserves our honor and respect. But where Baptists draw the line is we do not reserve veneration or worship for Mary."

To understand the fascination with the reported apparitions at Conyers, as well as those at various other sites around the world that have varying degrees of credibility even within the Roman Catholic Church, one must first understand the devotion to Mary that is so much a part of the faith to many Catholics.

Beginning as early as the second century, when the church father Irenaeus called Mary the "Second Eve," Christ's mother received special honor among Catholics. By the fourth and fifth centuries, Mary and other early heroes of the church came to receive special honor. Through the church's understanding of the communion of the saints, it ultimately recognized the ability of the departed Christians to have special intercessory ability with Christ, and through him to God the Father. The reasoning goes that if the departed saints are with Christ all the time, and Christ is omnipresent, then surely the saints also should be able to hear their requests for intercession.

Mary, particularly, became an object of veneration, in part because she was a virgin, according to J. Leo Garrett Jr., distinguished professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and a participant in a continuing dialogue between Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics.

"Christians began to look at the state of virginity as a higher state than marriage," he said. "And along with that came those who began to emphasize that Mary was without sin, or that Mary some way was even born in some way different from the normal. And over a period of centuries ... you had the development of the idea that Mary was without original sin and that Mary was perpetually a virgin." Mary also is believed to have been bodily assumed into heaven.

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Frank Ruff, a liaison to Southern Baptists from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Mary's status as the "Mother of God" -- a term used since the fourth century -- implies a closeness to Christ that goes beyond other saints and thus would have special favor in praying to Christ on behalf of Christians on earth. But the church does not officially hold prayer to Mary or the other saints is essential, he said.

"There's often a difference between Catholic teaching and popular religion," he said. "All of our public prayer, when we gather for Mass or worship, that's all prayer to God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. The teaching is it's OK to do it (pray to Mary), but it's not necessary to do it at all."

Gordon, who has studied Catholic teachings extensively, said the lines of official doctrine often get blurred. Officially, he said, the Catholic Church recognizes three kinds of worship -- one for God, one for a saint and one for martyrs. "As far as I'm concerned this is a house of straw that develops," he said. "... In the actual life of a Catholic, they don't really differentiate the kinds of worship."

It has been in relatively recent times that the veneration of Mary has so often included reported apparitions. Some of the most well-known were in Mexico City in 1531; Lourdes, France, in 1858, and Fatima, Portugal, in 1917.

These, and two other apparitions in 1830 and 1846, have been declared "worthy of pious belief." Ruff said their sanction is not on the basis of reported miracles that often serve as the popular yardstick.

"If there is any inconsistency with anything that is in the Scripture, then it is considered unreliable, or invalid," Ruff said. "And the second thing is more whether a person who is receiving it seems to be living an authentic Christian life and if it leads to a deeper spiritual life for that person or the other people." One of the attributes of the approved apparitions has been a reaffirmation of the prayer of Mary in the Magnificat in Luke's gospel, the exaltation of God and his grace in using lowly people in earthly eyes to accomplish his purposes, Ruff said.

Even when apparitions are accepted as authentic, Ruff said, the church considers their messages as sources of private revelation only. "The general teaching is that the revelation of God in Jesus is complete, and that's all that is necessary for Catholic Christians. That we call public revelation, and that public revelation was completed with the death of the last apostle. Even the apparitions that are accepted are considered private revelations, and no Catholic is expected to believe them (in order to be in good standing with the church)," he said.

In one sense, however, even fervent belief in an unauthentic experience is considered good -- a view that would apparently discourage questioning of reported apparitions. A quote by Pope Urban VIII from the 1600s distributed at the Conyers site had this to say about private revelations: "It is better to believe than not to believe, for, if you believe, and it is proven true, you will be happy that you have believed, because our Holy Mother asked it. If you believe, and it should be proven false, you will receive all blessings as if it had been true, because you believed it to be true."

As for the Conyers apparitions, the Archdiocese of Atlanta has thus far kept its distance, reserving final judgment on the authenticity of the apparitions but forbidding its priests from organizing pilgrimages or holding Mass on the site. Likewise the monks at the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit near Conyers have received similar instructions.

The archdiocese cites Acts 5:38-39 in dealing with such matters. "Leave them alone, for if this plan and work of theirs is a man-made thing, it will disappear; but if it comes from God you cannot possibly defeat them."

But the caution of leadership doesn't stop the flood of pilgrims.

The reported apparitions began in the home of Nancy Fowler on White Road in Rockdale County, near the intersection with Georgia Highway 138. The crowds soon grew large enough that a neighboring farm was purchased by a group of followers, and it is now the site of the apparitions. Well-worn paths, especially treacherous in the mud that accompanied the Oct. 13 event, thread throughout the property.

Fowler's yard, including her home and statues of Mary and a crucifix with an altar, is called Holy Hill. The well next to her house is believed to have been blessed so as to produce holy water, which is available to visitors with milk jugs. Pilgrims gather at the statues to pray.

Beginning at noon on the days of the public apparitions, which were suspended over the summer, everyone encircles the small farmhouse where Fowler reportedly receives the visitations.

The group is led in praying the rosary, a series of prayers of devotion to Mary and meditations on the life of Christ repeated systematically using a string of beads to keep track of progress. The version of the prayers offered at the Conyers site lasts about an hour and a half. The pilgrims point to the concerted prayer effort as the evidence of a work of God at the site and one of their main motivations for being there.

It is during this time that Fowler is believed to be hearing from Mary. The messages usually are focused on the importance of prayer and honoring God, as well as issues such as abortion and mankind's turning away from God. Fowler also has reported direct revelations from Jesus, as well as visions on the walls of the apparition room.

Afterwards, with the help of a spokesman who also translates the message into Spanish, Fowler relays what she believes Mary has told her. Then she comes out of the house and repeats the message, along with some words of her own for the crowd. Soon after that the crowd begins to thin, with some staying to offer more prayers at the various shrines on the property.

Throughout the event, various miracles have been reported as evidence of the validity of the event -- such things as rosary chains turning from silver to gold, the sun appearing to spin and various images of Mary and Christ appearing in photos to one degree or another.

Ruff acknowledged the most obvious criticisms of such reported apparitions by Baptists and other Protestants -- that they often can take the emphasis off of the sufficiency of Christ.

"Part of the reason the church is so hesitant with regard to apparitions is it can tend to lead people away from a more authentic following of Jesus," he said.

But some Southern Baptists believe it is the Catholic teachings regarding Mary that have allowed such excesses to go unchecked.

"I think that a lot of Catholics feel closer to Mary than they do to God or to Jesus. And many Catholics pray more to Mary than they do to God or to Jesus," said Gordon.

The apparitions, particularly the one at Conyers, are often easy to refute, he said. One common one, for instance, is the appearance of what looks like a door in pictures taken of the sky while the apparition is supposed to be taking place. Gordon said the "miracle" can be reproduced anywhere with the proper Polaroid camera, which reflects an image of an internal mechanism onto the film in excessive light.

Lyndon Collings, pastor of North Rockdale Baptist Church about a quarter of a mile from a parking area for the apparition site, said the reaction locally has not been especially supportive. He said a monk from the local monastery had told him the faith in apparitions was "a symptom of the spiritual poverty in the churches from which these people are coming. This was one Catholic talking about another Catholic," Collings said. "They're looking for reality they are not finding in their church."

But how should Baptists respond to friends and acquaintances who believe in the validity, or even possible validity, of the apparitions? The recommendation from those familiar with Catholicism is to proceed cautiously and focus on Scripture rather than experience.

"You have to be real careful in criticizing this, because many Catholics get very defensive if you're seen as attacking Mary," Gordon said. "I prefer in trying to witness to Catholics to keep things centered on Christ. ... Point out that we don't have to go to anyone else to go directly to Jesus. We have direct access to Jesus; we don't have to go to his mother or any other saint."

Garrett, the theology professor, also said the answer lies in a personal relationship with Jesus.

"If we really have a living relationship to the risen Christ and have the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we don't need any other channels of getting messages from God or finding out his will," he said. "It's when people have either elevated Christ to a remote station or they have institutionalized the Holy Spirit, then they turn to other means."

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(BP) photos available upon request from Georgia Baptists' Christian Index.

CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "Rwandan pedestrian killed in missionary auto mishap," dated 10/25/94, please change the spelling of the missionary's name in the second paragraph to Dianne Randolph.

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