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Falwell gains influence in SBC
with convention's rightward swing

By Mark Wingfield

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Independent Baptist Jerry Falwell has flooded the mailboxes of Southern Baptist pastors this summer, leading some to question anew whether Falwell intends to deliver himself into the Southern Baptist Convention as well.

As the SBC has swung to the right in the last 15 years, Baptist watchers frequently have asked whether the SBC and the fundamentalist televangelist eventually will find themselves standing in exactly the same camp.

Falwell has said on several occasions that he has no intention of becoming a Southern Baptist. But some of the SBC's new conservative leaders have continued to court Falwell and lend their support to his ministries. Although Falwell still has not affiliated with the SBC, his associations with Southern Baptists have continued to multiply.

The latest evidence of this arrived in the mailboxes of some Southern Baptist pastors this summer. Pastors in at least four states -- Kentucky, Texas, Florida and Virginia -- report having received two unsolicited mailings from Falwell in May and June.

The first was a 20-page newspaper called the Liberty Flame. It featured articles on religion and politics, mixed with promotion of Falwell's Liberty University. Southern Baptists highlighted in the articles included then-SBC President Ed Young, evangelist Rick Gage and SBC seminary president Paige Patterson.

The back page of the newspaper showed photographs and names of Liberty University's board of trustees. Of 32 trustees, eight are prominent Southern Baptists: evangelist Freddie Gage; Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas; Richard Lee, pastor of Rehobeth Baptist Church in Atlanta; James Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in the Atlanta suburb of Snellville; evangelist and former SBC President Bailey Smith; Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla.; Ike Reighard, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ga.; and Beverly LaHaye, an author/lecturer and member of Montrose Baptist Church in Rockville, Md.

The newspaper was followed a month later by a direct-mail piece promoting Falwell's "Super Conference" to be held in Lynchburg in October.

Eight of 12 key speakers at that event are prominent Southern Baptists: O.S. Hawkins and his wife, Susan; Bailey Smith and his wife, Sandy; Ed Young and his wife, Jo Beth; and Rick Warren and his wife, Kay. Hawkins is pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas; Young is pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston; and Warren is pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Mission Viejo, Calif.

Mark Smith, editor of the Liberty Flame, said the newspaper is a new publication of Falwell's ministries, with the first issue published in April 1994.

But Smith said he is "not sure who all receives it."

The paper is mailed out periodically "to the same audience," which he said he believes is primarily Falwell donors, some pastors, parents of Liberty students, Liberty alumni and subscribers to Falwell's now-defunct "Fundamentalist Journal." The total mailing list is about 75,000 people, he said.

Falwell spokesman Mark DeMoss confirmed the trend toward greater Southern Baptist participation in Falwell-sponsored programs, but said it is "not terribly new" although it "may seem more apparent" now. DeMoss said a number of Falwell's "closest personal friends would be Southern Baptist pastors."

"Jerry Falwell has enjoyed for a number of years a great relationship with not so much the Southern Baptist Convention but with many Southern Baptists," DeMoss said. "He has added Southern Baptists to the university trustee board in significant numbers. He has for a good many years been invited to speak in Southern Baptist pulpits and has reciprocated with having many Southern Baptists either at Thomas Road Baptist Church or at Liberty University."

For example, W.A. Criswell, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and the patriarch of SBC conservatives, is the only person to deliver more than one commencement address at Liberty University, DeMoss said. Criswell has spoken at three university commencements.

One of Falwell's closest friends among the SBC's new leaders is Paige Patterson, now president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. When Patterson was in trouble with trustees of his former employer, Criswell College in Dallas, in 1991, Falwell offered for Patterson to become president of Liberty University. Patterson declined.

Another friend is Reighard, who invited Falwell to speak to this summer's Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference in Orlando, Fla. At that gathering, Falwell praised the "spiritual and theological restoration" of the SBC but said he had no plans to join the convention.

"Our friendship is based on what we believe and what we're trying to accomplish," he said in an interview in Orlando. Although a more formal merger has not received his "serious consideration," that's not to say it couldn't happen, he explained. Later that night, Falwell was hosted at a reception attended by top SBC leaders.

Falwell previously attended an SBC annual meeting in Las Vegas in 1989, when he addressed the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists.

This summer's mass mailing of the Liberty Flame to thousands of Southern Baptist pastors is not the first time Falwell has mailed a message to Southern Baptists. In 1983, he mailed his Fundamentalist Journal to Southern Baptist churches -- addressed to "Chairman of Deacons."

Two years later, one month before the 1985 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Dallas, Falwell mailed the Journal to thousands of SBC churches. The Dallas SBC, with a record attendance of 45,519 messengers, was a pivotal contest between moderates and conservatives vying for control of their denomination.

Falwell also has spoken "at a number of state Baptist conventions or pastors' conferences," DeMoss reported.

Falwell has appeared regularly on special programs -- particularly building dedications -- at Southern Baptist megachurches in recent years.

He has spoken twice at First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga., where Liberty trustee James Merritt is pastor. Merritt is an up-and-coming young conservative leader who at one time was offered the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Dallas.

In October 1992, Falwell shared the Snellville podium with Oliver North, who then was speaking across

America in an attempt to raise \$5 million for legal expenses incurred when he was charged with lying to Congress about the Iran-Contra affair.

Falwell also has spoken at Rehobeth Baptist Church in Atlanta, his second appearance at the church where Richard Lee is pastor. Lee served on the board of the PTL television ministry when Falwell took over in the aftermath of Jim Bakker's fall from grace. Lee now serves as a trustee of Liberty University.

Last year, Falwell spoke at Montrose Baptist Church in Rockville, Md., in what was billed as a "bridge-building" conference between Southern Baptists and independent Baptists. "This may be the beginning of a lot of cooperation, and a lot of bridges will be built" Montrose Pastor Bob Crowley said at the time.

Most recently, Falwell preached Aug. 7 at Colonial Heights Baptist Church in Colonial Heights, Va., as part of a dedication for a new 1,200-seat sanctuary. The church's pastor, Terry Harper, a prominent conservative leader in Virginia, said he would be pleased if the overtures between Falwell and SBC conservatives resulted in Falwell joining the SBC. But Harper said he doubts that will happen.

"I think he's very encouraged by the conservative turn we've seen in the convention," Harper said. "We talked a little about that in our time before the service. He's very encouraged by Southeastern Seminary."

Harper said he believes Falwell "feels a kinship with the theological position of so many of our leaders, and he wants to be a source of encouragement."

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Falwell moving toward SBC
but may join, observers say

By Mark Wingfield

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Whether Jerry Falwell remains a well-liked but distant relative to the Southern Baptist Convention or moves into the family manor could be an indicator of the SBC's future, some Baptists believe.

"I think he would be a wonderful help to us if he ever decided he wanted to affiliate with our convention," said Terry Harper, pastor of Colonial Heights Baptist Church in Colonial Heights, Va. "Dr. Falwell has done as much or more than any man alive today to influence our nation for morality. He has set a standard and pace which has had some influence on us in the Southern Baptist Convention."

"I expect Jerry Falwell to be president of the SBC before he dies," predicted Baptist historian Walter Shurden of Mercer University. As conservatives "continue to push the SBC to the edge of American religious life," he said, the denomination will become an attractive haven for Falwell.

That could have tragic consequences for the SBC, some observers said.

"The day Jerry Falwell comes into the Southern Baptist Convention, you will see the split," said a former Lynchburg-area pastor who asked not to be identified. "A lot of middle-of-the-road people who have hung in will not take that," said the pastor, who himself has adopted a centrist stance.

"My opinion is that the smartest people in the convention who are still in power understand that," he said. "He's a cousin you want to kiss but you don't want to bring home."

However, Falwell's stature among Southern Baptist pastors apparently has been on the rise since the early 1980s.

James Guth, professor of political science at Furman University, has surveyed Southern Baptist pastors in every presidential election year since 1980. In 1980, 1984 and 1988, he asked the pastors specifically about Falwell. Over the course of that time, Southern Baptist clergy became "distinctively more positive toward Falwell," he reported.

Southern Baptist attitudes about Falwell pretty much fall along party lines, Guth said. "Conservatives were often quite positive toward Falwell and thought he ought to be a Southern Baptist. ... Moderates, of course, and

centrist conservatives were more suspicious toward him."

Nick Habel, a 75-year-old retired Baptist pastor from the Lynchburg area who has been at odds with both Falwell and the SBC's conservative swing, said the distance has indeed narrowed between the famed preacher and the SBC. But it's the SBC that has done all the moving, Habel said.

"He (Falwell) has stood where he's always been, and Southern Baptists have sort of cut the ground out of where we used to be," he said.

Moderates have accused Falwell of playing a behind-the-scenes role in the conservative rise to power in the SBC. Both Falwell and his Southern Baptist friends vigorously have denied that. In a 1989 interview with the Houston Post, Falwell declared, "I have never been involved with the internal politics of the Southern Baptist Convention."

And then-SBC President Jerry Vines asserted he and Falwell were just good friends. "He's never tried to insert himself in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention," Vines told the Post. "It's been clearly stated he has no intention of ever joining the Southern Baptist Convention. That's fine with me. I don't think you have to affiliate in order to associate."

Many friends and foes say Falwell would have little to gain by coming into the SBC.

Georgia pastor Ike Reighard, who invited Falwell to speak to the SBC Pastors' Conference this summer, summed up the feelings of many Falwell admirers when he said, "He's so much bigger than the SBC."

But others, particularly Falwell foes and SBC moderates, take a different view and suggest several reasons a Falwell-SBC merger might become beneficial to both parties. These theories generally revolve around the tough financial times that have afflicted both Falwell and the SBC in recent years.

"Many of us have suspected that as the SBC looked for new constituencies, they might turn to segments of the independent Baptist tradition," said church historian Bill Leonard, chair of the religion department at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

And several leaders among SBC conservatives readily admit they think Falwell's image could be an asset to the SBC in some circles. Such an endorsement could open doors to new constituencies for SBC schools, missions and literature.

On Falwell's side, some observers say, the benefits of an alliance would be a further enhanced stature for Falwell and more support for his various ministries, which for years have skated on the edge of financial disaster.

From 1979 to 1989, Falwell's Moral Majority is believed to have brought in donations of \$69 million from 6 million people. But the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s hurt Falwell, even though he was not among those who fell from grace.

Contributions to all of Falwell's ministries, including the Moral Majority, slipped from \$135 million in 1986 to below \$100 million in 1987, according to a report in the Lexington Herald-Leader. His organizations subsequently failed to make payments on some bonds, prompting groups of investors -- including some mom-and-pop bondholders -- to threaten to foreclose on Falwell's ministries.

Things worsened in 1993 when "The Old-Time Gospel Hour" agreed to pay \$50,000 in back taxes for what the IRS declared improper political activities in 1986 and 1987. By that time, Falwell's debts reportedly had reached \$37.6 million at "The Old-Time Gospel Hour" and \$73 million at Liberty University.

As recently as June 1994, Falwell said the finances of his ministries still were not on solid footing.

"We're still poor, and our finances are tight," he said in an article published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. "We're tightening the belt and doing all things that are prudent."

Falwell reported that Liberty University had a \$7 million operating deficit at the end of 1993.

And last month, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools put Liberty University's academic accreditation on "warning" status because of its financial problems, according to the Times-Dispatch.

Beyond finances, another asset to Falwell of merger could be opening new markets for his school's graduates to be hired.

"The only reason I can imagine for Jerry Falwell to be a part of the SBC is to find a place for his boys to preach," said one former Lynchburg-area pastor.

Despite these assertions, Falwell's spokesman and friends don't expect to see Falwell come into the SBC.

DeMoss likening Falwell's relationship to the SBC as being "a cheerleader on the side and nothing more." "He's a lifelong independent, and my prediction is that as long as he can enjoy an unofficial alliance like he has, that's what he would continue to do," DeMoss said.

"Falwell can't really see any advantage" to joining the SBC, said evangelist Bailey Smith. Southern Baptists "are flooding" Falwell's school already, Smith said.

Although his school has no official relationship to the Southern Baptist Convention, Liberty University is fast becoming a prominent training ground for Southern Baptist students. Falwell said in June that about 40 percent of the school's 14,000 students are Southern Baptists.

"It's safe to say," noted Falwell spokesman DeMoss, "that Liberty University has become the Christian undergraduate school of choice for an awful large number of Southern Baptists."

"It's almost a Southern Baptist school," explained Smith, a former SBC president. "There are more Southern Baptist ministerial students at Liberty than at any Southern Baptist school."

Smith and other prominent SBC conservatives -- such as Jerry Vines, Freddie Gage and Richard Lee -- have sent their own children to Liberty.

Meanwhile, the SBC has continued to smooth the way for churches like Falwell's to enter the convention.

Last February, a task force appointed by then-SBC President Ed Young recommended that the SBC aggressively open its doors to more independent Baptists.

"The day of bitterness is generally over" between Southern Baptists and independent fundamentalists, Young told the SBC Executive Committee. "They like who we are. They like where we're going, and they're ready to come home to a Bible-believing denomination."

Soon after Young's report, Falwell spokesman DeMoss told the Richmond Times-Dispatch that a Falwell-SBC merger shouldn't be ruled out. "There are certainly more reasons today for compatibility between independents and Southern Baptists," he said.

Meanwhile, in light of the SBC task force report, the Executive Committee has prepared a new promotional piece describing how existing independent churches can affiliate with the SBC.

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TV station pulls plug on Falwell
as charges of politicking continue

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Jerry Falwell, one of the country's best-known televangelists, is under growing criticism for mixing religion with politics on the air.

A Jacksonville, Fla., television station temporarily pull the plug on Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" Aug. 15, bowing to protests about the show's political content.

A small group of protestors picketed WTLV TV-12 a day earlier to protest what they described as sexually explicit language used by Falwell to describe allegations that President Bill Clinton made unwanted romantic advances toward a state employee when he was governor of Arkansas in 1991.

In May "Old Time Gospel Hour" carried excerpts from a videotape which accused Clinton of arranging for the murder of an Arkansas investigator, among other things. Falwell, calling Clinton "the most radical and controversial president in our nation's history, offered the tapes for \$43 apiece.

The latest controversy over the "Old Time Gospel Hour" surfaced Aug. 13. Jacksonville resident Cathy Corby told the Florida Times-Union she was shocked when her 9-year-old son asked her a sexually explicit question.

"He asked me what oral sex was," she said. "I asked him where did he hear about that and he said he heard it on Jerry Falwell's show on television."

She said she cleared her children out of the room and watched the rest of the program, which she described as "Falwell dealing with scandalous material while making accusations against President Bill Clinton."

The next day she, her husband, their two children and eight friends walked a picket line at the television station to protest what they described as a political program masquerading under the guise of religion.

Station officials said they had received several other complaints. Ken Topping, the station's general manager, said Falwell representatives said the shows will remain political only until after Sept. 4. "Between now and then, we are going to show reruns or find another show to fill Falwell's slot," he said. "If the shows change, we'll begin airing them again."

It is not known if other TV stations have cancelled the program. Marketing officials for "Old Time Gospel Hour" were not available for comment and Falwell's spokesman did not return phone calls.

The anti-Clinton videotape that Falwell began selling in May drew widespread criticism and news coverage.

Falwell's representatives asked to air the video on the TV network operated by Southern Baptists, but the Radio and Television Commission, which runs ACTS cable network, declined, said Deborah Key, RTVC vice president for network operations.

"We basically have an unwritten policy that we try to keep the networks out of the political arena," she explained. "The Falwell piece was not only very politically charged but was making some very strong allegations that we didn't feel were appropriate for the networks."

In the video, Gary Parks, son of a private investigator who supposedly had proof of sexual indiscretions by Clinton, says, "I think Clinton had my father killed to save his political career," but he offered no supporting evidence. The investigator was shot to death last fall by an unknown assailant.

Although ACTS declined the broadcast, some viewers reported seeing promotional messages for the videotape on the network. However, Key said the promotional segments were intercepted before airing.

The RTVC operates both ACTS and FamilyNet, the network formerly owned by Falwell. The RTVC bought FamilyNet in 1991, giving Falwell airtime on both networks as partial payment. "Old Time Gospel Hour" appeared on ACTS through March of this year and on FamilyNet through April, when the free airtime expired. Falwell opted not to purchase additional time.

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-- By Greg Warner and Mark Wingfield

First ordained woman in SBC
marks 30-year ministry milestone

By Anne Saker

DURHAM, N.C. (ABP) -- Thirty years ago on Aug. 9 Addie Davis walked out of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, N.C., and started a revolution.

On that summer Sunday, Davis became the first woman to be ordained as a minister in the Southern Baptist Convention. And while an estimated 1,000 others have followed, the 15.4-million-member denomination is even more closed to women in pastoral roles now than 30 years ago, she says.

"The Southern Baptists have only gotten worse instead of better," Davis said in a recent interview from her home in Covington, Va. "Why is there such resistance? It's a man's world. You wouldn't think that a woman minister is a new concept, but it still is to some people."

Though she has spent most of her ministry outside the SBC, Davis "broke the mold" for other Southern Baptist women, said Mary Zimmer, president of Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, a Louisville, Ky., clearinghouse for women of the cloth. "Her ordination was a significant historical moment and an inspiration."

Durham's Watts Street Baptist Church commemorated the anniversary of Davis' ordination July 31 with a service honoring her. She preached a sermon titled, "Do You Love Me?" based on John 21:15-19 in which Jesus asks the question three times of Simon Peter.

Davis touched only lightly on the milestone.

"There is no way I can adequately express my appreciation for your kindness," she told the congregation. "Thank you for taking the risk and saying yes to God's will."

Ordination in the SBC is no job guarantee. Each church picks its own personnel with no intervention from the denomination. The great bulk of the more than 38,000 churches choose men as pastors.

That's just fine for many Southern Baptists. Twenty years after Davis' ordination, the SBC passed a resolution in 1984 against women's ordination, proclaiming the convention would not "decide concerns of Christian doctrine and practice by modern cultural, sociological and ecclesiastical trends or by emotional factors."

The SBC resolution is not binding on churches, and nothing forbids local congregations from ordaining women if they so choose. In fact, Zimmer said, before the 1984 resolution there were 300 ordained women in the SBC; today, there are more than 1,000.

Still, most Southern Baptist pulpits are reserved for men. The vast majority of ordained women are "ministers of" -- overseeing youth programs or adult education or music. Only 23 are known to serve as senior pastor, preaching weekly and leading Southern Baptist churches.

Davis said as a girl she knew her calling was to be a pastor, but, knowing the obstacles, she told no one. She earned a bachelor's degree at Meredith College in Raleigh, N.C., in 1942, and hopped around a few jobs before moving to Phillippi, W. Va., as dean of women at Alderson-Broadus College.

She returned to Covington, Va., in the 1950s to be with her family following her father's death. While there, she decided she had ignored her true calling long enough.

She enrolled at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., in 1960 and joined the Watts Street Church.

The church licensed her to preach after she graduated in 1963. She searched the South for a church, but could find none willing to call a woman pastor. In the North, however, women ministers were more common in the American Baptist Churches of the U.S.A., and Davis was called as pastor of First Baptist Church in Readsboro, Vt.

With that offer in hand, an ordination council convened. While her answers to doctrinal questions were stellar, recalled Warren Carr, her pastor at the time, two men could not bring themselves to approve her ordination.

After some debate, Carr said, a young pastor on the committee mused: "Brethren, I've never been on this kind of thing before. I'm a little confused. You gentlemen have been so concerned that our candidate believe that a virgin bore the Word; now you are hung up on a virgin preaching the Word."

The vote was taken, and her ordination was approved.

Initially, the action drew little attention. The state Baptist newspaper, the Biblical Recorder, noted the news in three paragraphs and the Raleigh News & Observer took no notice at all.

But as word got out, demands that Davis' ordination be rescinded came in from across the South even while women contacted Carr to ask if they could fly to Durham to be ordained. He declined.

Davis served eight years in Vermont, and then became pastor at Second Avenue Baptist Church in East Providence, R.I., also an American Baptist church. She stayed nine years, leaving 13 years ago to return to Covington, after her mother's death, to care for ailing relatives. She never married.

Davis said she is "blessed with good health" and now works with two other pastors at a 100-year-old rural church attended by Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians.

"When the history of women in ministry is recited, it begins, 'On August 9, 1964, Addie Davis was ordained,'" said Sandra Hack Polaski of Durham, a member of the Watts Street church who organized the celebration for Davis.

"When I started to learn the history, I came upon the neat fact that her ordination is three months older than I am," said Polaski, who was ordained this year by a church in Nashville, Tenn. "It was a significant date for me. So I said to the folks of the church, 'Gee, wouldn't it be nice if we observed this anniversary?' And like most things in church work, they said, 'That's a great idea. Why don't you coordinate it?'"

Jeannette Stokes, who runs Durham's Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South, said Davis

and other women-in-ministry pioneers are "on the whole, remarkable" people.

"These were women who wanted to do something that no one wanted them to do," Stokes said. "They had to have a lot of faith, self-esteem or something that let them do what no one wanted them to do."

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-- Reprinted from the Raleigh (N.C.) News & Observer. Used by permission.

Birmingham pastor steps down
after facing prostitution charge

By Greg Garrison

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- The pastor of First Baptist Church of Birmingham, Ala., who was arrested and charged with soliciting a prostitute in March, announced his retirement from the church Aug. 7.

The pastor, Robert Taylor Baggott Jr., 62, appeared before Municipal Judge Carnella Greene Norman on April 8 to answer to charges of soliciting for prostitution, according to court records.

The retirement announcement followed months of turmoil for the 800-member congregation. Since Baggott's arrest, the church has endured rumors and an anonymous mailing of the police incident report, while the minister attempted to salvage a prestigious career. Court records say Baggott pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of disorderly conduct and paid a \$200 fine and \$54 court costs. City prosecutor Karen McLain said its is not uncommon for a first-time offender to have a charge reduced.

Birmingham police Capt. Julius Walker, supervisor of the vice and narcotics detail, said Baggott was videotaped propositioning an undercover officer in the 6400 block of First Avenue North in Woodlawn.

"We don't get a minister every day, but we didn't blow whistles and ring bells about who he was," Walker said.

Efforts to reach Baggott for comment were unsuccessful, but a deacon said the pastor maintains he is innocent of the charge. "He steadfastly denies it," said Harry Jeffcoat, who also teaches Sunday school at the church.

"It came down to this: who do you believe?" Jeffcoat said. "The police ... or a preacher with a 35-year record without a blemish? I go with the preacher."

Baggott's arrest occurred about 3:30 p.m. on a Thursday, which is one reason Jeffcoat said he believes Baggott. "If it was 11:30 on a weekend night, I would be more suspicious," he said.

Jeffcoat said he discussed the matter with Baggott on July 26, a day before a special deacon's meeting at which Baggott read his resignation letter.

Baggott told Jeffcoat he was taking a trunk full of clothes to a poor family in the East Lake or Woodlawn area when he got lost and stopped at a Captain D's restaurant, Jeffcoat said.

"He went in and got an iced tea. When he came out there was a girl who waved at him in the parking lot," Jeffcoat said.

"Here's a girl that talks like she knows him," he said. "He fell into a bad circumstance. There was a female police officer out there looking for an arrest."

Jeffcoat said Baggott told him he "kidded around" with the woman before realizing she was talking about prostitution. When she mentioned she had a hotel room they could go back to, Baggott told her he had no money and had to leave, according to Jeffcoat. Jeffcoat said Baggott recalled that as he pulled out onto the street, a police car pulled him over and an officer said he was soliciting a prostitute.

"If they have a video, why did they settle instead of taking him to court on that charge?" Jeffcoat said. "No, I'm sorry, I don't believe the police."

In May, an anonymous critic began sending copies of Baggott's police report to church members with a

message written in crayon: "Your church moved out of town but your preacher still comes back to do his thing," said Jeffcoat, who received a copy.

First Baptist relocated from its downtown location in 1985 to Lakeshore Drive. Baggott oversaw a building expansion at the church's new campus.

"I stood up in a meeting and said it's not right the way it ended," Jeffcoat said. "It was a forced retirement. The church should have stood up and said we believe the preacher."

"It didn't have to end this way," Jeffcoat said. "The way it is, his career is ruined."

Baggott was named pastor of the church in 1989 and has been chaplain of the Auburn University football team for 13 years.

An announcement about Baggott's retirement, effective Sept. 1, appeared in the Aug. 4 edition of The Alabama Baptist. His wife, Betty, a popular speaker for women's groups, writes a column and serves on the publication's board of directors. Baggott serves as a trustee of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

In a letter to the church, Baggott cited his mother-in-law's declining health and God's leadership to future ministry as reasons for resigning, according to the Alabama Baptist.

Baggott previously was pastor of First Baptist Church of Newnan, Ga., from 1961 to 1972; First Baptist Church of Opelika, Ala., 1972-82; and First Baptist Church of Dothan, Ala., 1982-89.

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-- Reprinted with permission from the Birmingham News.

Remote Albanian villagers hear
about Jesus through joint venture

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- More than 15,000 Albanians were introduced to Jesus this summer through a cooperative venture involving Baptists from Texas, Alabama and Tennessee.

The Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission coordinated the construction and operation of two base camps in Albania from which college-age volunteers journeyed to show Campus Crusade for Christ's "Jesus" evangelistic film in remote villages.

Organizers of Project AERO (Albanian Evangelical Rural Outreach) reported more than 2,300 professions of faith in what was -- until three years ago -- the world's only officially atheistic nation-state.

"Truly, the Father is working in Albania," said Texas team leader George Crews of North Richland Hills Baptist Church in Fort Worth. "What a pleasure it was to join him in what he is doing in Albania at this time."

Texas Baptists helped to operate a base camp near Albania's capital city, Tirana, providing hot meals, pure water, medical service and radio communication for about 100 volunteer student missionaries from Europe.

Students working from a second base camp in northern Albania included members of Baptist Student Unions in the United States who worked alongside Albanian Christian students and representatives of Campus Crusade.

Students from each of the base camps were divided into teams of six or seven members and taken by helicopters provided by the Swiss Helimission organization into remote villages, along with projectors and copies of the "Jesus" film. One six-person field team from the Tirana base camp included four nationalities, Crews noted.

After a team showed the film in one village, they hiked to three other villages in the next three consecutive days, showing the movie in each village. On the morning of the fifth day, they were picked up by helicopter and returned to the base camp for rest and reflection.

Each team was then airlifted back into the village that its members judged to be most receptive to the gospel. They spent two days discipling village leaders and starting Bible studies.

In one of the villages visited by a student missions team, a new church was started just one week after the "Jesus" film was shown. Twenty-five people attended the first worship service, Crews said.

Twelve International Service Corps representatives have been appointed to work for two years to follow up the summer project, helping to establish ongoing Bible studies and preaching points, according to Bill Peacock, associate director of Volunteers in Missions and coordinator of volunteer programs in Europe for the Foreign Mission Board.

Prayers were answered at every turn during the mission trip, Crews said.

Food in the base camps was cooked on propane stoves, and at one point the Texans discovered their supply was low. A search revealed that the required type of propane bottles -- manufactured and refilled in Italy -- would not be available anywhere in Albania for a month.

Crews and his team began to pray for six bottles of propane. They faxed a prayer request to the TBM office in Dallas, asking the staff to share the prayer concern that evening at Wednesday worship services. They also told a representative of Cooperative Services International stationed in Albania, who in turn shared it with his prayer partner.

"The prayer partner, following prayer, remembered where six bottles that were not needed on another project had been stored. When the bottles were given to us, there was 20 months of dust on them," Crews said.

In addition to sharing the message of eternal life and introducing Albanians to the "new birth" of the spirit, one student mission team had the opportunity to help save the life of a newborn baby and deathly ill mother.

Team members discovered the situation soon after being delivered by Helimission to a small village far from any hospital.

"Upon arriving, they found that a mother had delivered a child during the night, and the mother and baby were both gravely ill," Crews said. "The team radioed and requested that the helicopter return and ferry the mother and baby to medical help in Tirana."

The helicopter carried the mother and infant -- along with the worried father -- to Tirana, where they were met by two Campus Crusade personnel who took them to the hospital and stayed to comfort the father.

Attending physicians at the hospital said if the mother and child had not received medical attention when they did, both would have been dead within a matter of hours.

"The following day, the father found his way to the base camp in Tirana, sought the two Campus Crusade personnel he had met the day before and thanked them for all they had done," Crews said. "And he asked them to name the baby."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story was first issued Aug. 12.

Committee wants Texas Baptists
to redefine Cooperative Program

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) -- A Texas Baptist committee is calling for a redefinition of the Cooperative Program, the unified budget plan which funds both Baptist state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Cooperative Missions Giving Study Committee, commissioned by the Texas convention last fall,

adopted its final report Aug. 8. The recommendation would permit churches to support only Texas Baptist causes or designate recipients of missions dollars, including the SBC-rival Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and still have the gifts counted as Cooperative Program.

The report now goes to the state's administrative committee and then its executive board, and eventually to the state convention meeting Oct. 31-Nov. 1 in Amarillo.

At its sixth meeting in Dallas, the committee scrapped a two-tier plan approved earlier that committee members agreed was too confusing. They adopted instead a broad definition of Cooperative Program that includes not only undesignated gifts divided between Texas and the SBC, but also gifts which remain in Texas and those designated to particular SBC agencies or to the moderate-alternative Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Currently only undesignated gifts for support of both the state and national conventions are counted as Cooperative Program, the denomination's method of unified budget support established in 1925.

Because of tensions over the SBC's 15-year battle for control of the national convention, the Texas convention in 1991 adopted a plan that allowed churches to exclude up to five items in the unified budget and still have their gifts counted as CP. But gifts cutting out the SBC entirely have been considered "designated" and reported separately from CP gifts.

The study committee was authorized in 1993 when the state convention approved a motion by Ben Loring, pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo asking the president to appoint a committee "to study how to enhance cooperative missions giving among all Texas Baptists."

At an early meeting of the committee, Loring said many churches that have chosen to bypass the SBC Executive Committee because of disagreement with the convention's direction have been considered "second class," even if they continue to support the SBC through alternative channels, because of the way their gifts are reported.

In another meeting, several committee members said gifts through the moderate Fellowship should be included in the description of "Cooperative Program." To list them in any other way, they contended, would perpetuate the "second class" perception.

Opponents of the change noted the Cooperative Program traditionally has been a partnership between the local church, state convention and Southern Baptist Convention.

Proponents, however, contended that there is nothing "traditional" about what has happened in the SBC during the controversy of the last 15 years. Some said the SBC as traditionally held no longer exists, noting that anyone who has disagreed with the direction the convention has taken since 1979 has been disenfranchised.

"The Cooperative Program as we have known it and liked it has been a wonderful tool, but it is dead," said Ophelia Humphrey, a member of Amarillo First Baptist and a leader of the Fellowship. "The people who have taken over the Southern Baptist Convention did not support the CP before (they assumed control of the SBC). Churches like mine did support it. And we take the current leadership at their word and action that they won't put any of us in leadership who don't agree totally with what they have been doing. That is disenfranchisement and is hardly cooperation."

A "findings" section of the study committee report says Cooperative Program relationships between state conventions and the SBC have always been "fraternal and functional" and "subject to alteration by either at any time."

Texas has never adopted an official definition of cooperation with the SBC, the report says. When the Cooperative Program was established in 1925, it was understood to include all designated and undesignated gifts made by Baptists to Baptist causes, it adds.

In the 1960s, the Cooperative Program gradually came to be considered by most state conventions to include only undesignated gifts, a position confirmed by the SBC in 1978.

Several state conventions, however, continued to recognize the right of churches to exclude line items from the Cooperative Program budget.

In 1993 the SBC Executive Committee expanded its definition of Cooperative Program when it approved a plan that allowed churches to bypass state conventions and fund only national SBC causes. If cutting out state

conventions is fair, bypassing the national convention should be too, said proponents of the Texas plan.

The latest SBC action regarding Cooperative Program gifts came at the recent SBC annual meeting in Orlando when the convention directed its agencies to no longer receive funds channeled through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Members of the study committee who backed the panel's final report emphasized that their recommendations affirm the local church's right to give as it chooses.

"I interpret the document to mean we have retained a working relationship between the BGCT and SBC and maintained a system that allows churches to continue giving to the combined Cooperative Programs of the BGCT and SBC just as they have in the past," said committee chairman Cecil Ray of Georgetown.

"It affirms that historical position, but it also adds the right of the churches to give as part of the Baptist cooperative system to other causes as named, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship."

Those who opposed the plan said they had problems with redefining the Cooperative Program and would have felt better if giving that had not previously been considered Cooperative Program support had been retained in a special category.

"To me that would be a great concession," said John Hatch, the committee's vice chairman. "I am willing to make that concession, but to call those gifts Cooperative Program is not right, not acceptable."

Hatch, pastor of First Baptist Church, Lake Jackson, said he and "four to six" others on the committee are considering filing a minority report opposing the changes in the CP structure.

William Pinson, Texas executive director, stopped short of endorsing the plan. He said he hopes that consideration of the report "will not distract or divide us, keeping us from focusing on the priorities the Lord Jesus has given us."

"The committee now presents its report to Texas Baptists who will, I am confident, consider it carefully and prayerfully," Pinson said.

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, said the report represents "a departure from the partnership which has long existed between the state convention and the SBC." Chapman, former pastor of First Baptist Church, Wichita Falls, Texas, predicted the report and its recommendation regarding the Fellowship gifts "will be unacceptable to the majority of Southern Baptist churches in Texas."

Cecil Sherman, coordinator of the Atlanta-based Fellowship, said, the committee "affirmed a very powerful Baptist idea" by putting ultimate authority in local churches.

"This is a good report," said Sherman, also a former Texas pastor at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth. "Every once in a while Baptists do something Baptist. That is a very Baptist report."

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