

GROWING CHURCHES

Reaching out

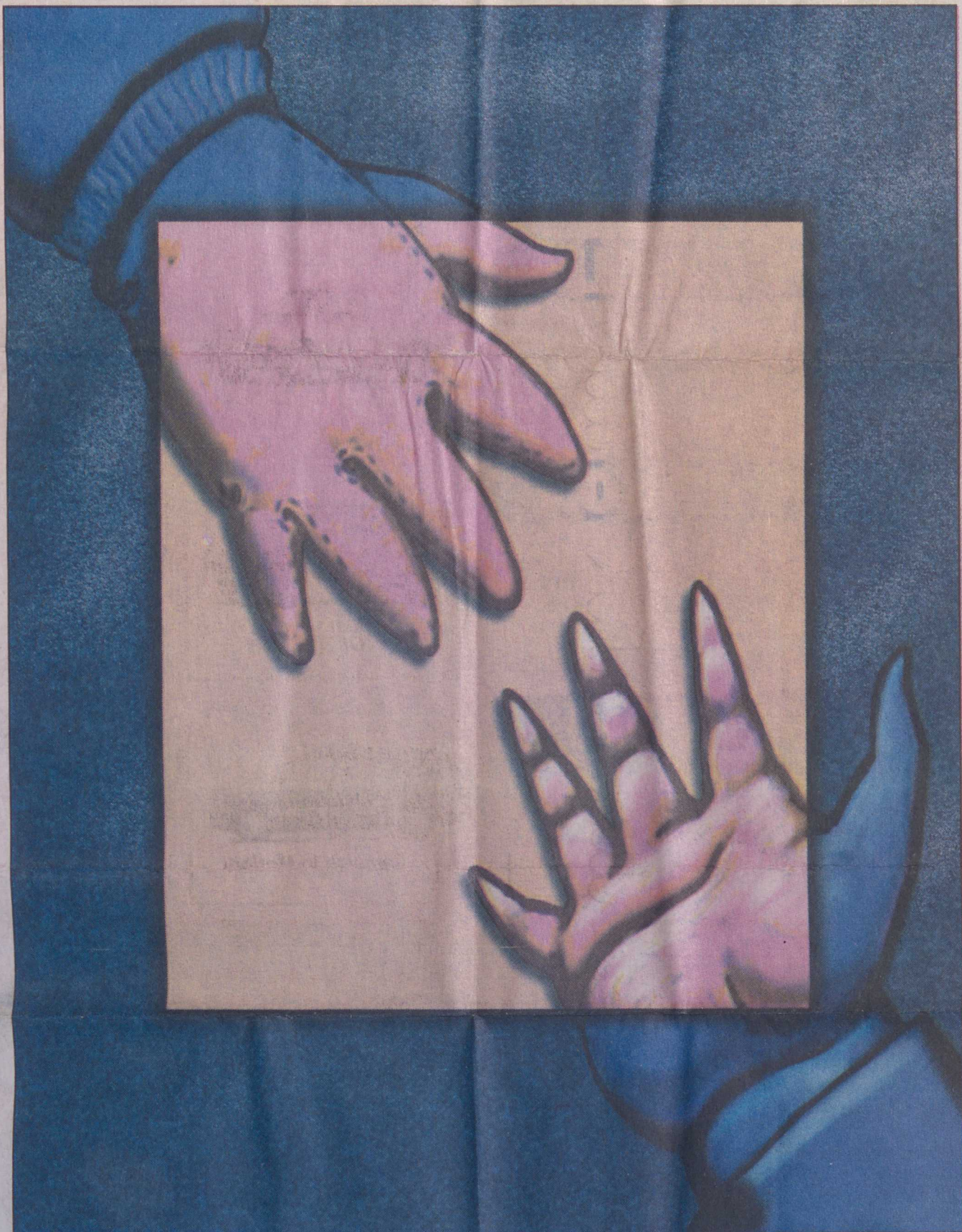


Illustration from Freedom News Service

Southern Baptist missionaries bring people closer to God

By Eric Michael Beam

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It was a long way from the small town in Georgia where Avery Sayer was born to where he would spend the last 25 years of his life as a Southern Baptist missionary.

There was little religious or cultural diversity in Fairburn, a town of 250 people. But Sayer was called to serve in a far away land where language and customs were very different.

He was sent to New York City.

Sayer was one of 54 missionaries from the U.S. and other countries who came to speak at Southern Baptist churches in the Gaston area this week. The "Mission Celebration," sponsored by the Gaston County Baptist Association, is held every five years to introduce congregations to the opportunities and challenges available in mission work, both in the U.S. and overseas. It's also a showcase of sports for the organization's growing commitment to global missionary efforts.

For Sayer, going to an inner-city, high-rise apartment complex in Manhattan to preach the gospel was indeed a challenge.

"It's the most diverse area in the country," he said during a presentation at Woodlawn Baptist Church in

Lowell.

The complex includes twenty 18-story apartment buildings, with 15 families on each floor. Within these apartments reside an array of minorities and nationalities, including African-Americans, Hispanics, Haitians, Philipinos and Vietnamese. The place is also home to the world's major religions, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

A basement mission

The Southern Baptist Church



Sayer

Sayer works out of in Manhattan takes up two apartments in the first floor of one of the apartment buildings. While church activities have primarily been separate from the rest of the complex, Sayer said in recent years its programs have become more accepted by the community. In fact, it was only three years ago that the church was allowed to conduct baptisms in the apartment pool.

Sayer said most of the people he serves are lower income, hard-working individuals who, like many New Yorkers, don't interact a lot with their neighbors. The city, with its endless hustle and bustle, conditions them,

the 55-year-old Sayer said.

But Sayer's church has brought these otherwise isolated people together in a place where community is a fleeting concept, especially since English is a second, not first, language for most.

"I've seen men hug each other whose countries are at war with one another," he said. "This feeling of one with the Lord is just wonderful."

Being a good neighbor

Like Christ's ministry 2,000 years ago, Sayer said his church's outreach comes through personal interaction with its neighbors, not soap box sermons. And it's usually simple things. During the summer, the church provides cups of cold water to the kids playing outside. It also provides them a place to cool off and hang out, especially during the school year when parents don't get home from work until late.

Most come by and don't even realize they're in a church, Sayer said. But the kindness he and other missionaries show these families often is enough to get them to come on Sunday mornings or participate in church activities such as the children's choir.

"I don't know how many kids have come to know the Lord through

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Missions

a cup of water," said Sayer, who noted there are about 7,000 children in the apartment complex. "But I've got many stories of how the adults have followed their children to church."

Sayer is one of thousands of Southern Baptist missionaries sent out each year to spread the faith.

According to Larry McElreath, director of missions for the Gaston Baptist Association, the International and the North American mission boards have steadily increased both the number of Baptist churches worldwide and the number of missionaries who staff those churches.

McElreath said 50 of the 117 churches who are members of the Gaston Baptist Association participated in "Missions Celebration." Churches within the GBA generally give 10 percent of their annual donations to Baptist mission efforts.

The GBA includes about 46,000 people and is one of the state's largest. It has also become one of the more diverse, with two African-American, one Hispanic and two Korean and Vietnamese churches among its ranks. It also includes churches in Cleveland, Lincoln, Mecklenburg and Catawba counties.

McElreath said the growth and diversity of the GBA will only enhance the organization's already active involvement in bringing people to Christ.

"We've been very proactive in our missions and evangelism programs," he said.