

A History of Resort and Leisure Ministry

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First Thoughts

It is difficult to put a finger on an exact date that resort and leisure ministry began. If one wanted to stretch it, we could say that resort and leisure ministry began back in the serene Garden of Eden of Genesis. Before the dream began at the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention¹, there were many resort and leisure type ministries going on. Not all of them were a part of the mission work of Southern Baptists. It is the purpose of this chapter to attempt to describe the attitudes, the ideas, and some of the circumstances that led to the dream of beginning resort and leisure ministry in Southern Baptist life. For our purposes, we will consider the beginning of resort and leisure work to be in 1965 when the Home Mission Board (HMB) began to solidify an effort to reach people in resort settings.

The early to mid 1960's were a time of change in America. People who had grown up during the Great Depression were now beginning to experience economic recovery. Never before in America had there been such an abundance of earned leisure time on the part of the American laborer. Vacations were in every labor contract guaranteeing almost every employee a specified earned vacation with pay. The 40-hour work week was the norm and there was talk of a 32-two hour work week. Leisure time produced entire industries to provide the necessary equipment to occupy all this free time.

The "hippie movement" along with the "Jesus people" movement was on the rise. It brought about new attitudes about relationships. The sexual revolution was begun with the development of "the pill." Many of the sacred family vacation spots or resorts were being taken over by the hippies, which created a fear of drugs, alcohol, and sex becoming the norm in those otherwise family-oriented resort communities. Resort areas such as Vail and Aspen in Colorado were growing as well as were the beach areas of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

National and state governments were developing more and more campgrounds in national or state park areas. Private campgrounds were also beginning to develop across the country. Because of cheap gas, easy transportation, and more time and money for leisure, Americans were beginning to enjoy their leisure time in a way they had never experienced before. There was also a movement to build flood-control dams on major rivers throughout the country. The lakes thus created new recreational areas for a large population of city dwellers.

Other religious groups had already begun doing some work in resort areas. The Lutheran church, the Presbyterian church, and the Roman Catholic church were all leading groups targeting resort and leisure areas. The Methodist church had produced a small workbook that provided their membership some guidance on the art of camping. It was written primarily to assist church members in how to do camping and get the most out of it. The idea of the current Campers on Mission came from conversations with people involved in camping. Perhaps the most significant ministry going on was the ministry of Warren Ost, founder and director of "A Christian Ministry in National Parks," (ACMNP). Ost was instrumental in helping Southern Baptists understand the whole leisure phenomenon in

post-war America. He had already begun using students from colleges and seminaries as “worker-priests” in national parks.

During this period the HMB began to notice the number of people taking advantage of their new found freedom to enjoy leisure time. Arthur B. Rutledge, Missions Director and Executive Secretary of the HMB, gave freedom to the Rural-Urban Missions Department to explore new and creative ways to spread the gospel in and to resort areas all over the country. Roy Owen, formerly of the Rural Urban Missions department, states that the purpose of developing resort ministry at the beginning was fourfold: “To win to Christ and minister to the workers and visitors in resort settings; to provide Bible study and a good worship experience for workers and visitors; to strengthen Southern Baptists in resort areas and help dissolve any prejudices other Christians might have toward Southern Baptists; and to start churches where possible for the continuing of the work.”

The attitude at the HMB was to be willing to learn from others and to cooperate with others in small ways. The dream was to involve state conventions, associations, and churches in leisure ministries.

In the summer of 1963, Lewis Newman, secretary of the Rural Urban Missions Department of the HMB, was conducting an in-service guidance conference on the campus of the University of Corpus Christi. Arthur Rutledge was also sharing at this conference. After the conference, the two men went to Rockport, Texas, to visit with Wilson Brumley, pastor of the First Baptist Church of this resort setting. First Baptist Church had noticed a large number of people from Midwestern states came to Rockport for the winter months. They were called “snowbirds.” During the winter months the members of First Baptist Church became friends with these visitors and developed ministries to witness and share with them. Except for a chaplain-type ministry on the beaches of Hawaii, there were no overt attempts by the HMB to do resort work before 1964. In May of 1964, Wilson Brumley was invited to the HMB to discuss a staff position in the Rural Urban Missions Department that would develop ways to minister to people through their leisure time. Brumley began this new work in July of 1964. He offered encouragement, direction, and resources to the development of resort and leisure ministries.

Departmental Beginnings

Florida became a priority focus of the new department. Brumley says, “We began by trying to see what could be done in Florida during the spring breaks that brought so many students from northern universities for sun, sex, and suds on the beaches of Florida. We rented motel rooms in beachfront motels and hotels and tried to offer some counsel to the young people who got into trouble with too much of all three of the reasons for being in Florida. Not all students had problems, and those were the ones that usually brought to us the ones that were having problems.”

Ministries were started around swimming pools, parks, or wherever else the young people would gather. Singing groups performed concerts; one of that group would share a testimony. Guitars and banjos took the place of pianos and organs. The new choruses began to be interspersed with the more explicit Christian hymns. Campus Crusade for Christ was also at work on these beaches of Florida.

In the spring of 1965, Brumley scheduled a conference on leisure time in America. The purpose was to create awareness of leisure in America and make a plan to begin ministry in these unique settings. All Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) program leaders that had the slightest interest in resort work were invited. Woman's Missionary Union, Brotherhood, and Sunday School Board were all represented. SBC Executive Secretary Porter Routh and other agency leaders were present. An ethics professor from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was on the program, and missions professors from other seminaries were asked to write papers and share them at the conference on subjects such as: the Bible and leisure, the theology of leisure, and the sociology and psychology of leisure. Ost was the main speaker at this first resort ministries conference. The workbook on camping that the Methodist denomination produced was discussed.

Many people in America were spending their two-week vacations camping in pop-up trailers, tents, and motor homes. They shared their experiences of when they worshiped, how they worshiped, and where they worshiped. It was out of these discussions that Campers on Mission³ had its beginning. As well as an awareness being created and a strategy developed at this conference, it was also concluded that it would be in the best interest of Christianity that the SBC not compete with ACMNP. Rather, it was thought that there should be cooperation between the two organizations in attempting to reach people where they spend their leisure hours. As an outcome of this meeting, Southern Baptists have had a member on the board of ACMNP since 1971. It was also decided that similar conferences should be held across the country.

As resort ministry within the Rural-Urban Missions Department continued to grow, so did its staff. In 1967, Brumley invited John McBride to assist the department in the continuing development of resort and leisure ministry. His responsibility was to develop resort mission programs and field them east of the Mississippi River. He was also to conduct other awareness conferences across the country. McBride was a leader in bringing the HMB to a point of appointing career missionaries to resort settings to begin new work. He also developed the use of student summer missionaries and US-2⁴ missionaries to establish new resort and leisure ministry projects. Ministry projects were begun in Padre Island, Texas; Jekyll Island and Brunswick, Ga.; Ocean City, Md.; North Carolina; and Portsmouth, NH. Other states that had resort projects included: New Jersey, Louisiana, Alabama, and Oklahoma. The beaches of Florida continued to be a major focus with the use of student summer missionaries. In 1969, the first year for these summer workers, 12 students were enlisted as summer missionaries. In 1970, there were 24 appointed and in 1971, 36 student summer missionaries were appointed.

These summer missionaries were given the command to "go and find a way to express your faith to the resort people." Brumley says some approaches were, "coffee houses in many churches and store front buildings by churches in resort areas; singing groups from churches near camping areas on Saturday evenings; Tuesday and Thursday worship services in areas where the business people were busy on Sundays selling equipment and gasoline for boats, fishermen, skiers, and whatnot." This became the new shape of resort and leisure ministry. Brumley goes on to explain, "One of the problems that we faced was that many of the churches near parks and other recreational areas felt that those people ought to be in a church building on Sunday and that the HMB was teaching people to desecrate the Lord's Day by encouraging worship in such a relaxed atmosphere."

Also added to the Rural Urban Mission Department staff in 1967 was Roy Owen, who had been serving as an associational missionary in Colorado. Owen was given the assignment of developing resort and leisure work west of the Mississippi River. New work was begun in the destination resorts of Breckenridge, Lake City, and Telluride, Colo. McBride and Owen worked with state conventions and associations in creating new resort and leisure projects across the country.

The strategy was developed very early that resort ministry would be a ministry in resort areas and not to resort areas. The ministry had to become indigenous. There has always been a strong emphasis on starting new churches in resort areas, especially those considered as destination resorts. Originally there were not appointed resort missionaries. Those people who were appointed to do resort work were appointed in other departments such as the Church Extension or Christian Social Ministries Department. Ministry models were designed in places such as Jackson Hole, Wyo.; Lake Tahoe, Calif.; Gatlinburg, Tenn.; Waikiki and Lahaina, Hawaii; and Sun Valley, Idaho. Even though these models were successful in starting new churches, there continued to be resistance from those who did not understand resort and leisure ministry. Veryl Henderson, Director of Church Extension Ministries for Colorado Baptist General Convention, said, "All of these ministries were designed to start new churches with new approaches because of the type of area and the people who visited there. It took a long time before worship services were considered legitimate. There was a strong resistance because of a perception that resort missionaries were making Christianity easy by taking it to those at play. The attitude of many in the church body was anti-resort missions because it legitimized recreation on the Sabbath day."

Those people who were considered resort missionaries also had their frustrations. They were appointed in a department that did not relate to resort areas and yet they were doing resort work. No one knew what to do with these missionaries. The department they were appointed in could not understand what resort work was really like, so it was difficult to be a strong support for the missionary.

In 1970 a major reorganization of the HMB allowed for resort ministry to be transferred into the Special Mission Ministries Department. Don Hammonds was the director of this new department. In April of 1971, Joel Land was invited by Hammonds to give leadership to resort missions and develop an assignment system for mission youth groups. The Special Mission Ministries focus was on providing short-term volunteers for resort ministry projects. They assigned all of the student summer missionaries, mission youth groups, most of the US-2 missionaries, and adult volunteers. One of Joel Land's great contributions was to move resort missionaries that had been appointed in other departments into the Special Mission Ministries Department. This move created better support for the missionaries from the HMB.

As Special Mission Ministries continued its growth, several major developments occurred. New resort ministry projects were started in major destination resorts across the country. Material for awareness and training was being written. New and creative ways of presenting the gospel in outdoor areas was encouraged. National resort and leisure ministry conferences were being planned. The establishment of resort ministry became a professional career ministry position. Southern Baptists across the country were beginning to hear about resort and leisure ministry through many articles that were being written about those missionaries in resort settings. In the spring of 1979, the first resort and leisure ministry

training conference was held at Grand Canyon. These training events have continued with others being held in Colorado Springs, Colo.; Land Between the Lakes, Tenn.; Hilton Head Island, S.C.; Lake of the Ozarks, Mo.; and Gatlinburg, Tenn. The HMB sponsored these conferences every three years. The purpose was to create an awareness of resort and leisure ministries, to train new people getting involved in resort and leisure ministry, and to provide a time of support and fellowship for the veteran resort missionaries.

Resort Missionary Frustrations

Veteran resort missionaries who had been in the field for several years, began to experience frustrations and problems that were unique to resort ministers. Isolation was one problem that became evident. They discovered that they were usually isolated geographically from large population bases. Cities that offered cheaper shopping were many times too far away or during winter times would be inaccessible due to weather.

Another form of isolation was by job description. The attitude of many traditional churches was that all resort missionaries do is play. Many Christian people would not validate the ministry being done with resort people. There was a lack of understanding of what resort and leisure ministry was about and why it was important. Psychologists tell us that if people do not understand something they will withdraw from it and ignore it. So it was with resort mission work. It was not understood, therefore, more traditional churches ignored it and withdrew from it.

Resort missionaries also began to feel isolated from each other. These missionaries shared a unique calling, a unique ministry, and many times shared a love for those at play and for play itself. A sense of family was created when they would get together at the national conferences held every three years.

Another frustration came as a result of unreal expectations placed on them by the HMB, state conventions, or associations. The normal means of church growth was to look at numbers in church membership and baptisms. Resort areas are very transitional in nature. Therefore, there would be times that the numbers recorded would show growth, but the next month might show a large loss. Also, many times a person might make a profession of faith but was not baptized and so was not considered in monthly reports. Many of the churches that have lasted through the years have been "rebuilt" every four to five years with new people.

Attempts to network with other Southern Baptist churches in more traditional areas also led to frustration. One resort missionary led a person to the Lord. As the new believer went back home, the resort missionary attempted to call a local pastor where the new believer lived. The missionary was met on the phone with suspicion, and no follow-up visit was ever made to the new Christian. Many of these frustrations led to stress that could not be understood by more traditional pastors or churches.

The Association of Resort and Leisure Ministers

In the fall of 1990, the HMB held its triennial resort and leisure ministries conference at Hilton Head Island, S.C. Many of the veteran missionaries that attended this conference were feeling a need for their own growth as professionals and also personal growth. At this meeting the veterans were used to lead conferences. After several years of ministry experience, they had become the authorities in the field. Since they were all leading conferences, little time was left for them to have fellowship together, play together, share

ideas, or even share each other's burdens. As this was discussed among these veteran resort missionaries, the idea was suggested that a professional organization was needed to provide for some of the needs of the veterans.

In January 1991, Bill and Cindy Black, co-directors of Smoky Mountain Resort Ministries in Gatlinburg, Tenn., invited veteran resort missionaries, Bo Simms of South Carolina, Sam and Betty Anne Schlegel of Florida, and Pete Owen of Colorado to a meeting in Gatlinburg. This "formation group" took upon itself the responsibility to initiate the planning and implementation to form a professional organization that would be for resort ministers and those who are interested in doing resort mission work. The goal of this committee was to involve as many people as possible in providing the association's basic design and purpose. This organization would be separate from the HMB while working in close cooperation with them.

In a paper Black wrote entitled *The Case for The Association of Resort and Leisure Ministers* he states:

"The history of resort and leisure missions is a history marked with strong individuals who were not afraid to follow God's call into the secular world of play. Wonderfully creative ministries have developed across our land because of the willingness of these people to invest themselves for Christ's sake in resort and leisure settings. Through the years, however, those of us involved in these ministries have experienced the special geographical isolation of resort settings. We have both struggled with and celebrated in the cultural detachment of leisure lifestyle people. Further, we have contended with the misunderstanding of our work by many in the church. We are strong in our individuality but we have needs in our isolation. For these reasons we have come together in the Association of Resort and Leisure Ministers. In this organization we accept responsibility for growing our family.⁶

Across the country the veteran resort missionaries, feeling a need for growth both personally and professionally, banded together for the first time. September 20, 1991, fifty-two resort and leisure ministers attended the formation meeting for the Association of Resort and Leisure Ministers in Atlanta, Ga. John Ferris, a long time resort minister in Missouri, made the motion to organize as an association and a unanimous vote followed. The time had arrived for resort and leisure ministers across the country to take responsibility for their growth and development. Bill Black was elected as the first president of the organization. Along with him, Christy Hansen was elected vice-president of administration; Bo Simms was elected vice-president of membership; Jeff Wagner was elected vice-president of programs and services; and Randy Cowling was elected vice-president of publications.

The new organization adopted its purpose statement to be:

"Our vision is to encourage and celebrate the revelation of God's presence in resort and leisure settings. As persons who minister in such settings, we join together to enhance the effectiveness of our own ministry and to promote the understanding of resort and leisure ministries. We seek to equip, nurture, and challenge those involved in resort and leisure ministries through the sharing of ideas and resources and by strengthening and undergirding professional and personal growth."

During the first year of the ARLM much was accomplished. The membership grew to 75 people. Three fellowship meetings were held, two newsletters were mailed out, and the membership of ARLM were involved in administrative decisions. A working policy and

procedure for the collection and distribution of resumes was established. Work also began on the standards of recognition and accreditation for members. Finally, ARLM was asked to serve in an advisory capacity for the HMB's 1993 Resort and Leisure Ministries Conference. Bill Lee and Joel Land of the Special Ministries Department of the HMB offered incredible support to the new organization by representing the HMB on the executive, council, and financial assistance committees. The two organizations began to work in concert with each other in providing for the needs of resort and leisure ministers. An agreement was reached that the ARLM could hold meetings in conjunction with the triennial National Resort and Leisure Ministries Conferences provided by the Special Ministries Department. The joining of these two meetings would allow greater participation of resort missionaries due to travel assistance provided to the national conference by the HMB. September 29, 1993, was the first triennial meeting of the ARLM at Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri.

ARLM has continued to grow and take responsibility for its growth. With support and encouragement from the HMB, the association continued to encourage and provide regional ARLM fellowships. Usually these meetings were attached to other conferences that the resort people would normally attend. Fellowship meetings were held on college and seminary campuses and others were held at the Southern Baptist conference centers in Ridgecrest, N.C., and Glorieta, N.M.

ARLM produces professional journals for its membership. A resume file is maintained for those areas that are looking for resort and leisure trained professionals. An accreditation for professionalism has been established by ARLM. Resort and leisure ministry classes are being offered on college and seminary campuses. These classes are being taught by accredited ARLM ministers. More people are familiar with resort and leisure ministries now than ever before. There is greater understanding by more traditional churches. More traditional churches are beginning to reach out in resort and leisure ministries to destination resorts or local recreational events.

Resort and leisure ministers have a family that has been brought together by a greater purpose. Networking among the ministers has continued to grow. Bill Black writes, "In the formation and action of ARLM, there is a bond of community. With great joy, we have discovered that there are other people like us who do the same things we do. There is a sense that family matters (fellowship); that what we do is important (extending the kingdom); that how we do it is also important (professional development); and that who we are is to be encouraged and celebrated (call and meaning). As we have become friends, we have affirmed each other and given meaning to our individuality and community."⁷

Whether one believes that resort and leisure ministry was founded in the Garden of Eden or through the work of people following the call of God into a secular world of play, it must be agreed that resort and leisure ministry has had a strong and inspiring heritage. This heritage has provided a strong foundation for resort and leisure ministry as it is today. As strong as the heritage is, so is the future of resort and leisure ministry. For the most part, resort ministers are strong-willed and highly motivated people who believe in their calling to these settings. They are creative people, unafraid to reach out with the gospel to those people who live leisure lifestyles. They are committed to continuing to reach people in resort and leisure settings.

Endnotes:

¹The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board merged with two other Southern Baptist agencies in 1997 and became the North American Mission Board.

²Questionnaire response to Pete Owen; October 1996.

³Campers on Mission is an organization to bring those who enjoy camping together in ministry and fellowship.

⁴The name was changed to US/C-2 after the formation of the North American Mission Board.

⁵Questionnaire response to Pete Owen, October 1996.

⁶*The Case for The Association of Resort and Leisure Ministers*; Personal papers, Bill Black, 1991.

⁷*Why We Do What We Do*; Bill Black; The ARLM Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1, February 1996.

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