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**Baptist union in Irkutsk ends partnership, cuts ties to IMB**

By Trennis Henderson

ROCHESTER, Minn. (ABP) -- An international missions partnership between the Minnesota-Wisconsin Baptist Convention and the Irkutsk Russian Baptist Union has come to an abrupt halt.

The partnership ended when Russian Baptist leaders in Irkutsk unilaterally voted to withdraw from the partnership and to sever the union's relationship with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board.

The international partnership, officially launched last year, was scheduled to continue through 2002. The end of the partnership initially was reported in the March issue of the Minnesota-Wisconsin Baptist newspaper.

"This was an unexpected move on the part of the Russian Baptist leadership in Irkutsk," said Glen Land, state missions director for the Minnesota-Wisconsin convention. "The issues involved were local to that particular province of Russia. There was no indication on our part that it was coming."

Land said volunteers who participated in a mission trip to Irkutsk last year were greeted with "genuine warmth and affection by the Russian Baptists while we were there. Our firsthand contacts with the Russian Baptists while we were there was positive."

Land said Joe Kelley, an IMB missionary serving in Irkutsk, indicated that the crux of the problem was a philosophical difference between the Baptist union and the IMB concerning how mission work should be done.

"We got caught up in a bigger controversy between Baptists in Irkutsk and the IMB," Land explained. "Our partnership became one of the casualties. For us, it's been an inconvenience but that's part of the price of partnership missions overseas."

Mike Norfleet, the IMB's Richmond, Va.-based associate for Central and Eastern Europe, said IMB officials and state convention leaders "did everything they could to make the partnership work."

Citing conflicting priorities with at least one senior pastor in Irkutsk, Norfleet said some pastors primarily are interested in receiving financial assistance while the IMB's priority is starting new churches.

"In that particular area, they're struggling with exactly what do to with Americans still," Norfleet said. "They had another agenda rather than the partnership."

Despite the setback, Norfleet added: "There still is hope there. We are praying we can help them see the long-term benefit of working together."

Norfleet said the Baptist union's decision "is not typical of Russia or Ukraine where they have a very warm, open-door attitude toward us. Hopefully we can build a foundation for relationships down the road."

Land said convention leaders in Minnesota-Wisconsin already are exploring other options for partnership efforts in Russia.

"We are hoping to get a new partnership in some other area of Russia, probably still in Siberia but not in Irkutsk," he said. Leaders hope to present a new partnership proposal to convention messengers in November.

"When you sign up for one of these things, you have to be pretty flexible," Land said. "I don't see any widespread dismay about it. We'll go where the doors are open. . I wouldn't discount the possibility of us going back to Irkutsk some day."

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## **U.S. can decrease world's hungry by half, says organization's report**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Additional U.S. aid equal to a penny a day per American could help cut world hunger in half by 2015, says the Christian organization Bread for the World's newly released annual report.

The 2001 report, titled, "Foreign Aid to End Hunger," urges Congress and President George W. Bush to "start with \$1 billion a year in additional U.S. aid and debt relief for sub-Saharan Africa, where hunger is most widespread and intractable."

"Hunger has dropped dramatically in developing countries during the last 30 years, but tragically, it has doubled in sub-Saharan Africa," said BFW President David Beckmann in a press release.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 291 million people live on less than \$1 a day, and one person in three is chronically undernourished, says the report.

Reducing African nations' foreign-debt payments is also essential, the report says, to free additional money for education, health care and other investments. The industrial nations have agreed to write off \$90 billion of poor country debt. But Congress must approve the U.S. contribution each year.

The organization's 11th annual report on the state of world and U.S. hunger says U.S aid to developing countries has declined in recent years.

From 1997 to 1998, the United States contributed a smaller share of its national income to "official development assistance" than any of the 21 countries participating in the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, the report says.

"Hunger is one problem we can actually solve," said Beckmann. "For the first time in history, we have the resources and technology to do it. The cost is surprisingly low. But our government must make it a priority. Other industrial countries have made it clear that if we take the lead, they will join us. They are waiting to see if we will accept that challenge."

Beckmann said that the number of undernourished people in developing countries has decreased by 20 percent over the last 25 years, despite the population explosion.

"Even with this improvement," he said, "792 million people in the developing world are still undernourished. If we don't act to reduce their hunger in a time of great prosperity, when will we do it?"

In addition to making the case for U.S. aid to Africa, Bread for the World Institute's report provides detailed statistics on U.S. and world hunger.

In the United States, "close to 31 million Americans live in households that are food insecure, meaning they resort to emergency food banks each month or skip meals to pay for rent."

The report says some U.S. states fare worse than others. Fourteen states were reported with "food insecurity" in more than 10 percent of total households: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, the District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas and West Virginia.

"Increased food-stamp program participation would dramatically reduce hunger in the United States," the report concludes.

BFW is a 45,000-member Christian citizens' movement against hunger. It was founded in 1974.

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## **Laiety key to church planting, conference speakers claim**

By Ken Camp

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Church planting is too big a job for just seminary-trained ministers, conference leaders told a group of Baptist church starters.

"Some of the best church planters in the world today are not ordained pastors," Charles Brock, a 20-year veteran church planter in the Philippines, said during a three-day event sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Specialized seminars about lay-led churches and equipping the laity as church starters were offered at the "Light Up Texas" church-starting conference, held March 22-24 in Waco.

Brock said every lay person should be trained and skilled to assume the role of a full-time minister within six months of accepting Christ -- with or without ordination or salary.

"I am speaking of the realized priesthood of every believer," he said.

Trained laity can assume leadership of new congregations, but that requires a return to a New Testament understanding of church, Brock said. Too often, he said, Christians allow buildings, budgets and salaries to become barriers to church planting.

Such unnecessary complexity "limits Kingdom expansion," he maintained.

Brock, who now is president of Church Growth International in Neosho, Mo., called on churches to "unleash" their lay members and equip them with usable tools for church planting.

"If we are going to have a significant church-planting movement, the strategy, methods and tools must be simple enough that an ordinary, Holy Spirit-filled believer can do it," he said.

"It's amazing what people can do if they don't know -- and we don't tell them -- that they can't," he added.

Training new leaders from within a newly started church is essential, Brock said. This can be encouraged through simple, inductive Bible studies guided by a professional church planter, handing off leadership responsibilities to lay participants as soon as possible.

"I believe in the rapid transfer of leadership," he said.

Otto Arango, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Getsemini in McAllen, Texas, outlined for conference participants the basic approach he has taken the last five years in equipping lay church starters through local, church-based training centers.

"The purpose is not to enlarge the brain but to facilitate the laymen immediately becoming involved in ministry," Arango said. "It's a way of helping to wake up those who have been called."

In the last five years, more than 3,000 laymen have attended the training centers, and they have started at least 235 new churches.

Any training for laity needs to be practical, contemporary, contextualized and relevant, not theoretical and abstract, he suggested.

Arango does not recommend formal examinations in such training. "The test is the student's ability to use the material in ministry," he said.

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## **New alternative springing up for temporary worship space**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Sprung is springing up all over.

A unique new structure called a Sprung building is gaining popularity among innovative and growing churches as an alternative for creating temporary space quickly.

Sprung comes from the name of the family-owned company that manufactures these high-tech tents, but they do virtually spring to life in a matter of days in all sorts of locations.

The structures are made of an incredibly strong synthetic membrane stretched tightly over a skeleton of aluminum beams. Insulation is placed between an outer membrane and an inner membrane, creating an insulation factor of R-28.

Typically, Sprung buildings are white, but they do come in other colors and patterns as well. The appearance of the completed building has been compared to a hard-shell circus tent, a giant marshmallow and a big bubble.

Although the company that manufactures these space-age structures has been around for more than 100 years, its structure division is less than 30 years old. Churches have begun using the pre-fab buildings only in the last decade.

Lawton Searcy was pastor of the third church in the United States to use a Sprung structure. In 1994, as pastor of a new congregation, he turned to Sprung to solve a crisis.

The young church had purchased property in Baton Rouge, La., but did not intend to build for up to 18 months. The landlord of the facility they were leasing at the time, however, gave them a 30-day notice to get out.

"We needed a worship space for 300 people immediately," Searcy recalled. "I thought about a tent, and the only person I knew who had a tent was Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California."

Searcy called Warren, who told him about Sprung buildings as a better alternative to a tent. Saddleback was using a Sprung building to accommodate its rapid growth.

Other than Saddleback and a Catholic church in California, no other U.S. church was using the unique manufactured buildings, Searcy said. However, he learned the structures had been used in an Olympic village, in Operation Desert Storm and in the arctic.

"Finally, we decided if it's good enough for the Olympic village, we're going to take a shot at it," he explained. "We ordered the building, and six weeks later we held our first service in it."

Just as important, he said, his young church put up the Sprung building for 30 percent to 40 percent of the cost of a traditional building.

The second Sunday Church of the Highlands occupied its Sprung building, teams of leaders from other churches began trekking to Baton Rouge to investigate, Searcy said.

Some time this year, the number of churches using Sprung structures will surpass the 100 mark, said Searcy, who now is a consultant for Sprung Instant Structures, based in Canada.

Churches using Sprung buildings fall into two general categories, Searcy said. The first group is new churches that need an immediate facility but have limited funds or can't get a traditional building erected fast enough to meet their needs. The second group is large churches that are growing so rapidly they don't have time to build an adequate traditional building without impeding growth.

Leaders of some United Methodist conferences are considering purchasing Sprung buildings as a part of their church-starting strategy, he said. Because the buildings are portable, they could be moved from location to location to help launch churches until they secure permanent facilities.

"It's fast. It's flexible. You can resell the building or relocate it. It doesn't interfere with your master plan," Searcy said. "It can keep churches growing until they can build what they want to build."

That's exactly what happened at Southcliff Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, where the congregation has worshipped in a 70-by-120-foot Sprung building for more than 18 months.

Southcliff will move in to a new permanent worship center Easter Sunday -- one that was built on the same spot as the old worship center. In the meantime, the 700-seat Sprung worship center erected on a church parking lot has helped the church not miss a beat during construction.

"We've had a great experience with it," said Joshua Whitehead, minister of evangelism and outreach and overseer of church facilities.

Southcliff bought the temporary building for \$187,500 -- about \$22 per square foot. The church spent quite a bit more, however, to put carpet on the floor, build a stage, install heating and air conditioning and install theatrical lighting and sound equipment.

Now that the new worship center is nearly complete, Southcliff is seeking to sell the Sprung building. Whitehead said he does not yet know what the resale value will be or how easy or hard it will be to sell the structure.

Cost and flexibility are major selling points of the Sprung buildings, Searcy said, noting the inside of the domes can be finished any way a church desires. Some churches put up drywall framing inside to create traditional rooms. Others use the structure as is, only moving in chairs and other furniture.

Because the structures have no corners, the acoustics are exceptional, he said. And the covering is fire-resistant and wind-resistant. The Sprung building he erected in Baton Rouge survived a tornado, he said.

Total cost of erecting a Sprung structure depends on how the building is finished out and equipped, Searcy said. But for an average church application, the total cost per square foot averages between \$25 and \$55, he said.

That compares to between \$40 and \$60 per square foot for construction of a metal building or \$70 to \$130 per square foot for construction of a permanent traditional worship center, according to Keith Crouch, director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas church-facilities office.

Crouch said his staff has worked with several churches using Sprung buildings and has seen applications where the temporary building met specific needs.

As with any church construction project, however, he advises caution and careful deliberation about all options. Whether a Sprung building is appropriate for a church will depend upon factors such as a church's mission strategy, location, community expectations and long-term goals, he said.

"Some places it will work, and some places it won't," he said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For illustrations of Sprung buildings, visit the website of Southcliff Baptist Church, [www.southcliff.org](http://www.southcliff.org), or Sprung Instant Structures, [www.sprung.com](http://www.sprung.com).

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