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Youth baptisms plunge
over past 20 years

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
11/28/94

ATLANTA (BP)--While baptism statistics in the Southern Baptist Convention have been on a roller coaster ride since 1972, baptisms among teen-agers have taken the greatest plunge.

A lack of adult volunteers leads the list of reasons for the decline, say leaders of youth ministries.

In 1972, Southern Baptists set a record by baptizing 445,725 people. Almost 31 percent of that total were people ages 12 to 17, according to Home Mission Board research.

Of last year's 349,073 baptisms, 23 percent were youth. Since 1972, no other age group had a greater decline in the percentage of total baptisms.

Although the percentage of youth in the nation's population has declined, baptisms have not kept pace with the number of teen-agers, said Dean Finley, HMB youth evangelism specialist. In 1971, Southern Baptists baptized one of every 191 teens. In 1990, they baptized one of every 253.

One reason Southern Baptists are baptizing fewer teens is that when a church hires a youth director, adults tend to think they no longer need to be leaders in the youth ministry, Finley said.

"Church members think, 'That's the youth minister's job.' Adults have said, 'That's not my task.' But there's a direct relationship between the number of adults involved in ministry and the number of teen-agers who get saved," Finley said.

Youth ministers at churches that consistently lead the Southern Baptist Convention in youth baptisms agree adult volunteers are vital to their success.

Last year Cascade Hills Baptist Church in Columbus, Ga., baptized 223 teens. While that was the second highest in the convention, the church did not have a paid youth minister last year.

"You don't have to have a youth director, but you do have to have a heart for youth," said pastor Bill Purvis. "I try to be real practical and communicate in their language." This year the church hired two youth ministers, one for senior high students and another for junior high students.

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First Baptist Church of Springdale, Ark., led the SBC in youth baptisms last year with 272.

John Cope, pastor to students, said his job is to motivate and equip youth workers. "We want adults who love kids and love God. If you want to reach 1,000 kids, you've got to have 100 workers."

First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., ranked third in youth baptisms last year with 181. Nearly 200 lay people work in the church's youth ministry, said Calvin Carr, high school youth educational director. About 950 youth attend the church's Sunday school.

"We have trained, excited, evangelistic youth workers," Carr said. "With a host of leadership, we can touch a larger number of youth."

"We hold our youth workers to high standards, and they rise to the occasion," Carr said. Some expectations are that workers will visit youth every week, attend Wednesday night leaders meeting, be involved in ongoing training and attend youth activities.

Volunteers commit themselves to the youth ministry, Carr said, because they share the "excitement of influencing young people who have the chance to live their entire lives for Jesus Christ."

Other reasons for the decline in youth baptisms, according to Finley and Richard Leach, HMB associate director of church growth and evangelism, are:

-- No strategy for reaching youth. "A church needs to be able to articulate its plan for reaching teen-agers," Leach said.

-- Attitude that youth need to determine their own religion. Some parents say "religion is a deeply personal decision" so they do not share their religious convictions with their children.

-- Pastors who do not support youth ministries. Pastors should periodically use sermon illustrations designed for teens and participate in youth activities to let youth know they are an important part of the church.

-- Peer pressure against religion. However, Finley said that's changing. "It's becoming OK to be a Christian and to be morally pure. Society is giving teen-agers permission to take a stand for the right thing."

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(BP) photo and chart mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutline on SBCNet News Room.

Evangelism bottom line
of youth activities

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
11/28/94

ATLANTA (BP)--Youth ministers at churches that lead the Southern Baptist Convention in youth baptisms say they plan a lot of fun activities, but evangelism is the bottom line in all their events.

"Activities, fellowships and trips are all good and we do them, but we have to keep the main thing the main thing," said Calvin Carr, high school youth educational director at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla.

While planning activities, Carr said youth leaders discuss how to share Christ during the event. "Our young people know if they bring their friends to anything, they will hear the gospel."

The constant presentation of the gospel also helps train young people to witness, Carr said.

John Cope, pastor to students at First Baptist Church, Springdale, Ark., said his strategy is to concentrate on doing the basics well. He described the basics as reaching youth, caring for them and teaching them.

"Build a hub and put a little glitter on that," Cope said. Sunday school is the base of the youth ministry at First Baptist, Cope said. "We try to make it real exciting, real enthusiastic. If we make them enjoy it, maybe they'll eventually love God."

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Youth won't come to church if it's not int resting, said Jay Singleton, junior high youth minister at Cascade Hills Baptist Church, Columbus, Ga.

"They come to fellowship and have fun with their fri nds. That's when they'r comfortable, and that's when you can reach them," Singleton said. "No matter how much fun or how crazy we get, it all boils down to Jesus and the Bible."

Some of the youth ministers' ideas for creative outreach include:

-- Witness Wear Wednesday. Youth wear T-shirts with a Christian message to school. The clothing generates discussion about church and Christianity.

-- Advertise on movie theater screens before the show starts. "Our message is the same, but we're willing to change our methods to reach this generation," said Bill Purvis, pastor of Cascade Hills Baptist Church.

-- Go to schools to have lunch with teens.

-- Host a lock-in somewhere other than the church.

-- Constant contact. "We're always on the phone, writing cards, going to football games, letting them know we care," Singleton said.

-- Prayer. Each Thursday, nearly 70 students meet at First Baptist Church, Springdale, to pray for fellow students. In three years, Sunday morning youth attendance at the church has grown from 200 to 450, Cope said.

Students pray for youth who visited Sunday school the previous week and students on the Sunday school rolls. Each week students pray for six or eight youth, Cope said. Students wad up the list, put it in their sock and pray for people on the list during the day as they feel the paper in their sock.

The peak times for youth activities, other than summer, are from the second week in September through Thanksgiving and from February through April, Cope said.

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Family, ministry top priorities
of new SBC Sunday school leader By Chip Alford

Baptist Press
11/28/94

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--As a child, Bill Taylor played baseball with his friends near First Baptist Church in Archer City, Texas.

In between strikes and balls, he would sometimes wonder of the church, "What are those people like in there? Would they approve of me?"

Understandable questions from a boy whose father, an occasional operator of nightclubs and beer joints, found himself at odds with the local clergy over a "wet/dry" liquor sales referendum.

"My father was a wonderful man, but it was a rough environment to grow up in," Taylor, 55, recalled. "My mother was a devout Christian, though, and she would take us to church some. She held our family together."

Although his self-described "not very stable" home life was sometimes difficult, Taylor said the experience has been helpful to him in both his personal life and his life's calling -- educational ministry in the local church. Not only did it leave him with compassion for the disadvantaged and troubled families, it also led him to make his own family a priority for life.

"The greatest happiness I've had is my family," said Taylor, who recently joined the staff of the Baptist Sunday School Board staff in Nashville as director of the Bible teaching-reaching division. He and his wife, Rose, are the parents of two adult sons, Billy Jr. and Brent, and grandparents of two boys.

Taylor described Rose, whom he met and married during his college days at Howard Payne University in Texas, as "the stabilizing factor in my life. Since I came from a very dysfunctional family, she brought a stability to my own personal ministry. Much of what I've accomplished has to be attributed to Rose."

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What he's accomplished is almost 30 years in the ministry, working as a minister of education and administration, associate pastor and executive pastor alongside well-known Southern Baptist preachers like Perry Sanders, Jack Graham and Dan Yeary. He's served at small and mid-sized churches (Field Street Baptist Church in Cleburne, Texas, and First Baptist, Paris, Texas) and at mega-churches such as Prestonwood in Dallas and North Phoenix in Phoenix, Ariz.

"In the local church, I've always considered myself to be the pastor's helper," said Taylor, known for his encouraging nature, enthusiasm and boundless energy. "I've been blessed to have the privilege of working for some godly men."

Taylor accepted Christ at age 19 during a revival service at First Baptist Church, Mansfield, Texas. He had joined the church four years earlier but had never made a profession of faith.

During the service, Taylor was impressed by the sincerity and spirit of the music leader, Jerry Wayne Bernard.

"He had something in his life that I wanted. I felt this emptiness inside," Taylor recalled, adding the void was filled when he invited Christ into his life. On the same night, he made a public commitment to vocational Christian ministry.

From there, it was on to Howard Payne in Brownwood, Texas, where he earned a bachelor's degree in voice and then to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, where he received a master of arts degree in religious education.

After serving several years as a minister of music, Taylor reevaluated his ministry in 1972.

"I found that my greatest gifts were in the area of working with people and building a team," he said. "I'm an encourager and I seemed happier in the areas of Bible study and administration."

Taylor said he was mentored in the "science of church growth" by Jim Neyland, former minister of education at Dauphin Way Baptist Church, Mobile, Ala., who recently retired as administrator at Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta. And while he counts as his friends Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, both leaders in the contemporary church growth movement, he also remains a proponent of the principles outlined in the traditional "Flake's Formula" for Sunday school growth.

"I'm never intimidated when I lead a conference on Sunday school and church growth because this isn't just something I've read about in a book," he said. "This is something I've been practicing since the early '70s -- Reach, Teach, Win and Develop."

"There is no organization or structure that can rival the small group Bible study when it is well-organized and running efficiently," Taylor added. He likes the 1-5-4 church growth principle touted by Gene Mims, vice president of the BSSB's church growth group, and said he believes the board should be in the business of sharing ministry principles, leaving methodology up to the local church.

"We've got to be flexible enough to let people work within their own paradigms and yet encourage them to be careful not to implement things that may be a fad. They might try something that will give them success in the short-term that could actually undermine everything they are really trying to accomplish."

When it comes to his leadership style, Taylor said he believes in empowering people to do the work they are called and gifted to do. He also believes in "benchmarking" -- constantly raising the standard for excellence.

One of his greatest sources of satisfaction, he said, is "having the privilege of seeing someone called to a work, seeing them excel in the job and then seeing them get the credit for it."

Although he's excited about the future, Taylor still knows the importance of the past. And he no longer wonders about those folks at that Baptist church in Archer City. After many years in the ministry, Taylor made a return visit to Archer City a few years ago to speak at a Sunday school banquet.

"They were really wonderful people," he said. "They made me feel very welcome."

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(BP) photo mailed state Baptist newspapers by the BSSB bureau of Baptist Press. It also is posted in the SBCNet News Room. A cutline is posted in the SBCNet News Room; filename is taylor.txt.

Viva Las Vegas:
the new boomtown

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
11/28/94

LAS VEGAS, Nevada (BP)--Harry Watson stares at a map of challenges behind his desk; a constant reminder of how many communities here have no Southern Baptist church.

"One of the hard things is to decide who you are not going to reach," says Watson, director of missions for the Southern Nevada Baptist Association.

"It doesn't mean you're going to turn them away, but it means you're not going to make a specific effort to reach some communities at this time," he says.

On his detailed layout of the metropolitan area, Watson points to a 3.5-acre lot the association was offered as a church site for \$400,000 -- about half the going rate.

"We don't have any idea right now how we'll do it, but we'll have to," says Watson, summing up what could be the association's motto and the challenge Las Vegas Southern Baptists face.

What used to be considered America's version of Sodom and Gomorrah is now touted as an all-American boomtown.

Unemployment is practically non-existent, as pro-business tax laws and several new casinos produce enough jobs to lure 4,500 new residents every month.

Las Vegas' population grew from about 700,000 in 1990 to more than 1 million today, says Sherri Bergner, vice president and director of marketing for the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce.

"They're projecting that this growth is going to continue through the year 2000," she adds. "Almost everything hasn't been able to keep up because it's growing so fast,"

Among the items feeling growing pains, she lists housing, water supply and roadways. "It used to be you could get anywhere in 10 minutes," she says. "Now it takes me an hour."

Such increases also have left Baptists behind, says Watson, a missionary sponsored by the Home Mission Board. "We haven't kept up with the growth."

Southern Baptists are the largest evangelical denomination in this city, yet Watson says they are stretched to one congregation for every 37,000 residents -- almost seven times the national SBC average.

Of the 31 communities with 12,000 or more residents, only five have Southern Baptist churches, Watson says. "The challenge is finding the best way to use our small force to reach the masses of people."

Baptists need to plant a church every month to keep pace with the growth, he estimates. "To catch up, we need to double our number of churches."

The association hopes to regain some lost ground this summer by hosting 10 teams of seminary students to start 10 churches throughout the city. "This would be a giant leap forward towards reaching our city," Watson says.

Five teams are confirmed for the project, jointly sponsored by the Home Mission Board. Leaders will learn by February if money is available for five more teams, says Pam Mungo, project development director for the HMB's new church extension division.

While the area's remarkable growth is challenging, it offers a lot of opportunities, Watson notes.

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"Most people see this as an exciting place to serve because they see a town full of lost people," he says. "When you're in a boom situation, you always have some success no matter what you do."

Meanwhile, home missionary Jeff Wagner encourages churches to not overlook the hurting and needy residents just because congregations can grow without them.

"It's easier to ignore the people who are hard to love," says Wagner, missions ministries director for the association. "It sure is easier to deal with the family with three kids that just moved here from Alabama."

In addition to recruiting churches to minister outside their churches, Wagner seeks ways to reach the more than 26 million annual tourists.

Earlier this year, the association hired pastor Tommy Starkes to be its chaplain to casinos. Starkes has access to more than 50 gambling halls and holds Bible studies in five of them.

With so many needs, Watson notes Christians who come to Las Vegas usually don't have to modify their call to ministry. "There's an opportunity in any direction you want to serve," he says. "You just have to decide who you want to reach and then we'll place you in that community."

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(BP) photo of Las Vegas (horizontal) mailed to state Baptist newspapers Nov. 23 by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Outlines available from SBCNet News Room.

Pastor found grace
after life with mob

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
11/28/94

HENDERSON, Nev. (BP)--Pastor Rene Houle may have the most vivid sermon illustrations in the state. As the son of a former mob member, Houle is never at a loss to explain God's grace.

"God's unconditional love is remarkable," said Houle, pastor of Fantastic First Baptist Church of Henderson. "His love doesn't start after salvation. It starts before we are ever created."

Houle praises God for both protection from his dad's enemies and the gang fights and shootings that occurred in the rough neighborhood where he grew up.

"I look back and see how God's hand was in my life," he said. "He was my father even when I was lost."

Houle describes himself as a "curb-kid," being dropped off every Sunday at church. "I had a knowledge of who God was and the essentials for salvation, but no one ever explained the difference between knowing about God and receiving him as your Savior."

His father, a Vietnam war veteran, became involved in the mob through his involvement with a transportation union, Houle said.

"My dad was hired to take care of the scabs," he said, referring to workers hired during a union strike. Houle attributed his dad's time in Vietnam as influencing his willingness to join the mob. "He learned real quick that killing people and being tough got you recognition."

His father also was involved in pimping, drug sales and "heavy work."

"If you owed me money and you hadn't paid it, he'd be the guy who would get the money or break your legs," Houle said. "He could probably tell you where bodies are buried all over this town."

"He had a pretty wild way of life," Houle said, referring to his father's temper and lifestyle.

"If somebody flashed their brights at him, he would get out and smash their headlights out with a baseball bat," he said.

Another sign of God's presence, Houle said, is that neither he nor his siblings got involved in drugs. He said his father's work was disrupted when leaders of the two families he worked for were killed.

Meanwhile, Houle became a Christian in high school and was called to preach shortly before he planned to enter the military.

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One summer in college he witnessed to his father. Despite initial objections, he eventually made a profession of faith, Houle said. "His basic thing was, 'How could God forgive me when I can't even forgive myself?'"

Although his father now owns a painting company, he still has occasional contacts from the past. "Every once in a while he gets a call to do something. He tells me he tells them he's not interested," Houle said. "There's that fear in his mind of who might be out there to hurt him."

Houle, who has ministered in Oregon and Florida, returned to Nevada in September 1993. Since his arrival at First Baptist, the church has grown in attendance from about 25 to more than 100.

"We've had 300 saved in the past year," he said, adding the church had 101 baptisms last year -- the second highest in the state.

While he credits such tools as Total Church Life and door-to-door witnessing, Houle notes most credit still must go to God.

"I want people to understand no matter what their background or family life is like, when and if they turn their lives over to the Lord God can use that for his glory."

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(BP) photo of Rene Houle (horizontal) mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines available from SBCNet News Room.

Holiday bus station ministry
is Baptist women's specialty

By Dana Williamson

Baptist Press
11/28/94

McALESTER, Okla. (BP)--His jacket was tattered and his face could barely be seen beneath the stocking cap pulled low over his ears. But Daniel had a ticket, a full stomach and a smile on his face as he boarded the bus to Texas.

The young man had hitchhiked to the McAlester, Okla., bus station on an icy Christmas Eve, hungry and without any money. Little did he know that he would be greeted at the crowded facility by women from First Baptist Church who were there to minister to the weary travelers the day before Christmas.

The Baptist Women's organization from the church saw to it that Daniel had two sandwiches and coffee, they paid for his bus ticket and gave him a Christmas sack containing homemade cookies, a Scripture card, the plan of salvation and a small Christmas gift.

Daniel is just one of hundreds of bus travelers who has been ministered to by the Baptist Women's organization.

About 30 women gather at the church the second Thursday of every month to prepare sacks of goodies which they take to the bus station every holiday.

It is a ministry which has blossomed since the day mission-in-action director Wanda Magdalena drove by the bus station and saw men, women with children and young people waiting for a bus.

"I thought, there is a place for ministry for our Baptist Women," Magdalena recalled.

A little timid at first, the ladies began the bus ministry on Valentine's Day in 1990.

"W stepped out in faith and became bold in our witness," Magdalena said. "This ministry has changed each of our lives. There are so many needs that can be met at the bus station."

The sacks are decorated to commemorate each holiday, as are the gifts inside, usually made by some of the women.

In addition to the sacks that each passenger receives, the women keep clothing at the bus station and on each trip set up a table with New Testaments in English and Spanish which are free to the travelers. They also have a fund for sandwiches and drinks. On the wall is a poster with the holiday theme made by member Debbie Waterbury.

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The women often encounter mothers traveling with no extra clothes for their children and men and women who may need articles of clothing.

Bus station manager Jo Shephard is a Christian who is pleased to think women from a church would want to meet weary travelers, Magdalena said.

"It is amazing how much you can learn about a person in a short time," Magdalena commented.

"People have shared their needs with us and we have prayed with them in a crowded bus station, not even aware of others around us."

The smiles, hugs, laughter and tears as well as the good-bye waves from inside departing buses are testimony to the effect the ministry has on passengers. As they journey down the road, the Baptist women pray that while the travelers are enjoying their homemade cookies, they will read the Scripture card and plan of salvation.

"God has promised his Word will not return void," Magdalena said.

Almost all of the women have special memories of passengers they have met.

Waterbury remembers a young mother, Michelle, who had just turned 16. She and her 18-month-old daughter had been kicked out of the home they shared with the baby's father, who had stolen the young mother's food and money.

"Michelle poured out her heart to me as she fed her daughter and changed her diaper," Waterbury said. "It was an awesome sight because she did all this with her feet and toes. Michelle was born with a birth defect and had no arms.

"I pray for Michelle and her daughter every day."

A young Oriental man is etched in Lee Collier's memory.

"He looked so lost," recalled Collier. "He thought he was supposed to get off the bus here, and he took my hand and led me to his luggage. I asked the bus driver where he was going and found his destination was Oklahoma City, so I told him to leave his luggage on the bus.

"He spoke very little English, so we communicated mostly by our own made-up sign language," she said. "I gave him a sack and pointed to First Baptist Church, which was written on the sack. He said, 'You are good woman.' He didn't want to let go of me because I was security to him in this situation.

"When he finally did board the bus, he sat down on the front seat, then all of a sudden bounded down the steps and hugged me."

Magdalena said she has come to realize how much the bus drivers care for their passengers.

"We always leave a sack in the driver's seat," she related. "At Thanksgiving, one driver stood up facing the passengers and said, 'I remember you ladies did this last year. People, isn't it great these ladies think about us? Thank you.'"

Magdalena recalled that one bus driver came to her car as she was leaving and asked what mission the ladies were from.

"How great it was to say 'the First Baptist Church of McAlester.'"

Preparing for five buses a day every holiday throughout the year keeps the women busy, but they still find time for numerous other ministries. Every month, volunteers are busy quilting, making lap robes for nursing home residents and preparing for a weekly gospel-sharing time at the Oaks, state alcohol and drug rehabilitation center, making place mats, Scripture cards and gathering toys for the Oaks' New Life program for women who have been through rehab and are living there with their children until they find employment.

The women also sponsor a shopping day for a local nursing home where residents may "purchase" items for Christmas gifts from tables the women have prepared.

The nursing care unit at McAlester Regional Hospital and the VA Care Center in Talihina, as well as the home for mentally disabled in Eufaula, also are the recipients of homemade gifts, stuffed animals, lap robes and candy provided by the McAlester women.

In addition a clothing room is constantly being restocked for families in need in the McAlester area.

"We realize from the people we've met the last few years how little it takes in kindness and caring in the name of the Lord to make a difference," said Magdalena.

**Migrant children receive
blessings at Christmas camp**

By Barbara Denman

EUSTIS, Fla. (BP)--The crackling bonfire casts an amber haze on young campers. One group sings "Silent Night" in English, another echoes the song in Spanish; others respond in French. The moment is magic. The gift of God's love transcends languages.

Back in their cabins, youngsters quickly prepare for bed, squirming only a little during devotions, anxious for the gifts that are to come next. For some, these small packages will be their only Christmas presents.

In its fourth year, the Christmas camp, held at Lake Yale Baptist Assembly near Eustis, Fla., is an expression of love from Florida Baptists to the state's migrant children. This year, 137 children from 14 churches attend.

The children need someone to show them love, says Felix Ramirez, pastor of La Primera Iglesia Bautista de Mascotte. "No one ever tells them they are special. They are all craving that."

They are youngsters forced to grow up too quickly, children who without guidance will become teen-age parents, children who every day are exposed to drugs, violence, alcohol and sexual abuse.

The Christmas gifts at Lake Yale are small: stuffed animals, basketballs, baseball caps. Every youngster receives a blanket, a Bible, a sweatshirt and a treasured package of toiletry items -- toothpaste, toothbrush, dental floss, hairbrush, comb, soap and shampoo.

Pastor's wife Helen Gallegos, who grew up in a migrant family, remembers that she was married when she first washed her hair with "real" shampoo. "A hairbrush of their own is like a million dollars to these children," she says.

The Christmas camp was Gallegos's dream. "Migrant kids go to school, come home do chores, baby-sit brothers and sisters," she explains. "Then, when they are 12 or 14, they go out to work on the farms. It's important that they go somewhere and do something they've never done before."

Gallegos took her idea to Brenda Forlines, director of the Florida Baptist Convention's community and migrant ministries department. Now the camp is better than anything she imagined, "And it's getting better and better," she says. "This is one thing these kids will never forget."

The cost of sending children to camp is underwritten by and promoted through the Maguire State Mission Offering. All gifts are purchased with contributions from Woman's Missionary Union groups, Sunday school classes and individuals.

One year, state Baptists donated \$10,400 in addition to state offering funds, and hundreds of gifts. Acteens held car washes; Mission Friends contributed a dollar at each associational event they attended. Parents gave money in memory of a daughter. Acteens made barrettes and bows for migrant girls. Ruth Bagwell, retired Florida Baptist WMU director, collected and recycled aluminum cans. Her profits sent six children to camp.

The Lake County Baptist Association annually sponsors an ice cream break, purchasing and serving the goodies themselves. The association also donated sweaters, coats and shoes during an unexpected cold snap.

All camp staff -- home missionaries, state WMU leaders, Florida convention staff members who serve as counselors, directors, recreation leaders, pastors and "gofers" -- pay their own way.

"We try to communicate to kids that Christmas is when God gave us the gift of his son," says Forlines. "The gifts from Florida Baptists are expressions of God's love inside each of us."

The camp is held at Christmas because that's when many of Florida's crops are harvested. From November to March, 88,000 to 150,000 migrants will pass through the state. A growing number of migrants are refugees.

"A lot of these children have lived a lifetime before they come to camp," says counselor Carol Vanderverter. "This is an opportunity for God to come alive in them."

And former migrants who share testimonies with the children tell how God changes lives. Miguel de la Cruz now serves as Florida Baptists' consultant for migrants; high school football coach Isaiah Gallegos discovered that playing football for Florida State University opened opportunities for a good education; Ramirez, a high school dropout who now holds a master's degree in education, is a bivocational pastor who translates curriculum for the Lake County School Board.

The camp gives youngsters the opportunity to experience that change. During the 1993 camp, 51 spiritual decisions were made, including 21 professions of faith.

Later many of the children show their appreciation in letters to Forlines. One wrote: "Thank you for making my dreams come true."

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CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

Church gave mother, son
stirring Christmas gift

By Barbara Denman

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11/28/94

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--Last holiday season, my church family gave me the gift of Christmas. And they allowed my 8-year-old son to unwrap and share it with me.

For me and for him, it was a gift that will ripple through a lifetime.

Southside Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., opened its doors to the city's homeless population for a second year. Church members cooked and served a Christmas dinner to their guests, who had been transported from shelters by chartered school buses.

The 350-400 guests were served by more than 150 volunteers, who offered second and third helpings of turkey, dressing, pumpkin pie, coffee and tea.

Following dinner, the guests were ushered into the church's sanctuary where the choir shared an encore performance of their singing Christmas tree. Before leaving, each guest received a wrapped gift that included socks, personal toiletries and the Gospel of John. The entire cost of the effort was underwritten by donations of members and friends of the church.

My observations of that night are colored through the eyes of a son who had recently accepted Christ as his Savior and was becoming acutely sensitized to the spiritual side of life. After he served 18 plates of food, cleared off the tables and picked up the trash, which he never does at home, Ashford turned to me and said, "Mom, I want to do this every Monday night."

While talking to his friend Robert, Ashford said, "We have something these people don't have."

"Yeah, homes," replied Robert.

"No," answered Ashford. "Jesus in our hearts."

When he inquired why one man was sleeping on a sofa in the hallway, he seemed surprised by my answer that it may have been the softest place the man has had to rest.

After we left and were reminiscing about the evening, my youngster who had complained earlier about his lack of gifts under the Christmas tree, began sobbing uncontrollably. "We have so much," he said. "And they have nothing." But my child wasn't the only one who experienced something special that night. The evening affected people of all ages.

Sitting with rapt attention during the performance, the homeless men and women reacted spontaneously, shouting "bravo" during the ringing of handbells, doing an "Arsenio Hall" cheer after the spiritual "Amen," and breaking into applause at unlikely times. It was if the performance had been created for them.

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"Now that took a lot of practice," I verh ard one hom less man say during the bell ringing. And then during a spiritual the same man sang word for word with the soloist. Another man, in words of the street, was overheard to say, "Now this church has th ir stuff (or something similar) together."

Church pianist Faye Lockamy said the choir never sang as confidently or as relaxed. "This was more than a performance," she said. "The two groups ministered to each other."

About 20-25 students from a local high school also volunteered to help. Some of the students, who do not attend any church, were so moved by the evening they began asking spiritual questions of the Christian students, according to Southside member Mandy Williamson.

Florida Woman's Missionary Union director Barbara Curnutt, who served as a table host that night, reported almost every homeless person she spoke with told of their efforts to find employment and make a better life. Many of them were working in part-time jobs and attending school. "It was a little different than the way most people perceive the homeless," she added.

Curnutt said she was impressed the "church treated the men and women with such respect and integrity. They were made to feel special and in return their spirit was one of appreciation."

As he was leaving to return to the shelter, one man turned to assistant pastor Ron Henson, saying, "You'll never really know how much we appreciate this."

And Southside Baptist Church will never how much I appreciate that night as its gift to me -- a gift that when all the glitter of the holiday is removed permitted me:

-- to focus on the true meaning of Christmas that is personified not in that which is received, but that which is done for others who have nothing to give in return;

-- to be content in that which I have rather than caught up in that which I want;

-- to instill in my child a desire to help others as an expression of Christ's love inside each of us;

-- to walk among the men who are similar to the people Jesus met and touched in his ministry on earth;

-- to live joyously for another year; and

-- to be grateful my congregation expressed a trust that goes beyond the condition of their marbled and carpeted hallways to the marketplace of scarred and barren lives whose only hope is found in Jesus Christ.

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Depression gives way to joy
in Christmas at rescue mission

Baptist Press
11/28/94

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--At the time, Gwen Williams probably had no idea she was creating a special Christmas memory.

Williams had just begun work in her first missionary assignment after graduating from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Williams served several years as a Southern Baptist home missionary, until resigning that post and becoming a free-lance writer.

In her first missionary assignment, she was a supervisor of the women's unit at the Brantley Baptist Center in downtown New Orleans. "My responsibility was to provide a place for transient women and children to receive rest, food, clothing and a listening ear. It was a challenging assignment. I had no prior knowledge of social work ministry. But I felt, with God's help, I could do the job."

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Williams recalled she had decided to do something special for the women in her care that year. But she had not made plans to spend Christmas at the center. She was planning to go home. "I knew the mission would remain open during the holidays, but I planned to go home to be with my family," she recounted. "I would do my part to make Christmas really special for 'these folks,' but I was not going to spend Christmas there."

As the holiday season got under way, however, Williams was informed she would have to work Christmas. She admitted she immediately forgot her call to missions. "I got really bitter, fussing about what I was going to miss. I had worked hard all year and I deserved to spend Christmas with my own family, not 'these folks.'"

"All I could think about was the drunks and bums I would have to encounter during such a joyous time of year," Williams said. "My once-friendly apartment at the mission became a dungeon of gloom. My first Christmas away from my family was to be spent at a rescue mission. Surely God would not ask for this kind of commitment."

It was not until about a week before Christmas that the gloom began to disappear for Williams -- ever so slowly.

She bought a tiny tree and let the children at the center string popcorn to decorate it. Then, each resident at the center that week made an ornament for the tree. Every night, all those at the center gathered to sing Christmas carols and tell Christmas stories to the children.

In no time, it was Christmas Eve, Williams recalled.

"I broke the rules that night and allowed the police to bring a battered woman with 10 children to the mission after the 10 p.m. curfew," she said. "It was nearly midnight before all was quiet at the mission."

Christmas Day began early, at about 5:30 a.m. "There were presents for everyone, including those extra children. They had to leave the building by 6:30 a.m., but when they returned at 4 p.m., I was dressed in my red outfit and Santa hat. I gave each lady a cup of hot cider when they arrived and soft footies for their tired feet."

Williams and residents then gathered for the Christmas meal. After that, they participated in a chapel service.

"I nearly cried at the expression on their faces as I sang 'Sweet Little Jesus Boy,'" she said. "Later, I let the ladies stay up late, telling jokes and stories. 'These folks' had become my new family. I cried myself to sleep with tears of joy, thanking God for the experience of a Christmas I will never forget."

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N.C. church's Christmas spirit
touched Ill. flood victims' kids By Melanie Kieve

Baptist Press
11/28/94

CONCORD, N.C. (BP)--Houses under water, property destroyed, children who lost all they had.

These were the sights Carey Carlton and Wade Carter of Concord, N.C., saw in Hamburg, Ill., while feeding victims of the "Great Flood of '93" on the North Carolina Baptist Men's disaster relief unit.

These sights touched the Concord volunteers, and even before they finished their six-day service on the unit, they knew they wanted to do something else for the 32 children who live in Hamburg, which has a population of about 100.

On their drive home from Illinois that summer, Carlton and Carter thought ahead to Christmas, and then it hit them.

They'd play Santa.

The two men approached their congregation, Young Memorial Baptist Church in Concord, about sending Christmas gifts to the Hamburg children, and members enthusiastically responded.

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Last December, Carlton and Carter returned to Hamburg with a rented van full of gifts and presented them during a Christmas party for the entire town. About 75 of the town's residents attended.

The church sent each of the 32 children a gift-wrapped box full of candy, toys, clothes, school supplies and other gifts. Each of the boxes weighed about 20 pounds and contained \$150-\$200 in merchandise.

Everyone attending the party received gifts such as blankets, towels, washcloths, kitchen towels, clothes, candy, jellies, molasses and pillows.

A Bible also was given to each child and adult. The Hamburg residents were very receptive to the Bibles and asked for some to give to their friends, Carlton and Carter reported.

Some parents commented it was the best Christmas their children ever had.

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