

Evangelists re-tool to increase impact

By: Mickey Noah

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ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)--Venerable, legendary Southern Baptist evangelist Junior Hill was just a 21-year-old north Alabama preacher when the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists was born almost 50 years ago in 1958.

But as COSBE celebrates its golden anniversary with special events at next June's Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Indianapolis, Hill and other key SBC evangelists say the organization is more vital than ever.

"Even for us guys who've been around and established relationships and credibility over the years, COSBE is important," Hill said. "But for the young guys trying to get established, it's awfully important to be a member."

Because of today's trend of fewer, shorter and even no revival meetings and less emphasis on evangelism by some Baptist churches, Hill believes it's more difficult than ever to be a fulltime vocational evangelist. He should know -- he's been one since 1967.

Hill — now 71, still based in Hartselle, Ala., and busier and more booked-up than ever — remembers the days of one- or even two-week revivals. He even remembers two-services-a-day revivals in hot but packed country churches all across the rural South.

In light of the changing times, Brian Fossett, COSBE's current president, and a Dalton, Ga.-based evangelist, is guiding COSBE to re-invent itself and make a comeback in terms of its membership and goals.

"We're at a real Nehemiah moment as far as the Southern Baptist Convention and evangelists go," said Fossett, 42, a fulltime evangelist for the last six years.

"Two of my major goals for COSBE are to get more exposure for our vocational evangelists and encourage the younger guys," Fossett said.

"Some believe revivals no longer work. I like what Dr. Roy Fish says: 'Revivals work when people do.'" Fish is the longtime evangelism professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Fossett's goal is to double the membership of COSBE -- now 200 evangelists -- over the next three years, and then double it again over the following three years. "We need to get the new guys in fulltime evangelism to identify themselves and join the group."

Why should an SBC evangelist join COSBE? What are the benefits?

Fossett said the benefits of being a COSBE-endorsed evangelist include:

- invitations and financial assistance to attend North American Mission Board retreats and conferences.
- listings in the COSBE directory, the SBC annual report, state convention lists of evangelists and on the COSBE website -- all of which introduce and promote COSBE evangelists and their ministries.
- invitations to participate in special COSBE/NAMB evangelistic events.
- access to NAMB training, consultants and materials.
- access to COSBE's Samaritan's Fund, which offers special assistance in times of severe financial crisis resulting from illness or a natural disaster.

Why should a church book an evangelist through COSBE?

"The main reason is that you know what you're getting," Fossett said. "There are a lot of good preachers who are gifted in presenting the Gospel in a revival setting. But fulltime vocational evangelists have a special anointing for evangelism. These are the men, endorsed by COSBE, who produce results."

Vocational evangelists differ from preachers who simply possess the gift of evangelism because "they feel a special call of God to pursue evangelism as a vocation," Fossett said. "This gives them the freedom to go anywhere, anytime and be used as a harvest evangelist."

Efforts to revitalize COSBE come at a time when Southern Baptists face the daunting challenge of declining baptism rates.

According to a NAMB/LifeWay Christian Resources report of 38,000 responding SBC churches, almost half (47.4 percent) recorded three or fewer baptisms during 2006. Some Baptist churches report no baptisms in a decade or more.

The number of baptisms across the convention fell in 2006 to 364,826, less than the 2005 figure of 371,850. SBC churches have not recorded 400,000 annual baptisms since 2000, and the all-time record was 445,725 in 1972, 35 years ago.

To address the current "no and low baptism" trend among Baptist churches, COSBE and NAMB have jointly launched the "Baptism Assistance Project (BAP)."

Through BAP, a COSBE-certified evangelist would preach at churches that request assistance. Churches must commit to a detailed planning and preparation process and

agree to take a sacrificial love offering which would go directly to the Baptism Assistance Project. Each COSBE member participating at an event would receive a modest, pre-determined honorarium and appropriate travel and lodging expenses.

"COSBE members have a passion for harvest evangelism and are committed to this project even though for most of us the honorarium will be significantly lower than our ministry's budget needs for a week," a recently drafted COSBE document stated.

"Our goal is to conduct at least 100 meetings each year. We conservatively project that we could see well over 1,000 professions of faith recorded from these 100 meetings."

Meetings might not be the traditional revival meetings of the Sunday-Wednesday variety but might be creative alternatives tailored to each church, whether rural, suburban or inner-city. Fossett said some churches prefer one-day "harvest" meetings or conferences and avoid use of the word "revival" altogether.

Fossett believes that even the best church pastors can benefit from the short-term presence of a fulltime evangelist. Hill likes to call evangelists "obstetricians" and church pastors "general practitioners."

"An evangelist is focused on reaping the harvest," Fossett said. "That's where the vocational evangelist can help the most. His focus is strictly on reaching those without Christ."

Echoing both Billy Graham and Junior Hill, Fossett believes 45 percent of the effectiveness of a revival or harvest meeting is preparation, including advance prayer, getting people to attend, getting church members totally involved in reaching and bringing lost friends, and in promotion -- covering the local area with posters and fliers, for instance.

"Another 45 percent is preservation," said Fossett. "You have to follow up after the meeting. Get those saved baptized. Get them in church and in Sunday School. Immediately get them connected to the church."

Only 10 percent of the revival, harvest meeting, conference or crusade, then, is the presentation itself, Fossett said.

"Salvation happens when the Gospel collides with people who need Christ," he said. "I see many good men out here, wonderful evangelists, who are still conducting effective revivals."

As an example, Fossett cites Canton, Ga.-based evangelist Jamey Ragle, who recently conducted a crusade in Virginia resulting in more than 225 baptisms.

Ragle -- who, like fellow evangelists Fossett and Hill, is a bear of a big man and a highly sought-after evangelist -- gets 30 invitations a week to conduct a church revival, crusade

or harvest meeting. "I'm working harder and busier than ever before. I'm away from home 200-225 days a year.

"There's no way I can make myself available for all those opportunities," Ragle said, "but sadly, we have young and seasoned evangelists alike who are struggling to remain viable and solvent financially. They're struggling to make it and many are barely hanging on."

Why the disparity? Some churches have given up on revivals and crusades, thinking they are obsolete. But Ragle wants to encourage them to look again.

In fact, Ragle -- along with Christian artist Chris Tomlin -- recently drew 20,000 to a crusade in Warner Robins, Ga. "We're seeing people make decisions for Christ and lives changed."

But Ragle also acknowledges that evangelists must be willing to make adjustments.

"Evangelists have to understand that they are at a church for a specific purpose: to encourage, empower the people and evangelize -- not to set every wrong in the church right, and not to come in like Sheriff Buford Pusser and tell the preacher how to do his job.

"I'm hard on us evangelists, too," Ragle said. "We have to improve our image. I look at some evangelists' promotional materials and videos and it looks like something from 'Leave It To Beaver.' It's old. If we evangelists don't change, we will die. The reality is that if we keep on doing what we've always done, we'll keep on getting what we always got."

As for struggling young evangelists, Ragle noted, "It's not rocket science. If God has called a man or a woman, then God is duty-bound to equip that man or woman with the avenues and resources to do what he or she is called to do."

On the other hand, Ragle asks pastors and churches who may have given up on guest evangelists to try again.

"I would tell pastors that just because you've had one bad experience with an evangelist in the past, don't write off all evangelists, saying you're never going to use one again."

Ragle said evangelists can't just come into a church and wave a magic wand to get results. Solid preparation and spade work are vital.

"If churches would pray, prepare, participate and posture themselves, revivals will work. The successful churches begin months ahead. Members target and engage people and prepare to reach people they know. By the time the revival or meeting comes, they've already planned how they're going to get people there -- even going to the trouble of having them for dinner and personally taking them."

Ragle cited Liberty Baptist Church in Hampton, Va., where people prayed, promoted, participated and postured, and a recent Ragle revival there resulted in 400-plus decisions for Christ. More than 225 were baptized.

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Mickey Noah is a writer for the North American Mission Board in Alpharetta, Georgia. For more information on the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists (COSBE) or how to join, access its website at www.sbcevangelist.org.

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