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OKLAHOMA CITY--Recommendations sought for Okla. exec's post.

Sunday school lesson helps

Oklahoma City class cope

By Chip Alford

Baptist Press

6/13/95

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Less than two weeks after a bombing tragedy left 167 people dead and scores injured, Willetta Heath was asked to teach her senior adult couples Sunday school class at Exchange Avenue Baptist Church in Oklahoma City.

When she saw the lesson title for Sunday, April 30, she knew it was a gift from God.

"Sharing One Another's Pain" appeared in the Convention Uniform Series quarterly, "Sunday School Adults," published by the Baptist Sunday School Board. Written by Marianna Albritton, an adult Sunday school teacher at Big Level Baptist Church, Wiggins, Miss., it focused on how God comforts his people in times of tribulation through his Word, his presence and his peace.

"When you prepared the lesson ... you had no way of knowing what a comforting and relevant lesson that would be for my Sunday school class," Heath wrote in a recent letter to Albritton. "God surely must have been leading you in this as I am aware that the lessons are planned and written two years in advance. ... It was just what our class needed to help us search our hearts and share our pain."

The pain was especially real for Heath and her husband, Paul, a psychologist for the Veteran's Administration. He had been working in his office on the fifth floor of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building when the explosion occurred.

"His office was located on the south and west end of the building and that is the part where the floor held when the bomb blew out two-thirds of the floors for all nine stories," Heath said.

"God's arms were around him. He was not in his private office, but in an adjoining office that had a cement block wall. As he was standing next to that wall when the blast blew through, the force had to go around the wall and he was uninjured."

After climbing over the debris, Heath helped some injured co-workers down the five flights of stairs and out of the building. He then stayed at the scene to help others.

Several of the Heaths' friends and many of their acquaintances were among the 167 who died.

"We have each been trying to deal with this violation of our lives and I wanted you to know that your writings were very helpful," Heath wrote in her letter to Albritton.

That was encouraging news to Albritton, who said a computer malfunction caused her to lose the entire lesson manuscript only days before it was due to editors.

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"I had to retype the whole thing," she said. "At the time, I thought, 'This is so hard. Is it really worth all this effort? Will it really help anybody?'"

"As a writer, you just never know what kind of impact you will have. It was staggering to see how God used it. This is the most wonderful thing that could have happened."

In the lesson, Albritton shared how God comforted her during her mother's lengthy illness and eventual death and how she has since been able to help others facing similar circumstances.

"God comforts us; then he allows us to comfort someone else who is hurting," she wrote. "To share others' pain and to comfort them is a source of joy."

The "verse to remember" for the lesson was 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: "Blessed be God, even the Father our Lord Jesus Christ ... Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble."

The Heaths learned the truth of that passage during their Sunday school class.

"It was really a healing thing for us," Heath explained. "It helped us to really open up and share how we were feeling, what we were going through."

The Heaths said they also have been blessed by "the Christian love we have felt from relatives and friends all across America. We know God's people everywhere have been praying for us, too."

While she and her husband continue to heal, Heath said, "It's a slow process."

"Paul still has some sleepless nights, but he is busy ministering to others that seek him out for help."

"We are counting our blessings daily as we search within ourselves, pray and share our pain."

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Volunteers should prepare
now for hurricane season

By Jim Johnston

Baptist Press
6/13/95

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--Allison caused minimal damage to Florida and Georgia on June 5, but the first hurricane of the 1995 season also delivered an important message to Southern Baptist disaster relief volunteers: Be prepared.

"The weather patterns suggest we could see a very active season," said Mickey Caison, national director of disaster relief for the Brotherhood Commission. "Now is the time to get ready for the summer."

Allison, a Category I storm, peppered Florida's Big Bend area with 75-mile-per-hour winds and heavy rain just five days into the hurricane season, but it didn't pose more of a threat because the relatively cool waters of the Gulf of Mexico wouldn't allow for further strengthening.

As the Gulf waters warm during the months of July and August, Caison fears more destructive hurricanes may be in store for U.S. coastal residents. So, he's encouraging Southern Baptist volunteers to begin putting on the full armor of God for the hurricane season, which runs from June 1 to Nov. 1.

"The most important thing is to be spiritually prepared," Caison said. "You have to be ready to minister to those in need. In order to do that, you must be closely walking with the Lord yourself."

Ministering to those who have been victimized by hurricanes requires a special touch, Caison explained. Those left homeless by storms like Hurricane Hugo, which Caison lived through in 1989 as the pastor of Macedonia (S.C.) Baptist Church, are particularly at risk for suffering from forms of post-traumatic stress syndrome. The symptoms don't show up immediately, but volunteers must be prepared for them when they do appear.

"There are often heavy rains in the aftermath of a hurricane," Caison said. "That's when victims sometimes have flashbacks of the storm they just went through. Volunteers have to be ready to deal with those special situations."

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Volunteer preparations for hurricanes are roughly the same as for other disasters. Those interested in disaster relief work should contact their state Brotherhood directors and let them know of their availability. Volunteers then will be advised of training opportunities in their area of expertise. Disaster relief volunteer ministries include work in feeding units, chain saw crews, temporary child-care centers, cleanup crews and home repair and rebuilding units.

Caison also encouraged individual churches to begin developing disaster relief ministries of their own. The members of his former church in Macedonia never considered the possibilities of a ministry in that area until they lived through the trauma of a hurricane themselves. Once they saw the physical and spiritual needs that could be met, they allocated funds for their own mobile feeding unit, which traveled to minister those in need in south Florida in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and other disaster areas.

"They saw the ministry that disaster relief could be," Caison said.

Once volunteers have been trained in disaster relief procedures, they need to begin work on the basics: setting aside money to cover their expenses, making sure their employers are receptive to them taking time off from their jobs and filling their luggage with clothing and supplies they will need at a disaster site.

"There's a great need for volunteers in this ministry," Caison said. "But it takes people who have a heart for the Lord, people who are willing to give of themselves and their time. It also takes people who are willing to prepare."

Southern Baptists interested in serving through disaster relief ministries should contact their state contention's Brotherhood department.

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104-year-old's baptism
elicits 'football shuffle'

Baptist Press
6/13/95

PINELLAS PARK, Fla. (BP)--When Jimmy Hammond lowered Joe Ramies into the baptismal pool waters, it was not the usual baptism.

"You may never see this again, folks," Hammond, pastor of First Baptist Church, Pinellas Park, Fla., told the congregation.

Ramies is 104 years old.

Hammond called Southern Baptist Convention offices in Nashville, Tenn., and found fewer than five people in the nation who were baptized during their second century.

"I've been preaching about 45 years, and I have never baptized anyone beyond age 91 or 92," Hammond said. "He's definitely the oldest member of our church."

Dressed in the traditional white baptismal robe, Ramies was assisted into the baptismal pool and lowered into the water. When he emerged, the Easter Sunday congregation shouted a rousing "Amen" and burst into applause.

There were two other baptisms at the church that day. But at ages 10 and 7, Matthew Peabody and Ciera Gomez are 94 and 97 years younger than Ramies.

Branson Rogers, the church's assistant pastor, said baptism is an outward expression of obedience to the Lord. "It means they have come to a personal relationship in their lives with the Lord Jesus Christ," he said. "I guess his (Ramies') baptism shows that it is never too late for us to express our faith strongly in the Lord. What he did should be an example to others, young people and adults."

Ramies was born Sept. 16, 1890, in Kingsland, Ga., near the Florida border. He moved to St. Petersburg in 1929 at 39, said his son, Alfred Ramies, 58.

"He was a sawmill man," Alfred said. "He worked in the sawmills until I was born and then worked in the city and county public works. When the war was on, he worked at a war factory, an ammunition factory."

His last job before retirement was with a cemetery, when he dug graves by hand, his son said. His wife, Mozelle, died in 1991. Besides his son, Ramies has two daughters, Gal Herbert and Marcella Deese, also of St. Petersburg.

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Ramies likes to dance and goes to an adult day-care center twice a week. Ramies is nearly deaf and has trouble with his vision; he walks on his own and cares for himself. Daughter Gale cooks his meals but Ramies does his own laundry and is particular about his clothing. For his baptism he chose a pinstriped blue suit with a tie that looked like a wide-mouth bass.

"I bought him the fish tie a couple weeks ago," Gale said. "He likes to dress up when he goes to the day-care center. He is really sharp when it comes to dress."

Hammond said most people half Ramies' age have trouble just getting to church on Sunday mornings, yet not only does Ramies attend church each week, he was adamant about being baptized.

"I've never seen anyone so happy to be baptized," Hammond said. "He has looked forward to this occasion. When I told him the date, he did the football shuffle in his living room. His face just lit up."

Ramies went to the church's Easter pageant and Christmas programs. Soon he was attending regularly. He wanted to go. Then he wanted to be baptized.

Alfred Ramies said he and his father both were baptized in the Methodist church in the 1950s, but his father wanted to be baptized in the Baptist church.

"He heard about Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, and he wanted that," he said.

Hammond said Ramies is young in spirit and heart with a "zip and sparkle" that belies his age. Ruth Norrie, a friend who works at the adult day care center Ramies attends, said Ramies couldn't wait for his baptism.

"He was so happy. He grabbed me, gave me a hug and asked me to come to his baptism," she said.

Ramies didn't have the address of the church, however, so Norrie wasn't sure where to go.

"I just called all the churches in this area," she said. "This was the biggest thing in his life. I wasn't going to miss it."

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Recommendations sought
for Okla. exec's post'

Baptist Press
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OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Recommendations are now being sought for executive director-treasurer of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

Search committee chairman Anthony Jordan, pastor of Northwest Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, said the eight-member committee has met to work out procedures for the search to replace William G. Tanner, who is retiring June 30, 1996.

Jordan said recommendations will be accepted until July 31. The committee will meet in August to review the applications and will bring a report to the next meeting of the BGCO board of directors, Aug. 30-31.

In the meantime, the search committee has divided into two subcommittees. One is writing a job profile and one is writing a job description for the next executive director-treasurer.

Jordan said when the committee meets in August it will be a "time of praying" as members sift through the recommendations. As recommendations come in, they will be forwarded to all committee members.

He said no information on candidates will be released until the committee agrees to do so. He also said the committee does not plan to "do horseraces" between several candidates, but will try to narrow it down to one candidate at a time.

"We may end up with a 'short list' of candidates, but the general consensus is we are not going to do any horseraces," he said. "We will just see if anybody rises to the top."

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Jordan said the committee is starting with no preconceived notions of who should be the new executive director-treasurer, and he said the process would be bathed in prayer.

He encouraged recommendations from any Southern Baptists who feel led to do so.

Recommendations must be in writing. There must be a resume attached to the recommendation. They should be sent to the Executive Director-Treasurer Search Committee, 3030 N.W. 23rd, Oklahoma City, OK 73107.

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