

# BAPTISTS Today



## Curiosity & Generosity

A CONVERSATION WITH  
BABS BAUGH

page 4



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# BAPTISTS Today

An autonomous national Baptist news journal



**Photo by John Pierce.** Babs Baugh is an art collector, musician and world traveler with a passion for Baptist-inspired freedom.

**Story on page 4**



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*Baptists Today* (ISSN 1072-7787)  
is published monthly by:

*Baptists Today*  
P.O. Box 6318  
Macon, GA 31208-6318

Subscription rates:  
1 year, \$20    2 years, \$35  
1 year groups of 25 or more, \$18  
1 year groups of less than 25, \$20  
1 year Canada, \$35  
1 year foreign, \$50

Periodical postage paid at Macon, Ga.  
31208 and additional mailing offices

POSTMASTER:  
Send address corrections to:  
*Baptists Today*  
P.O. Box 6318  
Macon, GA 31208-6318

(478) 301-5655  
1-877-752-5658  
www.baptiststoday.org

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# Curiosity & Generosity

## *A conversation with Babs Baugh*

**S**AN ANTONIO, Texas — She sings; she travels; she collects art. She is an active member of San Antonio's Woodland Baptist Church and a strong supporter of causes that advance the cherished Baptist principles of freedom.

Barbara (Babs) Baugh's maternal grandfather was a Baptist preacher, a church planter, whose six children were all born in different states. Her late parents, Eula Mae and John Baugh of Houston, were active Baptist lay leaders and generous contributors to Baptist educational institutions and other entities.

Today, Babs carries on the family legacy of generosity and influence that has made and continues to make a decided difference in the Baptist landscape — along with her daughters, Jackie and Julie — through a family foundation.

Recently *Baptists Today* editor John Pierce visited with Babs and her husband John Jarrett at their San Antonio home. The following conversation is adapted from an interview with her.

**BT: What are some of your favorite childhood memories?**

**BB:** Going to my grandmother's house and playing Canasta — with her as my partner. Our opponents were a friend of hers and her daughter.

Mama Nell and I won every hand of Canasta forever because we cheated — and they never saw us. My grandmother used to slip cards to me under the table.

I was named after her. On that side of the family I was the only girl. On the other side of the family, my mother's side, I was the first grandchild. So I had the best of both worlds.

Another happy, happy memory is my mother took me on the bus to the library every Saturday and we read books. And I guess my happiest memories are with my dad. He always introduced me as: "This is my son, Barbara."

He and I used to play baseball. He was a really good baseball player. He would waste his time playing baseball with me. When he got tired of pitching, he'd make me switch and then he'd hit the ball two or three blocks down the road so he could sit down and rest while I ran after it.

He left every morning for work at 4 (o'clock). And he came home about 8 or 8:30. After he had dinner, he would come in and wake me up and we'd play for about an hour. Then I'd go back to sleep.

Mother had to discipline me. He and I would play together unless it was really serious.

At school, if I did not make the grades that he thought I was capable of making, he would write a letter. Once he wrote a very formal letter to me about how he must have

failed me in some way because I was not achieving what he knew I was capable of achieving — which was about in the third or fourth grade. I had to take the letter to school and let the teacher read it and sign it.

The next time that happened, I had made all A's except for conduct. I got a C in conduct. So I got another letter about how anybody can keep their mouth shut.

This time I wrote him a letter back saying that if I didn't talk to the other kids they would think I'm a snob and I wouldn't have any friends. And that I thought it was more important to have friends than to make an A in conduct.

So we stopped letter writing after that.

### BT: When did music come into your life — and what role has that taken?

BB: That's been my whole life. My mother sang in the choir, and our choir director was also our organist: Joseph Evans. Mother took piano lessons from Mr. Evans, and I went with her.

For some reason — Mother was probably a horrible student — he told her that if she would give up her slot for me, he would teach me for free. And I took lessons from him from the time I was 4 until I was 14.

Unfortunately, I have not kept my piano up and can't play a thing. But I love it. All through school I participated in choral things.

I always had a girls' trio going no matter where we were: junior high, senior high, wherever. At Baylor, we had a trio that performed a lot during the year. We also worked in the Southern Palace (Theater) at Six Flags (over Texas) during the summer. That was a great deal of fun.

So I majored in music — music education. I wanted to teach but quickly found out that I'm not a teacher. I like to sing, to make people happy, to make people laugh. And I love choral participation, but I cannot teach.

I'm a great admirer of teachers. Every time I drive by a school I say: "Thank you, Lord, that I'm not in there." And I'm sure the kids are saying: "Thank you, Lord."

But music has been a huge part of my life. It's the way I worship. Randy Edwards, I think, is the finest church musician I have ever known. Our church's music creates worship for a lot of people.

It also inspired me to give scholarship help to students who are real musicians.

A lot of that has been at Baylor, but at other places as well.

I have a wonderful young friend from Costa Rica who is a fabulous pianist. We sort of adopted him. He spends all of the holidays with us. We helped him through Baylor and then put him through North Texas to get his master's in jazz piano.

He is just like having another kid. He was a physics major for awhile but realized that music is what he really cared about.

He's really funny. He will walk into a restaurant and ask if he can play the piano. They'll say, "I guess so." And he'll say, "Then will you turn down the music coming over the loud speaker?" They say, "I guess so."

Then he will sit down and play, and the whole restaurant becomes his. People love to

One of the things I noticed about my parents, that was a little different, was who their friends were. My dad worked with a lot of people that he thought a lot of. They were very fine, wonderful people — but they were friends Monday through Friday at the office.

The real friends, the ones you went on trips with or went out to dinner with or had over to your house, they were all church friends. That's pretty much the same way my life has turned out as well. The people we know at church are our real friends — the ones you can depend on.

Friendships have been really important in our lives. I have a group of women friends we call the "chicken shirts" — you have to be careful when you say that — because we all have black T-shirts with



Castle collection — What started as a single gift from her father has grown into a collection of castles that fills the mantle. Evidence of a deep appreciation for a variety of art styles is seen throughout Babs Baugh's San Antonio home.

hear him play. The girls come over and line up to sit on the bench with him. He's a showman too.

### BT: What are the best things you learned from your parents?

BB: To love God. To laugh whenever possible. To love as many people as possible. To be aware of things that are happening around you. To always be curious.

It's funny the things that you pick up from your parents that, at the time they are saying or doing them, you think I'll never say that. But years later you are saying the same things to your kids.

red-and-white, polka-dot chickens on them.

We travel together, and we laugh together a lot. And we cry together when necessary. It's really wonderful to have friends like that.

But my dad had a lot of friends at the church. When Tom Kennedy was interviewing people to write the book (*From Waco to Wall Street: The Story of John Baugh, 'The Sysco Kid'*), it was so funny. I gave him the names of 10-20 people to start with.

He'd go to them and ask: "Do you know John Baugh?" Everybody responded, he said, by saying: "Johnny Baugh, he's my best friend."

My dad hitchhiked from Waco to Houston when he was 16 — after graduating from high school — because it was the Depression and there was a job there. He had started Baylor but didn't have enough money to stay.

A&P had a job available. It took him three days of hitchhiking. He went to Second Baptist Church the first Sunday he was there because the pastor, Dr. E.B. Thorne, had been his pastor one time at Columbus Avenue Baptist in Waco.

A man came up and said: "Son, I haven't seen you here before. Are you visiting?" My dad said, "Yes sir, I am."

The man asked: "Do you have any friends here?" My dad said, "No, sir. I know the preacher, but I don't have any friends here."

The man said: "May I be your friend?"

It was Earl Hankamer. They were fast, fast friends. Mr. Hankamer died recently.

Mr. Hankamer taught him philanthropy. He also saved his business, but that's another whole story. If you walk the Baylor campus, you'll see his name on buildings. He was an oilman and a real sweetheart.

My dad had another good friend named Harold Calhoun, who was an architect. They were about the same age. Mr. Hankamer would do anonymous gifts and have my dad or Mr. Calhoun do them for him.

One of the things he did was when a deacon in our church died and left a widow, he'd send one of these guys down to see how much was owed on the house and he'd pay off the mortgage. Then my dad or Harold would go and tell the widow: "You don't have to move. The house is yours." He was unbelievable. He really was.

**BT: Did your dad get the job with A&P?**

BB: Yes. He worked at A&P for quite some time. Then he started his own company. He was not quite 30 and told Mother he thought frozen foods was the wave of the future. He said, "If it's not, I can get another job because I'm still young enough."

So he rented [frozen foods] locker space. He made sales calls in the morning and delivered in the afternoon. Mother did all the bookkeeping and answered the phone in their bedroom. When I was out of school for holidays I got to make sales calls with him. We always took poinsettias to the

dieticians and those he sold things to.

He represented Pictsweet Frozen Foods. Birds Eye was the competitor. So in the grocery stores, while Mother was shopping, I would go stand by the freezer.

If somebody picked up a package of Birds Eye green beans, I'd say: "Wouldn't you really rather have Pictsweet? It tastes a lot better." Mother was kind of horrified when she found out I was doing that.

My mother always took care of people who were having emotional problems. They gravitated toward Mother, and she wanted to solve every one of [their problems]. Sometimes she could, and sometimes she couldn't. But she tried.

And, oh, she tried to convince people that Christianity was the only way to live. She even tried to convince a Red Chinese border guard. "Popo" finally yanked her away. The guy was getting ready to arrest her.

She said, "Let me tell you about the Bible," and had a Bible to give him. She was always the missionary.

She made me work in Bible school when I was a teenager. We worked in the Mexican Bible school, the Chinese Bible school and our Bible school.

She always had projects going on. We called her "Dottie Do-Good."

I started bringing home people with problems, people whose parents were alcoholics or their father had left them. I just went through a phase where everybody I brought home was somebody who had a terrible problem.

**BT: You are known as a generous person. What is your philosophy of generosity?**

BB: First of all, you can't out-give God — or anybody. Secondly, "to whom much is given, much is required."

That isn't necessarily just money. That's caring and it's time — very important. It's love. But you do have to give money if you have it.

But you give what you have in abundance to help other people. Because no matter how much you try to help other people, you get more out of it than they do. That's not a good reason to do it. It's simply a result.

You can't out-love anybody. So you give what you have to give. If it's money, that's great. If it's not, it's something.

One of our dearest friends is 93. His name is Dan McLendon, and he was our associate pastor for years and years (at Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio). He never had a lot of money, but he has taught so many of us about hospital visitation. When somebody goes in the hospital, they ask for Dan to come see them. And he hasn't been an associate pastor for 20 to 25 years.

We still want Dan because he knows what to say to be comforting and how to pray. He just makes you feel good. And Dan has tried to teach other people. But that's been his gift, and he's given it to others. That's what we have to do.

My daughters are equal partners with me in the (Eula Mae and John Baugh) Foundation. It is a job — but I really should say a joy. It is a job because you need to make good decisions. But it's a real joy.

Of the many wonderful things my dad did for me, this is probably the most wonderful thing. To allow me to try to maintain what he started. Not with SYSCO, at all. But to maintain the Foundation and to have the joy of calling somebody and saying we can grant their wish for monetary help this year.

I got to do that just this week to a professor of religion who is probably in his late 80s. He wanted to build a scholarship program for Ph.D. students in religion who need to travel to finish their dissertations. When I called him and told him we were able to finish the scholarship fund, he talked for a few minutes and then said, "You'll have to excuse me; I have to wipe the tears away." That's a big joy.

**BT: Let's talk about Baptists a little bit. Why is being a Baptist and helping advance Baptist causes so important to you?**

BB: I often wonder had I been born in Afghanistan, to Muslim parents, would I feel about Islam the way I feel about Baptist doctrine? And what does that mean to me? If I'm really honest with myself, maybe I would be just as defensive about Islam as I am about Baptists. Maybe God works with different people in different ways.

But being Baptist is so dear to me because I see it as a way of being free within my worship. And there is a connection a lot of my friends don't seem to have.

The need for separation of church and

state and religious liberty for everyone is so obvious to me. It's a practical thing and what this country was based upon.

What I didn't mention, when we were talking about music, is how important hymns are. All the praise-and-worship stuff I understand. I get it. I get they like the rhythm and all of that. But in addition to that, our young people need to be learning hymns because there's good theology in hymns — really good theology.

"I Know Whom I Have Believed."

How much better can you get than that?

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." Talk about praise!



"Curbie" the penguin, made from items otherwise cast to the curb as trash, attended a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship movement retreat last April as a reminder that God sees value where people sometimes do not.

I feel real strongly about this. And I feel real strongly about the new *Celebrating Grace Hymnal* that's out. There are some new hymns in there that are just dynamite for a person who cares about music.

Also, Baptists haven't always had the reputation we have now. Unfortunately we have sort of deteriorated in our reputation. I'd love to be a party to cleaning up what other people think of Baptists. I'd like for us to be known as a loving group that cared about people and actually did what the Bible said to do.

Therefore, when you see people who

are trying to keep us from being those kinds of caring Christian people, by diverting our attention, it really kind of grabs you the wrong way. But it makes life interesting.

The problems in our denomination have caused us to learn more about our denomination. They've caused us to be more discerning. They've caused us to read the Bible more; to talk through what we believe more. So maybe it was time for us to ask: "What do we really believe? Who do we really believe?"

It has a lot to do with what our Foundation does. We are much more influenced by knowing who we can trust than anything else.

I think there are times when we do have to stand up for what we believe and point out what, in our opinion, is right and wrong. And we do have to qualify that it is our opinion. Lord knows I've made lots of mistakes in my life, and asked for forgiveness lots of times. But haven't we all?

**BT: You hosted a gathering of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship movement leaders at Callaway Gardens last April — of which I enjoyed being a part. Why did you do that — and did it accomplish what you hoped it would?**

BB: Absolutely! It accomplished more than I hoped it would.

There were things that came up in that meeting that we did not know were going to come up. I think there were some friendships born there. I think there were some surprises. I think people had predetermined impressions of other people that were dashed, and they saw good sides of people they didn't know had good sides.

I was absolutely blown away with the intelligence and the deep thinking, the thought-provoking comments, and the strength to say things they didn't know would be agreed with or not. A lot of people said things that were on their hearts.

When we looked back, it was amazing. That has caused a task force to be started with wonderful people — most I didn't know before. They are working hard.

There have only been two or three things that have happened since my dad died that I know he would want. It was either his thought or God's thought, but, either way, I'm not going to go against one of those.

I just knew from the day that thought (of the retreat) entered my mind it was something we should do. And how we went about it was the way we should go about it: no head table, all round tables, and changing tables with different people all the time.

It just worked. For some reason, the timing was right and the people were right. Boy, we had a lot of brainpower in that room.

We had a bunch of very bright, very dedicated people in that room. Everyone was there because they loved God, and that was impressive to me. They gave up time and energy and sleep, some of them. But it wasn't my idea.

**BT: You are the chair of the CBF 20th anniversary meeting in Tampa next June. Am I correct?**

BB: I am the head of the steering committee. And, you know, even though I've been to meetings, I'm not sure what that means. I think that means when they've done all the work they call me and I get to go: "Yaaaay!"

One of my big hopes for that meeting is that it's fun. I think it's time. We're celebrating 20 years and looking forward to the next 20 years. And I think we are going to have fun.

We've planned some things that are going to cause a lot of smiles and perhaps some new friendships to be born. And I think we ought to go there anticipating that God is going to let us have a time of joy.

**BT: Are there some things you'd like to see happen in Baptist life?**

BB: Sure, there are lots of things. I would love it if we could explain somehow — and let the rest of the world know — what being a real Baptist is. And why, in my opinion, some people who claim to be Baptist aren't. And why some people who are real Baptists are embarrassed to admit it.

The word "Baptist" should mean people who love God and love each other and are filled with joy and are positive and willing to share that joy with everyone who needs it — which is the rest of the world. I also wish we could do what the Bible tells us to do — without worrying about who's going to misconstrue our purpose.

I think we probably need to honor those who've gone before us more than sometimes we do. There are a lot of Baptists doing a lot of wonderful things. **BT**

# Quotation

## “ remarks ”

**“Actually caring about people we encounter online would be nice.”**

—*Religion News Service columnist Dick Staub, author of About You: Fully Human and Fully Alive*

**“So how are you going to be an editor if you can’t say something anybody disagrees with?”**

—*Patricia Faulkner of Marion, N.C., who resigned from the board of the North Carolina Baptist newspaper Biblical Recorder after editor Norman Jameson was forced out by Fundamentalists in control of the state convention (ABP)*

**“Seriously, Christians, if you absolutely must go to court to make a case petitioning for the public display of scripture, ask for the Beatitudes.”**

—*Number 17 in a list of “25 Random Things” posted by Pastor Josh Hunt of Ross Grove Baptist Church in Shelby, N.C.*

**“...We do not intend to act as a judge of other countries or hold ourselves out as a perfect example, but the United States cares about religious freedom.”**

—*Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to reporters upon releasing an annual report on international religious freedom in November (RNS)*

**“There’s a real hostility now, and Christians with very strong and more conservative convictions really don’t seem to be contributing much to a civil discourse and a calming of the heated discussions in the larger culture.”**

—*Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary and author of Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World (RNS)*

**“I want to keep giving the devil hell after I’m in heaven.”**

—*Pastor Johnny Hunt of Woodstock, Ga., on the continuing broadcast of sermons by fellow former Southern Baptist Convention president Adrian Rogers who died in 2005 (Baptist Press)*

**“I grew up knowing ... God lived in heaven — a gated community with pearls — where all the saved Southern Baptists got houses based on the size of their church tithes. God put all the rest of the people (about 6.5 billion) in a place that resembled Phoenix in August.”**

—*Susan Sparks, comedian, attorney and pastor of New York City’s Madison Avenue Baptist Church, in Laugh Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor from SkyLight Paths Publishing (Huffington Post)*

**“Yet again, a product of African-American spirituality has been turned into a term of joking and derision. It’s a distortion, and it’s a sad reversal.”**

—*Glenn Hinson, a professor of folklore at the University of North Carolina, on the flippant use of “Kumbaya,” the title of a spiritual song calling for divine deliverance of the oppressed, to dismiss persons who seek compromise (New York Times)*

**“Only when one forms social networks in a congregation does religious service attendance lead to a higher level of life satisfaction.”**

—*Chaeyoon Lim and Robert D. Putnam, writing in the American Sociological Review about a study showing higher satisfaction among those who share congregational life with close friends (RNS)*

**“In my experience, a Baptist does not ladle out rice in a soup kitchen differently than does a Buddhist.”**

—*Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, telling a congressional subcommittee it is “ethically and legally wrong” for a religious group to discriminate in hiring for a job funded with public money (RNS)*

**We are backed into a corner, and we are trying to be as gentlemanly as we can.”**

—*Selma Baptist Association’s Tom Stacey, who joined other Alabama directors of missions in asking the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board to slow down implementation of new mission strategies tied to the SBC’s Great Commission Resurgence Task Force report (BP)*

**“Relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have a troubled history, but it is our hope that Baptist churches and individuals will be inspired to lead the way in expressing practical reconciliation and forging a harmonious and prosperous common future for all Australians.”**

—*National Director Brian Winslade of Australian Baptist Ministries, supporting a constitutional amendment to recognize Australians of Aboriginal and Islander origin as the nation’s first peoples (Christian Today Australia)*

**“Along with this Ark, I anticipate that there is going to be a rainbow — and at the end of that rainbow is a pot of gold.”**

—*Grant County, Ky., Judge-Executive Darrell Link, anticipating an economic boon from the planned for-profit Ark Encounter project outside Cincinnati that is expected to include a full-size Ark and other theme-park attractions*



# editorial

## Proficient lying, buried heads are not the marks of faithfulness

By John Pierce

**W**hen ESPN began a report on the U.S. military's ongoing dealings with the so-called "Don't ask/Don't tell" policy, I wondered what this had to do with sports. However, the story quickly focused on a female athlete at Yale University.

This young woman came to Yale from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point where she spent two years in preparation to become an Army officer. But having to continually bite her tongue or play make-believe about her sexual orientation wore her down.

Young people routinely talk to one another about romance and relationships, she noted. Being unable to speak openly and honestly, she said, was causing her to become "proficient at lying."

Ironically, a highly respected educational institution with a honor code that calls for honesty and integrity was training one of its good students to become more comfortable in dodging the truth about herself. The code states plainly, "A cadet will not lie..."

More irony can be found in noting that sports reporters, legislators, military brass and justices are openly and widely discussing the issues of equality as related to sexual orientation — while so many within church life remain as silent as possible.

Oh, some church leaders are quick and loud to condemn homosexuality and, too often, all homosexual persons as well. They express no doubts about God's shared perspective on this issue. They denounce homosexuality as a sinful "choice" that can be changed through an adequate dose of repentance and faith.

Yet not one can pinpoint the moment at which he chose to be heterosexual — if indeed that is his sexual orientation. We've discovered that sometimes those who speak out most harshly in opposition to an acceptance of homosexuals are dealing with their own struggles over sexual identity.

On the other side, some more-liberal Christians are wide-open advocates for a full acceptance of gay and lesbian persons within the church. Sometimes they are involved in splinter groups within larger denominational traditions.

But the broad middle — including many Baptists — have sensed (or experienced) the divisive impact that awaits them when this issue reaches the surface and are just hoping it goes away.

Be assured: It won't. It can't. And it must be addressed.

Why?

First, more families are now facing the realities of same-sex orientation. Beloved sons and daughters or grandchildren are revealing their once-secretive sexual identity.

They do not fit the stereotyped promiscuous, protesting or predatory persons unfairly painted by those who preach against "the homosexual agenda" — as if all persons with same-sex attraction think the same and conspire to achieve something more sinister than respect and fairness.

In many families, even those with conservative Christian values, homosexuality has come home. Now the issue has a different, kinder and more familiar face.

Impersonal hostility toward unknown participants in a distant Gay Pride parade on TV creates vastly different feelings than hearing good and gracious sons and daughters share honestly about a sexual identity they did not choose — and the often-accompanying anxieties.

Second, generational perspectives will require serious and soon conversations about the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. While a few younger church leaders in funda-

mentalist training schools will continue the aggression of their mentors, there is a clear generational difference emerging.

Even conservative Christian teens have gay and lesbian friends whom they value — and cannot imagine how others might condemn them or close doors of opportunity to them based merely on sexual orientation.

Conversations might be delayed a bit longer in some church circles but, if prolonged, the dam is going to break. Young people moving into positions of leadership will not tolerate what they see as injustice.

However, the growing openness to gay and lesbian persons is not solely tied to generational concerns. Older adults, in growing numbers, are rethinking long-held perspectives on this issue — especially as it hits home.

Third, justice and equality issues — when given energy — do not retreat. The only question is not if or when, but how constructively these concerns will be addressed.

Dialogue, though surely passionate, must be respectful. Sincere, devout, compassionate, bright people have different interpretations about the proper biblical understanding of and Christian response to homosexual orientation and behavior.

And, for many, there are more questions than answers about this issue. In some cases, granting time — not for stalling, but for ongoing reflection and dialogue — will be needed to avoid irreparable damage.

However, there are no stop signs along the way to a fuller discussion of how churches and church-related organizations will respond. This is not a conversation to be forced, but one to be acknowledged — without buried heads and without a contradictory message of calling for honest living and then asking some members to become proficient at lying. **BT**



# Embracing change:

## *Maximizing the interim experience*

Raise your hand if you love chaos, uncertainty and insecurity. Those who did not raise their hands lose their television-watching privileges for one day for not telling the truth.

**T**he rest of us have identified three of the primary reasons faith communities want to avoid the interim time between pastors.

With the very best of intentions, congregational leaders may immediately form a search committee and begin seeking candidates. This anxiety-driven reaction, however, can lead to less-than-maximum outcomes.

Of course, pastors leave for many different reasons: retirement, going to another church, accepting a denominational call, moving to another non-profit organization, shifting into another profession/career, forced termination, and death, just to name a few. While each of these circumstances is different, all create a sense of not knowing what the future holds.

What if attendance drops, we don't attract new members, finances begin to dwindle or other staff ministers leave? Who will handle hospital emergencies, sit with a family whose loved one is dying, and perform weddings and baptisms?

No congregation is exempt. Every faith community has, or will, experience a time when its current pastor is no longer serving the congregation. So doesn't it make sense that congregations look for a method of addressing this interim in a way that will help strengthen them and make the transition to the next pastor a smooth and positive experience?

Those who did not raise their hands in agreement have lost another day of television viewing!

Since the late 1960s, studies of hundreds of faith communities have shown that the period between senior pastors is a rich and fertile opportunity for congregations to experience significant spiritual growth, both individually and corporately. In order for this growth to take place, however, congregations must be patient and intentional about what they want to do.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the first article in a year-long series titled "Transitions: Helping churches and church leaders in changing times," provided through a partnership between *Baptists Today* and the Winston-Salem, N.C.-based Center for Congregational Health ([www.healthychurch.org](http://www.healthychurch.org)).

### Bringing order from chaos

Scripture underscores the powerful outcomes of living through chaos, uncertainty and insecurity. The first chapter of Genesis reports that in the beginning of time, the earth was formless and empty, with darkness covering everything.

Eugene H. Peterson (*The Message*) translates verses 1-2 this way: "Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness ... a watery abyss."

At this point, God brought about light so there was day and night, the waters were separated so there was sky and dry ground and seas, and thus creation was launched by moving from chaos to order, structure and certainty.

Perhaps the best remembered biblical story about chaos, uncertainty and insecurity is the wilderness journey. This is the story that describes how Moses leads the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt to their new home, the Promised Land.

The modern version of this journey in the wilderness was reframed and named for us in the early 1970s. A major, interdenominational research project known as "Project Test Pattern" sought to identify the best ways for congregations to experience renewal. One of the most surprising findings was that, contrary to popular opinion, the interim time between pastors is the most opportune time for congregations to affect long-term beneficial plans for change.

The work that has grown out of this initial study makes it possible for present-day congregations to re-enact this powerful biblical story during the interim time between pastors.



This potent time provides congregations with the same challenges and opportunities that Moses and the Israelites encountered.

One challenge is for congregations to leave behind the enslaving behaviors and attitudes that keep them looking toward the past and to decide which worthwhile aspects of history, tradition and practice will be carried into the future.

Another challenge is to clarify their mission as the people of God and develop an energetic vision that will call them to better meet the spiritual growth needs of their members in order to enhance their ministry in the world.

Yet another challenge is to see more effective ways to organize present ministry, to develop and incorporate new leadership, and to find more inclusive ways of making decisions. A final challenge is to take a fresh look at the others on journey with you and how you relate to one another, the neighborhood and community, and other partners in ministry.

Faith communities that do the crucial work of asking themselves, "Who are we?" and "Who do we believe God wants us to be?" during the interim period can become stronger and better prepared to call and work with their next pastor.

What is done in this transitional interlude determines whether the new pastor and people will form a solid ministry team. One of the most powerful ways congregations can address this time of transition is by engaging in the intentional interim ministry process.

### Growing through the process

Although the intentional interim ministry process was originally designed to address the period following a long pastorate, it quickly became evident that churches dealing with conflicted issues could benefit as well. Today, thousands of congregations of every size and shape have experienced the benefits of taking time to reflect on five interrelated aspects of congregational life that address the two questions noted above.

This effort is carried out under the

leadership of an intentional interim minister and a group of laity known as the transition team. The faith community usually moves through the focus points in the following manner:

- **Heritage:** reviewing how the congregation has been shaped and formed
- **Mission:** defining and redefining sense of purpose and direction
- **Leadership:** reviewing the membership needs and its ways of organizing and developing new and effective leadership
- **Connections:** discovering all the relationships a faith community builds outside of itself
- **Future:** developing congregational and pastoral profiles

Intentional interim ministry works differently in every setting because it is a process designed by the lay leaders, under the guidance of a specially trained minister. Here are two comments from recent experiences:

“At first I was a little skeptical that we, as a church, really ‘needed’ to go through a special program/process after the internal difficulties we experienced a couple of years ago. (After all, our internal ‘difficulties’ had actually left the church anyway. Therefore, I felt we probably just needed to continue on.) But shortly after our intentional interim came and we began going through the process, I realized how helpful and healing this process really is. I would highly recommend this program to any church that is transitioning from one pastor to another — especially in the unfortunate event of turmoil.”

—TRANSITION TEAM MEMBER FROM A  
BAPTIST CHURCH OF 1,050 MEMBERS

“The transition team has been a valuable experience for the church. We learned a lot about our strengths and weaknesses and have figured out ways to solve them in order to be ready for a new full-time minister.”

—TRANSITION TEAM MEMBER FROM A  
BAPTIST CHURCH OF 200 MEMBERS

To the extent that a faith community works its way through these significant elements of congregational life during the interim period between pastors, it is better equipped to move into the future with new leadership and renewed vitality for ministry. **BT**

—Les Robinson is vice president and manager of interim ministry resources for the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, N.C.

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# Who are **the Baptists** — in Germany?

German Baptists trace their history to 1834, when Johann Gerhard Oncken and six other believers were baptized in the Elbe River in Hamburg, Germany, by the American Baptist pastor Barnas Sears.

**O**ncken worked tirelessly to spread the gospel and plant new churches in Germany, with his passion for mission work being evident in his well-known and widely-adopted motto that “every church should be a mission and every member a missionary.”

That first Baptist church in Hamburg and others that followed gave rise to the Union of Baptist Churches in Germany. Since 1942, after the unification of Baptist, Brethren, and Elim churches, the organization has been known as the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany.

In 1969, after Germany was divided during the Cold War with the erection of a wall separating East and West Germany, Baptists were unable to meet together, and the Baptist Union of the German Democratic Republic (former East Germany) was founded. The union was reunited with the Baptist Union of the Federal Republic of Germany (former West Germany) in 1990.

Today about 10 percent of the churches in the Union are Brethren churches and very few Elim churches remain: the majority of churches are traditionally Baptist.

Since 2003, the headquarters of the Union have been in Elstal, near Berlin. The Union has an Educational Center (*Bildungszentrum*) that offers various programs for continuing education for ordained and lay people in the churches, and includes

the German Baptist Theological Seminary. Churches across the country work together in different fields of social services, missions, evangelization, church development, and church counseling.

The Union also has active Women’s and Men’s Departments of work, and Seniors’ Ministries. The “*Gemeindejugendwerk*,” or Youth Department, emphasizes an “Up to you” concept that promotes the active involvement of children and young people in its diverse programs. Pastors of the member churches include both men and women, and are predominantly educated at the Theological Seminary in Elstal.

International churches of migrant workers, asylum seekers and international students play an increasingly important role in the Union. Recently, a special program for pastors of these churches has been developed, leading toward official recognition of these ministers.

The Union of Evangelical Free Churches



Regina Claas

(Baptists) in Germany is a member of the Baptist World Alliance and the European Baptist Federation. With the assistance of European Baptist Mission International and German Baptist Aid, the union supports and encourages people worldwide. The Union cooperates with other churches in the Council of Christian Churches in Germany, of which it is one of the founding members. The Union is also a member of the Conference of European Churches. In addition, close relationships exist with the Evangelical Church in Germany and its member churches.

The oldest association between churches in Germany is the Council of Evangelical Free Churches, which was founded by the Methodists, the Baptists and the Covenant of Free Evangelical Churches in Germany. Many members of the Union of Evangelical Free Churches work within the German Evangelical Alliance together with evangelical Christians from other churches and in joint operations and projects such as “ProChrist” and the “Year of the Bible.”

Rev. Regina Claas has been general secretary of the Union since 2003. A statement on the Union’s website summarizes its mission as “Let’s get there: [that] is our call and it is the expectation of the missionary work of our union, because we understand that only those who focus on people and respond to their needs can make the good news of Jesus Christ understandable.” **BT**

*Editor’s note: This is the fourth in a series of articles introducing readers to member groups of the global Baptist family. Regina Claas and Julia Grundmann provided the first draft of this article.*

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# Fraud and the *faithful*

## Do religious people make easy targets for scams?

Convicted Ponzi schemer Bernard Madoff bilked billions of dollars out of thousands of fellow Jews, including charities like the Elie Wiesel Foundation and Steven Spielberg Wunderkinder Foundation.

**O**ther major frauds exposed by federal investigators in recent years have targeted Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, black churches and other denominations, from \$190 million lost in a three-year scam promoted by a Christian radio host in Minnesota to an estimated \$1.4 billion conned from thousands of Utah Mormons.

Now three Pakistani immigrants — two believed to have fled the U.S. — are accused of swindling \$30 million from hundreds of Chicago-area Muslims with an investment plan they promised complied with Islamic law.

Is it simply too easy for con artists to prey on people of faith?

"We've seen where it's an outsider who has come into the fold, and we've seen some where it's a person who has been a member of the community for decades," said Lori Schock, director of investment education and advocacy for the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

"We've had cases where people quote Scripture, that the Lord wants you to make money. And when the house of cards comes crashing down, the victims sometimes lose more than just their money — sometimes they lose their faith, and it's extremely sad."

Why do religious groups make such easy targets? For one, a swindler who professes the same faith, or belongs to the same congregation, has an easy time of earning trust, however misplaced. Duped investors, meanwhile, also hesitate to suspect or report

on one of their own, Schock added.

Although the FBI's Utah Securities Fraud Task Force has issued a warning to members of the Church of Latter-day Saints, the SEC hasn't examined whether religious groups are more susceptible to "affinity fraud" — scams that target specific demographics, whether evangelical Christians or the elderly.

But researchers say it's a question worth considering.

Harvard scholar Robert D. Putnam and Notre Dame's David E. Campbell found a connection between religiosity and trust in others in their new book, *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*.

Based on Harvard's 2006 Faith Matters Survey, Putnam and Campbell conclude religious people are viewed as more trustworthy by both religious and nonreligious Americans, and also tend to be more trusting of others.

In an interview, Campbell said the strong social networks found in some faith communities, such as "the tight bonds among Mormons," seems to make them especially vulnerable to fraud.

"The underlying issue, I think, is the question of mutual trust," agreed Nancy Ammerman, a Boston University professor of religion and sociology. "These schemes rely on and exploit that trust, and people within religious communities tend to have high levels of trust for others within their community."

There's also ease of access, Ammerman said.

"Conversations are easy to strike up, and everybody's got a directory or an e-mail list or at least people they talk to at coffee hour. The social connections are there, and that makes it easier for someone with something to sell to get new customers."

Anson Shupe, an Indiana University sociologist and author of several books on

faith-based fraud, said his own research indicates evangelicals, Mormons and black churches are most susceptible, while Catholics are relatively protected by a dense, hierarchical network of clergy supervision.

"Protestants and Mormons tend to believe that there is a sort of straightforward relationship between keeping the tenets of the faith and contributing financially to it, and then reaping rewards in the here and now," he explained. "Some pastors preach a one-to-one relationship between worldly prosperity and attendance to matters of faith."

Members of these groups also believe that God wants them to prosper, and that God wouldn't allow them to be ripped off — especially not by someone who shares their beliefs, he added.

But Earl L. Grinols, a Baylor University economics professor, believes any correlation between faith and fraud stems from a "mistaken" perception that religious people are easily misled. That prompts con artists to disproportionately target them, along with the elderly and the newly affluent.

"It's the ease of identifying and finding people in the group to scam, and that the perpetrators have a misperception that these members are more naïve," he said. "They may tend to view (Christians) as more simple, maybe more easily led."

Schock said potential investors should check with the regional SEC office before handing money over to potential con artists, whether it's a longtime congregant in good standing, a religious leader who has been endorsed by fellow clergy, or someone who promotes an investment that appears faith-friendly, such as church bonds or Islam-compliant loans.

"Trust, but verify," she said. "If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is." **BT**

*Why do religious groups make such easy targets? For one, a swindler who professes the same faith, or belongs to the same congregation, has an easy time of earning trust, however misplaced. Duped investors, meanwhile, also hesitate to suspect or report on one of their own.*

# Mormons lift the veil on official 'handbook' of teachings: Church neutral on Coca-Cola

**S**ALT LAKE CITY (RNS) — For Mormons — or anyone else — who might be wondering, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints takes no stand on drinking Coca-Cola.

The church opposes gambling, guns in churches, euthanasia, Satan worship and hypnotism for entertainment. It also “strongly discourages” surrogacy, sperm donation and vasectomies.

These and other positions are spelled out in what Mormons commonly refer to as “the handbook” — a newly published two-volume set of instructions for regional leaders, bishops and other local LDS leaders.

Until now, the handbook was available only to these church leaders. That still holds true for the first volume, which is available online to local and regional leaders.

That blue volume includes information about counseling with members. LDS authorities worried that if it were widely read, some members “might decide they don’t need to go see their bishop,” said LDS spokesman Michael Otterson. “It made much more sense to reserve that volume for leaders.”

But the church is putting the second, red volume online for everyone. So, for the first time, members and outsiders can read for themselves the church’s position on a panoply of social issues.

“It’s extremely convenient to have it on the Internet,” Otterson said. “Church members can search it easily and cross reference it with other materials. It absolutely makes sense.”

Putting Handbook 2 on the Web “removes the veil of secrecy from a lot of the operation,” says Mormon sociologist Armand Mauss of Irvine, Calif. “That’s healthy.”

Mauss sees the move as part of a “recent trend in the church to become more transparent.”

Such transparency also is reflected in “a new appreciation for candor and openness in publishing Mormon history,” Mauss said, “and in a public approval for academic Mormon studies not controlled by the church.”

All these developments, he added, help to “neutralize the public image of the church as an unduly ‘secretive’ organization in its operations.”

*For outsiders as well as the faithful, the handbook provides a fascinating peek into the administrative, social and doctrinal positions of the nearly 14 million-member faith.*

Julie M. Smith, a Mormon in Austin, Texas, also applauded the move.

“Some people assumed that there was something sinister that the church was trying to hide,” Smith said in an e-mail. “Making the book public shows this wasn’t the case.”

Smith pointed to the church’s position on vasectomies as an example.

“I’ve known church members who were shocked that the handbook strongly discourages vasectomies. They had no idea that there was any policy concerning it,” she says. “If there are such policies, I think it is wise that everyone — not just those with leadership callings — knows about them.”

Making such positions available is particularly important for women, who generally had less access to the handbook, she said. They can “feel more involved and knowledgeable about church policies.”

The move to put Handbook 2 online also may have been prompted by busy Mormon authorities who were tired of answering questions already delineated in the book.

In fact, the book specifically says that

members should not contact church authorities about doctrinal or personal issues. (It says not to ask for their autographs, either.) Instead, Mormons are urged to take their questions to local leaders.

For outsiders as well as the faithful, the handbook provides a fascinating peek into the administrative, social and doctrinal positions of the nearly 14 million-member faith.

Many members hail this new openness and find several statements in the handbook to be surprisingly complex, leaving much decision-making to individuals or couples.

Take birth control. The handbook says it is a “privilege” for Mormon couples to nurture and rear children, but the decision of how many to have is “extremely intimate and private and should be left between the couple and the Lord.”

The book also says sexual relations in marriage “are divinely approved not only for the purpose of procreation, but also as a way of expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds between husband and wife.”

While the Mormon church discourages the use of in vitro fertilization using semen and eggs from people outside the couple, the decision “ultimately must be left to the judgment of the husband and wife.”

As a whole, Mauss says, putting Handbook 2 online should have the effect of helping rank-and-file Mormons feel “inclusion and ownership” where programs and policies are concerned, rather than belonging to the leaders.

The church’s rules and policies, Mauss said, will “seem more like ‘ours’ as a church than as ‘theirs.’” **BT**



# Between Cops and Congress

Clergy's professional reputation hovers in the middle

**W**hat do nurses, soldiers, pharmacists, elementary school teachers, doctors, and police officers have in common?

Americans say they are all more ethical and honest than members of the clergy, according to a Gallup survey released last month.

Slightly more than half of Americans (53 percent) rate the moral values of priests, ministers and other clerics as "very high" or "high." That percentage is a slight bump from 2009, when only 50 percent of Americans said men and women of the cloth are ethical paragons, the lowest number in Gallup's 32 years of measuring professional reputations.

Before the Roman Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal erupted in 2002, two-thirds of Americans had regularly approved of ministers' morals, according to Gallup.

"Stability is generally the norm in Americans' ratings of the honesty and ethics of professions, but Americans' opinions do shift in response to real-world events, mostly scandals, that reflect poorly on a profession,"

Gallup said.

A third of Americans this year said the clergy's morals are "average," and 8 percent rated them "poor," according to the survey.

Bringing up the bottom of the professional ethics list were lobbyists, car salesmen,

and members of Congress.

Results for this Gallup poll are based on telephone interviews conducted Nov. 19-21, 2010, with a random sample of 1,037 adults, aged 18 and older. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points. **BT**

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# Christ and capitalism in 21st-century America

**W**hile unemployment and foreclosures soared in 2009 in the midst of America's Great Recession, the investment firm Goldman Sachs — a major underwriter of the subprime loans that led to the nation's financial collapse, and a beneficiary of a taxpayer bailout — paid its employees an average of nearly \$600,000. Meanwhile, CEO Lloyd C. Blankfein prudently took a pay cut that reduced his annual income to a few tens of millions of dollars.

The numbers reflected the firm's best year in its 140-year history. And quite a history it is. The world's most successful investment bank is described by U.K.'s *The Times* as "the best cash-making machine that global capitalism has ever produced." Asked in 2009 to explain Goldman's success, CEO Blankfein replied that he was merely "doing God's work."

Last year, in the midst of the lingering effects of the devastating national recession, American corporations posted their greatest profits in history, some \$1,700,000,000,000 (\$1.7 trillion). These staggering numbers are aided by government subsidies to corporations totaling hundreds of billions of dollars.

Yet many highly-profitable businesses continue firing workers and/or reducing worker pay, while cheating on their taxes. Through accounting gimmicks and offshore accounts, some 66 percent of U.S. corporations, including some of the largest in the world, pay no federal income taxes.

Conversely, some 15 million Americans are unemployed, 40 million are living in poverty, tens of millions depend on food banks in order to eat, and the United States faces record levels of debt.

Annual corporate profits in the U.S. have now reached roughly \$110,000 for every unemployed American and approximately \$40,000 for every person living in poverty. Corporate profits from 2010 alone would pay off this year's trillion-dollar plus national debt, with hundreds of billions to spare.

It may come as little surprise, therefore, that the wealth gap in America is now the equivalent of many third world nations — and the gap continues to widen. Based on data from a 2007 U.S. census publication, the wealth gap in Florida has plummeted to that of Rwanda, while New Jersey is now equal to

## AN ANALYSIS

Uganda — and none of the 50 states is within the normal range of income distribution that characterizes the rest of the developed world.

According to BusinessInsider.Com, between 1900 and 2005 — in inflation-adjusted wages and well before current record corporate profits — CEO pay rose 300 percent; corporate profits rose 105 percent; production workers' wages rose 4 percent; and the federal minimum wage dropped 9 percent. In the meantime, the richest Americans pay much less in taxes than 50 years earlier, while middle class taxes have risen.

Thus, the 400 richest Americans now own as much wealth as the bottom 150,000,000. The top .01 percent of Americans at the top of the economic scale average more than 1,000 times the average income of America's bottom 90 percent, the greatest disparity in American history. The top one percent of richest Americans own roughly 45 percent of the country's wealth, the richest 20 percent own 93 percent, and the bottom 40 percent on the economic ladder own less than one percent.

Reflecting on the socio-economic landscape of the U.S. in a 2006 *New York Times* article, Warren E. Buffet, the famous investor and one of the richest men in the world, declared: "There's class warfare all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."

Buffet was not gloating. Rather, he was venting his anger at America's current tax structure that redistributes money from the poor and middle classes to the nation's wealthy elite. Thanks to tax laws designed to benefit the rich, Buffet was paying less in taxes than the secretaries and clerks on his payroll. "How can this be right?" he asked.

That was in 2006. In a November 2010 interview on *This Week*, in the midst of record corporate profits, Buffet repeated his plea for the government to tax the richest in proportion to their wealth. "Taxes for the lower and middle class and maybe even the upper mid-

dle class should even probably be cut further," Buffet said. "But I think that people at the high end — people like myself — should be paying a lot more in taxes. We have it better than we've ever had it."

He continued: "The rich are always going to say that, you know, just give us more money and we'll go out and spend more and then it will all trickle down to the rest of you. But that has not worked the last 10 years, and I hope the American public is catching on."

Echoing Buffet, numerous other billionaires and multi-millionaires in recent months have since asked the government to raise their taxes to reduce the nation's fiscal deficit.

Historically, the Old Testament prophets repeatedly warned the nation of Israel about favoring the rich over the poor — and God punished the Hebrew people for embracing greed and rejecting the poor and needy. Jesus echoed the prophets, consistently and frequently warning that God opposes the unjust rich and privileged and demands justice for the poor, needy and oppressed.

In the 18th century, Adam Smith — widely considered the father of capitalism — set forth his economic theories in his famous volume, *Wealth of Nations*. An early advocate of free markets, Smith embraced modern labor, championed the working class, was wary of the greed of the capitalist class, argued for government regulation of corporations, advocated progressive taxation in which the rich paid in proportion to their wealth, and warned that too great a wealth gap between rich elites and common people inevitably lead to national destruction.

Two centuries later, wealthy Americans and corporations remade Smith into an advocate of unfettered free markets. The story of how the history of capitalism was rewritten in such a manner as to pave the way for the current, unprecedented economic disparity in America parallels the story of American Christianity of the past 100 years.

The post-Civil War era brought about what historians refer to as the Gilded Age, a term coined by Mark Twain in 1873 that came to describe the period of rapid economic growth and the creation of the modern industrial economy in the late 19th century. In short, during the last three decades of the 19th century, a handful of American businessmen became very rich even as America's



Bruce Gourley



great cities became home to millions of impoverished workers living in slums. During this era, many affluent Protestant Christians came to embrace a prosperity gospel, while viewing labor unions — often comprised of immigrant Catholics — as undesirable.

At the turn of the 20th century, America, stoked by the selective prosperity of the Gilded Age, embarked upon the era of modern business. Religious denominations followed suit, striving for structural growth efficiency, while establishing massive fundraising mechanisms to support expansion.

In 1905, German political philosopher and sociologist Max Weber penned *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he proposed the “Protestant work ethic.” Reinterpreting history, Weber argued that the Protestant Reformation and Calvinism redefined worldly work as benefiting both individual and society. Rather than the Catholic concept of good works leading to salvation, work became a sign of one’s already-granted salvation.

Yet, theological uncertainty over the identity of the elect led to speculation of the individual’s salvation. Hard work, frugality and self-discipline — the Protestant work ethic — became the outward signs of one’s inner salvation. Personal economic success, in turn, became a measurement of God’s blessing, bathing the emerging capitalist movement in righteousness.

Weber’s Protestant work ethic was soon reinforced by historian Richard H. Tawney, who in 1926 published *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, making an even stronger argument for the marriage of Christianity and individual, financial self-sufficiency. In a parallel development, the economically prosperous ’20s witnessed the rise of a movement by wealthy Christian businessmen to reframe Jesus as the world’s first business executive.

Once appropriated as a teacher of wealth and advocate of unbridled capitalism, the American Jesus was never the same. Following the stock market crash in 1929 and during the early years of the resulting Great Depression, many wealthy Christian business owners, buttressed by Weber’s Protestant work ethic and perceiving wealth as a sign of God’s favoritism, positioned themselves squarely against the labor movement.

Proclaiming that communist sentiment led employees to demand higher wages, American corporations — frequently led by executives who claimed the high moral and religious ground — fought against workers,

often resorting to violence. Many privileged American Christians sided with corporations, creating an even greater gulf between poor, working-class Christians and more prosperous believers.

This religious socioeconomic tension, however, in the coming decades was largely resolved as the privileged class shifted popular Christian sentiment to their side by focusing on fears of an encroaching “godless” communism and worker socialism. As a result, to this day conservative Christians typically oppose labor unions. Jeff Sharlett chronicles the 20th-century history of Christian anti-union views in *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*.

Meanwhile, in the 1950s Adam Smith was reborn as an advocate of unfettered free markets, his advocacy of worker’s rights and regulated markets discarded and largely forgotten. Today, Weber’s “Protestant work ethic” yet defines popular American Christianity, as few Christians express outward concern about the monumental economic disparity in America.

The Religious Right long ago incorporated wealth and unfettered free markets into their theological and political platforms, and Christian leaders routinely equate Christ and the New Testament as advocates of capitalism and unfettered free markets.

Capitalism stands as the “inevitable product of biblical law,” Christian Theocrat Gary North argues in his 1987 volume, *Inherit the Earth: The Biblical Blueprint for Economics*. North’s teachings are common in Christian schools, within the Christian homeschooling movement, and within the growing Christian nationalist movement.

The alliance of Christ and capitalism is such that in 2010, when the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) asked Delta Air Lines for increased pay and better working conditions for flight attendants, Delta CEO Richard Anderson (who earns more than \$8,000,000 annually) called a company meeting in which he blasted the AFA as being “un-Christian” and “immoral.”

Since at least the 1950s, a gospel of wealth and prosperity has been preached from many of America’s most notable pulpits. In September 2010, the Southern Baptist Convention’s LifeWay teamed with *Outreach Magazine* to produce an analysis of America’s largest and fastest-growing churches. Many of the largest congregations openly embrace a gospel of prosperity, claiming that Christ desires for his followers to live in luxury and

extravagance. Many megachurch pastors throughout America teach and model that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing.

Indeed, the American Christian preoccupation with the righteousness of individual wealth invokes hard questions. Why do many American Christians today view Christ as the CEO of American capitalism — a capitalism that picks the pockets of the poor in order to further enrich the wealthy elite?

Why have notable 20th-century developments — Weber’s “Protestant work ethic” theology, the creation of the corporate Jesus, Christian businessmen’s scapegoating of labor unions as communists, the makeover of Adam Smith, and the mainstreaming and celebration of a prosperity gospel — collectively equated wealth with godliness and dismissed poverty as the fruit of slothfulness? And why is the pursuit of wealth — rather than a striving for mercy and justice — commonly preached from Christian pulpits?

Richard T. Hughes, professor of religion at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, in his recently-published *Christian America and the Kingdom of God*, offers a penetrating look at the Christian nationalist movement, arguing that America — buttressed by a popular, civil version of Christianity foreign to the Bible and Jesus — has become a nation of religiously-induced greed, materialism, injustice and violence.

Or said another way, unfettered capitalism may have become the altar at which much of modern American Christianity worships. Certainly, Christ was not a cheerleader for riches or for the pursuit of wealth. Clearly, many Christians in America have been compelled to give Jesus — and the gospel — an extreme makeover.

For those of us who are affluent American Christians (as are many of us, compared to the world’s citizens), the cause of Christ — mercy and justice — beckons. Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, advocated an ethical, principled capitalism that disallows a large wealth gap between poor and rich.

Can Christ and capitalism in 21st century America be reconciled? The jury is still out. **BT**

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# German Christians fight for right to home-school

FRANKFURT, Germany — After police barged into the Busekros family home in Bavaria, the family's 15-year-old daughter, Melissa, was placed in a psychiatric facility, and later long-term foster care.

**T**he police, the girl said, told her she had been brainwashed by her conservative evangelical parents, who home-schooled her. "They never even tested me to know for sure that I had a mental problem," said Busekros, now 19.

The moment Busekros turned 16 and could legally choose where she would live, she slipped through a window at her foster home and returned to her parents.

Earlier this year, Elke Schupp missed a court date to answer charges of home-schooling her two young boys. Later, when a police car with lights flashing pulled up behind her on a German highway, Schupp said, she panicked and slowed down long enough to send her boys running off into a forest.

When police caught up with them, she said, she lost custody for good.

"I told them I wouldn't home-school again," said Schupp, a nonreligious woman who said she simply wanted to nurture her children on her own, without state interference, "but they don't believe me."

In Germany, home-schooling is a crime so serious that families who ignore the law have been fined into poverty, and parents have served jail time. Some families have staged stand-offs against the police, or hid their children with other families.

The home-schooling movement is a mix of religious conservatives and nonreligious families — some call themselves "un-schoolers" — who embrace a barefoot back-to-nature lifestyle that shuns traditional schooling.

Both want the practice legalized, but some religious families worry the movement's anti-establishment wing gives home-schooling a bad name and harms their bid for acceptance.

"If the majority of Germans see these alternative home-schooling families, they wouldn't accept home-schooling," said Uwe Romeike, a conservative Christian who, with his wife, Hannelore, home-schools his five children. "People would think that they are weird, or at least that they look weird."



Jurgen Dudek and his wife Rosemarie have been fined and sentenced to three months in jail for home-schooling their seven children. RNS photo by Krista Kapralos.

Earlier this year, the Romeike family was granted political asylum in the U.S. when a federal judge in Tennessee decided that the family was persecuted by the German government for teaching their children at home.

In many ways, the Romeikes fit the standard profile of German home-schoolers: Conservative, evangelical Christian, and opposed to sex education, evolution and fairy tales, which in Germany are often built around witchcraft or paganism.

Germany is one of just a handful of nations that bans home-schooling. While home-schoolers argue about whether the constitution expressly forbids it, a Hitler-era law gave states the right to take custody of children who don't attend school.

For many Germans, going to school is just as much about social integration as it is about education.

"Education is a social process," said Ludwig Unger, a spokesman for the education ministry in Bavaria, Germany's largest state. "In classrooms there are 20 or 30 people, and they come from different families with different cultural and social backgrounds, different religious backgrounds, and they have to learn tolerance. Therefore, it is necessary that they visit school."

Even private religious schools must follow the same state-approved curriculum that is used in public schools.

People involved in the movement estimate there are 1,000 children or more who learn at home, and most of those families operate underground.

Each German child is registered with the

government at birth, so when the child is nearly 6 years old, school leaders already have a list of children who must enroll.

To avoid getting caught, some families tell school officials they've sent their children to foreign boarding schools, or say the kids are enrolled in distance learning programs. Some families convince local school principals to not report them.

German officials say there are only a few families who home-school, and many are religious radicals, or as Harald Achilles, a spokesman for the education ministry in the central state of Hesse put it, "fundamentalists."

But not all home-schoolers choose to break the law for religious reasons. Stephanie Edel, who runs a website for German home-schoolers with her husband Jan, chose home-schooling so she could spend more time with her children and give them a more relaxed learning environment.

Though the movement has matured, with websites, e-mail lists and communal events for home-schooling families, a vast ideological gap persists between Christian and non-Christian families.

Standing barefoot in the center of Stuttgart, 22-year-old Immanuel Wolf handed out leaflets to passersby that listed the names of famous Germans who, like him, had learned at home. Growing up, Wolf said he spent his days bounding through forests and sharing stories with his grandfather.

"We're not religious," he said. "We just want to be close to the earth. The world is so big, and there is so much you can do. Why spend all day in a classroom?" **BT**

# 2010 Bible Studies

These lessons follow the adult Formations studies from Smyth & Helwys Publishing [www.helwys.com](http://www.helwys.com)

Feb. 6, 2011

## Unauthorized prophets

Numbers 11:10-15, 24-30

Have you ever been so fed up from a day filled with irritations that you turned to your spouse, your boss or someone who just happened to get in your way, and just gave them a verbal blasting? Have you ever been fed up with God, and prayed such an honest prayer that you kept one eye peeled for lightning bolts even as you prayed?

### Of praying ... (11:10-15)

Today's text begins with just such a prayer. When Moses unloaded on God (usually called "Yahweh," or "LORD" in these verses), he complained that God had saddled him with such a massive band of miscreants as the rebellious Israelites. Moses accused God of mistreating him, dared God to put him out of his misery, and insisted that death would be sweet release from his current burdens — not the sort of prayer one might expect from a spiritual leader.

By the time we reach Numbers 11, Moses' tenure had been a rocky one. The people had been slow to believe, and the celebration following their deliverance from Egypt was short-lived. Days and weeks in the wilderness led to persistent complaints about the lack of food and water. When God provided the miracle of manna, they found it boring and bland. After entering a covenant relationship with God at Mt. Sinai, they immediately fell into apostasy. In the first few verses of Numbers 11, the people's griping reached such a point that the writer says God expressed divine anger by torching some of the outlying tents. As usual, it was Moses who heard the complaints (11:1-3).

After being subjected to more whining about the "good old days" in Egypt (11:4-9), Moses was fed up. As his fellow Hebrews blamed Moses for their trials, Moses blamed God for putting them into his care. His

boldness reminds us of Elijah's painful prayer in 1 Kings 19:4, of Jeremiah's broken complaints in Jeremiah 15:10 and 20:14, of Job's plaintive plea in Job 3. The burden of spiritual leadership can be extremely heavy.

God did not fry his impudent servant, but heard Moses' prayer with patience and compassion. Instead of condemning Moses' honest expression of anger, God instructed Moses to call out 70 elders to assist in leadership, promising to bless those who would help to share the load with some of the same spirit Moses experienced (11:16-17).

God expressed anger, but not at Moses. Moses was guilty of nothing but speaking from the heart. God respects an honest prayer, however disrespectful it may appear to be, far more than pious platitudes.

*Reflect: Do you think the Israelites' complaints were justified? How about Moses' complaints? Was he guilty of sacrilege in accusing God of having mistreated him? Have your prayers ever been marked by complaints?*

### ... and prophesying (11:24-30)

At God's instruction, Moses called for 70 representative elders to come and surround the tent of meeting. As other Hebrews watched, they saw a cloud descend on Moses, then heard the gathered elders begin to "prophesy." The form of the verb suggests that the men were speaking ecstatic utterances rather than rational speech, and the text notes that "they did not add," which seems to suggest that it was a one-time event. Having received the sign of spiritual authority, the men could go back to the camp and assist Moses in settling quarrels and other issues that arose among the people.

The number 70, as is often the case in scripture, is probably to be understood as a round number, rather than an exact one. In verse 26 we learn that two other men had been registered (literally, "among the written"), but had not gone out to the tent. The circumstances keeping them from the tent of meeting

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Written by Tony W. Cartledge, associate professor of Old Testament studies at Campbell Divinity School and contributing editor of *Baptists Today*



are not described: perhaps they were ill or ritually unclean. Despite their distance from the sacred soil, however, they also gave evidence of having been touched by God's Spirit, and began to prophesy where they were, within the camp.

Joshua, Moses' chief assistant, expected Moses to be displeased and suggested that he order the men to stop. Moses did not feel threatened, however, and declared a wish that Yahweh's Spirit would touch all of God's people.

The story is reminiscent of Mark 9:38-41, in which Jesus' disciples called for him to chastise a person who had been casting out demons in Jesus' name even though he was not among the disciples. Jesus declined to criticize, however, insisting that one who showed such evidence of the Spirit could hardly be working against him.

Even those who believe they are doing God's work can be subject to jealousy, resenting the work of others who also work in God's behalf. Moses' response to Joshua and Jesus' response to his disciples suggest there is more than enough of God's Spirit to go around, and when believers see evidence of the Spirit at work, it is cause for celebration, not complaint.

*Reflect: Have you ever felt jealous of someone else who dared to do the same spiritual work that you do, perhaps more effectively? Could this text inform the common contemporary admonition that Christians should be sensitive to where the Spirit is working, and get on board?*

Feb. 13, 2011

## Bold spies

Numbers 13:1-2, 25-33; 14:5-10a

Young Walter toyed with his cell phone as he pondered his next move. There was this girl, and he liked her a lot, and he wanted to ask her out. But, he'd never been on a date before. He was unsure of himself, afraid of rejection, intimidated by the confidence he saw in Katie's



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easy smile and casual conversation with others. He tried to dial her number, but could not bring himself to actually talk to her. He started pecking out a text message, thinking perhaps potential rejection would be easier to bear in print, but he chickened out and hit “cancel” rather than “send.”

Walter knew in his heart that dating Katie could bring joy beyond imagining, but he never found out. He never called, never sent a text. He admired Katie from afar, but remained a prisoner of his fears.

### A closer look (13:1-2)

As the Israelites made their way from Egypt, through the wilderness, and toward the promised land of Canaan, they complained all the way, often erupting into outright rebellion. From the “Wilderness of Paran,” a region in the northern part of the Sinai peninsula, Moses called for a representative from each of the 12 tribes to go and spy out the land. It was important to learn where the fortified cities were, where the best farmland could be found, and what natural resources were available (13:17-20). With such a caravan of old and young, it was likewise important to learn the lay of the land and the best roads for travel.

As the “spies” were chosen, Moses knew it was important that they be reputable men who were respected by others. Thus, Moses insisted that each scout be among the leaders in his tribe.

*Reflect: Have you ever been on a study committee to consider a new church program, ministry or building project? Are there ways in which that responsibility was similar to the scouts’ spying out the land?*

### A mixed report (13:25-33)

The men probably did not attempt to travel in secret, but roamed the land as sojourners over a period of 40 days, working their way from the southern Negev to as far north as Dan, at the northern border of what would later become the land of Israel (11:21-24). They saw amazing things and brought back impressive samples of produce from a land that, in their words, “flows with milk and honey.”

Though united in their praise of the land’s fertile attractiveness, the men were divided about whether the Israelites could conquer it. The cities, already sitting atop tall hills and with heavily fortified walls, looked impregnable. Furthermore, some of the residents appeared to be like giants. The Anakim, or

“descendants of Anak,” were thought to be descended from the Nephilim (fallen ones), the purported progeny of male angels who had come to earth and taken “the daughters of men” as wives (Gen. 6:1-4).

Although Caleb spoke up to express confidence in a sure victory, the majority report was of intimidation and fear before the land’s inhabitants: “to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them” (13:33).

*Reflect: Have you ever felt that a task was so large that you were afraid to try it, or so intimidated by a person that you dared not confront him or her, even when it needed doing?*

### A lost generation (14:5-10)

The author portrays the Israelites as remaining true to their mistrustful and fault-finding nature. Ignoring Caleb’s confident challenge, they bought into the majority report from the spies, believing that any invasion of the land would be hopeless. Moses and Aaron responded by prostrating themselves in apparent grief over Israel’s unbelief, while Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes as a sign of mourning.

They called the people to trust God and have confidence that they could take the land, rather than rebelling in disbelief. “The LORD is with us,” they insisted: “do not fear them.”

But the people remained in fear, and refused to go forward. Fearful that God might destroy the stubborn people altogether (vv. 11-12), Moses pleaded that the people might be forgiven (vv. 13-19). Yahweh responded with a proclamation of forgiveness, but also declared that the entire generation of those who left Egypt — with the exception of Joshua and Caleb — would have to die out before a new generation arose that would be ready to believe and act on God’s promise. God had delivered the people from slavery in Egypt, but they remained in bondage to their own fears, creating for themselves an empty future.

*Reflect: Are there ways in which you remain enslaved by fear or habit, uncertain or unable to pursue opportunities God lays before you? Are there phone calls or visits you need to make?*

Miriam in the first verse and his brother Aaron in the last. In between, the aging leader is swamped by a rebellious and unhappy host of Israelites, he lets his temper lead him into disobeying God’s command with painful results, and his diplomatic efforts toward Edom fall on deaf ears. It was a hard time in Moses-land.

### When leaders fall (20:1-13)

As we saw in last week’s lesson, the entire population of Hebrews, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, had proven so unbelieving that God had condemned them to die in the wilderness without reaching the Land of Promise (14:5-10). Miriam’s death in verse 1 brought that divine pledge home to Moses. Although Miriam had once sided with a faction that rebelled against Moses (12:1-16), through most of the narrative she was a loving and loyal older sister who helped to save Moses’ life as a boy and to support his work as a man. Moses would certainly have felt deep sorrow and an empty place upon her death.

Moses’ grief was compounded when the people found themselves short of water, short of food and short of temper. They complained to Moses, reminiscing fondly about the abundance of food and water in Egypt, and blaming him for leading them into a barren wilderness.

When Moses and Aaron prayed at the tent of meeting, which housed the Ark of the Covenant and other holy objects, “the glory of Yahweh appeared to them” and instructed Moses to take “the staff,” gather the people at a particular place (the Hebrew word suggests a rocky cliff face), and in company with Aaron, verbally instruct the rock to produce water.

Evidence suggests that God did not intend for Moses to take his own familiar staff, but to use Aaron’s rod that had budded as proof that God had chosen him to lead the priests (17:8). The staff had been left with the Ark of the Covenant, over which God’s presence was thought to dwell, as a reminder and warning to potential rebels (17:10). The text reads “take *the* staff” instead of “*your* staff” and notes that Moses “took the staff from before the LORD” (20:20), so we are probably to assume that he was holding Aaron’s sacred staff when he stood before the people.

There, instead of simply speaking to them and declaring Yahweh’s willingness to provide water, Moses chose to harangue the

Feb. 20, 2011

## An irate leader

Numbers 20

Have you ever had a period when everything went wrong? That’s the sort of scene we find in Numbers 20: Moses is bereaved of his sister



people for their rebellious lack of faith, concluding “*shall we bring water for you out of this rock?*” (v. 10, italics added). Acting on his apparent anger, Moses then struck the rock face — twice — and water began to gush in sufficient quantity to provide for all the people and their livestock (v. 11).

The sandstones found in mountains of that region soak up the rare rains and act as standing reservoirs as the water percolates through the porous stone, usually finding an outlet on the lower slopes. Moses could have gotten lucky and cracked the rock at a place where water was near the surface, thus bringing glory to himself. As Raymond Brown has noted, though, “Only God could make a word into a waterfall” (*The Message of Numbers* [Inter-Varsity Press, 2002], 179).

For once, famously obedient Moses chose to disobey God’s clear command. If he was using Aaron’s sacred staff to hit the rock, the offense could have been even more serious. The people got the water God had intended to give freely, but they also got a tongue-lashing, while Moses got the glory. God then announced that Moses and Aaron, like the unbelieving common folk, would also be denied entrance to the Promised Land. The place name “Bitterness” (Meribah) reflects not only the people’s bitter spirit of rebellion, but also the bitter sentence pronounced on Moses and Aaron.

*Reflect: Have you ever taken a position or performed a service that was ostensibly for God, but was in reality designed to draw attention to yourself or build up your reputation? Have you known someone who claimed to speak for God, but did so with such anger that the witness was lost?*

### When leaders fail (20:14-21)

Successful diplomacy has the potential of bringing great prestige to a leader, but when it fails, it can bring a disastrous drop in approval ratings.

Israel had failed in an earlier attempt to enter the hill country of Canaan from the south (14:39-45), so Moses sought to lead the people eastward and then north through the territory of Edom. He sent envoys to the king of Edom, appealing to him as “your brother Israel.” The tradition of kinship between Israel and Edom goes back to the stories of Jacob, whose sons begat the 12 tribes of Israel, and Esau, who moved eastward and founded the nation of Edom (Gen. 36:1, 8,

19, et. al.).

Moses promised that the Hebrews would not stray from the main highway or take anything from roadside fields, but the king refused passage. In an apparent second attempt at diplomacy, Moses promised to pay for any damages the people might cause, but the Edomite leader was unmoved, sending a large force of armed soldiers to block the way and forcing Israel to turn back.

*Reflect: What happens in your church when plans don’t work out? Are leaders allowed to try new ideas, even if they fall flat, or do they get blamed for failing?*

### When leaders die (20:22-29)

Can you imagine climbing a mountain, full knowing that death awaits at the summit? That is not what we typically think of as an appealing “mountaintop experience.”

Prevented from proceeding through Edom, the Hebrews turned back into the wilderness. At Mount Hor (presumably in the same general area as Kadesh Barnea), God announced that Aaron’s time was up, and instructed him and his son Eleazar to accompany Moses in scaling the mountain. There, in full view of the Israelites, Moses transferred the high priestly vestments from Aaron to Eleazar. Aaron conveniently died on the spot, leaving his son as the new high priest.

The respect shown to Aaron is seen in the narrator’s note that the people mourned for him for 30 days, far longer than the traditional seven-day period of mourning.

*Reflect: If you knew that you would die at a certain time, would that change how you lived in the meantime? Even though Aaron had made multiple mistakes, he was still highly honored in death. How do you think people will remember you?*

Feb. 27, 2011

## An unexpected prophecy

Numbers 22:36-23:12

Do you ever feel cursed — or blessed? We often overlook the power of words, not in the magical sense of a sorcerer or witch pronouncing a curse on a victim, but in the everyday comments we make to each other.

Children, especially, are subject to feeling blessed — or cursed — by parental statements that write scripts for self-understanding. Children who know their parents believe in

them and their abilities are blessed. Those who are told they are lazy or hopeless live under a curse. Words have power.

### The rule of the curse (22:3-40)

People of the ancient Near East had no doubts about the power of the spoken word. Indeed, words of promise apparently played a role in turning Israel’s fortunes about. As we come to Numbers 22, the people of Israel are no longer the defeated and defeatist masses who had no hope of inheriting the Promised Land.

After being embarrassed by the king of Edom (20:14-21), they met the Canaanite king of Arad, who also confronted them with military force. This time, however, the Israelites united in making a vow to God, promising to destroy all potential booty as an offering to God if only the Lord would fight for them and give them the victory (21:1-3).

The words of the vow appear to have prompted a turnabout in Israel’s confidence. Despite continued complaints (21:4-20), the Israelites followed Moses’ lead until they found themselves in the heart of the Transjordan. When Moses asked for permission to pass through land controlled by the Amorite king Sihon, he refused, but this time the Israelites did not take “No” for an answer. Emboldened by earlier success, they defeated Sihon and occupied his territory (21:21-32), then continued advancing northward, conquering fertile lands of Bashan from King Og (21:33-35).

The king of Moab took notice, and was afraid.

The accounts found in Numbers 22-24 fit somewhat awkwardly into the narrative, because Moses and company had already bypassed Moab. They had left settlers behind along the way, however, including some near Moab, in the formerly Moabite territory they took from King Sihon.

Feeling vulnerable, the Moabite king Balak sought divine aid by promising a small fortune to a powerful Aramaean sorcerer named Balaam in return for his willingness to pronounce a curse on Israel, to weaken them.

Balaam lived some distance away, in northern Syria, and his approach to Balak is one of the Bible’s more delightful stories, including a series of conversations between Balaam, Balak’s messengers, Balaam’s sharp-eyed (and sharp-tongued) donkey, and “the angel of Yahweh” (22:1-35). Surprisingly,



though Balaam is portrayed as a pagan prophet, he speaks freely of Israel's God, using divine names such as "Yahweh," "Elohim," "El" and "Shadday."

The first interchange between the king of the Moabites and the master of curses did not go smoothly. Balak complained that Balaam had been long in coming, despite his promise of substantial payments. Balaam replied that curses are not automatic: he could only pronounce a curse on Israel if God allowed him to do so.

*Reflect: Can you remember a turning point in your life in which words played a significant role? Consider, for example, "I do" or "I promise to uphold..." or "I will never do that again."*

### Preparing a curse (22:41-23:3)

Scholars debate whether we should think of Balaam as a prophet, a diviner or a sorcerer. King Balak called him a diviner (one who uses various techniques to tell the future), and spoke paying divination fees, but it's clear that his intent was for Balaam to curse Israel: that's the work of a sorcerer. Balaam, however, insisted he could not speak until he received a word from the Lord, as a prophet would.

Balak hoped that taking Balaam to the "high places of Baal" (Bamoth-baal) might inspire him to get in a cursing mood. Balaam's insistence that they build seven altars underlines the significance of the moment, as the number seven indicates completeness in the biblical world.

On each of the seven altars, the men offered a bull and a ram as whole burnt offerings. This also was unusual: in most cases small parts of large animals would be burned (the fat around the entrails, for example, and the fat tail of the sheep), while the worshipers and the priests shared the remainder of the meat. Immolating seven bulls and seven rams would have required a major effort and huge amounts of firewood.

The purpose of the sacrifice, apparently, was to capture the deity's attention and seek a favorable response to Balak's desire for a curse. As a Moabite, Balak would have worshiped the national god Chemosh, but Balaam insists that the word of power must come from Yahweh, the personal name for Israel's God.

*Reflect: Have you ever gone to great lengths to seek God's favor, perhaps through fasting, lengthy prayers, or the promise to give up some favorite food or activity until God responds? How did that work out?*

### An unexpected blessing (23:4-13)

Balaam retired to a solitary place in hopes of hearing a word from God, and he was not disappointed. The word, however, was not what Balak had hoped for: Yahweh instructed Balaam to bless Israel.

Having financed the expensive undertaking, Balak must have been furious when he heard Balaam insist that he could not curse those whom God had not cursed, before proceeding to intone blessings over Israel.

Balaam's oracle of blessing is couched in terms that recall the promise to Abraham, to whom God had said, "I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth" that could not be counted (Gen. 13:16). Balaam asks, "Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the dust-cloud of Israel?" (23:10). Instead of wishing evil upon the Israelites, Balaam wishes that he could live and die as one of them.

Balak harangued Balaam for blessing Israel instead of cursing them, and persuaded him to try cursing on three other occasions, but Balaam insisted he could speak only what God had put into his mouth: and God had spoken blessings.

*Reflect: What are the operative words in your life? Do you live out of blessings others have given you or from the curse of a negative script? When you speak to children or to others, do you speak words that harm the spirit or the words of blessing Christ taught?*

Mar. 6, 2011

## A final rebellion

Numbers 25:1-13

If someone were looking for the most distasteful text in the Bible, today's passage would certainly be among the contenders. Not only do the Israelites practice atrocious behavior, but the judgments against them — reportedly either commanded or endorsed by God — seem harsh in the extreme.

In addition, the text itself starts and stops, with instructions that get changed or don't appear to be carried out and the ending of a plague that had no narrative beginning. Scholars generally conclude that chapter 25 as we have it consists of excerpts from an older source (called JE, in vv. 1-5) concerned with issues of idolatry, and a later source (called P, in vv. 6-18) primarily concerned with matters of the priesthood.

What shall we make of this troublesome text?

### Serious idolatry (25:1-5)

The trouble begins, for some readers, at least, with the pronunciation of "Shittim," a location in northern Moab, just across the Jordan River from Jericho. Public readers can relax: the correct pronunciation emphasizes the second syllable: "shi-TEEM."

In its canonical context, the story follows the upbeat accounts of Israelite victories over Moab and Ammon in chapter 21, and the prophet Balaam's blessing of Israel in chapters 22-24. One might think the younger generation of Israelites was proving to be more faithful than their predecessors, but their activities in chapter 25 prove otherwise.

A significant number of Israelite men, apparently, accepted invitations to attend a feast in honor of the local god "Baal of Peor," an act of worship that may have included ritual sex with cultic prostitutes. The claim that Israel thus "yoked itself to the Baal of Peor" suggests this was a habitual action rather than a one-time occurrence. The male heads of Israelite families — who should have been setting a faithful example — committed themselves to Moabite gods, and Yahweh, the God of Israel, was understandably angry.

What follows is unclear. In verse 4, we read that Yahweh instructed Moses to execute "all the chiefs of the people" in public fashion. Whether the word "chiefs" (NRSV), literally "heads," refers to tribal leaders or to "ring-leaders" of the apostates is unclear. The word "impale" (NRSV) could also mean "hang" or even "throw off a cliff," so the manner of execution is less clear than the public nature of it. Apparently, the point was to demonstrate the danger of apostasy through the public execution of offenders.

The text, however, does not record any fulfillment of the command. Instead, Moses instructed the "judges of Israel" to kill those who had actually "yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor" (v. 5). Again, there is no indication that the command was fulfilled, or any record of executions taking place. This does not diminish the seriousness of the offense, however, or necessarily indicate that no one died as a result of their transgression. Idolatry is serious business.

*Reflect: Some Israelite men, surrounded by Moabite culture, surrendered to the appeal of local custom and sinned against both God and their wives. B. Maarsingh, in Numbers: A Practical Commentary (Eerdmans, 1987), p. 91, comments that their sin "constituted not only literal fornication (unfaithfulness to their*

wives) but religious fornication —unfaithfulness to the Lord.” Can you think of ways in which American Christians, whether men or women, are tempted to adopt cultural practices that are harmful both to family and their relationship with God?

### Serious punishment (25:6-13)

With verse 6, the source of temptation suddenly shifts from Moabites to Midianites, and we are told that a certain Israelite man (identified in v. 14 as Zimri, the son of a prestigious clan in the tribe of Simeon) brought a Midianite woman (identified as Cozbi, of an influential Moabite clan) “to his brothers,” or “into his family.”

To add to his offense, the man did this “in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (v. 6). Was the weeping due to the punishments mentioned in verses 1-6 being carried out, or to the plague that is not mentioned until verse 8? We do not know — but the introduction of the Midianite woman was seen as a travesty, an “in your face” violation of the law. The act touched a raw nerve in one Phinehas, the son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron. The young priest grabbed a spear and followed the couple into their marriage chamber, where he killed them both with one thrust of the spear, apparently impaling them as they engaged in coitus.

This act is said to have pleased God, somehow effecting an “atonement” and bringing to an end a plague that had killed 24,000 people, though nothing about such a plague had been said previously. More importantly for the narrator, Phinehas’ act inspired God to appoint him as the legitimate successor to Aaron, offering him “a covenant of perpetual priesthood” as a reward for his zeal. Thus, in both negative and positive ways, the text emphasizes the dangers of disobedience and the rewards of loyalty to God.

*Reflect: Commentators often note that the idolatry of Numbers 25 has many similarities to the “Golden Calf” story of Exodus 32, with the accounts forming “bookends” that mark the early and late failures of the generation that died out in the wilderness. Do you predict that the new generation will be any more faithful? Have you had the experience of repenting and seeking a new start, only to fall into the same sin all over again? As Baptists, we hold to a belief in the priesthood of all believers. Can you think of more positive ways for believer-priests to encourage obedience? BT*

## in the know

### Keeping up with people, places, and events

Jessica Asbell is serving Winter Park Baptist Church in Wilmington, N.C., as associate pastor for children and families.

Christa Brown, of StopBaptistPredators.org, received the Phoebe Award from Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, where Dwight McKissic is pastor. The Phoebe Award is named for a woman mentioned in the Book of Romans as “a servant of the church” and “helper of many.” Brown is former Baptist outreach director for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, a support-and-advocacy group formed in 1989 in response to Catholic pedophilia scandals but with a focus that has expanded in recent years to clergy sexual abuse in other denominations. Brown tells her personal story of sexual abuse at the hands of a Baptist youth minister in her book, *This Little Light*.

Tim Cannon is pastor of Brandt Oaks Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C.

Randel Everett has resigned as executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas to serve as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas. He came to the BGCT in 2008 from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Newport News, Va.

Vickie Hollon stepped down Dec. 1, 2010, as executive director of the Louisville-based Wayne E. Oates Institute. She currently lives in San Antonio and fills an interim position at Trinity Baptist Church where her husband, Leslie Hollon, is pastor.

Dennis E. Norris died Nov. 5, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was the former executive minister of the Cleveland Baptist Association with American Baptist Churches USA. Earlier he served ABCUSA as a world mission support field officer.

Morgan Patterson died Nov. 19, 2010, at age 85. A church historian and former president of the Baptist History & Heritage Society, Patterson had served at New Orleans Seminary, Southern Seminary and Golden Gate Seminary. From 1984 to 1991 he was president of Georgetown College.

More recently, he was Scholar in Residence at Campbellsville University. In 1969 he wrote *Baptist Successionism: A Critical Review*, challenging a 19th-century popular view of Baptists as the bearers of true faith since the New Testament. He was a contributor to the *Baptist World Alliance Centennial* volume published in 2005 and to *Pilgrim Pathways* published by Mercer University Press in 1999, as well as the author of numerous journal articles on Baptist history.

Tyler Roach is minister of youth and family life at the First Baptist Church of Morganton, N.C.

David Russell, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain from 1967-1982, died at age 94. He also served as a pastor and a college president.

Robin Stoops has been named executive minister of American Baptist Churches of Nebraska.

Brenda Thompson is minister of youth and missions at Wake Forest Baptist Church in Wake Forest, N.C.

Michael Tutterow is pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Cartersville, Ga.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, will receive the Virginia First Freedom Award from the First Freedom Center on Jan. 13. The First Freedom Center was established to commemorate the bicentennial of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson and passed in 1786. It became the model, historians say, for the religion clauses of the First Amendment.

Charles O. Walker, who was featured in the July 2010 issue of *Baptists Today*, died Dec. 1 at age 81. He was pastor of First Baptist Church of Jasper, Ga., from 1960-1997. He wrote 12 books including topics of Baptist history as well as groundbreaking work on the history of Cherokee Indians before the Trail of Tears removal.

**Pastor:** First Baptist Church of College Station, Texas, is seeking a pastor who can minister to all age, race and cultural groups in a diverse congregation. Applicant should have at least a master's degree from seminary and will need to be a team builder. The church supports both the Southern Baptist Convention and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Respond in confidence to: Pastor Search Committee, 2300 Welsh Ave., College Station, TX 77845 or [fbccspastorsearch@gmail.com](mailto:fbccspastorsearch@gmail.com).

**Senior Pastor:** The only CBF church in the immediate metropolitan area on the south side of Atlanta seeks a full-time senior pastor. The church has an average Sunday school attendance of 190 and an annual budget of more than \$420,000 with no debt. This moderate church with traditional worship services supports a free medical clinic located just behind the church and the only homeless shelter in our county; operates an active and well-used food bank; and has a history of supporting hands-on mission projects such as Habitat for Humanity, March Mission Madness, and mission trips to other states and countries. Staff includes part-time ministers for congregational care, senior adults, youth, music and pastoral care. Applicant should be an ordained minister with at least a master's degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school. Our ideal candidate will relate well personally with diverse people of all ages and ethnic groups, and will be an excellent preacher, exceptional teacher and caring pastor. For more information about the church, visit [fbcmorrow.org](http://fbcmorrow.org). To apply, send résumé and reference information by Feb. 1, 2011, to: Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 1647 Lake Harbin Rd., Morrow, GA 30260.

**Senior Pastor:** A friendly, welcoming CBF church located in desirable West Asheville, N.C., an area with a growing, diverse population, is seeking a senior pastor. The church has just completed an eight-month transition process and self-study through the Center for Congregational Health. It supports women in leadership roles, is financially secure and debt free, has excellent facilities, is accepting of people from all walks of life, and has a high priority for missions locally and beyond. The candidate should have a master's degree from an accredited seminary, with experience as a senior pastor preferred. This person should be an effective preacher, speaker, leader and administrator; must be responsive to the needs of the congregation and help members grow spiritually; and must be able to cultivate teamwork, fellowship and missions among members. Submit résumés by Jan. 31, 2011, to: [pastorsearch@calvaryasheville.com](mailto:pastorsearch@calvaryasheville.com) or Pastor Search, Calvary Baptist Church, 531 Haywood Rd., Asheville, NC 28806. ([www.calvaryasheville.com](http://www.calvaryasheville.com))

**Senior Minister:** St. John's Baptist, a CBF church in Charlotte, N.C., seeks a senior minister who embraces Baptist distinctives, has a master's degree or higher, and has experience as a senior pastor. The ideal candidate will have a mature faith, preach in a captivating and inspiring style, have a warm, engaging personality with a sense of humor, and espouse a partnership between a strong and free pulpit and a strong and dynamic pew. Important tasks will include church growth, planning and leading meaningful worship, managing staff as a cohesive team, and preaching. Ours is a multigenerational congregation with a budget of \$900,000. For more information, visit [www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org](http://www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org). To apply, submit résumé with references by Jan. 31, 2011, to: Pastor Search Team, St. John's Baptist Church, 300 Hawthorne Ln., Charlotte, NC 28204 or to [slyness5832@gmail.com](mailto:slyness5832@gmail.com).

**Pastor for Congregational Life:** Northminster Church, Monroe, La., is seeking a pastor for congregational life. Duties will include pastoral care; ministering to youth and children; preaching regularly in consultation with the Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, pastor for preaching and worship; leading the educational ministry of the church; administering church programming; and engaging in outreach. Northminster Church is a progressive church established 21 years ago, has approximately 250 members from various denominational backgrounds, averages about 100 in worship and is affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists. Persons applying should have at least a basic theology degree. More information is available at [www.northmin.org](http://www.northmin.org). Interested candidates should send résumés to: [peggyburns@yahoo.com](mailto:peggyburns@yahoo.com) or Search Committee, Northminster Church, 2701 Lamy Ln., Monroe, LA 71201.

**Family Life/Youth Minister:** First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge, Tenn., is seeking a mature, energetic, motivated person to serve as family life/youth minister. Although the position serves the entire church, primary emphasis is on youth ministry.

Responsibilities include working with children and youth lay leadership and ministering to church families. Ministry focus areas include discipleship, fellowship, service missions and outreach. Collateral activities include involvement in pastoral care, education, worship leadership and spiritual direction. Previous experience and a four-year degree from a college or university with major emphasis on religion, child psychology, family studies and/or communications is preferred. Salary is commensurate with experience and education. This position is full-time; however, suitable candidates seeking part-time status may be considered. To obtain additional information about this position, please contact: [fbcoffice@fbcoakridge.org](mailto:fbcoffice@fbcoakridge.org) (attn: Family Life Minister Position).

**Minister of Children:** St. Andrews Baptist Church in Columbia, S.C., is seeking a minister of children. A bachelor's degree is required, with a seminary degree and a minimum of two years ministerial experience preferred. The candidate must have proven experience in planning, developing, supervising and coordinating a growing ministry with children ranging from birth to sixth grade. Email cover letter with résumé attached to: [Twinados@gmail.com](mailto:Twinados@gmail.com). Application deadline is Jan. 21, 2011.

**Coordinator, CBFMS:** The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Mississippi seeks a full-time coordinator to advance both the mission and identity of the CBF and the purpose and goals of the CBF of MS. Candidates should possess a Master of Divinity degree or its equivalent; a minimum of five years experience in missions and/or pastoral ministry; proven administrative skills; excellent interpersonal, communication and public speaking skills; and a thorough knowledge of the polity and practices of the CBF and CBF of MS. CBF of MS seeks one who enjoys the practice of missions and ministry. To that end, the person chosen for this position will be expected to take on an active leadership role in either the establishment of a new church start in the coastal region of Mississippi or in expanding the ministry of the Rural Poverty Initiative in the Delta region of Mississippi. To view the formal job description, specific responsibilities and qualifications, please visit [www.cbfms.org](http://www.cbfms.org). Résumés may be sent to the CBF of MS office by Jan. 31, 2011: [dgrubbs@cbfms.org](mailto:dgrubbs@cbfms.org) or Deenie Grubbs, Ministry Manager, P.O. Box 1725, Madison, MS 39130.

**Pastors:** The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts seeks pastors to participate in a congregational renewal program matching pastors and congregations, and offering accountability and support during three- or six-year tenures. For more information, contact Jason Rutherford at [fcoapastor@verizon.net](mailto:fcoapastor@verizon.net).



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## guest commentary

# The Baptist passion for Christian unity

By *Steven R. Harmon*

Enough non-Baptist Christians think the title of this guest commentary is oxymoronic that a few years ago my friend and former Campbell University colleague Glenn Jonas needed to write a pamphlet titled “Myth: Baptists are Anti-Ecumenical” for the “Baptist Myths” series sponsored by the Baptist History & Heritage Society.

**B**ut as many Baptists prepare to participate in this month’s observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan. 18-25), they can do so in the confidence that Baptists at our best have long been passionate about the quest for Christian unity.

Dr. Jonas’ pamphlet called attention to Baptist missionary William Carey, who in 1806 — a full century before the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference marked the institutional beginnings of the modern ecumenical movement — proposed “a general association of all denominations of Christians from the four quarters of the earth.”

Baptists later participated in the formation of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in the USA, and British Baptist leaders John H. Shakespeare and Ernest A. Payne even urged Baptists in the United Kingdom to pursue organic church union across denominational lines.

The passion of global Baptists for Christian unity is embodied by the Commission on Doctrine and Christian Unity of the Baptist World Alliance. Beginning in the 1970s, this commission has engaged in bilateral dialogues with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Mennonite Conference and the

Anglican Consultative Council.

These dialogues have issued reports that serve well as study resources for observing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity along with neighboring churches that belong to the communions with which the BWA has been in dialogue. These have been published individually and are collected in the three-volume *Growth in Agreement* series (WCC Publications, 1984-2007), and some are also available online.

The Mennonites are Baptists’ closest denominational kissing cousins. If there is a Mennonite fellowship in your area, members of your Baptist congregation can get to know them by exploring together “Baptist-Mennonite Theological Conversations” (1989-1992).

While Baptists represent a distinctively different stream of the Protestant tradition, its Reformation tributaries flow from the Lutheran beginnings of Protestantism. Join Lutheran neighbors in digging down to common roots by reading “Baptists and Lutherans in Conversation: A Message to Our Churches” (1990).

Not all Baptists are Reformed with a capital “R” (i.e., Calvinist), but since the 17th century significant segments of Baptist life have identified with that expression of the Reformation. Whether you claim the heritage of Particular (Calvinistic) or General (Arminian) Baptists, the “Report of Theological Conversations Sponsored by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Baptist World Alliance, 1973-77” is an excellent entrée to stimulating theological conversation with local Presbyterians ([http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news\\_file/4.pdf](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/4.pdf)).

Dissent from the Church of England birthed the Baptists, but contemporary Anglicans/Episcopalians and Baptists now have much more in common and many gifts



to share with one another. “Conversations Around the World 2000-2005: The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance” (2005), edited by renowned Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes, is a rich and engaging exercise in ecumenical theological reflection that will enlighten members of Baptist congregations and Episcopal/Anglican parishes as they read, mark and inwardly digest it together ([www.anglican-ecumenical.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/baptist/docs/pdf/conversations\\_around\\_the\\_world.pdf](http://www.anglican-ecumenical.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/baptist/docs/pdf/conversations_around_the_world.pdf)).

It would be difficult to imagine a more polarized pair of ecumenical dialogue partners than Baptists and Roman Catholics. Yet the two communions have been able to issue “Summons to Witness to Christ in Today’s World: A Report on the Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversations” (1984-88). ([www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/b-rc/doc/e\\_b-rc\\_report1988\\_01.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/b-rc/doc/e_b-rc_report1988_01.html)).

Watch for a report from the 2006-2010 series of BWA-RCC conversations in 2011. Both documents will help Baptists and Roman Catholics learn to recognize one another, and learn from one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

At the grassroots, Baptist laypersons can be some of the most passionately ecumenical people one can meet, for they gladly embrace those whom they perceive to be following the same Lord. When they build on that instinct by reading these dialogue reports in the company of their non-Baptist friends, the dialogues will make their hoped-for contribution to Christian unity. **BT**

—*Steven R. Harmon is adjunct professor of Christian theology at the Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity in Boiling Springs, N.C., and author of Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity (Cascade Books).*

# the lighter side

## In with the old, in with the new

By Brett Younger

**W**hy isn't this month's namesake featured on more church newsletters and websites? Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, endings and time, has two heads that face opposite directions. One head looks back at the last year while the other looks forward to the new, simultaneously looking into the future and the past. Janus would be a fine symbol for congregations that cannot decide which direction they should be facing. The absolute necessity of both old and new is obvious, and yet old and new have a longstanding, ongoing battle in the church.

We have been to churches that hope tomorrow will be 1958 and churches that stay away from anything older than they are; churches that still give 10 points for reading the Bible every day and 20 for being on time and churches that discuss the theological implications of the films of Will Ferrell; churches that got their Hammond organ when the funeral home closed and churches that got their drums when the pastor's rock band broke up; churches that smell of incense and churches that smell like the gymnasiums they are six days of the week; churches with paintings of rivers in the baptistery and churches where the baptistery is a river; churches where they hug and say, "God loves you and I do, too" and churches where no one has hugged in years; churches with kneeling, reciting, and genuflecting and churches

with clapping, waving, and dancing; churches that are emerging and churches that are submerging; churches that love whatever is covered with dust and churches enamored with whatever came in the mail this morning.

The churches in which I grew up loved the old. Things seldom changed. One churchgoer put it this way: "This is what I learned at First Baptist Church. I learned that unleavened bread is Chicklet-sized soda crackers. I learned that the Hebrew word for grape juice is spelled w-i-n-e. I learned that the moneychangers at the temple were communists, not capitalists. I learned that every passage of scripture has three points. I learned that Sunday school teachers have an unlimited supply of construction paper, Elmer's glue and Popsicle sticks."



We were serious about the ancient words. We had dog-eared Bibles with multi-colored underlining and sermon notes scribbled in the margin. We taped memory verses to our mirrors, refrigerators and baby beds. We took sin seriously. The church warned us about the dangers of worldliness and the hypnotic glitter of having, doing, and thinking what the sinful crowd has, does and thinks.

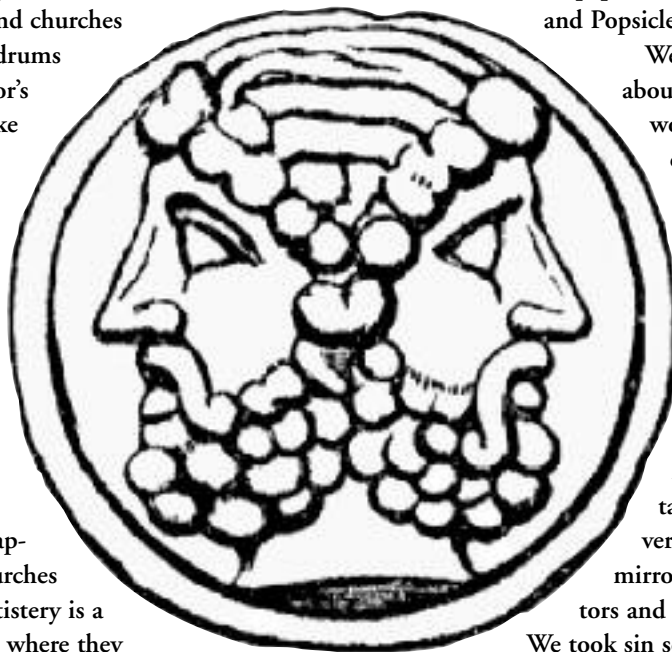
There are so many good things about churches that love the old that it takes a while to realize some crucial things are missing. God calls us in new, surprising ways. Churches in love with the old miss the gospel that's always new.

There is also danger in the opposite direction. Some churches accept only what's new and push aside everything that's old. We've been to churches that love the new. They can be a lot of fun. It's fun to sing without a hymnal when the words are on a big, big screen; to sing what has been called 7-11 music — 7 words repeated 11 times. It's fun to hear easily understood, often alliterative sermons with titles like, "How to Be Happy," "How to Have a Happy Marriage," "How to Have Happy Children" and "How to Have Happy Children Who will Have Happy1 Marriages." It's fun to watch clips from *Avatar* that supposedly illuminate the story of David and Goliath. It's fun to have Pepsi and potato chips for the Lord's Supper. It's fun to go to church and be surprised by what's new.

Churches that love only the new can be so much fun, so genuinely joyful, that it takes a while to realize something is missing. God calls us to walk ancient paths. Churches in love with the new miss the old gospel.

Jesus' advice is to love the best of the old and the new: "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of the treasury what is new and what is old" (Matt. 13:52). We know it is not either/or, but both/and. We read the new by an old light. We see the old in a light that is new each day. Janus had the right idea. We need to look both ways. **BT**

—Brett Younger is associate professor of preaching at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology.



# tell us what you think

**B**aptists Today is seeking feedback from readers to guide decisions about the design and content of the news journal. Submissions are anonymous and confidential.

Please take a few moments to respond by going to the survey online at [www.baptiststoday.org/survey](http://www.baptiststoday.org/survey). Or, if you prefer, you may respond to the survey questions below and mail the completed page to *Baptists Today* Survey, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318. Thank you.

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Articles about current issues and trends that impact churches  
1 2 3 4 5

Informative pieces on various Baptist groups nationally and worldwide  
1 2 3 4 5

News reports on actions and activities of various Baptist conventions and associations  
1 2 3 4 5

Current religion news in general  
1 2 3 4 5

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1 2 3 4 5

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1 2 3 4 5

Quotations page  
1 2 3 4 5

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20 and younger   21-30   31-40   41-50  
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# Sweetheart banquet fills hearts with love, laughter

“I want a new one this year ... a good-looking man who will talk to me.”  
 “I like having the same man every year, but it’s also fun getting to know different people.” “I just love him.”

Valentine’s Day is just a few weeks away and from the sound of statements such as these, Cupid must be arranging “dates” for the annual senior ladies sweetheart banquet at the First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga. Now in its 22nd year, this event observed on the Thursday night before Feb. 14 has become the highlight of the year for many single and widowed women age 60 and above.

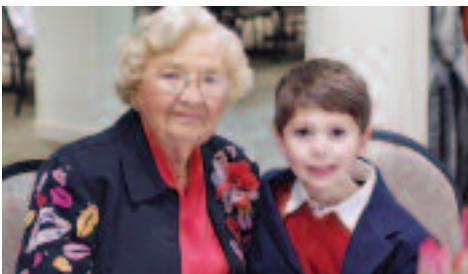
Started in 1989 as a project to give new life to a dying Brotherhood organization, it quickly became one of the most significant intergenerational events in the life of the church — and a ministry to numerous seniors in the community. “Folks jumped on a specific project with value and purpose,” said Thad Broome, who helped launch the program.

Having little time or money and no planning history, Thad began enlisting women to participate. He depended on the organizational skills of his wife, Ginny, and the influence and support of other helpers as the project took shape.

A young male newcomer to the church lined up escorts in the 20s-30s age range. Frances Floyd, a retired Mercer University employee who knew just about everyone and could coax anyone to join her cause, signed up some male Mercer professors. Ginny matched the women with suitable escorts according to personality, background and interests. She and Deacon Cioban, a retired florist, took charge of decorations. Staff ministers at the time, Chuck Poole and Ben Taylor, also lent their support.

Attendance at the initial event, which was held at a restaurant, exceeded 100. There was no designated funding, so each man paid for his meal and that of his date. Since that time the sweetheart banquet has been included in the church’s annual budget, with current costs averaging \$1,000-\$1,500 for 40 couples. This amount covers food, flowers for each woman, pictures of each couple and usually an honorarium for the main program personality.

When Thad and Ginny Broome retired and moved away, leadership passed to the able and caring hands of Delinda Grisamore and Robin Barfield, who receive assistance from their husbands, Ed and Tommy, respectively.



Delinda, who has a heart for seniors — she directs the Keenagers program at First Baptist — starts planning the banquet right after Christmas. She and Robin enlist participants, escorts and program personalities, arrange with the church kitchen staff or a caterer for a nice meal, and “match” couples. On the day of the event, Delinda and Robin also decorate — sometimes receiving limited assistance from one or two helpers.

After enjoying a leisurely dinner with background music provided by a male pianist, a program with light-hearted and upbeat personalities commences — but at an unhurried pace. As Delinda emphasizes, “The women don’t like to be rushed. It’s important to be flexible and not have a rigid schedule because everything takes longer than planned.”

Jonathan Alderman, a lawyer by profession but best known as the church comedian, serves as master of ceremonies. Each man introduces his date to the group, and the couples tell some history of their attendance at the banquet. Men, usually First Baptist members, provide musical entertainment — such as love songs from the past. The bulk of the program is either comedy or music or inspiration.

Last year, “Uncle Sam” (a local Methodist minister) appeared on stilts and in patriotic costume and delivered trivia, thoughts and stories about great women in U.S. history. Another year, “Mr. Doubletalk” (Macon native Durwood Fincher), a corporate speaker and entertainer, donated his time as he shared laughs with the women. He had so much fun, he returned the next year as an escort for one of the women, a friend of his deceased mother.

Interestingly, Delinda and Robin find it is much easier to enlist escorts than women as the men see their role as an important ministry. After attending once, though, the women are hooked. In fact, most of them request (demand) the same escort (preferably young!) from year to year. Touching stories of the women and their dates abound.

One man who had attended the banquet for many years was noticeably absent in 2010 because his usual date, a bright and energetic 95-year-old, had recently become ill and died the week of the banquet.

In both 2009 and 2010, the long-time volunteer director of senior adult ministries at First Baptist traveled from a city two hours away so as not to miss her Valentine’s routine. The daughter of this 90-year-old provided transportation so that her mother could reunite with friends.

A woman who has worked in the church nursery for the past 30-40 years and also has babysat most of the church’s children in their homes now is of age to attend the sweetheart banquet and thoroughly enjoys it. But she is so afraid it will be cancelled due to decreasing numbers in attendance and finances. However, she has been assured if that happens, her date — whose children she helped raise — will still take her out.

The First Baptist Macon senior ladies sweetheart banquet provides love, laughter and acceptance for some important players in God’s Kingdom. It is one of many intentional efforts at the church to build relationships between generations and a great way for almost-strangers to become fast friends. **BT**

# Singing the praises of a favorite book

Our church's acquiring and dedicating the new *Celebrating Grace Hymnal* has triggered my thinking about the great part the church hymnbook has played in my life.

**M**y first memory of being in "big church" was of standing on the pew between my mother and father, holding the hymnbook, singing. (They were standing on the floor.) I was probably 3 years old and a member of the Beginners Sunday school department at Fourth Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

The great hymns have always been an important part of my vocabulary, even though in my growing-up years, I didn't really understand or pay attention to some of the often-archaic words. There were flowery phrases like "Here I raise my Ebenezer," "Rock of Ages, cleft for me," "O Zion haste," "Chords that are broken will vibrate once more."

As we sang them through my Primary, Junior and Intermediate years, slowly the words became more meaningful and familiar — and they became a comfortable and dependable part of me.

Our family joined Crescent Hill Baptist Church when I was 8, and I made my profession of faith at age 10 to the familiar strains of "Just As I Am." We used *The Modern Hymnal*, published by Broadman Press. It preceded *The Broadman Hymnal*, but our church never saw the need to change.

I loved it because it had the Doxology

inside the front cover, and the Gloria Patri inside the back. Many of the old standards I sang then have been included every time a new hymnal is introduced. I'm glad "Just As I Am" and "I Stand Amazed" made the cut once more.

In childhood and teenaged years, it was fun to sing favorites like "I Am Resolved" and "Dwelling in Beulah Land."

Of course, we marked some pages with "Turn to page..." that would lead to another page and so on through the book. The messages were in the titles, like: "Shall We Meet?" followed by "O Why Not Tonight?"

Or "I Am a Poor Wayfaring Stranger," answered by "Does Jesus Care?" or "Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown?" leading to "No, Not One."

"Where Is My Wandering Boy Tonight?" was answered by, "On a Hill Far Away." Oh, and there was "Almost Persuaded" followed by "Yield Not to Temptation."

Seems like they used to be funnier. Certainly giggling in church was more fun than anywhere else.

Several years ago, my friend, Janie Peacock, who grew up in Mississippi, and I were on a cross-country trip. We began to remember church songs and the corruptions of them that all kids knew, like "Gladly the Cross-eyed Bear."

One of us began to sing a version of "At the Cross," and the other joined in. We were

delighted that we both remembered every word:

"At the bar, at the bar, where I smoked my first cigar, / And the money from my pockets rolled away. / It was there by chance that I tore my Sunday pants, / And now I have to wear them every day."

Though having grown up in different parts of the Baptist world, we were connected by such "music." Our saintly husbands threatened to dump us on the side of the road.

I have been doing some figuring: Based on an age of 76, which would have made me just old enough to be brought into church by my parents, I can multiply that by 52 Sundays in a year. That's 3,952.

Multiply that by six, for at least six hymns were sung in the morning and evening services, and the total is 23,712. Then including opening assemblies, prayer meetings, revivals, fifth-Sunday singings, conventions, WMU, VBS, Baptist colleges, funerals, church picnics, etc., it is safe to say I have sung from a hymnbook at least 26,000 times.

Whatever edition, the hymnbook is a major part of me. And when I am no longer able to hold it and read the wonderful words, I guess I'll just "turn over in my hymnbook." But, for now, I am *Celebrating Grace*. Long live the hymnbook! **BT**

— Ann Roebuck, a Kentucky native, is a longtime resident of Rome, Ga., where her husband, Floyd, is pastor emeritus of the First Baptist Church.



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# ‘Ministry of trash’ grows out of fitness habit

IRONTON, Mo. (ABP) — Ruth Ann Short, now ensconced in a snug apartment at The Baptist Home’s main campus in Ironton, Mo., was last year’s “poster child” for a ministry that grew out of her walking habit — as a volunteer in the Missouri Department of Transportation’s Adopt-A-Highway project.

The department recognized her volunteer labor by featuring her on the “Trash Bash” publicity — decked out in her yellow volunteer vest, sporting yellow gloves and holding a yellow “No More Trash” bag.

Short, a retired Southern Baptist missionary to Nigeria, first volunteered for Adopt-A-Highway duty through Charrette Baptist Church in Marthasville, Mo., in May 2008.

She and her late husband, James “Doc” Short, lived at The Baptist Home from Sept. 1, 2001, after Doc suffered a stroke. She remained in an independent-living apartment on the Ironton campus for a few years after her husband’s death in 2004.

She chose to return to Marthasville in

*“I go all around and I pick up trash wherever I walk.”*

2007, and the church asked her to work with senior adults, visiting the homebound, those in area nursing homes and the hospitalized.

Short loves to walk. When she discovered that Charrette Baptist had adopted a section of the highway on which it was located, she decided to get involved and began picking up trash along the church’s one-mile stretch as part of her walking regimen.

Because she usually covers more than a single mile during her walks, she stretched her coverage area to include all the major thoroughfares into Marthasville. While covering a few miles each day, Short collected, on average, more than 16 MoDOT bags full of trash



Ruth Ann Short

each month.

When she moved back to The Baptist Home last July, she brought her “adopt-a-community” attitude with her. She volunteered to walk the mile the home had adopted along Highway 72, and soon added Ironton’s Main Street — both sides — and a few additional streets to her route.

“I go all around and I pick up trash wherever I walk,” she said. Short has a pedometer and tries to clock at least 10,000 steps each day.

Short prays for the people who live in the homes she passes and for those who discard trash along roadways. She sheepishly admits that she often has to pray about her attitude toward litterers.

She does much more at The Baptist Home than clean a stretch of road in front of it. For example, Short, who serves on the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Missouri’s Coordinating Council, has been cleaning out one of the drained ponds being reworked on the Arcadia Valley campus “as a hobby.” **BT**

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- **Keith Lowry**, Family Ministry Specialist and Adult Sunday School Consultant, Baptist General Convention of Texas
- **Levi Price**, Retired Professor of Christian Ministries and Director of Pastoral Ministries at Truett Seminary
- **Chris Wommack**, Associate Pastor of Music, FBC Woodway

The registration deadline is April 30, 2011, and the cost is \$49 per person. To register or receive more information please go to [www.baylor.edu/truett/pillars](http://www.baylor.edu/truett/pillars) or contact:

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## media shelf

## Scholar explores the ‘prayer for all’

*A review by Walter B. Shurden*

### The Greatest Prayer

Rediscovering the Revolutionary  
Message of the Lord’s Prayer

*John Dominic Crossan*

New York: HarperOne, 2010 | 190 pp.

**J**ohn Crossan is one of our most learned biblical scholars today. He describes the Lord’s Prayer as “a radical manifesto and a hymn of hope for *all* humanity in language addressed to *all* the earth.” The “all” of that last sentence is crucial.

But why does he call it “the greatest prayer”? Because this prayer comes from one religion, Judaism, through another religion, Christianity, but it is designed for *all* the people of the earth.

The “greatest” prayer, Crossan argues, speaks to the conscience of the entire world, not simply to the followers of one religion. The “greatest” prayer has not a trace of religious sectarianism in it. Have you ever noticed that about the Lord’s Prayer?

While it is the “greatest” prayer of Christianity, the Lord’s Prayer is also Christianity’s “strangest” prayer. “It is prayed by all Christians, but it never mentions Christ.

It is prayed in all churches, but it never mentions church. It is prayed on all Sundays, but it never mentions Sunday. It is called the ‘Lord’s Prayer,’ but it never mentions ‘Lord.’”

Crossan continues describing the strangeness of the prayer: “It is prayed by fundamentalist Christians, but it never mentions the inspired inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, the miracles, the atoning death, or bodily resurrection of Christ. It is prayed by evangelical Christians, but it never mentions the ... gospel. It is prayed by Pentecostal Christians, but it never mentions ...

the Holy Spirit.” And Crossan concludes, “It is prayed by Christians who emphasize what it never mentions and also prayed by Christians who ignore what it does.”

What, then, does this “greatest” and “strangest” prayer mention? It mentions God as “Our Father.” For Crossan that moniker is an inclusive rather than exclusive metaphor for the Holy One. Crossan provides a new and provocative name for “Our Father.” He calls God “Householder of the Earth.” Crossan’s name for God is a key to his interpretation of the prayer.

As “Householder of the Earth,” God is a just and good householder in the biblical tradition. How do you recognize a good and just biblical householder?

A good householder had concern for the fields as well as the livestock. The good biblical householder provided dependents with adequate food, clothing and shelter. This included everyone from slaves to children.

Moreover, a good householder gave loving care to the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable. Everyone in the family of a good householder had enough. The pronoun, therefore, is “Our” Father, not “My” Father; the prayer is about all the people on earth, not simply my share of the household.

Crossan argues that a concern for distributive justice lies at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer. Distributive justice! When most of us think of the word “justice” we think of punishment or of retributive justice. But the distributive justice of this prayer is not about punishment. It is about fairness.

To pray “hallowed be your name” is to say that God is holy. And to be holy as

God is holy is to deliver the oppressed as God delivers the oppressed. Justice is at the heart of God’s holiness.

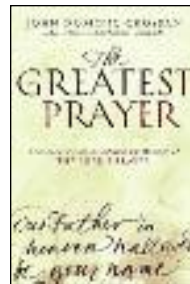
To pray “Thy Kingdom come” and “Thy will be done” is not a prayer for divine intervention but for human collaboration. It is a prayer about the universal justice of God and our participation in that justice-seeking project.

“Our daily bread” is not to be hoarded. It is to be shared. We must “pass the bread” to keep alive God’s concern for distributive justice. “Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors” is yet another justice issue. So what is the “temptation” that we pray not to be led into? It is the temptation to enter into violence, the temptation to forget that God is a divine householder who practices nonviolent justice.

One can find challenging and provocative spiritual nourishment here. To do so, however, one has to forgive Crossan his historical and theological excursions that often cloud rather than clarify the words of the great prayer. Crossan’s weakness stems from his vast learning. At times he told me more than I needed to know. But what he told me that I needed to know was important to know.

At the First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga., we faithfully pray the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday morning. I will seldom be able to pray that prayer again without remembering why it is great and why it is strange. And I doubt seriously that I will be able to pray this prayer in the future without thinking of God as the Divine “Householder of the Earth” who is concerned with justice for all. **BT**

—Walter B. Shurden is Mercer University’s minister at large, a well-published church historian and a member of the Baptists Today Board of Directors.



*While it is the “greatest” prayer of Christianity, the Lord’s Prayer is also Christianity’s “strangest” prayer.*



## Obvious observations

By John Pierce  
Posted Nov. 30, 2010

[www.baptiststoday.org/johnpierce-blog](http://www.baptiststoday.org/johnpierce-blog)

A few recurring themes seem to surface when reading published opinion pieces or casual individual online postings.

In fact, much of what is heard these days fits into three categories. In a sense, these are obvious observations.

One: Life moves quickly, especially in the second half. For many of us, 1990 seems like yesterday and the '80s aren't the ancient history our children tend to believe. We wonder how we got to this time in life so soon.

Two: We live in a society that is deeply polarized by differing political and religious perspectives. Even a televised dance contest can become a political tug-of-war.

Being convinced that one's doctrinal beliefs and/or political philosophies are superior to all others can quickly lead to the feeling of personal superiority and the belittlement of those who might look at these matters differently. The delineation between "us" and "them" keeps widening.

Three: Despite our tendencies toward



division, there is strong value in finding mutual support and encouragement when going through life's rites of passage.

Community support in various forms — extended families, congregations, neighborhoods, online forums, etc. — buoys us through personal challenges and enhances our times of joy.

These obvious observations, however, raise the important question: "What can I do about it?" There are limitations for sure, but we can find positive ways of responding to that question.

One: We can't slow down our clocks and calendars. However, we can become more conscious of the opportunities each day provides.

Despite the difficulties, life is a gift to be embraced and milked for all the joy and fulfillment it can offer.

Two: It is deliciously tempting to join

in the polarization process. But we must use restraint. There is a clear difference between holding firm to our beliefs and dismissing those who believe differently.

Arrogance built on a false sense of certainty is poisonous. We must make conscious decisions to distinguish between the ideas we reject and the rejection of those who hold these ideas.

Three: In the same way we breathe in and out, we can be givers and takers within our places of community. There are times when we need the encouragement, support and care of others. There are times when others need those acts of kindness from us.

Beyond the confusion and complexities we sometimes encounter, life often gets boiled down to a few obvious observations that deserve our best attention and efforts. **BT**

## Thou shalt not commit Facebook

By Tony W. Cartledge  
Posted Nov. 18, 2010

[www.baptiststoday.org/cartledge-blog](http://www.baptiststoday.org/cartledge-blog)

A New Jersey pastor has ordered about 50 married church officials in his 1,000-member congregation to delete their Facebook accounts and swear off the social networking site, according to the Associated Press.

Pastor Cedric Miller, of the Living Word Christian Fellowship Church in Neptune, N.J., said he made the decision after counseling with 20 couples over the past six months, all of whom had experienced marital strife after

Facebook enabled one spouse or the other to connect with an old flame.

Conversations often lead to physical meet-ups, he said, and "The temptation is just too great." Miller has previously encouraged married couples to share all their login information with each other, and is considering asking members to voluntarily swear off Facebook lest they endanger their marriages.

Miller agrees that Facebook can be used in legitimate ways, and has an account of his own, which he says was started to help him keep track of his six children. He says he will shut it down, however, in solidarity

with other leaders he is requiring to leave the site.

Anyone who has poked around Facebook very much can see easy evidence of ways in which it facilitates friendships, and I suppose most anything that helps people engage socially can become the occasion for fraternizing that goes beyond appropriate.

I suspect, however, that a congregational boycott of Facebook won't do much to change human nature or reverse some folks' proclivity toward a wandering eye.

For that, better to focus on the GoodBook. **BT**





# Leena Lavanya

## 'The Baptist Mother Teresa'

**"G**od, I don't have money to give you, but you gave me this precious life. Use me to do your service."

This simple but earnest prayer uttered in 1993 has proven transformational, not only for the young Indian woman who spoke it in her heart, but also for countless individuals of Andhra Pradesh, India, and its surrounding villages.

In 1993, Leena Lavanya traveled from that community to Zimbabwe to attend the Baptist World Alliance's Youth Conference. She attended a workshop led by provocative American Baptist teacher and preacher Tony Campolo, who contended that while they often sang the hymn, "All to Jesus, I Surrender," few Christians ever surrendered very much. Leena committed to take that hymn seriously, and voiced the prayer that would shape her precious life.

On a recent visit to Mercer University's campuses in Macon and Atlanta, Ga., and the First Baptist Church of Christ at Macon, Leena told the story of her ministry among India's poorest.

Raised by her grandmother and grandfather, a Baptist seminary president and vice president of the Baptist World Alliance, Leena learned faithfulness firsthand. Each Christmas, her grandparents hosted nearly 400 beggars, serving them rich food and an equal portion of love and dignity. Leena's childhood experiences of welcoming the poor, the widows and the lepers into her home nurtured her own sense of compassion and justice, leading her to venture even beyond her role models in her resolve and opportunity to minister to the marginalized of society.

Unable to pursue dreams of becoming a medical doctor due to financial constraints,

Leena began her career as a biology teacher. Traveling from the comfortable, safe home of her family into a neighborhood of mud streets and worn-down settlements opened her eyes to the plight of her destitute neighbors, and she began ministering to them in various ways.

One day while riding on the bus, Leena encountered a woman working in the sex trade. When Leena encouraged her to abandon this lifestyle, the woman replied, "How do you expect me to support my family?" Leena and her family vowed to give up their breakfast for three months, allotting their savings to purchase a sewing machine for the woman. When Leena saw the difference the sewing machine made for that woman, she began a sewing school. Hundreds of women have been rescued from the sex industry and have now graduated from the school, each receiving her own sewing machine as a graduation gift.

Leena soon discovered that the children of the sex workers could not attend the government schools because they did not know their fathers. Leena recognized that without education, their futures were bleak, and she started a school for these slum children. ServeTrust Elementary School has grown beyond the original leaky, thatched hut with no desks into a jewel in the midst of the surrounding slums.

One day, Leena stopped to ask a woman beside the road why she was begging, and she learned that the woman suffered from HIV/AIDS. In her culture, those infected with HIV are outcasts; the religious believe they are sinners, and the healthy are afraid to touch them for fear of catching the disease.

Leena took the woman to the hospital, where the doctor told Leena that treatment was a waste of money. But Leena resolved

Leena Lavanya has been recognized as the "Baptist Mother Teresa" and was awarded the BWA's Denton and Janice Lotz Human Rights Award in 2009 and the Mahatma Gandhi Award in 2008 for her work among the poor and marginalized of society.

Learn more about Leena's story and get connected with her ministries through the ServeTrust website ([www.servetrust.org](http://www.servetrust.org)) or in Julie Whidden Long's book, *Portraits of Courage: Stories of Baptist Heroes*, published by the Baptist History & Heritage Society and Mercer University Press. While her ministries strive toward sustainability, funding from individuals and churches help to expand the Kingdom work of Leena and those who minister alongside her.

that the woman receive medical care, so Leena sold her own gold bangle bracelets to pay for the treatment.

As she continued to visit throughout the woman's hospitalization, the sick woman asked Leena, "You are not my mother or sister. Why are you helping me?" Leena replied, "Because Jesus loves you, I love you." Before she died, this woman whom others refused to touch felt the embrace of Jesus' love. Leena went on to establish a hospice for those dying of AIDS so that they might receive both physical and spiritual care.

Other inspiring and touching stories about Leena's work and ministry abound. In addition to the elementary and sewing schools and AIDS hospice, her ServeTrust ministries includes a leper colony, a home for the elderly, a computer school for unemployed youth, health care for isolated tribal people, and a ministry of evangelism and church planting in remote villages.

Leena admits, "I have no training, I don't know medicine, but this is what I do: 'Let your light shine before others...'" By surrendering her one precious life to Jesus, Leena Lavanya has shown the light of Christ to those who live in physical and spiritual darkness, and through her, they have seen a great light. **BT**

—Julie Whidden Long is minister to children and families at the First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga.

# An often-ignored command

Actress Hilary Swank pushes churches to reach out to prisoners

Jesus left his followers with precious few commands: love thy neighbor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the prisoner among them. So why do so many churches have such a hard time with that last one?

Oscar-winning actress Hilary Swank, for one, is waiting for a good answer.

In her recent film, *Conviction*, Swank plays Betty Anne Waters, a real-life high school dropout whose 18-year quest to free her brother from a wrongful murder conviction led her from GED to the bar exam.

“As we’re sitting here speaking right now, someone is in prison for a crime they didn’t commit,” Swank said at a screening of the film at a historic black church in Alexandria, Va., “and that’s not OK.”

Waters’ brother, Kenny Waters, was the 83rd prisoner exonerated and freed as a result of DNA testing, forced by the persistence of the New York-based Innocence Project. To date, 261 prisoners have seen their wrongful convictions overturned.

“I think we always have to have hope and faith that eventually the right thing will happen,” said Swank. “I don’t know how it will be solved, but I think in talking about it, we shine a bright light.”

Prison Fellowship, the nation’s best known church-based outreach to inmates, is teaming with Swank and her film to help show congregations prisoners’ needs, and lobby to reduce wrongful convictions, end prison rape and halt the shackling of female inmates during childbirth.

“I think it’s hard to convince people these things are happening,” said Kimberly Alleyne, spokeswoman for Prison Fellowship. “Who wants to believe that these women are being shackled and held down while they’re giving birth to babies? It’s almost unconscionable.”

While Swank’s movie highlights the problem of wrongful conviction, U.S. prisons are full of people who admit to being guilty. In 2008, the last year for which the Bureau of Justice Statistics data was avail-



Photo courtesy of hilaryswankfan.org

able, 7.3 million people — one in every 31 American adults — were in jail, prison, on probation or on parole.

“I think some struggle with the issue of helping prisoners because by and large, many of the people who are serving sentences are guilty,” Alleyne said. “Our approach is whether they’re guilty or not — particularly if they are guilty — they still need to be embraced by the love of God. This is not a judgmental work.”

Pat Nolan, a Prison Fellowship vice president who served 29 months in federal custody after pleading guilty to corruption charges as a California state legislator, knows what it’s like. He maintained his innocence and says he accepted a plea deal to avoid the possibility of a long imprisonment.

“When you’re in prison, it’s like you’re an amputee,” Nolan said. “You’re cut off from your family, you’re cut off from your job, from your community, from your church.”

“I still have every letter that was sent to me (in prison),” Nolan told attendees at the screening, his voice breaking with emotion, “Within each of your churches are people who have sons, brothers, wives, sisters in prison. They suffer alone.”

Prison Fellowship, which was founded by Watergate ex-con Charles Colson, currently partners with about 8,000 U.S. churches, but says it needs more. Some churches are reluctant to join prison work because it involves “stepping out of your comfort zone and going to a place you haven’t been to before,” Alleyne said.

But she said it’s not just about hardened criminals inside the walls, but what happens to them when and if they rejoin society on the outside.

“The local church is the backbone of our re-entry process,” Alleyne said. “People from the churches and the community are there waiting on the outside so that when a prisoner comes out, he or she has somewhere to go for clothing, to get housing, to get help with jobs.”

It’s what happens at Shiloh Baptist Church, which hosted the film screening. Because inmates often serve sentences far from home, Shiloh runs a teleconferencing ministry to allow families to talk to incarcerated loved ones.

“I’ve done teleconferencing with prisoners who haven’t seen their family in 16 years,” said volunteer Lionel O. Smith, a 30-year veteran of the federal prison system. “They have just an emotional period of about 10 to 15 minutes where they’re just so emotional they can’t even speak.”

Shiloh’s pastor, Lee A. Earl, said serving prisoners and their families is part of the church’s mandate to address all aspects of human need.

“Like Miss Swank said, it’s a tremendous love story. This is about love. That’s what Christ was about, that’s what he died for — receiving people that proper Christians or church folk didn’t think he ought to be receiving. If we’re not careful, we’ll get into that same kind of religion.” **BT**

# commentary

## Though gone, his voice keeps saying ‘Push on’

By Tony W. Cartledge

**H**e always called me “Bubba” and it made me feel special, even though I knew he called most other men and boys “Bubba,” too. In the South, that’s as close to an endearment for other males as most men can come.

Johnny Brown had a way of making other people feel special, feel comfortable, feel at home. When he died in the early morning hours of Nov. 19, most folks in the larger Baptist community didn’t know it, but a good dose of homespun hospitality was lost from this world, and that makes me very sad.

The man who sometimes called himself “The Big ‘un” was a big part of my life for many years, and he’s not here anymore.

When I first got to know Johnny very well, there was a pig between us — two, actually. I was the fresh young pastor at Highland Baptist Church in Hogansville, Ga., eager to meet new people and “grow the church.” Johnny’s wife attended, but he — who’d been raised a Methodist — stayed home.

One day I asked Carol how I could get to know Johnny. She laughed and suggested that he could use some help slaughtering a couple of hogs that night.

I knew how to do that, so I sharpened the big knife I use on such occasions, bundled up in an old coat, and joined him in the backyard between his mother’s house and the barn. In a bitterly cold wind, we slaughtered two sows and laid out the meat to cool on the screened-in porch, except for some tenderloin that we fried up somewhere near midnight. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Before long, Johnny joined our church. He was a big man, and when I baptized him, I failed to get the tip of his left elbow under water. Afterward, anytime he let a cuss word slip, he would blame it on me for leaving a little Methodist in him.

Johnny worked for Southern Bell for 30 years before retiring, then opened a catering business and built a restaurant in the pasture behind his house. He called it “Johnny Brown’s Country Fixin’s,” and his slogan was “Best Que and Stew Anywhere.”



In this 2005 photo, Johnny Brown shows Samuel Cartledge, the writer’s son, how to make shrimp and bacon kabobs.

He was buried Nov. 21, wearing his trademark bib overalls, the casket filled with pictures of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, one born less than two hours before the funeral.

When I stood there, in the funeral home, looking down at my friend, the overalls looked natural, but his face didn’t look right to me. I realized after a few minutes that it was because he wasn’t smiling. Johnny smiled with his entire face, and he smiled often, and when he did, it was like sunlight shining through the trees.

Johnny was never the type of person who talked a lot about Jesus, but he lived a lot like Jesus, showing kindness and grace and good cheer to those he met. There’s no telling how many volunteer hours he put in, or how much gas he invested in supporting high school band members and majorettes and cheerleaders, as well as local charities.

For me, especially, Johnny was an encourager. I sat up with him after surgery to remove one of his kidneys years ago, and later the other one failed. He spent more than 10 years on dialysis, while diabetes ate away at his feet, one toe at the time, one bone at a time. Yet, he remained positive and optimistic, always prov-

ing to be good medicine to those who cared for him. He knew how to face adversity and move on.

Johnny was locally famous for a number of characteristic “sayings.” When he knew I was stressed about something, for example, he would always say “Don’t worry ‘bout the mule going blind; just load the wagon.”

I never understood why the mule was visually challenged, but I took him to mean that we should focus on those things we have some control over, and not sweat too much over things we can’t control.

At other times in my life, when I have faced hard or dark times, I didn’t even have to call Johnny to remember his advice and sense his encouragement. Some things about him just took up residence in my head and heart, and when difficult days came, I could always hear him, from the back of my mind, saying “Push on, push on.”

That’s what his family is doing these days, and so many others who loved him. And though most folks reading these words were not lucky enough to know Johnny Brown, I hope you’ll share with me a prayer of thanks for God’s gift to the world of a unique, wide-open, special man, and push on. **BT**

# Typical atheist is white son of religious parents

WASHINGTON — The typical member of a fast-growing atheist association is a highly educated, married white male who grew up with religious parents.

The Freedom from Religion Foundation, which grew from 5,500 in 2004 to about 16,000 members this year, announced results of a survey of its members on Dec. 1.

The Wisconsin-based organization received nearly 4,000 responses to its survey, which was mailed to all its members in May. Respondents replied to the nonscientific survey by mail or online.

Asked about their primary reason for being “deconverted from religion to freethought,” about a third of respondents said “religion doesn’t make sense.” Seventeen percent said religious hypocrisy or bigotry was the cause; 9 percent said reading skeptical authors; 5 percent cited reading the Bible.

Most respondents said the religious denomination they left behind was Protestant (42 percent), but 30 percent

*Asked about their primary reason for being “deconverted from religion to freethought,” about a third of respondents said “religion doesn’t make sense.”*



said they were raised Catholic and 27 percent were raised Jewish.

The overwhelming majority of atheist respondents — 95 percent — are white, but foundation officials hope that statistic will change.

“We’ve started to do more outreach to the African-American and freethought communities of color, and clearly, this is a great untapped source for new members who support reason and secularism in this country,” said foundation co-president Annie Laurie Gaylor.

She said the group’s membership grew

by 1,000 within a few weeks of an April decision by a federal judge who sided with the foundation and declared the law creating the National Day of Prayer unconstitutional.

Other findings from survey respondents include:

- 88 percent describe themselves as atheist, and 12 percent as agnostic
- 43 percent are retired
- 30 percent volunteer regularly
- 24 percent are veterans
- 11 percent are vegetarians
- 9 percent are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. **BT**

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# Déjà vu

Top religion stories from 2010 have familiar ring

The calendar may have said 2010, but for Pope Benedict XVI and much of his global flock, it looked and felt a lot like 2002.

**F**or the second time in a decade, damning charges of child molestation at the hands of Catholic priests dominated headlines, this time reaching the highest levels of the Vatican, as critics questioned whether Benedict himself mishandled abuse cases.

The Roman Catholic Church wasn't the only institution battling a sense of déjà vu, as some of the most controversial religion stories of the past 20 years returned to the headlines.

A 1994-style fight over health care reform not only pitted Republicans against Democrats, but also Catholic bishops against Catholic nuns. Lingering questions about President

Obama's Christian faith morphed into a belief among one in five Americans that he's actually a Muslim. Nearly 10 years after 9/11, Islamophobia returned with a vengeance as a Florida pastor threatened to torch a pile of Qurans, and Tennessee officials debated whether Islam is actually a religion.

This time, the resurrected stories were more pointed, the debates more polarizing. Old stories found new life online, and voices that once would have been dismissed as extreme were amplified by the Internet, Facebook and Twitter.

"New media has had the effect of keeping certain news stories alive, bringing them back



Obama's faith was questioned again.

from the dead and propelling them into the news," said Diane Winston, a scholar of religion and media at the University of Southern California.

The 2010 abuse scandal, unlike the 2002 crisis in the U.S., was largely confined to Europe, starting in Ireland and later erupting in the pope's native Germany. Four bishops resigned, and Benedict ended the year by telling cardinals that worldwide guidelines for handling abuse cases will be forthcoming.

"It was really almost like the crater of a volcano, out of which suddenly a tremendous cloud of filth came, darkening and soiling everything," the pope told a German journalist in a book-length interview.

Here at home, the ghosts of 9/11 loomed large as a fight over a planned Islamic community center a few blocks from Ground Zero became a litmus test for tolerance toward American Muslims. Evangelist Franklin Graham was uninvited from a National Day of Prayer event at the Pentagon for calling Islam an "evil" and "wicked" religion, comments he made back in 2001.

Even as Michigan's Rima Fakhri was crowned the first Muslim Miss USA, 53 percent of Americans admitted harboring unfavorable views of Islam. Oklahoma voters passed a preemptive ban on judges using Islamic law in state courts.


Omid Safi, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said he is most concerned by the reaction against the organizers of Park51, the proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero.

"These are the most interfaith-y group of Muslims imaginable," he said. "They are as successful an American story as it gets; it's the perfect immigrant narrative. These are people who get sent by the State Department overseas to say Muslims can live freely in this country, and then they are caricatured as jihadist radicals."



Franklin uninvited from Day of Prayer.

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Distrust of Islam was not limited to American shores. A year after Switzerland banned minarets at mosques, Belgium and



Veils banned in Belgium, France

France banned Muslim women from wearing full-face veils in public.

Like the 1994 Republican resurgence, the Democrats' midterm "shellacking" was fueled, in large part, by anger over health care reform.

The plan split American Catholics, with bishops opposing it and Catholic hospitals and nuns supporting it. The hierarchy later dismissed dissenters' support for the plan as mere "opinion," however "well-considered."

In the Episcopal Church, it felt a lot like 2003 again as the Rt. Rev. Mary Glasspool was elected the church's second openly gay bishop. New Hampshire Bishop V. Gene Robinson, whose 2003 election sparked a global schism, announced that he will retire in 2013.



Episcopal Church elects gay bishop again

Glasspool's election prompted Anglican leaders in London to sideline their rebellious American branch on some international panels. The Presbyterian Church (USA) voted — for the fourth time in a dozen years — to allow openly gay clergy, and new rules that allow gay clergy prompted dissident Lutherans to form the North American Lutheran Church.

In a flashback to 1976, when Episcopalians opened the priesthood to women, the last hold-out diocese, in Quincy, Ill., finally ordained its first female priest.

A rash of teen suicides and gay bullying spurred religious leaders, rock stars and even



Teen suicides spur 'It Gets Better'

Obama to join the "It Gets Better" project, while an October poll found that two-thirds of Americans see a link between religious teachings against homosexuality and higher rates of suicide among gay youths.

Religious teachings against homosexuality are not enough to justify a ban on gay marriage, a federal judge ruled in August in striking down California's



The mobile offshore drilling unit Development Driller III (near) prepares to drill a relief well at the Deepwater Horizon site in May 2010 as the MODU Q4000 holds position directly over the damaged blowout preventer. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Patrick Kelley.

Proposition 8. And religious beliefs are not enough to justify the unconstitutional law that created the National Day of Prayer, another federal judge ruled in April.

Pioneering televangelist Robert Schuller, after a bitter and public family feud, handed his Southern California pulpit over to daughter Sheila Schuller Coleman, who filed for bankruptcy in October, citing church debts of \$43 million.

In Oregon, prosecutors traveled down familiar terrain as two parents from a controversial faith-healing church were sentenced in the death of their teenage son; their daughter and son-in-law had been acquitted on similar charges last year. Another set of parents from the same church face similar manslaughter charges.

Religious and humanitarian groups rallied to deliver relief to earthquake-ravaged Haiti, where an estimated 220,000 died, more than 300,000 were injured and more than one million left homeless. Ten U.S. missionaries were detained, and later released, on charges of trying to smuggle Haitian orphans out of the country.

Along the Gulf Coast, social service agencies were stretched thin trying to deliver relief to families and businesses struggling to cope with the massive BP oil spill.

2010 saw several prominent culture warriors take a bow from the national stage: After stepping down last year as chairman of Focus on the Family, James Dobson turned off the microphone at his daily radio program only to start his own show.

- Ill health forced Donald Wildmon to retire as head of the American Family Association.
- Ergun Caner was forced to step down as dean of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary after exaggerating his dramatic conversion from militant Islam.

At the same time, several controversial newsmakers from years past re-emerged for a second act in 2010:

- Colorado Springs pastor Ted Haggard started a new church four years after a stunning fall from grace in a scandal involving a male escort and drugs.
- Obama's fiery former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, alleged that the president "threw me under the bus" during the 2008 campaign.
- Roy Moore, who lost his job as chief justice on the Alabama Supreme Court in 2003 for refusing to remove a 5,300-pound Ten Commandments monument, lost his second bid for governor.
- Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan returned to demand an apology from Jews for "the most vehement anti-black behavior in the annals of our history."
- Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr was named president of Baylor University, the world's largest Baptist school.

2010 also saw the passing of several notable figures: Jews for Jesus founder Moishe Rosen died at age 78; pioneering feminist theologian Mary Daly died at age 81; "Davey and Goliath" creator Art Clokey died at age 88. Gospel artists Doug Oldham died at age 79, Albertina Walker at age 81 and Walter Hawkins at age 61. **BT**

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