

The Baptist Sunday School Board and Its Records

By BELDEN MENKUS*

*Sunday School Board
Southern Baptist Convention*

THE Civil War placed tremendous economic burdens upon the young Baptist churches of the South. Yet, in May 1863, in the midst of financial impoverishment, the first Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention was formed at Greenville, S. C.

This board might well be considered an outgrowth of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (now of Louisville, Ky., but then located at Greenville). Its early heads were John Albert Broadus, longtime professor of the New Testament at the seminary and later its president, and Basil Manly, Jr., for many years the seminary's professor of the Old Testament. Significantly, it was under Manly's editorship that the *Kind Words* series of Sunday school publications was begun in January 1866. This series has been in continuous publication since that time, being maintained by the present board as a series of three age-graded papers for children and young people.

In 1873 the first board and its companion Sunday School Union, no longer able to support themselves financially, were absorbed by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, which continued the publications.

By 1890 Southern Baptist churches had sufficiently met their financial problems. Interest was renewed in a separate agency to assist the growing Sunday school movement. In May 1891, at the Convention meeting in Birmingham, the present Sunday School Board was established at Nashville, Tenn. Among the stipulations in its establishment was a provision that the new board must not incur debt. Thus, the first staff of three worked in donated office space. From the beginning the board undertook a program of direct aid to the local church and to the denomination that has con-

*The author, a member of the Committee on Records Management, Society of American Archivists, is Records Analyst of the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tenn. On Oct. 5, 1960, at the 24th annual meeting of the Society, in Boston, he and John T. Caton, Illinois State Library, led a discussion of records center operations.

tinued through the past 70 years. In that first year, after all operating expense had been met out of income, it was possible for the board to donate literature worth \$370 to help new Sunday schools through their first three months of work.

Teachers had to be trained for the growing Sunday school movement. Pastors and lay administrators needed to learn how to operate the schools most effectively. In June 1901 B. W. Spilman began a program of field work for the board, traveling from church to church helping to meet this need. The program of direct contact with the churches has continued and steadily increased for 60 years.

A teacher-training program, designed to be administered by the local church, was begun in 1902. One of the first textbooks, *The Books of the Bible*, by Hight C Moore (later for many years secretary of the Convention and editorial secretary of the board), is still in print.

In 1906 the board went a step further when it began to pay half the annual salary of a chair of Sunday school pedagogy at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. At the same time it supported an annual series of lectures in this field. Lecturers over the next several years included Charles Evans Hughes (later Chief Justice of the United States) and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Ultimately both projects were consolidated as the present School of Religious Education of the seminary.

Today the Southern Baptist Convention is the second largest Protestant group in this country, exceeded in size only by the consolidated Methodist denomination. The Convention has some 9,732,000 members in just under 33,000 churches. The Convention itself is an annual meeting of messengers from these churches. Regionally the churches cooperate through similar annual conventions organized at the State level. Though a year-round program of work is carried on through *ad interim* executive boards, none of these conventions has any authority over local congregations. The only ties are voluntary cooperation of congregations holding similar views on doctrine and church order.

The Sunday School Board is one of a number of agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention, which controls its operations through the election of a board of trustees. Similar agencies exist in other denominations, but the Sunday School Board is unique in that it supports itself entirely from earnings, and it combines functions spread in other denominations among several agencies. Chief among these are the curriculum-development functions ordinarily performed by a denominational board of religious education. In all

the Sunday School Board has 19 basic programs of work that range through such areas as film and phonograph-record production and marketing, music publication, church library development, church recreation development, church-related vocational guidance, work among Baptist students of colleges and universities throughout the nation, and development of materials for the general administration of the local church. The original donated office space has now become a complex of buildings occupying more than three complete city blocks. The first staff of 3 employees has grown to a staff of just under 1,600.

The combined income of the Sunday School Board for 1960 was about \$26,306,000—an increase of over 80 percent since 1952. It is one of the nation's leading booksellers, operating a chain of 47 retail outlets. In addition, the board operates summer assemblies in North Carolina and New Mexico, which served approximately 49,000 people during the 1960 summer season of educational and inspirational conferences.

Publishing continues to be the board's major activity. In 1960 the board shipped just under 8,000 tons of periodicals to churches in this country and in 58 foreign countries. Under the imprints of the Broadman and Convention presses it published 85 first editions in 1960.

The basic program of church membership and teacher training continues to grow. In 1960 some 1,340,000 awards were issued to individuals for the successful completion of specific texts in the present course of study. Records of progress are maintained for each of over 1,500,000 individuals in Southern Baptist churches who are participating in this program of study.

A number of programs of direct service to the local church are maintained from the board's income. Typical of these is the program of church architectural consultation, which during 1960 provided without charge specialized professional advice on construction to over 9,000 churches in this country and in 28 foreign countries.

The greater part of the board's expansion has come since the end of World War II. (There were only 79 employees as recently as 1929.) Modern administrative techniques, however, were not introduced in the board's operation until 1954. The records program dates from 1957.

Schedules for all of the records of the Nashville departments were completed in early 1958. A master procedure for the maintenance of records and a master schedule for their disposal were

issued to the board's bookstore managers in 1960. (Since the basic administrative records are retained in Nashville, the only records kept at the bookstore sites are those needed locally to handle tax problems and the collection of accounts.) Similar procedures are being developed for the two assembly locations and will probably be issued sometime this year.

At the field locations and in the departments at Nashville the emphasis has been upon the destruction of the greater portion of inactive records on site, as soon after creation as practicable. There is, however, a central storage area in which a little less than a thousand cubic feet of special-category and longterm-retention records are maintained.

The records program has been designed to fit the continuing system of management control. While the records of the field locations are subject to periodic review by the traveling staff auditor, the records of the Nashville departments are subject to a complete review of records creation, maintenance, and disposal practices every two years.

Apart from the normal problems of education inherent in developing an operational records program, the major problem (and minor blessing) has been organizational continuity. For instance, at present there are 38 employees with over 30 years of service. In some instances it has been very difficult to change long-established habit patterns.

A remarkable number of early board records, however, have been recovered from their hideaways within the board's buildings. Microfilming of the extensive official and personal files of the early executive secretaries is currently being completed. Other archival materials are being recovered through the application of the records schedules. These will be included in a master archival program for Southern Baptist agencies being developed under the direction of Dr. Davis Woolley of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission. These materials will be added to the historical repository of the Dargan-Carver Library, a joint project of the board and the commission.

Future plans call for the planning of certain key series of records at the time and point of their creation. Control of the form and the content of records created, together with refinement of records maintenance techniques, are the next areas of work in the board's records program.