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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Religion guidelines sent  
to schools; effect debated

By Tom Strode

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Department of Education has sent guidelines on religious expression to the country's public school superintendents, and Secretary Richard Riley hopes the action "will end some of the confusion" about the sometimes volatile issue at the local level.

The problems will not be solved without the passage of a constitutional amendment protecting religious expression, a Southern Baptist church-state specialist said in response.

The guidelines were mailed Aug. 17 to 15,000 superintendents in response to a directive from President Bill Clinton. In a July speech on religious liberty, the president announced he had instructed Riley, in consultation with Attorney General Janet Reno, to inform schools by the start of the new year of the administration's interpretation of what is permissible religious expression by students, including interpretations of the Equal Access Act, which provides religious clubs with the same access to school facilities as secular clubs.

According to the guidelines, the following religious expressions are among those allowed in schools: prayer by individuals and groups as long as it is not disruptive; prayers over lunch; student-initiated religious discussions; witnessing that does not constitute "harassment;" individual reading of the Bible or other religious books; teaching about religion; student expression of religious beliefs in homework and class presentations; distribution of religious literature; wearing clothing with religious messages if clothing with other messages is allowed; and equal treatment of student religious clubs.

The guidelines are "not intended to change anything," Riley said in an Aug. 30 briefing at the Department of Education. "They also won't solve all the problems. We are very quick to say that.

"But it is the hope of the president and my hope that it will end some of the confusion and it will be then a catalyst for people to come together to talk about what is and what is not permitted and protected under the First Amendment."

The impact of the guidelines will be to reduce legal action schools have to contend with, a spokesman for the National School Boards Association said at the briefing.

The NSBA is very pleased to see the guidelines produced, said Gus Steinhilber, general counsel of the association. "We find ourselves in the crossfire" between both sides.

When a parent on either side brings a complaint to a superintendent and school board, they can, with the guidelines in hand, "point to the fact that there is a document that, first of all, has been agreed to by the president of the United States," Steinhilber said.

The guidelines are "going to have an impact, and I really believe that ... the result will be to lessen litigation," he said.

The NSBA deals with more problems in the church-state field than any other, Steinhilber said.

The guidelines will not have the impact needed, a point he made in discussions with Department of Education officials, said Michael Whitehead, general counsel of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"We urged that, even if the president does not endorse a religious equality amendment, which we support, the White House could make a substantive policy impact by issuing a new executive order or by proposing new legislation on equal access, with real sanctions to stop the violations," Whitehead said. "Otherwise, a White House information campaign may be dismissed as symbolism over substance.

"The guidelines will not change the strict separationist opinions" of some Supreme Court justices, he said.

A religious equality amendment, which is awaiting introduction in Congress, would solve some of the problems not handled by the guidelines, Whitehead said. These include equal-access violations on the elementary-age level and religious discrimination in the workplace, he said.

Riley said he believes "tampering with the Constitution would be a mistake."

The guidelines, as well as the directive issued by Clinton, draw heavily from a joint document released in April by such organizations as the American Jewish Congress, Baptist Joint Committee, Christian Legal Society, American Civil Liberties Union, National Association of Evangelicals and National Council of Churches.

The 35-member coalition almost unanimously opposes a constitutional amendment. The Christian Legal Society and the National Association of Evangelicals are exceptions.

"Frankly, I will use that statement in a debate to say, 'Look at all the things that you can do now under the Constitution as it now exists,'" said Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, at the briefing. "And Steve McFarland of Christian Legal Society, on the other side, is going to say, 'Yeah, but the glass is only three-quarters full.'"

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WMU's O'Brien: Rankin letter  
is 'inflammatory ... divisive'      By Art Toalston

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Calling it "inflammatory, misleading and divisive," Woman's Missionary Union Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien issued a reaction Aug. 31 to a letter Foreign Mission Board President Jerry Rankin mailed to nearly 40,000 local Southern Baptist churches.

"We are furious with the letter sent by Jerry Rankin, written at the encouragement of Foreign Mission Board trustees, to pastors and WMU directors," O'Brien said at the outset of her response to Rankin's Aug. 25 letter.

Rankin, addressing the churches' "Pastor/WMU Director," called for prayer for the national WMU organization to reverse its plans to produce "missions education supplements" for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of Baptist moderates opposed to the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative leadership.

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WMU announced July 12 it would produce the CBF supplements. Churches will have to specifically order the materials, to be available early next year with WMU's coed missions curriculum. In its key magazines, however, WMU said only information on FMB- and Home Mission Board-appointed missionaries will appear.

O'Brien predicted "the timing of this unwarranted attack" on WMU "will have negative impact on the 1995 Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. When we are attempting to reach a challenging \$100 million goal, many Southern Baptists will have second thoughts about giving because of this new criticism of WMU from the Foreign Mission Board."

And O'Brien stated "it would be difficult not to imagine" that the letter's aim was to "drive a wedge" between local WMU members and the organization's national leadership. Noting "grassroots members elect the members of WMU's Executive Board," O'Brien said, "This is true only of WMU and not other SBC entities." The WMU board consists of each state WMU's elected president, while trustees of SBC entities are elected by local church messengers to the annual meetings of the SBC.

Nevertheless, O'Brien said, "Ninety-nine point nine percent of what we do is, and will remain, related to the Home and Foreign Mission boards. Rather than 'promoting and publicizing' the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, we are simply responding to a request from churches for materials which include information about what the CBF is doing in missions. ... It is our desire and purpose to equip all Southern Baptists to fulfill the Great Commission."

Rankin, in his letter, said WMU had abandoned its 107-year, "historic role of exclusive support" of FMB and HMB missionaries at a time of "evangelistic harvest and unlimited opportunities overseas." He described the CBF as an organization "which would divert funding and undercut support" for the SBC and its missions agencies. WMU's assistance to CBF, Rankin said, "undermines a cooperative spirit" among the FMB, HMB and WMU. And Rankin voiced dismay that WMU would forge ties with the CBF after appealing to be incorporated into a new SBC structure approved during the convention's sesquicentennial in June.

In comments to Baptist Press, Rankin said the letter was written directly to pastors and local WMU directors out of a feeling that "our concerns have been ignored." He said, "We are confident that we still have the loyal support of the WMU in the local churches who continue to identify Southern Baptist missions with the work of the Home Mission Board and Foreign Mission Board."

Said O'Brien, "Our Executive Board has taken into consideration the concerns Dr. Rankin has put forward from time to time. Likewise, we have forwarded our own concerns about recent steps by the Foreign Mission Board toward relying on outside assistance, such as Global Focus, which erodes confidence in the promotion and missions education efforts of WMU. These non-traditional methods have totally left out the significance of prayer support in favor of 'raising money' for missions."

Global Focus was founded earlier this year to help churches design a comprehensive program of global evangelistic vision as well as personal involvement in local, home and foreign missions. The organization received a \$200,000 grant from FMB trustees in mid-August for FMB-related expenses in 1995 and 1996.

Rankin, in Latin America visiting with missionaries, had received a copy of O'Brien's response but was not able to issue a response Aug. 31, according to an FMB spokesman.

Carolyn Miller, WMU's national president, also issued a response to Rankin's letter.

"I am appalled that Dr. Rankin would assume by our action that we have deviated from our historic role. We have never intended to change our relationship with the Foreign Mission Board nor our support for Southern Baptist missionaries," Miller said.

"Our decision to produce materials related to the work of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries grows out of the decision the WMU Executive Board made in 1993 and reaffirmed again in our June meeting in Atlanta. The 1993 decision states that WMU would 'produce resources for Southern Baptist groups involved in missions at their request.' Our recent action is in line with that decision. WMU will not promote these materials. CBF leaders will. WMU is simply the printing and distribution vendor."

Concerning the FMB's networking with various Christian ministries, Miller added, "If the Foreign Mission Board can work with evangelical groups -- some of which have been viewed in years past as 'competing' with Southern Baptist efforts -- why cannot we work with a group of Southern Baptists?"

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The full texts of comments by O'Brien and Miller of WMU are posted in SBCNet News Room.

Texas conservatives list nominees,  
question other nominee's CBF ties By Art Toalston

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

GRAND PRAIRIE, Texas (BP)--Southern Baptists of Texas, an organization of conservatives in the state, has announced a slate of nominees for Baptist General Convention of Texas officers to be elected at the BGCT annual meeting Nov. 13-14 in San Antonio.

Gary Miller, pastor of Sagamore Hill Baptist Church, Fort Worth, will be the group's nominee for BGCT president, according to an announcement Aug. 30 by John Yeats, editor of the group's newsletter, Plumblin.

Miller will face at least one other candidate, Charles Wade, pastor of First Baptist Church, Arlington, who will be nominated by Russell H. Dilday Jr., former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, now acting dean of Baylor University's Truett Seminary.

For BGCT first and second vice president, Southern Baptists of Texas will back Casey Perry, pastor of First Baptist Church, Malakoff, and Dee Slocum, pastor of Highland Baptist Church, Amarillo, respectively, said Yeats, pastor of South Park Baptist Church, Grand Prairie.

Yeats also released a resolution adopted by officers of Southern Baptists of Texas during an Aug. 17 meeting attended by about 40 people in Irving, and stated: "To really show their hand, the moderates couldn't have picked a better candidate. Charles Wade personifies exactly what our statement indicates."

The resolution noted:

"The time has come for Southern Baptists across the great state of Texas to declare 'enough.' There is no doubt to even a casual observer that past elected officials of the BGCT have allowed or in some cases promoted a sympathetic drift away from our historical Southern Baptist roots.

"Our Southern Baptist heritage in Texas of cooperation for missions and theological education is eroding in Texas at the very hour when we need to make significant advance. The erosion in the BGCT of the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program support is further enhanced by moderates who redefined cooperative giving to, in effect, dually align the BGCT with the CBF and promote an independent giving spirit in our churches."

"CBF" is a reference to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of Baptist moderates opposed to the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative leadership.

"Dr. Wade has great pastoral skills," Yeats acknowledged, "and the church, First Arlington, is a leading church in this area. My own personal view, however, is they've been misguided in their understanding of Southern Baptist missions and theological education. I think there's been a lot of misinformation about our Southern Baptist entities. The SBC is true to the course and we are doing a great work; I question whether their laypersons in the pew have been told that."

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Under the church's former pastor, Henerd East, who led First Baptist, Arlington, from 1951-76, it was "the Southern Baptist flagship of the Mid-Cities," Yeats said.

Wade, reached for comment about the church's dual giving to the SBC and CBF, said, "The truth of the matter was that after some of the SBC decisions, the people in our church were so concerned and upset with the (SBC) attitudes that if we had not found a way to do missions alongside the SBC -- an alternative way to do missions -- we would have lost a sizeable amount for missions. Many of our people simply would not have given.

"We have simply tried to maintain the missions heart of our people," Wade said. "Through a strong missions program of CBF and SBC, all Southern Baptists will be able to give gladly to missions and hopefully give more. If we can allow diversity among our people and let them give as they feel led to do, more people will be saved, more churches will be started and more young people trained for ministry."

The resolution adopted by Southern Baptists of Texas officers pointed to three overarching actions to "maintain our support of Southern Baptist missions:"

1) "resisting any reduction of giving to Southern Baptist work through the Cooperative Program."

2) "continuing support of our Southern Baptist seminaries (there is an attempt to draw funds away from our seminaries to a new independent seminary, Truett Seminary) and opposing any attempt of the BGCT or Baylor University to subsidize student tuition to Truett Seminary."

3) "electing loyal Southern Baptist officers who would lead our BGCT to restore its focus on helping our churches cooperate with other Southern Baptists worldwide in sharing the gospel."

Miller, in addressing the Southern Baptists of Texas officers' meeting, was quoted as saying:

"Motive is everything. In our own human strength we cannot overcome this issue. We must do God's work his way.

"Therefore, prayer is the central issue. We must link up with other Southern Baptists in our state in prayer. We must ask our Lord to help us turn our state convention back to its historical mission of helping churches join hands with other Southern Baptists and fulfill the Great Commission," Miller said.

"Tragically right now, the BGCT calls anything 'missions' as long as it can keep the mission funds in the state. Texas is important. It is an incredible mission field. But our commission is to reach the world.

"When our churches have a money crunch, we try to find ways to cut administrative costs and be resourceful, so we can keep our missionaries supported," Miller said. "The BGCT must follow suit.

"This battle is the Lord's. We must trust him to come to our aid and keep intact Texas support of the Cooperative Program and our missionaries on the field and those awaiting support."

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Ga. Baptist medical center  
ends talks with Columbia/HCA By Lee Ann Broussard

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

ATLANTA (BP)--Officials of the Georgia Baptist Health Care System board of trustees have announced the system would end talks over a joint venture agreement with Columbia/HCA Healthcare Corp.

In April of this year, the owners of the Georgia Baptist Health Care System, the executive committee of the Georgia Baptist Convention, initially gave the go-ahead for Georgia Baptist to sign a letter of intent with Columbia/HCA. The signing enabled both parties to begin in-depth analysis and negotiation that would lead to a finalized contract. However, the exploratory joint venture discussions with Columbia/HCA have ended without final approval between the two health care systems.

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According to J. Truett Gannon, chairman of the Georgia Baptist Health Care System trustees and pastor of Smoke Rise Baptist Church, Stone Mountain, the decision was amicable for both organizations.

"You just never fully understand the possibilities or the problems of another corporation until serious study and examination take place," said Gannon. "I believe that both parties worked very hard to accomplish a workable agreement and in the end, it just couldn't be accomplished without compromising the mission and the vision of Georgia Baptist."

Georgia Baptist officials had hoped to negotiate an agreement that would have allowed the joint venture to continue many of the ministry aspects of the hospital, including generous charitable care, discounts for Georgia Baptist ministers and an agreement that no abortions would be performed at any Columbia/HCA hospital in Georgia. The Georgia Baptist Health Care System would have retained a minority stake in the partnership, according to the preliminary discussions, and any cash proceeds from the formation of the partnership would have gone to fund expanded ministries of the Georgia Baptist Health Care Foundation.

The Georgia Baptist Health Care System has been and will continue to examine ways to expand within today's health care environment. David E. Harrell, chief executive officer, explained, "A successful venture must be a philosophically and economically sound decision for both parties in order for it to become an effective relationship. I truly believe that the due diligence period with Columbia/HCA was forthright and honest.

"However," Harrell stated, "the board felt that it wasn't the right match for a not-for-profit, faith-based organization.

Georgia Baptist Health Care System trustees will continue to meet in the next several months, looking at other options being considered by Georgia Baptist. Said Gannon, "It is our goal to explore without sacrifice to our commitment to the Georgia Baptist mission, culture or its values."

According to hospital officials, the financial strength of the Georgia Baptist Health Care System continues to improve, as it adapts to the new managed care environment responsible for 27 percent of health care delivery in Georgia today. Net operating revenue and net income have grown over the past two years, with projections that the growth trend will continue through 1995. In 1993, Georgia Baptist net operating revenue was \$212.79 million, with a net income of \$4.24 million. In 1994, net operating revenue was \$223.73 million, with a \$6.04 million net income. The projections for 1995 show a net operating revenue of \$232.3 million, yielding a net income of \$7.6 million.

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Broussard is a writer for the Georgia Baptist Health Care System. Staff members of The Christian Index, Georgia Baptists' newsjournal, contributed to this story.

John Avant helps kindle  
revival at Midwestern

By Jennifer Mauldin

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--The Aug. 29 chapel service at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary ended with about 40 students and faculty packing the altar to pray for spiritual awakening. Some wept openly. Others gathered in groups to pray aloud.

What prompted the outpouring of God's Spirit? It was a simple testimony from John Avant, pastor of Coggin Avenue Baptist Church, Brownwood, Texas. In 30 minutes, he detailed how God has used a spiritual awakening in Brownwood to spark a mighty work across the whole country.

Following the service, Mark Coppenger, president of the Kansas City, Mo., seminary, said, "We've talked about prairie fire of revival at Midwestern. John Avant has seen prairie fire of revival and described it to us. We now have a clearer vision of where we might go. We have seen the first fruits of a harvest."

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Various students at Midwestern also caught the spark of renewal. Scott Willsey commented, "People are finally seeing God move. I think he wanted to do it all the time and we were just sitting there. It was great to finally see guys get up out of their seats."

During the chapel service, Avant said, "I believe what we are missing (in churches today) is a powerful, Holy Spirit-sent, New Testament revival that literally shakes everything that we are, everything that we do and changes us from the inside out so that then the world around us can be changed.

"God is doing something in our day. I believe we have a window of opportunity and God help us if we miss it."

In January widespread spiritual renewal started at Coggin Avenue Baptist Church and moved to Howard Payne University in Brownwood and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas. The revival began when a Howard Payne student walked to the altar during an invitation at Avant's church and shared a burden for his classmates' spiritual lives. That service continued three-and-a-half hours as dozens of church members openly voiced prayers and confessions before God.

Now, Avant said, the spiritual renewal that began in Brownwood has spread to at least 50 university campuses and dozens of churches across the nation.

"All these things God has done are just him. Nothing that we have planned or programmed." Avant said the revival is God answering the prayers of his people "and maybe, just maybe we could be on the verge of another great spiritual awakening."

"God is far from finished with this country," Avant stressed.

He challenged the chapel congregation: "If you're not seeking spiritual awakening, why are you here? If now is not the time for it, when have we ever needed it more? If God's not going to begin it with you, then who is trustworthy for God to use in revival?"

Coppenger joined students and faculty in prayer following Avant's message. As a crowd gathered at the altar, Coppenger reminded them, "It's not fun to get clean but it's worse not to get clean."

Avant said he and others across the country continue to pray for revival. "Lord sweep across the nation in a powerful way. Change us. Change our campus. Change our churches. Change our country with another great spiritual awakening."

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Mohler reminds seminarians  
of generations of witnesses

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Seminarians who have sacrificed financial security and secular success to pursue their ministerial callings stand with generations of faithful saints who have selflessly served God, according to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President R. Albert Mohler Jr.

In an Aug. 28 convocation address opening the fall semester at the Louisville, Ky., seminary, Mohler urged students to cling to the faith that brought them there.

"Around you and in you is testimony to God's calling and to the faithfulness of those who come and to the faith which has propelled you here," Mohler said. "This is not a place where the majority of your college classmates are to be found. This is not a place where the corporate headhunters are waiting to bestow executive suites, corporate jets and golden parachutes.

"And the world, and perhaps not only the world, but some in the church and not only the church, but perhaps even some in your own family, wonder why it is that you are here."

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In his address, Mohler directed students' attention to the faith of the biblical characters listed in Hebrews 11. Faith, he explained, is necessary to gain God's approval. "And yet faith is one of the most abused words in the contemporary vocabulary," he said. "It has often been reduced to mere bromides." Mohler added too often society's message is simply to "have faith."

"But we should not be concerned with faith in faith, but with faith in God, and in particular, faith in Jesus Christ our Great High Priest and Mediator," Mohler said.

Today's students at Southern Seminary follow in a tradition of faith that began with the school's founders and continued through successive generations, the seminary president asserted. Seminary founding faculty member John A. Broadus' commitment to serve Christ at the seminary was so strong that he turned down the presidencies of prestigious colleges and the pastorates of large churches, Mohler said. He emphasized that when Broadus refused to leave the seminary as it struggled to recover from the devastation of the Civil War, many of his fellow Baptists could not understand his "quality of commitment, that quality of faith in Christ."

"Go up to the third floor of the library and look through all the composites of graduates of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and there you see another pantheon of faithfulness," Mohler said. "They left homes and family and security, and the world would ask, 'Why?'"

Using the biblical image of "running the race," Mohler cited three instructions from Hebrews 12 for effectively running the race of faith. First, he noted Christians are to "lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us." Mohler called on the campus community to "prepare ourselves by purifying ourselves."

A second instruction is to "run the race that is set before us." Mohler told the students they "pay honor to those who have gone before" by demonstrating endurance in their own Christian walk. The third instruction for running the race of faith is to "fix our eyes on Jesus." Christ is the believer's model as well as mediator, Mohler said.

During convocation, three faculty members signed the original copy of the Abstract of Principles, the school's confessional document: Craig A. Blaising, associate professor of Christian theology; Daniel I. Block, professor of Old Testament interpretation; and J. Mark Terry, associate professor of Christian missions.

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Crews: Leadership stretches  
beyond size, location, style

By Cameron Crabtree

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

MILL VALLEY, Calif. (BP)--Effective leadership will continue to be a burning issue for churches as the new century approaches, asserted William O. Crews, president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

Crews welcomed new students to the seminary during the semester's opening chapel on the Mill Valley campus Aug. 30.

Golden Gate Seminary, one of six Southern Baptist Convention seminaries and the only SBC agency in the western United States, has focused its mission on "shaping Christian leaders for the churches of tomorrow," Crews said.

He acknowledged there are some misunderstandings about Christian leadership:

-- It has nothing to do with size. "Every ministry for God deserves an effective leader."

-- It has nothing to do with location. "Whether your ministry is in Los Angeles, the Middle East or the mid-section of the United States, you need effective leadership."

-- It has nothing to do with style. "Leaders come in all shapes and sizes and have different ways for getting things done."

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Using the example of Old Testament prophet Nehemiah, Crews noted the story is concerned with the "three circles of leadership:" character, competence and influence.

"We will do you and the kingdom of God a great disservice if we simply shape your God-given gifts and equip you with leadership skills, without first attempting to shape in you a Christlike character that influences everything you do," Crews warned. "Whatever else you do, make a godly character your aim both while you are in seminary and for the rest of your ministry."

Nehemiah also knew how to get "the right things done at the right times," he said.

"We're going to work on character around here, but if that's all we do, you'll be ill-prepared for ministry in the real world," Crews said.

There are several competencies illustrated by the life of Nehemiah:

- how to wait for God's timing.
- how to release God's vision to others.
- how to deal with external opposition.
- how to deal with internal dissension.
- how to stay focused on the vision until it is fulfilled.

Crews also noted competencies must be guided by God: "I hope your ministry gives occasion for people to look back and say, 'God did that.' There ought to be things that are part of your ministry that only God can explain."

Ultimately, Crews said, the story of Nehemiah points potential leaders to the effective use of influence.

"Nehemiah practiced a leadership that influenced others to do their best for the sake of the kingdom of God," Crews said. "He could do that because he was willing to sacrifice himself for the welfare of God's people.

"If your people know you really love them, they will follow you in storming the gates of hell, but if you use them for your own self-appreciation, they won't follow you anywhere."

Crews noted leadership is not an end unto itself, but a means to something greater.

"Our task is to lead people on a journey with the ultimate aim of bringing the Lord God glory."

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Illinois executive director  
in critical condition

Baptist Press  
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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (BP)--Gene Wilson, executive director of the Illinois Baptist State Association, collapsed at his home and suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 30.

He remained hospitalized in critical condition Aug. 31 in the intensive care unit at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield, where he was still unconscious at press time.

Doctors believe he may have suffered an aneurism and scheduled an angiogram this afternoon.

Wilson has been executive director in Illinois since 1993.

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Branson Baptists, volunteers  
active in tourist ministry

By Chuck Zehnder

Baptist Press  
8/31/95

BRANSON, Mo. (BP)--Branson hosts about 6 million tourists a year and many of them come through the summer months. Caravans of visitors arrive in their motor homes and campers to spend a week or two.

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Four years ago Becky Castleberry, Baptist Student Union director for nearby College of the Ozarks, felt a moving of God's Spirit to try to reach some of these people coming from all over the nation and the world.

She has proceeded to do just that. "Halfway through the summer we had 5,900 contacts and 12 decisions for Christ," she reported in early August.

This is the fourth year of the tourist outreach, now called Mountain Country Ministries. Castleberry directs MCM in the summer, continues to serve as BSU director during the school year and sings in the choir at First Baptist Church, Branson.

Mountain Country Ministries grows every year. By summer's end, more than a thousand volunteers from 11 states will have taken part in visitor ministry in campgrounds and other venues.

Groups of volunteers are assigned to different campgrounds during the week, Castleberry explained. In the mornings they hold day camps for youngsters they have met in the campground. The camps are simply Backyard Bible Clubs with the material adapted to use in the campgrounds. These run each morning -- a time when there are few shows on the Branson "strip" and activity has slowed for the visitors.

Early evening family programs at various sites are another facet of the ministry. These are different kinds of shows, often using puppets and always including lots of singing.

"There are 13 day camps during the mornings each day and 15 family evening programs during the week," Castleberry said. Some volunteer groups hold several day camps and then come together for a single family evening program; smaller groups may do only one day camp.

Both programs are evangelistic; often an invitation is extended.

About half of the church groups coming to Branson during the nine-week summer season are from Missouri. They are recruited through Castleberry's winter mailings to youth workers.

Most out-of-state volunteers are youth groups on summer mission projects who find out about Mountain Country Ministries through the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta.

This year Castleberry has utilized three summer missionaries, an intern from Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., and a US-2 missionary to direct the volunteers.

The work can be tedious and the sheer numbers of contacts exhausting. "We get discouraged sometimes because we plant lots and lots of seeds, but we don't see lots of results," Castleberry acknowledged.

But this summer God let them see some fruit of their labor. A few years back, an unchurched woman and her children were staying at a Branson campground and her children had a great experience in an MCM day camp.

Although none of them made a public decision for Christ at that time, they returned home to Kansas City and found a church home. They became excited in their service to the Lord -- and this year the woman returned as a sponsor of her church's youth group doing campground ministry.

"Those numbers, of course, were never recorded all those years ago," Castleberry said, "but God let us see the results. We know that has to happen even more.

"You hear those kind of stories and you say, 'Well, I can do this another four weeks.'"

Dick Wakefield, director of missions for Tri County Baptist Association, pointed out being on mission changes the lives of the young volunteers as well. For most, he explained, their faith has been given to them by their home churches and its leaders. The perspective changes when they minister to others.

"They go back with a whole new concept of what Christianity really is," he said. "They learn that Christianity is giving, and not just receiving."

Wakefield said he tries to offer spiritual leadership to the workers. He is joined in that effort by Mission Service Corps volunteer Grace Coen, who leads a Bible study for team members.

Nadine Gold of the Tri County association staff handles the initial contacts from churches wanting to send mission teams to work with Mountain Country Ministries. She sets up the volunteers on a first-come, first-served basis and then puts them in contact with Castleberry. The Missouri Baptist Convention provides funding through the Missouri Missions Offering and helps with summer missionaries and US2-ers.

"We are very, very grateful to the Missouri Missions Offering and what it's doing," Wakefield said. The association hopes to launch other resort ministries in Branson, including a tour bus outreach. Branson is the world's No. 1 tour bus destination.

Six million visitors come to Branson every year expecting the best in family entertainment. Thanks to the efforts of Mountain Country Ministries, some leave for home as members of the best family -- the family of God.

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Zehnder is a correspondent for Missouri Baptists' Word & Way newsjournal.

Young basketball star shares  
hoop skills, love of Christ

By Julie Nall

Baptist Press  
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ST. JAMES, Mo. (BP)--She was named Miss Show-Me Basketball for 1995. She was the student body president at John F. Hodge High School in St. James, Mo., as well as valedictorian of her graduating class. She took an active part in several clubs and organizations, including Fellowship of Christian Athletes, National Honor Society, Future Business Leaders of America and Spanish Club.

But for Amy Rhea, these school-year highlights were overshadowed by her bringing light to others as a Missouri Sports Crusader.

Rhea spent 10 weeks of her summer vacation using what she acknowledges as God-given basketball skills to teach youngsters the fundamentals of both basketball and a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Crusaders were two teams of four basketball players each who conducted 20 basketball camps around Missouri and in Wichita, Kan. One team, all men, taught boys' camps. Rhea's team, on which she was the only female, taught coed camps.

The basketball teams usually taught two groups a day to accommodate younger and older groups of athletes. Team members taught participants the fundamentals of life on the court, such as dribbling, shooting and defense. Then they taught them the fundamentals of life with Christ.

Rhea said the Crusaders had a "time out" session each day when they presented the campers with an "Impact" booklet with Bible verses and fill-in-the-blank work. They also provided "A Path to Victory," a sports version of the New Testament with testimonies of Christian professional athletes.

"They're really neat books, and the kids really went nuts when they saw Kevin Johnson and the other professional basketball players" in the materials, Rhea said.

She said one day each week the Crusaders presented the plan of salvation to the campers. The response was fantastic, she reported, with several youngsters making decisions to accept Christ as Savior or making a rededication of commitment to him.

Funded through Missouri Baptists' student summer missions program, the Crusaders were coordinated by Bobby Shows of the Missouri Baptist Convention missions education and ministry development team.

Shows said the camps did what they were intended to do. "The response of the kids was overwhelming," he said. "If the adults will get the word out, the kids will come. They respond to these idols, these older kids. They respond athletically and spiritually."

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Shows said it was Rhea's response to people, coupled with her maturity level, that led him to invite her to join the Crusaders. She had her own logic for accepting the invitation.

"There are two reasons why I decided to get involved with the Crusaders," Rhea said. "I love to play basketball and I feel that is an ability God gave me that h wants to use for him. The second reason is because I feel God wants me to be a missionary of some sort."

Rhea said she is not really sure what being a missionary might entail for her. She is headed to John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Ark., with the intention of playing basketball and majoring in accounting or another field of business.

But for this summer, in being a missionary to young people who wanted to learn to dribble, shoot and defend a goal, Rhea was able to express an even higher goal of life.

"A lot of time athletes feel like they don't have a chance to be a witness, except maybe off the court," she said. "We were able to show the kids how much we love basketball, but even more, how much we love Jesus."

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Nall is a newswriter for the Word & Way, Missouri Baptists' newsjournal.

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