

## BCUs - Baptist Churches by the Bunch

By Lee Burdette Williams

My sister Susan was visiting from New Jersey, and we were on our way to enjoy a day of rafting on the Nolichucky River. We were making our way to Erwin, Tennessee by way of Roan Mountain. Susan had a minimalist map on her lap, trying to determine our remaining distance. "How far on this road?" she asked.

"I think it's another four Baptist churches." She looked at me quizzically. "It's just something I noticed around here, especially on these back roads. There tend to be a lot of Baptist churches, and they're spaced pretty regularly. In fact, I've come up with a unit of distance, the 'BCU,' 'Baptist Church Unit,' to determine distance. So it's like 4 BCUs to the highway."

She raised her Yankee eyebrows in a look familiar to me—that look that members of my family often give me when I do or say anything remotely Southern ("I like vinegar-based barbecue" . . . "NASCAR's not so bad" "I'm thinking about getting a pickup truck" .etc.). "A 'BCU'?" she repeated. "Exactly how large or long is a BCU?"

"Well, around here, where you've got Freewill Baptists, Grace Missionary Baptists, Independent Baptists, Southern Baptists and just plain Baptists, a BCU seems to be about a mile and a half. So yeah, on average, you get a Baptist church about every mile and a half on a road like this." She looked incredulous. "Just watch," I said.

We passed Roan First Baptist, Roan Park Baptist, Fellowship Free Will Baptist and Victory Baptist, and there we were, just about to the highway. "So

it was about four BCUs, or about six miles, just like I said."

"Is a BCU always a mile and a half?" she asked.

"No -- it's kind of a relative thing. Some areas of North Carolina and Tennessee have so many Baptist churches that BCUs are really small, like three quarters of a mile. And it's not just here. When I was driving through Oklahoma, I think I calculated that BCUs are around a half mile there. And there are exceptions to the rule, of course. Like in some towns, there is a First Baptist Church literally across the street from the Second Baptist Church, which always makes me wonder about the fight that led to that split. Was it theological? Political? Was there a fistfight at a church picnic and people had to choose sides? Anyway, so a BCU is really just an approximate average for the area."

She pondered that for a while. "How does an area that doesn't seem too populated support so many Baptist churches?"

"I've wondered that myself," I replied. "On a Sunday morning or a Wednesday night, though, there are always full parking lots. What I've come to realize is that in the mountains, there are more people than you'd expect. In New Jersey, you can stand in a second story window and see dozens of houses in the neighborhood, laid out like Krispy Kremes on a conveyor belt. But here, people's houses are hidden in hollers and over ridges. You can't see them until you're right on top of them, and you're not likely to find yourself right on top of them unless you're very lost or you've

been invited, the latter being much preferred.’

She considered this for a while. “But even when we’ve been in the supermarket or at the movies, there are a whole lot fewer people here than in New Jersey, and we don’t have this many Baptist churches.”

‘Couple of things you’ve got to understand. In New Jersey, people are twice as loud, so if you have an equivalent number of New Jersey residents and North Carolinians, it will sound like you have twice as many from New Jersey. Southerners are just not very loud, unless they’re at a NASCAR race or a tobacco auction. Plus, in New Jersey, one’s personal space is, like, miniscule. Here, people like distance. It’s respectful or something. I think they’re just not used to having to sit thigh-to-thigh with strangers on a bus. And lastly, unlike in New Jersey, just about everyone here goes to church, so you can fill all these Baptist churches, plus some Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Presbyterian and the occasional Lutheran.’

“What about Catholic?” she asked, being one herself.

“Let’s just say that you wouldn’t want your car to break down two CCUs from town.”

We weren’t too far from the river outpost when Susan looked at her watch. “How much longer till we get there?”

“Oh, about 3 STRs.” She sighed in a way that let me know I was pressing the limits of her sisterly affection.

“And what’s an STR?”

“It’s a unit of time,” I said. “It’s the length of time between sweet tea refills at your average southern restaurant.”

“And that is.?” she asked.

“No time at all,” I said, and we turned into the outpost parking lot.  
us.