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May 10, 1995

95-79

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Old meets new as HMB gives
away Bibles at New Age fair

By Dwayne Hastings

Baptist Press
5/10/95

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (BP)--No incense, crystals or African drums, just a folding table stacked with over 1,200 paperback Bibles is all that the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's interfaith witness group had to draw visitors to their booth at the Life Enrichment Expo.

Surrounded by advocates of the New Age -- all hawking their own path to a higher consciousness -- Bill Gordon, associate director of the HMB's interfaith witness department, was nonetheless at ease among the exhibitors at the Asheville, N.C., show. "We believe that all people need to hear the gospel," he said, "and that there are many people here who have never heard an evangelical presentation of the good news."

Touted as "the largest body, mind and spirit expo in the South," the three-day show, April 21-23, allowed Gordon to share the gospel alongside self-proclaimed psychics and holistic healers.

For the most part, Gordon said, those coming to the expo were open to at least taking a Bible. "Many of these people are receptive when they do hear the gospel. We are in a seed-planting ministry here, planting the seed of the Word of God. Although we realize in many cases it may be awhile before we see any fruit."

The most difficult people to witness to are those who embrace the New Age belief that they are God, said Gordon, recalling one incident where a man responded to the inquiry, "What will you say to God when he asks you why he should let you into his heaven?" by saying: "I am God and I would never ask myself that question!"

Those drawn to New Age are inquisitive about spiritual things, although their idea of spirituality is often at odds with orthodox Christianity, Gordon said. "I think many of the people here are searching spiritually. They're often easy to witness to because many of them are seeking spiritual truth and they're interested in spiritual things," he said.

The HMB had Bibles available in nearly all the popular translations for people to take home -- handing out nearly 700 in the three days -- but one of the most popular was Gordon's own copy of the Greek New Testament. "Many in the New Age movement trace their practices and beliefs back to ancient times," he explained, "so the words of the New Testament in its original language catches their interest and it gives the Scripture additional truthfulness for them."

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This is not the first time Gordon has packed up and headed out to share the gospel in such a unfriendly setting. And to hear him talk, it won't be the last: "This is an opportunity for us to give the Word of God out to people who would never hear it. If we don't share it with them, who will?"

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Historical Society plans for
'independent historical voice' By Herb Hollinger

Baptist Press
5/10/95

AUGUSTA, Ga. (BP)--The Southern Baptist Historical Society, an auxiliary of the SBC Historical Commission, voted to become independent if the commission is eliminated in a denominational restructuring set for a vote in Atlanta in June at the SBC annual meeting.

Meeting with the commission May 8-10 in a celebration of the 1845 formation of the SBC in Augusta, Ga., members of the society voted to change their charter and bylaws but only if the Historical Commission is abolished. The proposed restructuring, which would reduce the number of SBC agencies from 19 to 12, will require the approval of two successive SBC annual meetings.

About 300 members of the society met on the site where the SBC was formed May 8, 1845. The building now houses a new Southern Baptist congregation, GraceWay Church, while the original congregation, First Baptist, relocated years ago to a new facility on the outskirts of Augusta.

Albert W. Wardin Jr., a retired Belmont College church history professor, said the restructuring proposal is the "most serious challenge" the society has faced since its founding in 1938.

Wardin, president of the 750-member society, said it became an auxiliary of the Historical Commission in 1952, the year after the commission was formed by the SBC.

"The relationship between the two organizations has been cordial, even symbiotic, but the society, with no executive director separate from the commission, nor an independent treasury, has atrophied," Wardin, of Nashville, Tenn., said.

"Today the society must begin to stand on its own two feet," Wardin said. "This action is necessary even if, contrary to the (restructuring proposal), the SBC preserves the Historical Commission" or even if the commission and the library and archives continue as one entity but under the control of another SBC agency.

"Southern Baptists need an independent historical voice," Wardin told the group. However, Wardin said the society needs to cooperate with the SBC and not become a "dissident body." He stressed both the society and the commission were "not acting in a spirit of antagonism nor seeking any hostile takeover," but taking measures to develop its own independent status.

He listed the purpose of the "new" society as fourfold:

- Maintain the Baptist History and Heritage publication.
- Convene annual meetings for presentation of historical papers, sponsorship of workshops and to provide a forum for professors of Baptist history and other Baptist studies.
- Serve as an advocate for the publication of Baptist historical materials and for the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives for its preservation and further development.
- Serve as a national center and clearinghouse for the state Baptist historical societies and to develop a special relationship with them.

Wardin also kicked off an endowment drive by contributing \$1,000 toward a goal of \$150,000 for the society which currently has "only \$6,500 in endowment support."

If the society does change its charter and bylaws, Nashville's Belmont University will provide the society with an office, it would be chartered as a Tennessee corporation, seek tax-exempt status, and employ an executive director-treasurer.

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Under the current charter and bylaws, Rosalie Beck, of Waco, Texas, was elevated to president and Alan Lefever, of Fort Worth, Texas, was named vice president and president-elect.

If the change takes place, Wardin was elected executive director-treasurer; Charles DeWeese, Nashville, secretary; Jesse Fletcher, Abilene, Texas, development coordinator; and W. Morgan Patterson, New Orleans, membership coordinator.

The society also approved a motion to write letters of encouragement to state Baptist conventions to encourage them to support Baptist state historical societies.

In a related development, the Southern Baptist Library Association has voted to request the SBC Executive Committee, which officially will propose the SBC restructuring plan in Atlanta, to reconsider its proposal.

Elizabeth Wells, spokesperson for the 50-member library association, said the group met in Atlanta May 6 and "decried plans to eliminate the Historical Commission."

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Chaplaincy concerns include
ethnic diversity, job security By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
5/10/95

ATLANTA (BP)--James Wilborn didn't intend to make history as a Southern Baptist chaplain. He was just looking for a job.

At 26, Wilborn wanted to be a pastor, but churches didn't want a single man as their leader. In 1974 he became the first African American to be endorsed as a Southern Baptist military chaplain and he hasn't looked back.

"I had a great career," said Wilborn who retired last year after 20 years in the Air Force. "I got to travel and literally take the gospel to the world."

While Wilborn poked a hole in the race barrier, Southern Baptists are still lacking in ethnic diversity among chaplains, say chaplaincy leaders. And while the chaplaincy force continues to grow, government budget cuts and corporate downsizing threaten the job security of many.

Albert W. Holmes, Home Mission Board director of business and industrial chaplaincy, is the first African American to serve on the chaplaincy division staff. After working for the Texas department of criminal justice nine years, he joined the HMB staff in January.

"We need to encourage more minorities" to be chaplains, Holmes said. "Many of them are not aware or informed about the opportunities." The Navy's chief of chaplains also issued a plea for more ethnic chaplains earlier this year.

Wilborn said many men prefer the power and freedom of being a pastor over the military's up-line accountability.

"In the military, you have to answer to the rank and file. If men want to build a building, chaplaincy is not for them. It's for people who want the challenge to go into all the world."

With current trends of downsizing and corporate mergers resulting in layoffs, however, the challenge for many chaplains may be keeping their jobs.

Chaplains are endorsed by the Home Mission Board's chaplains commission, but they are paid by the organizations they serve, including hospitals, prisons, businesses and military institutions. Or they volunteer.

To Southern Baptists, chaplains are a bargain. They receive no Cooperative Program or Annie Armstrong Easter Offering funds, but last year the 2,343 endorsed Southern Baptist chaplains reported 24,036 professions of faith.

Yet to some managers trying to balance budgets, chaplains are expendable.

"Administrators are asking, 'How can we justify spending the money to fund you?' A chaplain must earn the right to be where he or she is," said Bill Donovan, recently retired HMB director of institutional chaplaincy.

Four years ago, 56 chaplains in Georgia state hospitals, mental institutions, juvenile centers and prisons lost their jobs due to government budget cut-backs.

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As a West Virginia hospital chief executive officer, Don Smith said he must "balance budgets, conserve resources and avoid waste. Many CEOs take the position that there are not enough dollars to fund both care and caregivers."

Army chaplain Jim Rennell said military leaders are asking, "Can a civilian do the (chaplain's) job cheaper? Can volunteers or part-timers do it cheaper?"

Part-time chaplains may be cheaper but not always as effective, said Huey Perry, director of HMB chaplaincy. Volunteers and part-time chaplains can lead worship services, but they cannot have a thorough understanding of the institution without being there daily, he said.

Most contract chaplains work a limited number of hours and receive no benefits, Perry said. Consequently, the contract system attracts few qualified professionals.

On the other hand, Perry is optimistic about chaplains' role in the trend toward privatizing institutional care. In some places, private companies have contracts with government entities to run institutions such as prisons and mental health hospitals. Many of those contracts require chaplaincy services, Perry said.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Outline in SBCNet News Room. Editors' note: May is Southern Baptist chaplaincy awareness month.

Brantley Center specializes
in homeless, addicts' needs

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
5/10/95

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--In a city that's six feet below sea level, the Brantley Baptist Center stands as an island of help to those who have fallen even lower.

For 16 years, director Tobey Pitman has worked at Louisiana's largest homeless shelter, which also has a drug and alcohol treatment program, in the heart of New Orleans.

Nearby, Bourbon Street invites visitors to forget their problems. But Brantley's collection of addicts and indigent bear witness to a darker meaning for the Crescent City's motto as "The city that care forgot."

"There's not a lot of sympathy expressed for people who are down and out," says Pitman, 38. "It's always been interesting to me that in New Orleans, being a Catholic place, Southern Baptists operate the largest shelter in the whole state."

The Baptist Rescue Center opened in 1927 for men who came seeking jobs or housing. It has moved twice and was renamed in honor of former director Clovis Brantley. The center now occupies a six-story, brick building one block from the raucous French Quarter.

In a city where homeless estimates range from 8,000 to 15,000, Brantley can lodge up to 270 people. On "freeze nights," workers clear chairs from the chapel for an extra 50 mats.

In the midst of this, Pitman and others offer a spiritual response to problems too many people view as solely physical.

"There's more money set aside for homelessness in the upcoming (federal) budget than there's ever been, but money's not the solution," says the Texas native. "Maybe it's a feeling that it excuses us from personal involvement."

But personal participation is vital, he contends, to help those who made bad choices get on and stay on a better path. Clay Corvin is among those who understand the need to be involved.

On Sunday mornings, Corvin starts the center's worship service with instructions before leading in singing. "If you fall asleep, we understand. A lot of you have been on the street all night. If you start snoring, we're going to wake you up."

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Corvin first volunteered here in 1976 while a student at New Orleans Baptist Seminary. When he returned in 1980 to be the school's business manager, he also returned to Brantley. "Just as somebody's been called to a pastorate, I feel like I've been called down there."

Students assist him with preaching, counseling and other duties at the center, which he calls both a shock to the system and the perfect laboratory for practicing the principles they learn.

Although the congregation differs from typical Southern Baptist churches, Corvin says his message remains the same. "I've preached on tithing and everything else," he says. "God's Word is for every man. The thing that I accentuate is God's love."

Corvin requires students attend three chapel services in the center before they can preach. "Most of them never make it three times."

Pitman understands. "I often hear pastors say, 'I could never do what you do,' and my comment back to them is, 'I could never do what you do,'" he says. "The lesson in that is God gives each Christian particular gifts to fulfill his call in their life, and nobody else can fulfill that call."

For Pitman, that call came during his second year in seminary. He says he entered school planning to be a pastor "by default."

"My vision of ministry was so narrow that I didn't know what else to do," he says. If some Christians fear a call to full-time mission service, Pitman was just the opposite. "I was afraid I wanted to be in the ministry but the Lord didn't want me to be."

He and wife Cathy prayed one night for an opportunity to apply and practice the counseling classes he was taking. The next day, a student asked Pitman if he were interested in a part-time counseling internship at Brantley. "It was there, really, that a whole new world was opened to me."

In 1988, he was named director of the center and in the process has become a nationwide resource for Southern Baptists on addiction and homelessness. If the work sounds discouraging, don't tell Pitman.

"I'll take homeless people over church people any day," he says. "There's no facades to break down. What you see is what you get."

On an office door are taped the words of Charles Haddon Spurgeon: "Some men look for tall steeples and big bells. Give me a rescue mission one yard from hell."

If clients in Brantley's drug and alcohol rehab program feel one yard from hell, Pitman and other counselors work to keep them from finishing the trip.

The program accommodates up to 34 people. It lasts at least four months and would cost \$1,000 per day in a traditional hospital, says Kay Bennett, a home missionary from Mississippi. "Only through the Cooperative Program are we able to offer what we do."

Many view drugs or alcohol as an addict's problem, but program director Charlie Holmes says it's actually the solution. It's just not a very good one. "The problem lies underneath," he explains. "Got a headache? Take an aspirin. If you're hurting from the soul, you self-medicate, and I see drugs (and alcohol) as self-medication."

Holmes, a home missionary from Columbia, Miss., compares addiction to the visible tip of an iceberg of problems. Underneath, he says, lie such issues as guilt, low self-esteem or grief.

Secular programs often fail to treat the entire patient, he says. "Man is a social, sexual and spiritual being, and too many times people deal with two of them and neglect the third. To be successful, you need to deal with the spiritual."

Pitman says he is cautious not to introduce Christianity as a magical cure for the chemically dependant. Someone who accepts Christ but remains addicted will feel more helpless. "He's left with only one conclusion: He was so bad off that God couldn't save him."

From their first discussion, however, Pitman asks addicts and homeless about their spiritual background, hoping to introduce them to a different kind of need.

"People will talk about their physical and emotional disorders but not their spiritual needs," he says. "They say, 'Well, I'm Catholic, but I haven't been to church in a long time.' It becomes clear they really don't know who they are spiritually."

He says the consistent Christian lifestyle from staff and volunteers convinces clients the chapel messages and other verbal witnesses make a difference.

"When it finally dawns on them that you do love them and you do care for them, it's at that point that we're able to talk," he says. "And the next time it comes up, it's them bringing it to me."

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(BP) photo (horizontal) of Tobey Pitman mailed to state Baptist newspapers and/or color photo available upon request by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines are in the SBCNet News Room.

Drop in chapel attendance
results in more decisions

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
5/10/95

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--It took a fire marshal to spark a revival at Brantley Baptist Center's worship services.

As is common for homeless shelters, Brantley used to require guests who were registered by 7 p.m. to attend the nightly services.

"It is the standard practice for mission centers," says director and home missionary Tobey Pitman. "Most missionaries make you go to a chapel service before you ever get something to eat."

Nightly, about 130 people would pack the chapel, which has seating for only 100. Workers were satisfied with high attendance and about 250 annual decisions by clients to become a Christian or rededicate their life, Pitman says.

"We were manipulating them, really, in order to show some pretty impressive numbers," he says. "Our concern was to get them into chapel. Their concern was to get out of chapel and get to bed."

In 1980, a fire marshal changed all that by telling leadership they could not force people into a crowded room, creating a fire hazard, Pitman says. The impact was instant. "We saw an immediate 80 percent decrease in the number of people attending."

But they also experienced an unexpected increase in the number of decisions. Last year the center recorded 987 decisions although attendance averaged only 50.

The increase may have resulted because worshipers no longer have the distractions of coughing contests and rattling newspapers that occurred when everyone was required to attend, Pitman says.

"Those who come now come for one reason alone," he says. "They've already got their bed ticket. They've already had their meal. They come now just plainly, clearly out of a concern for their spiritual condition."

Leaders also are more confident about the sincerity of decisions being made, he adds.

"While we manipulated them, they manipulated us through their response to the invitation," he says. "On the back row, you'd see a coin flipping. Heads or tails, who's going to walk the aisle?"

"They learned that you would never walk the aisle on the first verse. Because if you did that, the speaker would get the impression the Holy Spirit was working and he'd offer a long invitation."

By the third verse, one or two would go forward, hoping leaders would be satisfied and close the service, Pitman says. "We would later learn that the idea was, 'I walked the aisle last night. It's your turn tonight.'"

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Pitman notes centers are the gatekeepers for basic physical services and some homeless people may feel compelled to give a response to stay at the center. "You've got them over a barbell, really. And I never want to be guilty of somebody making a spiritual decision to please me."

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(BP) photo (horizontal) of a worship service at the center mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines are in the SBCNet News Room.

Should you give
homeless money?

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
5/10/95

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Got a dollar?

A home missionary working with the homeless says too many Christians are ill-prepared to respond to this question.

"Most people see homeless people on a daily basis and don't know how to deal with it," says Tobey Pitman, director of the Brantley Baptist Center, a 270-bed homeless shelter in New Orleans.

The most common request from homeless people may be for money, but Pitman says their poverty is usually a symptom of a deeper problem, such as mental illness or substance abuse.

"These problems are much deeper than one of financial need," he says. "I rarely give money. I never even carry money, in fact."

With the many feeding programs available, Pitman says a panhandler asking for money to buy food is either lying or new in town. "There's no reason to be hungry on the streets of New Orleans."

Pitman encourages Christians to learn about community services and become personally involved in a shelter or mission center.

"You become an educated citizen and you can divert them to places that can actually help them," he says. "In doing that, you're becoming part of the solution."

Pitman commonly cites Matthew 26:31-45 as the proper response to the poor. "We learn from that passage that Jesus is concerned about the physical needs of people," he says. "It's by meeting the physical needs that we discover the gateway to the heart."

The Bible contains more than 400 references to the poor, he adds. "Most of those are in ways the Christian believer should be doing something to impact the issues of poverty in both society and the life of the individual impacted by poverty," he says.

"Sometimes we're left like Peter at the gate called Beautiful saying silver or gold I cannot share with you, but I really have something more valuable that I can share."

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Substance abusers credit
Brantley for new chance

By David Winfrey

Baptist Press
5/10/95

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Frank Jones remembers how badly he felt that Sunday morning in October after smoking at least seven rocks of crack cocaine and drinking \$20 worth of liquor.

"I felt like a snake," he recalls, "the lowest thing on the ground."

Sitting on his front porch steps, he watched people dressed up, walking to church and wished he too could go.

Instead, he walked 16 blocks to Charity Hospital, where he stayed clean for seven days. But the hospital allows only a one-week maximum stay, so officials there recommended the Brantley Center.

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"The center is a dream come true for the drug addict if you're serious about getting your life back together," Jones says. "It turned my life around and I'm grateful."

Jones' testimony is echoed by several others enrolled in the Brantley Baptist Center's drug and alcohol rehabilitation program:

-- "If it weren't for the Brantley Center, Rev. (Brantley director Tobey) Pitman and his crack staff, I would be dead," says Cliff Kurocar. "This place has given me a chance to find my life again."

Kurocar says he was 18 when he started taking heroine. He advanced to cocaine before hitting rock bottom.

"Cocaine is the only drug I ever knew that would rob your spirit," says Kurocar, 46. "You actually become a pre-historic being -- an animal."

It also broke him. "I'd get paid on Friday evenings and on Saturday morning I'd have to ask for 50 cents to get a cup of coffee. Does that tell you anything?"

Having completed the center's addiction program, Kurocar stays to continue learning and encourage others. Pitman says Kurocar's message matches others who stay to help.

"If I can get straight, these people can too," Kurocar says. "Life is pretty good for me right now. I don't have a lot, but what I've got is great."

-- "This place has literally saved my life, not to mention my soul," says Ronnie Laddin, 54, the night supervisor and maintenance assistant.

Laddin says he spent 17 years in prison for crimes related to his heroine abuse before getting saved. He credits God with taking away his addiction. "I firmly believe I had to take the route I did for Christ to tap me on the head and wake me up," he says. "I think when Christ sets you free he takes that craving away."

-- Walter Kott tried to check himself and his wife into another treatment program only to find it would only take one of them. He checked her in and left searching for another program. He found Brantley.

"I pray they realize one day how much they've done for me," says Kott, 38.

"If I would have went to a military, regimental program, I would have left," he adds. "The most important thing I've done since I've come here is rekindled a closer relationship with God."

-- Patrick says God gave him a second chance through Brantley. "I've been drinking and using drugs over 30 years," says Patrick, 44, who asked that his last name not be used.

When his kidneys failed during a binge of drinking and drugs, he got an ultimatum from the hospital doctors. "They told me, 'You either have to stop living the way you're living, or you're going to die,'" he says. "They gave me two months to live."

The ex-Marine is more than half-way through the rehab program, which he credits for turning him "into a different person."

"Through being able to see through Christ's eyes, I feel altogether different about things," he says.

"Every day I wake up, I pray that the Lord will give me this day sober and clean," he says. "Anybody that can't come here, clean up and learn something doesn't want to."

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(BP) photo (vertical) of Jones mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press. Cutlines in SBCNet News Room.

Home missionary
profile: Tobey Pitman

Baptist Press
5/10/95

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--WHO: Tobey Pitman.

SERVING: Director of the Brantley Baptist Center in New Orleans.

BORN: July 30, 1955 in Ranger, Texas.

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FAMILY: Wife Cathy (birthday, June 12); sons Andrew, 12, and Jay, 10.

HOBBIES: Woodworking, gardening, auto restoration.

FAVORITE SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 13:3.

WHAT I LIKE MOST ABOUT BEING A HOME MISSIONARY: The work that I do. I guess I would do this if I weren't a home missionary.

PLEASE PRAY FOR: Efforts to open a nearby facility as a shelter for homeless families. "Families that are homeless don't usually stay a family very long."

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(Editors' note: This can be formatted as an information box to accompany (BP story titled "Brantley Center specializes in homeless, addicts' needs.")

EDITORS' NOTE: In (BP) story titled "Baptist camp, hospital hit hard by Texas storms," dated 5/9/95 please update the death toll in the first paragraph to 20.

Thanks,
Baptist Press

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