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# SOUTHEASTERN NEWS

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## CONVOCATION EXPLORES PARTNERSHIP OF ALL GOD'S PEOPLE AS MINISTERS

WAKE FOREST, N.C. - What if every Christian were a minister? What would Christianity look like if all the church laypeople believed they were called to be Christian ministers in the everyday world of their occupations and their communities? What if pastors mobilized their congregations to be a force of lay ministers?

Entertaining a vision of the church as a priesthood of believers ministering to a broken world was the reason over 200 laypeople, ordained ministers and seminary students gathered for the Convocation of the Laity held recently at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

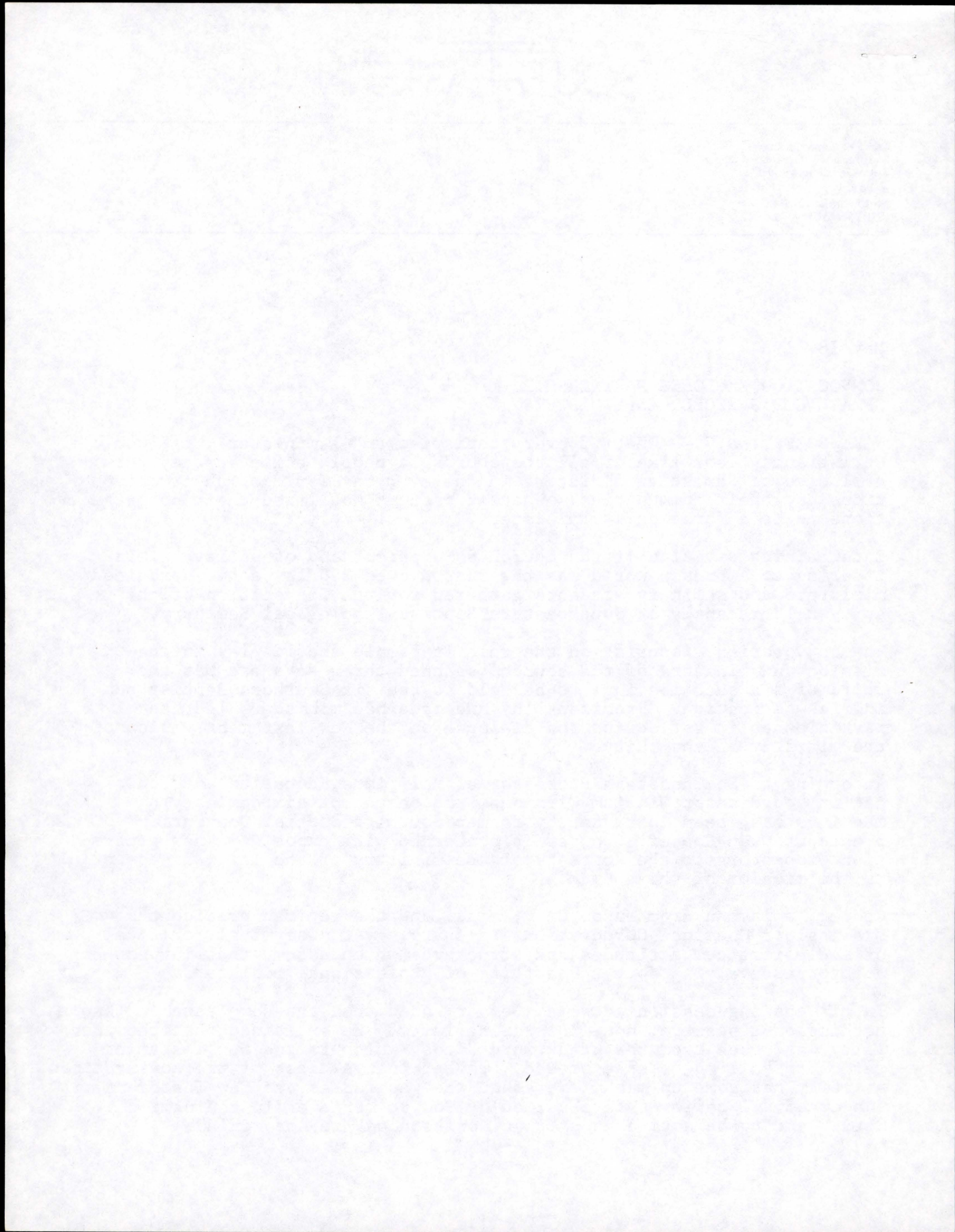
The convocation, focusing on the role laypeople should play in the mission and ministry of the church, spanned three days and was the third of six such meetings to be held at the six Southern Baptist seminaries nationwide. Prominent lay and ordained ministers led the participants in reflection and dialogue on the New Testament vision of the ministry of the laity.

According to Southeastern Professor of Religious Education and convocation coordinator William Clemmons, the series of six seminary meetings has been initiated by former Southern Baptist Convention president Owen Cooper. Cooper is concerned with exposing a new generation of pastors to the concepts of the ministry of the laity as essential to the mission of the church.

Cooper, a layman from Yazoo City, Miss. and the retired president of Mississippi Chemical Corporation, is sharply yet disarmingly critical of ecclesiastical attitudes and structures which assume that laypeople are to passively support the efforts of professional ministers.

In his opening session address, Cooper noted that the New Testament knows nothing of a passive, non-ministering laity. He explained that the word laity was taken from the Greek word "laos" which in the New Testament refers to "all the people of God," rather than a class of the non-ordained, as laity has come to mean. He added that as far as the New Testament is concerned all believers are called by God to minister in the name of Christ and to be active as a "royal priesthood" in the world.

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"I feel the greatest heresy among Southern Baptists isn't whether we agree on a few adjectives we use in relationship to the inspiration of the Bible . . . rather, it is the fact that we have divided [the people of God] into two groups . . . We are not teaching the New Testament role of the laos. We have unconsciously relegated the non-ordained to a second class, low expectation, non-biblical role," Cooper said.

In an extended and insightful analogy between the SBC and an army, Cooper evaluates the effects of the rigid distinction between clergy and laity and warns that the mission of the church, including Bold Mission Thrust, is severely disabled as long as the lay "footsoldiers" remain in camp while some of the clerical "officers" go out to fight all the battles.

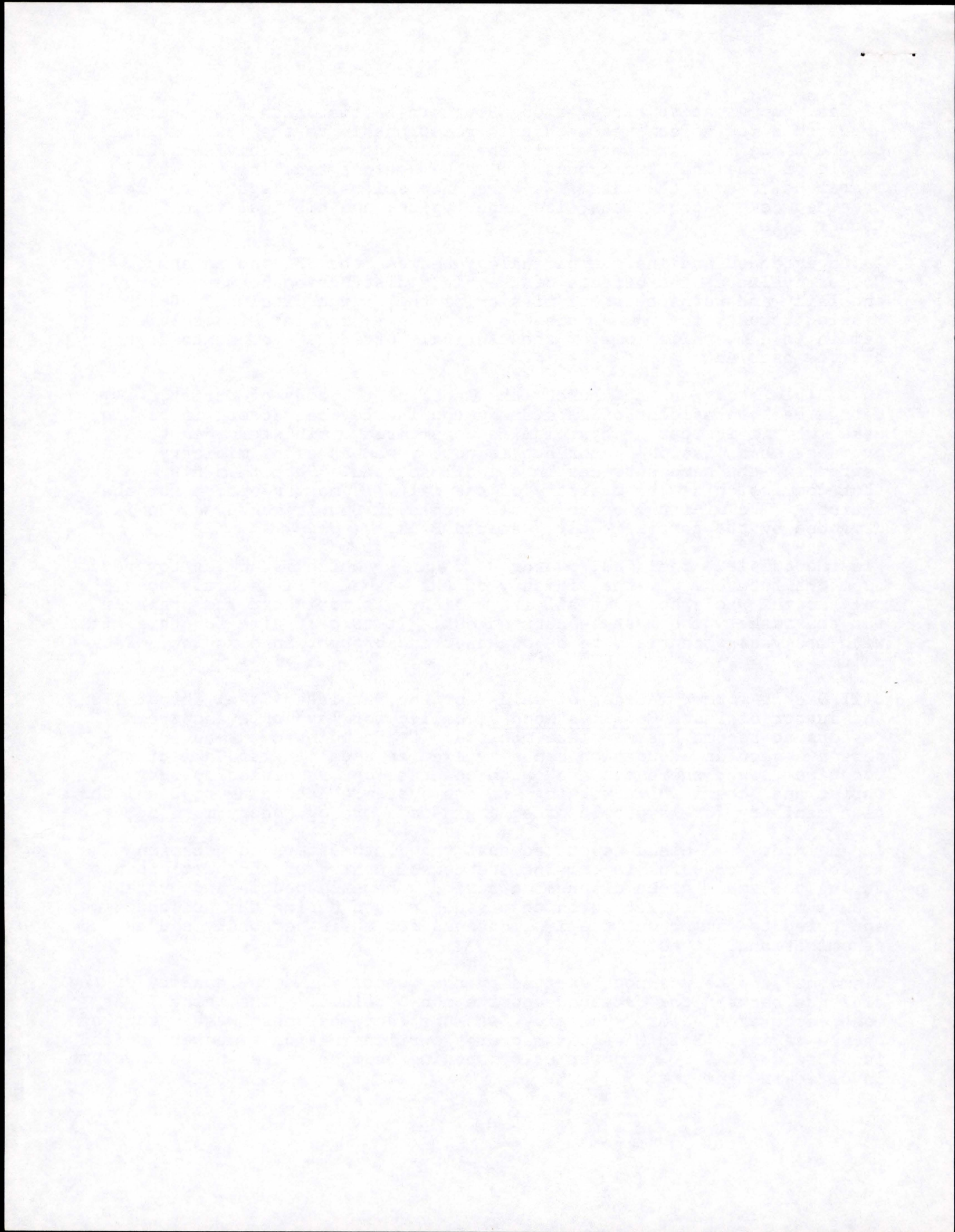
In a Bible study on the church (the laos) as the body of Christ, George Peck, president of Andover Newton Theological School in Boston, asked why it is that a physician is considered a minister when sent overseas as a mission doctor but is not viewed as doing ministry when performing the same services in a local setting. Peck told his audience that commissioning the ministry of the laity is not an option for the church. "The ministry of the whole people of God is mandated, it is demanded by the gospel itself," stated Peck.

"In the complex, ramified, overcrowded society which is coming toward us from the future . . . the ministry of the gospel will be truly possible only as the whole body, in all its variety, is motivated and prepared for the tasks which must be carried out. It is past time for this giant, with its vast potential, to be awakened and brought into action," Peck said.

Bill Diehl, former manager of sales for the Bethlehem Steel Corporation and author of Thank God It's Monday, called for laypeople and their pastors to become "marketplace ministers." He pointed out how a layperson's secular occupation can be viewed as a calling to Christian vocation "right where you are" with concrete opportunities to serve Christ and others while working "in the system." According to Diehl Christian ministry for laypeople often begins at work on Monday morning.

In an interview, Clemmons stated that the Southeastern convocation was especially successful in raising the consciousness of the participants during the small group discussion periods where laypeople and professional ministers reflected on the issues raised during the presentations and tried to hammer out the implications for their personal, church and denominational lives.

Clemmons said he was most excited by the quantity and the quality of the dialogue between the ordained and the non-ordained. "The thing I was most encouraged about," he said, "was the fact that here was a group of people saying, 'Bold Missions captures our imagination--empower us (the laos) to do it . . . empower us by setting us free believing that we are involved in ministry.'"



Clemmons noted that the renewed emphasis and concern with the ministry of the laity comes in the wake of an unexpected and unprecedented surge of laypeople volunteering for home and foreign mission work. Currently close to 100,000 lay volunteers are assisting in mission concerns which, he said, is "unheard of because we've always thought about that as being the exclusive realm of career people." He added that many more laypeople are involved in "para-church" ministries because denominational programs are often at a loss as to how to directly involve laypeople who want to give of their time and talents as well as their prayers and paper dollars.

In a concluding address, Porter Routh, a layman and former Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee, challenged his fellow Baptists to respond to Bold Mission Thrust "right where we are" by seeing lay people as persons with the potential for ministry instead of people with problems.

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