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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
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Nashville, Tennessee

Leaders urged to present  
gospel in creative ways

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press  
12/05/95

JACKSON, Wyo. (BP)--Living Water still satisfies spiritual thirst, but churches must learn to put it in containers non-Christians can handle, a Methodist professor told Southern Baptist evangelism leaders.

To illustrate his point, Leonard Sweet poured water from a pitcher into a glass, a paper cup and a coffee mug. "Water will fill every container it can find. The content remains the same, but the container is different."

Sweet was among the speakers at the annual meeting of evangelism leaders of Baptist state conventions, seminaries and mission agencies sponsored by the Home Mission Board, Nov. 30-Dec. 3 in Jackson, Wyo.

Churches often will not change their methods of sharing the gospel despite an ever-changing environment, said Sweet, dean of theology at Drew University, Madison, N.J. "The whole world is dying because the church refuses to put the Living Water in a container it can handle."

One container for worship is to involve more people in the service. Today people want honesty and participation, he said. Soap operas, the most popular daytime television shows in the 1970s, have been replaced in popularity by talk shows, Sweet noted. Talk shows are popular because they are about real people and they allow for audience participation.

"The bleachers have to be empty; people have to be brought into the mainstream of what we're doing," he said. "Step from behind the pulpit to interact with the congregation."

In a related address to the group, Calvin Miller, evangelism professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, agreed that the gospel must be presented in relational and experiential terms. "It's not what we know but who we are and who we know," he said, referring to a Christian's personal relationship with Christ.

As another example of the demand for interactivity, Sweet noted that "Experiencing God," one of the Baptist Sunday School Board's best-selling publications, was an interactive notebook before it was published as an individual study book.

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Miller said the gospel should also be presented in art forms. "People may or may not talk about your sermon on the way home, but they always talk about the movie they've just watched." With video rental and electronic stores on virtually every corner, Miller said the church should consider how to present the gospel in other ways.

Sweet agreed. "The development of electronics will have a greater impact on planet earth than the invention of fire. It's as dramatic as going from the spoken word to written word."

Christians should learn to use on-line computer services and videos as containers for the living water, Sweet said.

Today's young people can access all kinds of information without an authority figure presenting it to them, Sweet said. Yet they need mature Christians to demonstrate what to do with that information.

Miller also said non-Christians need to see Christians apply their faith to daily situations. "We can't argue this lost generation into Jesus."

Churches also should follow the medical community's trend of emphasizing wellness -- prevent disease rather than treating symptoms later. "The Sermon on the Mount is a prescription for healthy living. We should stop people from getting sick."

Spiritual health is more important than numerical growth, Sweet said. "Numbers are important, but numbers are tricky. Growth is meaningless as an overall measure of well-doing."

While presenting the gospel in today's culture, Miller said dogma must come last. Christian convictions and absolutes must be taught, he said, but they should not be the church's first approach to non-Christians.

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Chapman: Evangelism is priority  
in convention restructuring

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press  
12/05/95

JACKSON, Wyo. (BP)--Telling others about Jesus Christ is the priority of the Southern Baptist Convention restructuring, Morris Chapman told evangelism leaders from across the nation Nov. 30.

"Evangelization is its priority, not one of its priorities," said the SBC Executive Committee president. "The heartbeat of Southern Baptists, and that is evangelism, must drive it all."

Messengers to the 1995 SBC annual meeting approved a proposal to reduce the number of Southern Baptist agencies from 19 to 12. The plan will combine the Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission and the Radio and Television Commission into a new organization to be called the North American Mission Board. The reorganization process is to be implemented by 1997.

The recommended structure of the North American Mission Board includes evangelization as one of three major divisions, Chapman noted. The emphasis on evangelism didn't happen accidentally, he said.

Chapman called the reorganization "visionary reality," saying it involves seeing by faith and being led by God's Spirit to make the vision a reality. Chapman named six other steps for the SBC to remain a viable denomination:

1) Do less and be more. "We attempt to do before we become," he said. "Scripture is heavily weighted in becoming who we are in Christ and letting our ministry flow from that."

2) Be less self-serving and more sacrificial.

3) Aim less for personal goals and more for God's glory.

4) Do less programming and more praying.

5) Focus less on religion and more on relationships.

6) Envision the power of God and pray for God to demonstrate his power.

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**Campus Crusade leader  
urges revival preparation**

JACKSON, Wyo. (BP)--Southern Baptists should prepare for revival because "the greatest spiritual awakening of the century has begun," said the founder of one of the nation's largest Christian student movements.

Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, spoke to evangelism leaders from across the nation Dec. 1. Revival will occur when millions of Christians take the gospel to their friends, family and neighbors, he said.

Bright challenged leaders to take seven steps to prepare for revival:

1) Help church members understand the assurance of their salvation. As many as half the people who attend church regularly are not sure they are Christians, Bright said. They must be certain of their salvation before they will witness to and disciple others.

2) Teach Christians to deal with sin and temptation. Christians who harbor inequity in their hearts will hinder revival, he said.

3) Teach Christians about the Holy Spirit, including how to live in the power of his presence and how to pray and witness through his strength. Also, Christians must be open to the brokenness caused by the Holy Spirit's conviction, he said.

4) Train Christians to witness in simple terms anyone can understand. "Teach them what to say, how to say it and when to say it."

5) Fast and pray for souls and for revival. Fasting and praying help Christians meet the conditions of God's promise to heal the land when his people humble themselves and pray, Bright said.

6) Go and witness. "If we allow Jesus to live through us, it will be an effortless kind of witnessing."

7) "Expect God to use us. Who is more interested in the lost than he?"

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**Missionary says seeking lost  
involves 'seek, scratch, start' By Sarah Zimmerman**

**Baptist Press  
12/05/95**

JACKSON, Wyo. (BP)--Seeking lost people, "scratching where people itch" and starting churches are three ways to effectively share the gospel, a foreign missionary told Southern Baptist evangelism leaders from across the United States.

Seeking the lost must be priority, said Wade Akins, who serves in Brazil. "If we're not careful, we'll let programs and administration totally consume us . . . . We denominational workers face the danger of becoming religious professionals. God is looking for messengers who will do the work of an evangelist, not sit in an office planning meetings, answering phones or dictating letters. We have to be personally involved in evangelism and let nothing get in our way."

Akins uses the "Jesus" movie to present the gospel throughout Brazil, using a portable screen and generator. Produced by Campus Crusade for Christ, the film about the life of Christ has been shown in 217 countries and is available in more than 300 languages. The movie, which has been used extensively in other countries, is beginning to be used more in the United States as an outreach tool.

"Scratching where people itch" is the phrase Akins gave ministry-based evangelism. Historically Southern Baptists have focused on ministry or evangelism, but they should not be separated, Akins said. "If you take love out of the gospel, you have nothing."

As an example, Akins' wife, Barbara, told of using world hunger funds to minister to Brazilians whose homes were destroyed by a flood. Feeding hungry people gave local churches numerous opportunities to share Christ, she said.

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Starting churches also impacts a community for the gospel, Akins said, but no country has enough preachers to start churches in every community. In Brazil Akins trained 40 laymen and women who started 63 churches in two years. His goal is to train 10,000 Brazilian laypeople to start 2,500 churches by the year 2000. He recruits volunteers from the United States to help new churches evangelize the area. He also asks volunteers to buy materials and build concrete chapels for the new churches. Using a plan developed by U.S. laymen, one group can build a chapel for 175 people in eight days, Akins said.

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Money's 'best buys'  
drops Samford, Baylor

By Carrie L. Brown

Baptist Press  
12/05/95

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Money magazine has dropped Samford University and Baylor University from its "best buys" list because of their emphasis on religion.

Each year Money magazine evaluates the nation's colleges and universities to determine which schools offer the top education values. Last year Money ranked Samford 41st and Baylor 34th on its list of "best buy" schools. But this year Samford and Baylor were dropped from the list.

The rankings appeared in the 1996 edition of the personal-finance monthly's special "Money Guide: Your Best College Buys Now."

According to the magazine, the "rankings include only schools whose curriculum and campus life make students of any (or no) faith feel welcome." The article also stated that the magazine excluded:

- colleges whose primary purpose is to turn out members of the clergy;
- colleges that require an affirmation of faith from students;
- colleges that aspire to graduate students with a particular world theological view;
- colleges where the curriculum or extracurricular activities significantly reflect the ideology of a specific faith; and
- colleges where religious study of any nature, even though it may not be restricted to one faith, is a significant academic requirement.

This year, the magazine determined the universities' religion-related requirements made them ineligible.

Jillian Kasky, a Money reporter who worked on the rankings, explained that the criteria for inclusion on the list had not changed.

"The criteria have always been the same, but the research had never been done thoroughly," Kasky said. "This year, we went through over 1,400 catalogs and applied the definition to all the schools.

"We're not saying, 'Don't take religion,'" Kasky said. "But any school that requires classes that teach religion from one perspective or mind-set were excluded."

Kasky said that in previous years inclusion on the list has depended on who spoke to whom about requirements at the school. This meant that a school might make it one year but not make it the next. In order to make sure that all schools were given equal consideration, Money ordered each university's catalog and used the catalog to determine the school's academic requirements.

Samford requires all undergraduate students to complete 64 chapel credits in order to graduate. Samford's public relations director, William A. Nunnelley, said that the chapel requirements can be met through a broad range of activities, including convocations, concerts, lectures and community service programs. Students also are required to take Old Testament and New Testament classes.

At Baylor, two semesters of two-day-a-week "chapel forum" are required for graduation, except for entering students age 25 and above, along with Old and New Testament survey courses in most degree programs.

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In a statement released after Monday published its 1996 list, Samford President Thomas E. Corts said that although Samford has always been grounded in its own faith tradition, the university has been open to persons from all religious faiths and has served persons from many religions and no religion.

"Obviously, a magazine has the right to establish its standards excluding faith-related institutions, just as surely as Samford can choose to be a place of religious conviction," Corts said.

"However, we believe that faith-related institutions deserve consideration on their merits, whatever their religious connection," he said. Samford had been on Money's list the past four years.

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Brown is a correspondent for The Alabama Baptist newsjournal. Art Toalston contributed to this story.

His focus is revitalizing  
churches with 150 or less

By Lonnie Wilkey

Baptist Press  
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HARRIMAN, Tenn. (BP)--J. William Bargiol has seen numerous church growth plans during his 40 years of ministry, including the last 20 years as a director of missions.

But most of the programs, while good, are geared directly toward bigger churches, said Bargiol, of the Big Emory Baptist Association, Harriman, Tenn.

Though they can be "adapted" for smaller churches, Bargiol felt a program was needed specifically for smaller churches of less than 150 members.

To fill the void, Bargiol published "Church Alive: Creating a New Dream," a simplified planning process for small churches.

The skeleton for formatting the materials was taken in large part from the book "To Dream Again," written by Robert Dale and published by Broadman Press in 1981, Bargiol said.

Added to that were "bits and pieces" from a mass of printed materials, conferences, workshops, training events and retreats "which span the years," he said.

The "Church Alive" program is a simple four-night (two hours per night) program which "requires no extensive professional training and produces immediate results," Bargiol said.

"The program has proven to be especially useful in the older small- and medium-size congregations which make up the bulk of Southern Baptist life," he said.

After going through the four-night program, church members have in hand ministry needs they've prioritized and grouped into four time frames: six months, one year, two years and three years.

"The intent of the program is to enable a congregation to focus on their present situation and circumstances and make deliberate plans and commitments for the next one to three years," Bargiol explained. It is "intended to create new life in and a new vision for small churches."

Bargiol summarized six strengths of the program:

- 1) It is simple and easy to understand.
- 2) The program is flexible and can be used in churches of any size and circumstance.
- 3) It is inexpensive. There are no costly books and other materials to purchase.
- 4) The program is short and quick.
- 5) The program produces results directly related to the needs of the church.
- 6) The program is spiritually grounded and rooted in the biblical concept of the church.

Bargiol's "Church Alive" program is a good plan for a small church to do some strategy planning, affirmed Ray Gilder, bivocational ministries director for the Tennessee Baptist Convention and bivocational pastor of Gath Baptist Church, McMinnville, which recently went through the program.

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The plan presents an "opportunity to involve more people in doing things," Gilder said. "It has great potential and I'm encouraging directors of missions to use it as a tool to help small churches do strategic planning."

A pastor in Big Emory Baptist Association whose church has been in the program for one year is high on the "Church Alive" method.

"The program, while simple and focused, is the best thing I know to create a new vitality and life in a small, stagnated church," said Mark Caldwell, pastor of Union Baptist Church, Wartburg.

Persons interested in obtaining more information about Bargiol's program can call (423) 882-6446.

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Program helped congregation  
meet 20-plus goals in a year

By Lonnie Wilkey

Baptist Press  
12/05/95

WARTBURG, Tenn. (BP)--Mark Caldwell, pastor of Union Baptist Church, Wartburg, Tenn., is a firm believer in Bill Bargiol's "Church Alive: Creating a New Dream" program.

In one year, Caldwell has seen remarkable progress at the 149-year-old church which voted to begin the program about the same time he accepted the pastorate last year.

The church did a self-analysis, Caldwell said. They looked at themselves and did a brainstorming and prioritizing process covering a three-year period, the pastor noted.

Union's priority list included 40 ministry needs, of which they felt 22 could be done the first year, Caldwell said.

At the end of the year, they went over the list and found they had actually accomplished 23 projects.

What's more, the members accomplished numerous other things not on the original list as well, Caldwell said.

One example, Caldwell cited, was a parking lot. At first the church didn't think they needed one, but when more people began coming, they responded and added more parking spaces.

Projects ranged from simple but important needs, such as controlling fan noise to improving the nursery/preschool area and making plans to build a family life/educational building.

Also, the church began a tape ministry for shut-ins and developed an extensive outreach program through its Sunday school classes.

"Sunday school enrollment is up from 114 to 195 and many people have been saved and baptized," Caldwell said. "Outreach for Vacation Bible School resulted in an increase from 53 last year to 191 at this year's school."

One year ago, the church did not offer discipleship training classes. They now have 90 in discipleship training each week.

In addition, the church's missions offerings nearly doubled, from \$5,900 to \$10,500 and the church budget and receipts doubled, said Caldwell, who entered the pastorate after giving up a successful banking career and serving as bivocational youth minister at Black Oak Baptist Church, Clinton, Tenn.

From his banking experience, Caldwell noted there were goals and purposes, which Union did not have. The congregation just came three times a week for church, he said.

The church also discovered it had "plateaued," and the program gave it a new vision and a "common goal we could all see," he said.

One of the most important benefits of the program "has been the number of people involved. We have had people working in the church, volunteering for positions or jobs that have never served in church before," Caldwell said. "And God has blessed us through each one."

Union does not have committees; instead, they have "dream teams," usually with four to five operating at once, he said.

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"Our people got excited when they saw something accomplished from start to finish. As they work d, they made dreams come true, and God has blessed."

There are some problems connected with the "Church Alive" program, Caldwell admitted.

One is administration. "Someone has to administer it for it to work," said Caldwell, who has served in that role for Union.

Bargiol, Big Emory Baptist Association director of missions who developed the program, recommends that someone other than the pastor serve as administrator.

Another real problem, although it has been a pleasant one, has been rapid growth, Caldwell said.

"We've had so much growth that we do not have enough teachers. We're trying to train new teachers as fast as we can," he said.

In reviewing the year for the congregation, Caldwell took note of all that was accomplished but noted the church is not finished. "In the coming year, many of these dreams will continue and many more dreams will come about as long as we focus on the work that God has called us to do -- sharing the gospel with the world."

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Tribe leaders' partnership  
with local Baptists blossoms

By John D. Pierce

Baptist Press  
12/05/95

WHIGHAM, Ga. (BP)--When a caller to the McCormick house asks to speak to the chief, the likely response is: "Which one?" Nealie McCormick is chief of police for the city of Pelham and his wife, Vonnie, serves as chief of the Lower Muskogee Creek Indian Tribe.

In 1972 the tribe purchased 78 acres of property in Grady County, Ga., including swampland, to develop as the Tama Tribal Town. The land, purchased from Creek descendants, now contains an administrative center, the ceremonial square and simple housing for about 35 residents. The tribe officially numbers more than 2,000, with many others still unregistered. Many of the Muskogeas would like to eventually move into the community, according to their chief.

Language and cultural losses due to assimilation, years of oppression and discrimination, as well as unsuccessful attempts at formal recognition of the tribe, would seem to be enough to create bitterness and animosity.

But you'll not find that in the McCormicks.

They are hard-working, yet good-humored, Christians who heartily embrace their Indian heritage and seek to improve the quality of life for fellow Muskogeas. It is often an uphill battle through both slow-changing attitudes and legislation. Just last year, Vonnie McCormick, the only female Indian chief in Georgia, was among the Native American leaders who met with President Clinton to discuss issues of education, job skills and housing.

For more than two decades, she has worked for federal recognition of the Lower Muskogeas. Her desire is for the tribe to qualify for housing opportunities which would allow Tama Town to further develop. As she nears the end of her four-year term as chief, with leanings towards a re-election bid, McCormick appears focused and positive about the future of the Muskogeas. She envisions the day when the now-sparse landscape will be a vibrant community of individual homes, housing units for the elderly and an on-site source of employment.

But first she wants a church.

"Next year you're going to see a church (building) out here," McCormick said on a cool, bright Sunday afternoon. "God has opened a lot of doors."

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Among the divinely opened doors is the willingness of Roger Ezell, director of missions for the Grady County Baptist Association, to get involved. With the association's support, Ezell began leading twice-monthly worship services last January in the tribal town's community building. The invitation to lead the new congregation came as a result of an earlier friendship with the McCormicks developed while Ezell was serving First Baptist Church, Pelham, in neighboring Mitchell County.

Ezell knew little about the Muskogees before agreeing to lead worship and expected the group, rightly so, to be suspicious of outside involvement. However, the soft-spoken minister has been warmly embraced by the Muskogee congregation.

"I'm going out there because they have asked us to help them establish a church," Ezell said. "You have to build trust. There are so many bridges to build and walls to tear down.

"Working with this group is totally different," he added, noting the church must reflect the culture of the Muskogee Creeks.

The Creeks were forcibly removed from their lands a century and a half ago by federal forces. While most were relocated to reservations in Oklahoma, a remnant remained in southwest Georgia. Some assimilated themselves into nearby communities while others went into hiding in the swampland around Attapulcus, near the Florida line. Descendants of these remaining Muskogees were forbidden by state law to organize and acknowledge their ancestry for many years, even well after federal treaties were signed to the contrary.

For many descendants, the most recent years have been a time of rediscovering lineage and heritage. Leaders of the tribal town now offer classes in the language and customs of the Muskogees. Pow-wows -- festival events with exhibits and dance competitions -- bring in large crowds of visitors to learn about Indian traditions. Additionally, McCormick regularly hosts groups of school children who visit the community to learn of the Muskogee culture.

Traditional Creek ceremonies are conducted five times a year in the "town square." Volunteers from local Baptist churches recently helped rebuild some of the structures of the square which were damaged by storms. It was a well-received act, according to the chief, "because they knew it was important to us."

A challenge to developing a church in the tribal community is finding the proper way of embracing the ancient culture while being faithful to Christian teachings. The task is made easier by Christian leadership among the Muskogees. McCormick sees the revelation of Christ as consistent with the early Creek understanding of one God, known to her earlier ancestors as "Esaugeta Emissee, the giver and taker of the breath of life."

Both Nealie and Vonnie McCormick were raised with strong understandings of their heritage. Nealie's father, Neal "Tall Pine" McCormick, now 86, was a pioneer in Indian country music. He originated the electric steel guitar from parts of an old Ford and gave the late singer-songwriter Hank Williams his first job as a musician.

The McCormicks are unwilling to be sidetracked by peripheral issues like terminology. "We prefer to be called Muskogees," Vonnie said. However, they freely use the term "Indian" as well.

What about the issue of sports teams with Native American names? "It is nothing but a game," Nealie responded. "At least they were thinking about us," he said with a smile. "And at least they have a team called the Cowboys, too!" he added, demonstrating his wife's earlier assertion that most Creeks have a tremendous sense of humor.

Unlike the McCormicks, Mike and Karen Mathers have just recently begun uncovering their Muskogee roots. While leading "Experiencing God" discipleship programs at Providence Baptist Church in Whigham, Ga., the Mathers sensed that God was calling them to a special ministry.

"I began to think about this place out here (Tama Town)," Karen recalled. "(Mike) had always been told that he had Creek heritage. The (Muskogee) people began to come to my mind, and I began to pray about it. I told Mike, 'I believe God is calling us out there.' We prayed about it together."

One Wednesday evening, Providence pastor David Crawford, a member of the associational missions committee, read a letter from Ezell to the congregation concerning the need for help with the Muskogee church. Karen recalled her prayer of response: "Oh, that's what you (God) were up too!" The Mathers shared their calling with their pastor and the director of missions. "We just wept because we knew that God had been working on both ends," Ezell said.

Attendance at the worship services varies from a handful to more than 50 as some travel from as far away as Tallahassee, Fla. Five persons officially joined the Tama Community Church when membership was opened a few weeks ago. Others are expected to join soon. Ezell and Grady County Baptists are careful not to dictate their methods to the congregation.

"It is my responsibility to go and preach the gospel, not to make them Southern Baptists," Ezell explained, adding that Baptists have many resources and that he would be proud if they chose to be so.

In addition to the local association, one resource the congregation has already discovered is fellow Muskogee Christians. A missions team from the Muskogee Seminole Baptist Association in Oklahoma came this fall to lead the church in a revival. The visiting group gave testimonies, preached and taught songs in their native language. The Tama congregation is now using hymn books which allow them to sing in both English and in the Muskogee language.

While some Indian leadership in Oklahoma is not eager to embrace Muskogees in the east, that was not the case with the mission team. Ezell described the bonding among fellow Muskogee Christians from the east and west as "a reuniting of family."

Likewise, appreciation of Ezell among the Muskogee people was evidenced recently when one member offered to make him a traditional ribbon shirt to wear while he was leading worship. McCormick was impressed by the unexpected act of acceptance. "They just don't do that (for non-Indians)," she said approvingly. "They have begun to look at Roger as their pastor."

McCormick insisted the future is too important to be sacrificed through holding grudges. "It's easy to get mad, but you don't build bridges that way," she said.

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Church, pastor confront  
change to reach community

By David Winfrey

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12/05/95

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (BP)--In 1991, interim pastor Dale Harlan told an aging and dwindling urban church it had three choices: move, die or change.

Commonwealth Baptist was sitting in the middle of a racially changing community when the Anglo congregation chose the toughest of its options and Harlan as its full-time pastor.

Since then, members have changed the church name and expanded their ministries and outreach in a Charlotte, N.C., neighborhood with which they have less in common each day. Along the way, Harlan says, he's learned something about refocusing a congregation and breaking traditions to meet the mission field's needs.

"I find people are so afraid of change. It's almost a dirty word," says Harlan, a former home missionary to Iowa.

In situations like Commonwealth's, inflexibility can be fatal, he says. "A church has an innate ability to hang on for years and years and years and dwindle and let the life literally drain out of it," he says. "The uniqueness of what we're doing is trying to lead a traditional church to be different and to change its traditions and see outside the fortress."

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When constituted in the 1950s, Commonwealth Baptist was on the fringe of metropolitan Charlotte. Today, the sanctuary sits nine miles inside the city limits. "We are surrounded on three sides by apartments," Harlan says. "We (the community) are becoming very rapidly African American, Southeast Asian and Hispanic."

Attendance had risen to 350 during the late '70s, but had fallen to about 100 by 1991.

Harlan was director of church starts for Charlotte's Mecklenburg Baptist Association when he agreed to serve as interim pastor. While there, he led them in a Home Mission Board study for churches in changing communities.

The program, Project Assistance for Churches in Transition, "helped the people become aware of what was happening in their community and gave them an arena to talk about it."

After Harlan became the church's full-time pastor, the next change was in name. The church had moved two blocks from Commonwealth Avenue but kept the name, confusing anyone looking for the building. "Even the fire trucks couldn't find us."

In 1993, members voted overwhelmingly to rename the church Briar Creek Road Baptist. Harlan calls that significant. "If they were willing to change their name, they were willing to allow us to do whatever needed to be done."

Since then other moves were made toward ministering in the area. Among them:

-- The church recreation building was refocused from inreach to outreach. As a community center, about 75 percent of those using it come from outside the church, says Mike Henley, minister of family life and youth. "There's no ethnic barrier anymore. It's really neat to see it happen."

-- African American Debra Hayes was added to the staff to direct ministries for 5,000 neighboring apartment dwellers. She says her goal is to affect change from inside the community -- not to come in once a week with a church bus for Sunday worship.

"I did a survey with all the apartment managers and asked, 'What can we do to help you?' Their response was, 'We're tired of Christians and churches coming in here for a week during the summer and during Christmas. Where are you the other times of the year?'" Hayes says she counsels 10 families a day, from their spiritual needs to grocery needs. "I love putting people to work," she says.

-- Two ministries for neighborhood assistance and crime victim advocacy were brought into the church. Members also added a food bank and clothing closet. "We minister to more people in the week than we'll have here on Sunday," Harlan says.

-- Briar Creek Road Baptist linked with two suburban churches offering financial and volunteer help. Both are vital for a congregation with aging members, Harlan says. "We need those churches and they need us for a place to live out their calling."

Harlan says he often asked pastors to make changes when he worked for the association, but he never understood the difficulty until he led a congregation through it.

"One of the places that people do not want to change ... is the church," he says. "But they forget that the church is not the consistent thing in their life. It's Christ."

One of the lessons Harlan says he's learned is the need to be patient. "You've got to earn your right to be pastor before you can lead them to change." Others, he said, are:

-- knowing God's vision for the church and reminding the members. "You have to continually share what God is doing and what God is going to do," Harlan says. "Sometimes, when you're in the middle of it, you lose sight of it."

-- praying a lot. The church now uses its Wednesday evening service as a true prayer meeting, with a short devotional and members praying in small groups for 20 to 30 minutes.

-- realizing some people will never accept change. "That's a hard lesson," he says. "It's OK if they don't change, but don't let it inhibit the church from moving forward.

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(BP) photo of Harlan and Hayes (vertical) mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press.

Church is ally to parents  
of kids with special needs

By Laurie A. Lattimore

Baptist Press  
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INDIAN SPRINGS, Ala. (BP)--A four-hour break from the kids one Friday night a month doesn't seem like much, but for many parents of children with special needs, this church's "Ministry of Respite Care" is an important and often-rare four hours.

First Baptist Church, Indian Springs, Ala., offers free care for children of special needs and their siblings from 6 to 10 p.m. the third Friday of every month. Four teams of eight to 10 church members have been trained to work with special-needs children, and each team is coordinated by someone with a medical background. One team volunteers each month to spend time with the children and their siblings.

"This is great," said Cindy Houtz, mother of Elizabeth, who has special needs. "It relieves some of the stress. There is always stress, but this is a great break."

David Freeman, pastor of the Indian Springs church, started the program shortly after moving back to Alabama four years ago from Washington, D.C.

Freeman and his wife, Kelley, have a 6-year-old daughter who is mildly mentally retarded. Through the Freemans' interaction in support groups, they realized churches were not doing much to reach out to families of children with special needs. "We saw a great need for this, and it was a need that wasn't being addressed," Kelley Freeman said. Her husband added, "This has become our niche."

In addition to the Friday night respite program, Indian Springs has trained volunteers available to take the children to Sunday school so that their parents can attend services. Often parents of children with special needs will alternate going to church or not go at all so they can take care of their child, the Freemans said. Most families just stay home because churches are not able to take care of their children while they attend Sunday school and worship, David Freeman said.

"Churches as a whole are lacking greatly in their responsibility to this need," he said.

Freeman said about 30 children from the Birmingham area have participated at one time or another in the past two years. Between 10 and 20 children usually come each month. Each child is registered, and a file with special medical information is kept for care instructions and in case of emergencies. The church takes reservations for the Friday night event on the previous Monday. Freeman said there have been times they have had to turn people away because so many want to participate.

Vicki and Hunter Barton usually go to dinner and a movie after they drop off Dustin and Bailey. Dustin has cerebral palsy and is legally blind. "It is a nice time to get away. It is hard to get a baby-sitter for a handicapped child, because people are scared," Vicki Barton said. The fact that the church also takes care of siblings is a great benefit, the Bartons said, so they have time alone to do whatever they want.

Kristi Barnett often drops off her three children -- two of whom have special needs -- and finishes things around the house. "This is wonderful. I enjoy the quiet time," she said.

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Steve Norton enjoys the four hours to himself but probably not as much as his sons, Bradley and Austin, enjoy going to the church. Norton said Austin often gets to spend the night with other friends or have them over. But Bradley, who is mentally retarded, doesn't have the opportunity to do that.

"This is like Bradley's 'spending the night.' He loves it," Norton said as Bradley raced by him in the church hallway. "This is a real good program. We're thankful it is available."

The church volunteers also are thankful for it. Leigh Hudon, volunteer since the program started two years ago, said the four hours is a valuable thing to give parents of special needs children. A local teacher, Hudon knows what it is like to work with these children for a few hours a day. "I always wondered how parents did it."

Hudon added that society has been slowly learning to integrate special needs people into the mainstream, and churches need to do the same. The church's respite care ministry is a step toward that goal. "It is really a small sacrifice to do this two times a year," she said. "You always feel good after you leave because you have given someone the greatest gift. You are saying, 'I care for you and there is a place for you at this church.'"

John Ward and his 8-year-old daughter, Jennifer, also have been volunteer team members since the program started. When Ward wasn't playing on the floor with the young ones, he was making laps around the church with the "walkers," the children who like to just walk around for four hours.

"I like the kids and the joy of seeing the smiles on their faces when they are here," he said, adding he also likes "getting to be a kid again."

Jennifer comes every time her dad is scheduled because she has made friends with many of the children. "It is pretty fun, and I think it is a good thing that they can come here and fit in with the church," she said.

Ward said he likes being a part of a church program that is more than worth the effort. "These parents deserve this," he said. "We know the parents are going to appreciate this program, but they deserve it!"

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