

TBAPTISTS Today

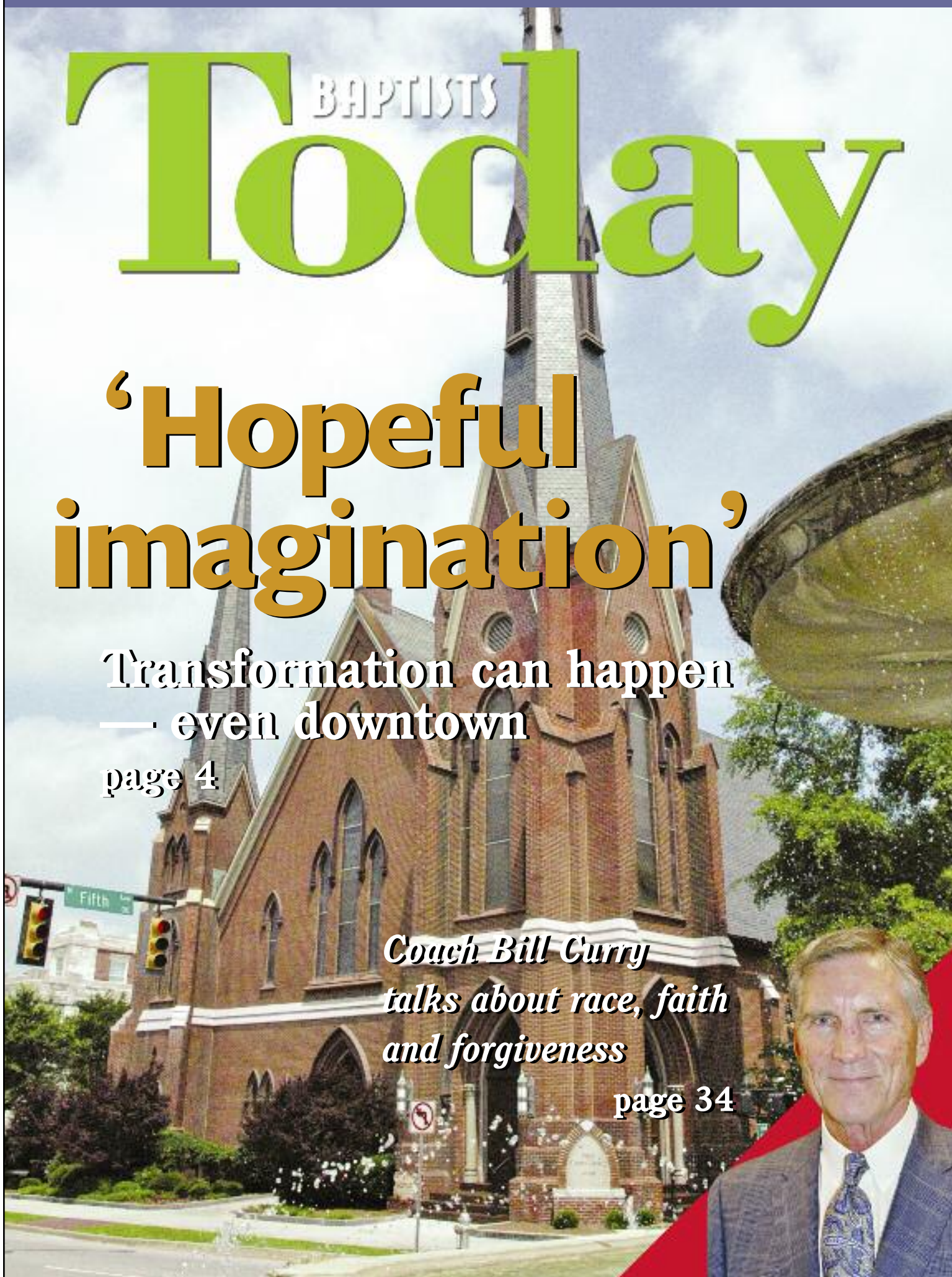
‘Hopeful imagination’

Transformation can happen
— even downtown

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talks about race, faith
and forgiveness*

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Laxness, liability in the laying on of hands



Cover photo by Tony W. Cartledge.

The transformation taking place at a 200-year-old church in Wilmington, N.C., just might spark "hopeful imagination" in other places.

Page 4



Cookies, cooking & caring



Pastor Mike Queen stands at the entrance to the Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center that houses multiple social ministries and humanitarian services in Wilmington, N.C.

‘Hopeful imagination’

Transformation can happen — even downtown

WILMINGTON, N.C. — Transformation doesn’t happen overnight, especially for a sizable downtown church with a lengthy history and traditions to match. But transformation *can* happen, and when it does, amazing things follow in its wake.

First Baptist Church of Wilmington was not unlike many older downtown churches when Mike Queen became pastor 24 years ago. Its historic twin spires were firmly planted in the downtown area, but it was in some ways an island unto itself, disconnected from the surrounding community.

Today, the church is deeply involved with missions programs and outreach activities,

serving the community in a variety of ways.

The church hosts a growing ministry center of faith-based social and humanitarian ministries in facilities it bought from the county and continues to renovate, for example.

In addition, lay members are empowered to initiate acts of service to the community. An average of 100 new members join the church family each year, and a dynamic program of education and discipleship has scores of church members involved in researching and writing its own Bible study curriculum.

On October 22-23, the congregation will host a conference for church leaders who long to see congregational transformation in their own settings. Called “Hopeful Imagination,” the conference is not designed to make one church’s story the model, but to spark the imagination and stoke the passion of participants for their own churches.

A cultural shift

Early in his tenure, Queen saw a need for the congregation to become more involved in its community. When Jim Everette came as minister of education and missions 20 years ago, Queen charged him with getting more members plugged into missions and outreach.

That cultural shift, said Queen, “has defined us, shaped us and made us a different kind of congregation.” He credits Everette, now associate pastor, with successfully engaging more members in hands-on ministry, and changing their mindset from self-service to serving the community.

An early opportunity took place when Wilmington’s Good Shepherd soup kitchen lost its space and was on the verge of shutting down its ministry of feeding the homeless. With Queen’s encouragement, Everette called

Kathy Dawson, who was directing Good Shepherd at the time.

As Queen recalls it, when asked why she had not already called on First Baptist for assistance, she said “We never dreamed that a downtown church would take us in ... you know the crowd we serve.”

Good Shepherd fed homeless persons from First Baptist facilities for 19 months, until the ministry was able to obtain its own building. At least half of the volunteers remain members of First Baptist, Queen said.

Another opportunity came when a Pentecostal congregation’s building burned and the pastor asked Queen if his congregation could use First Baptist’s large activity center, located a few miles from downtown. The Rock Church used the facility for 33 months before completing a new building. By then, new relationships were born.

A willingness to risk

As Queen completed his 14th year in Wilmington, he and other church staff members invited consultant George Bullard to join them for a retreat during which they sought to understand their congregation’s past and to envision a “future story” for the church. Bullard led them to think about what changes might be needed in order to turn their dreams into reality.

After several suggestions had been made, longtime youth minister Don Vigus said, with some hesitation, “Mike has to change.”

The room became very quiet as Vigus suggested that his boss had been holding back. “You’ve been building up capital for 15 years,” he said to Queen, “and you need to spend it.”

“I think you have a vision for the church, but are afraid,” Vigus said, suggesting that Queen had been holding back in preaching and vision casting. “You need to let go and let God lead us where he wants to lead us.”

When asked for a response, Queen said, “I think Don is right.” Though still wondering if he had the courage needed, he asked the staff to support him and pledged to give his best.

Shortly afterward, Queen attended a conference on church transformation at Flamingo Road Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., where Don Southerland was pastor, and later took the staff and several deacons to the same conference.

Southerland advised them to be patient: “The older the church, the slower you go.”

It took four-and-a-half years before the first major change, the addition of a well-done contemporary worship option, came to fruition. Other changes were incremental, though sometimes changes came in spurts.

“Being deliberate means sometimes you’re stirring a lot of pots, but nothing is happening,” said Jayne Davis, minister of education. “But then, several may start to boil at once.”

Through the gradual process, “We opened ourselves in such a way that we didn’t ask why we could not do something,” Queen said, “but focused on how we could do it.”

An audacious dream

An unexpected opportunity arose in 2003 when a large county-owned building that wrapped around two sides of the church became available. Built in an architectural style called “Brutalism,” the massive red brick structure had housed the sheriff’s department, a variety of other government offices, and the county jail in more than 60,000 square feet of heated space, plus an underground parking garage.

The building had so many leaks that Queen wondered if it might be best to tear it down and use the space for parking. When challenged by a friend and real estate devel-

oper who thought the leaks could be controlled, Queen and the staff began to dream about ways in which the building could become a hub for cooperative but independent ministry activities serving the Wilmington community.

Making the purchase would prove to be a challenge, however. The church placed a bid of \$1 million on the building, which had a tax value of more than \$10 million. A local developer offered a competing bid, raising it by five percent within the required 10-day period.

The church was preparing to counter-offer when a member read the county’s bid requirements more carefully, and realized that competing bids must raise the offer by 10 percent of the first \$1,000, and five percent of the remainder. The competing bid was \$50 short of meeting the requirement, and the 10-day waiting period passed with no other offers. The county was then obligated to sell the property to First Baptist for the \$1 million bid, but some of the commissioners reversed their vote to approve it, and the chairman refused to sign the contract.

Enter Evelina Williams. As The Rock Church prepared to dedicate its new facility, Queen was invited to attend and say a few words so the congregation could express appreciation for the hospitality First Baptist had shown to them.



An imposing former government building that included a jail has become a place of redemption where ministry is carried out daily by a large number of volunteers and through a variety of agencies and organizations hosted by the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C.

The purchase and repurposing of the county jail is but one of the many stories Queen and his staff will tell during the Hopeful Imagination conference.

The next week, he received a phone call from an African-American woman who identified herself as Evelina Williams and said she had seen Queen at the “grand opening” at The Rock Church. She had called to tell Queen that she and her “prayer warriors” had been praying for months that First Baptist would be able to purchase the county building so they could “turn that jail from a place of incarceration to a place of redemption.”

The prayer warriors turned out to be 18 women, both black and white, who had crammed into Williams’ tiny living room for a time of ardent prayer every Thursday morning for the past 22 years. Queen asked permission to visit the group so he could thank them for their prayers, and before the morning was over he had been anointed with oil, prayed over, and left weeping by the fervor of the women’s faith.

Some time after, Williams called Queen to say she had good news — that Jesus had come to her the night before and said “You’re gonna get that building,” though she didn’t know where the million dollars would come from. A few weeks later, she called again to say Jesus had told her that one man was going to donate the entire sum.

Fast-forward four weeks, when a local businessman named Bobby Harrelson invited Queen and Everette to lunch, and indicated that he wanted to help the church get the building. Queen thanked him, and said they’d been applying for grants, looking for other sources of revenue, and could use all the help they could get. But that wasn’t what Harrelson had in mind: he wanted to donate the entire million dollars in memory of his wife, who had recently died.

When Queen called Williams to say, “You’re not going to believe what just happened,” her response was, “When will you learn that when the Lord makes a promise, he keeps his promises?”

Today the JoAnn Carter Harrelson Center is home to the Wilmington Area Rebuilding Ministry, Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity, Phoenix Employment Ministry,

Christian Women’s Job Corps, Campus Crusade for Christ, an after-school program for at-risk children called “Communities in Schools,” a quiet retreat for abused or threatened women, and several other ministries.

An entire floor of the administration building remains to be renovated, along with the jail. Opportunities for new ministries still abound: Queen hopes the former jail may one day house a home for developmentally disabled adults.

Empowered for mission

The purchase and repurposing of the county jail is but one of many stories Queen and his staff will tell during the Hopeful Imagination conference.

Several years ago, tired of learning about community needs but taking no action, some of the church’s youth obtained three cases of bottled water and distributed them to random people in the streets and parks of Wilmington. The next week, they bought dozens of donuts and took them to the staff at the local hospital. The third week, they used their own money to buy

supplies and set up shop in front of the church, where they offered peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to homeless people.

The teens are still there every Tuesday night, providing a meal to the homeless 52 weeks a year, even when Christmas falls on Tuesday. They operate on donations and their own funds, with just enough adults around to provide security, passing on leadership from youth to youth.

When a woman in the church said she wanted to begin making prayer shawls for the sick, Queen didn’t expect much from the incipient ministry. But, the project has grown as other women and girls who knit have joined in. Queen said he often finds hospital patients holding the prayer shawl they have provided, using it to cover their head while praying, or even wrapping it around an injured knee.

Ministries like these can arise because both the staff and the membership have “incredible freedom” to hear God’s call and respond to it, Davis said. Such freedom grows from “an amazing level of trust” between the congregation and the staff, she said, and it empowers individuals to find their place of ministry.

Hopeful Imagination

The upcoming conference “is designed to offer hope, encouragement, inspiration and practical ministry tools” for leaders from traditional churches on the journey of transitioning and transformation, said consultant Eddie Hammett, who is helping to organize the conference. Co-hosted by several entities and open to all, the conference is especially designed for “churches that are plateaued, stuck and drifting,” but who desire to move forward, he said.

Participants will not get instructions on “how to do what we do,” said Davis. Rather, the conference is designed “to be a spark to get you thinking about what God is doing and what God wants you to do in your church.”

More information about the Hopeful Imagination conference can be found on page 39 and at www.cbfn.org. **BT**



Pastor Mike Queen credits Evelina Williams (shown with him in the photo he holds) and her prayer partners for ardent prayers and blessings leading up to the purchase of a neighboring building that now makes a positive impact on the larger community in and around the coastal city of Wilmington, N.C.

editorial

Fostering fairness in a culture of diversity

By John Pierce

The Supreme Court is divided — and so am I. Both sides in the recent *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez* decision raised some valid concerns.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in writing for the court's 5-4 majority in the case, defended the University of California's Hastings College of the Law policy that requires all official student organizations — including positions of leadership — to be open to all persons. She described the policy as “reasonable” and “viewpoint neutral.”

On the surface, that sounds right. Who wants an official student organization on campus that practices ugly acts of exclusion such as forbidding membership to African-Americans or Jews? Our history has more than enough of that stuff to make everyone cautious of discrimination.

On the other hand, the Christian Legal Society seems reasonable in wanting the freedom to have student leaders who reflect the organization's name and purpose. Is that discrimination too?

Many, including a number of Supreme Court justices, think not. Writing for the Court's minority in the case, Justice Samuel Alito called the decision a “serious setback for freedom of expression in this country.”

Justice Alito explained: “There are religious groups that cannot in good conscience agree in their bylaws that they will admit persons who do not share their faith, and for those groups, the consequence of an accept-all-comers policy is marginalization.”

Like the high court, I have a divided opinion on this issue. Acts of discrimination are highly offensive and should be countered at every turn. Yet it seems quite reasonable, and constitutional, that voluntary student groups whose very identity is tied to a shared religious or political perspective would limit its leadership to those who share such commitments.

Must a Young Republicans group accept a Democrat for treasurer? Can Hillel not limit its officers to Jewish students?

As a longtime Baptist campus minister who served on state university campuses, these are considered as very practical questions. Yet, good relationships with reasonable university administrators and my own caution about proper church-state separation kept me out of such conflicts over the 13 years I served on government-funded campuses.

Challenges did arise on occasion. The president of one school asked me to serve on what became known as “the sensitivity committee” — launched when a new counselor, who was Jewish, objected to an overtly Christian prayer at a faculty and staff dinner. He was quite shocked when the Baptist campus minister (me) made the case that such sectarian religious exercises were improper in that setting.

But it seems wholly proper that student (or faculty) organizations with particular religious, political or social interests would serve a limited audience.

Public universities that grant official organizational status to student groups should expect a cooperative spirit and openness to the larger campus community. Yet, on the other hand, the reason for having so many groups on campus is to provide students with options for different interests and, yes, religious beliefs.

While serving as Baptist campus minister at Georgia Tech in the early '90s, there were regular meetings of the chaplains or directors of religious organizations. On one occasion the Lutheran campus minister, who also served as chaplain at a retirement facility in Atlanta, came storming into the room.

His on-campus activities were held in

a small house that provided dorm rooms for a few students and a limited program. Someone from the student activities office had just called to ask about the organization's racial and ethnic diversity.

Then came the warning: Either become more racially diverse or lose your status as an official campus organization.

Lutheran Campus Ministry did not have policies designed for exclusion. Rather the organization simply drew a very limited audience based on the number of Lutherans in the widely diverse student body.

At the Baptist Student Center, we offered a warm welcome to the larger campus community too. Yet the students who were elected to lead the organization were expected to share certain Baptist commitments and identity.

Allowing religious groups to have leadership that affirms common beliefs is not the same as giving official status to a racist organization that fosters hatred. It is about identity, not exclusion.

In fact, the wider array of organizations on campus reflected the university's diversity rather than ignoring or compromising it.

While not familiar with all details of the recent Supreme Court case, the issue of funding seems most problematic. Enacting a policy of not passing along collected student fees to any organization would be a better option. Surely dues, outside sponsorships and fundraising can float student organizations just fine.

My biggest concern as a leader of a religious organization on a state university campus was always about access. And, as a Baptist who affirms liberty for all, I wanted no more or no less than any other recognized group — whether fraternal, political, religious or otherwise — on campus.

Such an assurance of equal access, it seems to me, guarantees both fairness and the space needed for rich diversity to blossom. **BT**



Editor's note: This is the eighth in a yearlong series of articles on "Healthy ministers for healthy churches," produced in partnership with the Center for Congregational Health and supported by a gift from Henry V. Langford.

Bearing our burdens: Healthy families give voice to pain, fear and loss

By Paul Mullen

When Nancy's husband was diagnosed with leukemia, their lives were devastated. Multiple, accumulating demands spawned a nearly unbearable burden.

Nancy's religious faith and upbringing, as important as they were, left her ill prepared to deal with the onslaught.

The emotional pain of seeing her husband suffer was compounded by fears of the unknown. Anger brewed at the threats to their security and the utter lack of control.

Untold stress resulted from trying to maintain the household while navigating a complex medical system. Lurking in the sea of sadness was anger at her husband for leaving her to cope alone.

Nancy, an active member in her church, turned to her faith to cope with the assault on her spirit. She and the church prayed fervently for her husband to be healed.

When church members visited Nancy and her husband in the hospital, they marveled at how she seemed buoyed by her faith. With a calm demeanor and apparent sense of control, she was the picture of grace under fire.

Nancy's husband became progressively worse. He was moved to an ICU unit and put on a ventilator. When the physicians said his prognosis was grim, Nancy and her church continued to pray for a miracle.

A week later, she was asked to consider removing the life support and allowing him to die. Standing by his bedside, Nancy collapsed in a seizure.

I visited with her several times in her own hospital room. She began to pour out her heart, sharing closely guarded thoughts and feelings.

"I'd prayed so hard for my husband to be well, but it seemed like the harder I prayed, the sicker he got," she said. "I was confused and afraid."

She continued: "I thought I was supposed to be a tower of strength, a witness of faith for my family and church family. I thought if I believed God without doubting, and kept my faith from wavering, that he would answer my prayers.

When the church members came by, I knew it made them nervous if I wasn't doing well. So I pretended that everything was all right.

"But underneath, I sometimes wondered if my prayers were doing any good. I secretly wondered where God was and whether he cared. I felt angry and disappointed with God. Mostly, I felt ashamed for feeling that way. But the harder I tried to push the feelings away, the stronger they got. I think that's maybe why I had the seizure."

With spiritual support focused on empathy, honesty and compassion, Nancy gradually felt permission to embrace her authentic feelings. She fully experienced the depth of pain and sorrow. Over time, the intensity of her anticipatory grief subsided.

When her husband died a few weeks later, she went through a process of normal, healthy grief. She emerged with a stronger and more resilient faith, with a deeper connection to Christ than she had ever

experienced before.

Nancy and her church had done the best they could to cope with the harsh realities of pain, suffering and loss. Like all of us, they just needed some help along the way.

In the face of overwhelming anxiety, our religious coping efforts often take an unconscious turn toward emotional denial, suppression or repression of our honest feelings.

What is adaptive in the immediate aftermath of tragedy can become maladaptive if it lingers. What appears to be a healthy faith, holding our fears and pain at bay, can work against us in unhealthy ways — physically, emotionally and spiritually.

The anxieties of church members who want to offer support can add to the dilemma.

How people handle emotional pain in the face of the harsh realities of life is central to healthy adaptation. When our faith reinforces denial and suppression, the physical, emotional and spiritual outcomes are usually negative.

Prosperity theologies, with an emphasis on positive thinking, can heighten the denial.

Candace Pert, a neuroscientist and expert in mind-body medicine, observed that while positive thinking may be helpful, it becomes harmful when the truth of how you honestly feel is avoided. "Undigested emotions" create stress in the body and increase vulnerability to disease.

David Spiegel, a Stanford psychiatrist, wrote: "Adapting well to a situation does not require that a person maintain an upbeat or rigidly positive attitude. Ventilation of negative emotion ... helps patients acknowledge, bear, and put into perspective their distress."

The Book of Lamentations expresses a



*The package of human experience brings pain,
fear and loss to all of us along the way.*

similar theme from a faith perspective.

Israel was torn apart at the seams following the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile. The author arranged many of the poetic verses into acrostics, where each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The intent was to express the full range of emotions in the nation's suffering and grief — from crushed hopes and anguish to renewed faith and hope as Israel remembered God's mercy and power.

James Hollis wrote: "Life is a series of gains, but it is also a series of losses; failures to grieve loss and disappointment openly, honestly, will rise again, as unbidden ghosts from their untimely burial, through depression ... or captivity by the mindless distractions of our time. Failure to incorporate loss into our lives means we have not yet accepted the full package life brings to us. Everything given is also lost ... Jung challenges us: 'Real liberation comes not from glossing over or repressing painful states of feeling, but only from experiencing them to the full.'"

I remember a mother and father's great courage in experiencing loss to the fullest when their young child was killed in an accident. Active church members, they had turned to God immediately after the accident in effort to bring order to the chaos. Initially, they were sustained by faith and the support of their church family.

However, within months they came undone in a season of "spiritual disorientation." They cried out to their pastor, "Why did God let this happen? Why would God want to hurt us like this? Where is God? Does he care? Is he even there? Are we losing our faith?"

The pastor managed his own anxiety well enough to listen without denying the pain of life's most poignant questions. After a time of silence, he said, "I'm so very sorry.... You're not losing your faith at all.... Grief has times of peace and tremendous pain on the way to healing — a time when you'll remember with more joy and less pain. But not right now. God completely, fully understands — like he did with David, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jesus on the Cross."

Some time later the parents experienced a "new orientation," in their spiritual lives, as God began transforming the darkness into hope.

They were able to say, "We have a much clearer sense of God's presence in our lives. Our faith is deeper than before the accident. We'd give anything to have our child back, but with God's help, we're making the best of life that we can."

The package of human experience brings pain, fear and loss to all of us along the way. As we entrust to God our authentic voices, giving expression to the whole range of human emotion, God can transform the ashes of despair into renewed hope. Spiritual wholeness emerges in the context of courageous, honest, healthy faith. **BT**

Paul Mullen is director of church and community relations at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, N.C.

reader's response

Appreciates lessons, other content in news journal

EDITOR: How much I do appreciate your very fine publication. You do such a great job in selecting outstanding writers covering a wide range of subjects — all with a keen sense of fairness and giving the readers the truth, inspiration and often a humorous slant.

Truly outstanding were the Bible study lessons for August by Jim Dant. Such an outstanding grasp of human nature. So very interesting how he revealed the hand of God using persons for his purposes in spite of such foibles inherent with us all. This section will be clipped for my files.

May God continue to empower and bless your good efforts.

Miriam F. Griffin, Thomson, Ga.

How real is your faith?


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Quotation

“ remarks ”

“Testimony envy may be part of any community, but we evangelicals seem to have a particular bent toward narrative one-upmanship.”

—An editorial in *Christianity Today*, after *Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary President Ergun Caner's demotion for exaggerating his story about growing up a militant Muslim (RNS)*

“It's much easier to have an opinion about how someone else should lead than it is to actually lead yourself.”

—Colleen Burroughs, moderator-elect of the *Cooperative Baptist Fellowship* and vice president of *Passport, Inc.*

“Our response has not been as compassionate and loving as it should be.”

—Stephen Thurston of *Chicago*, president of the *National Baptist Convention of America*, to the *Chicago Tribune* about how black churches are slowly becoming more outspoken about testing and education on HIV/AIDS (RNS)

“The sanctuary is designated as the holiest of holies in a place of worship — an especially holy place in the church building ... We have lost sight of the main purpose of coming to church, which is to worship God.”

—David Stovall, facilities manager at *Highland Baptist Church* in Waco, Texas (ABP)

“Well-meaning church members who focus on ‘traditional,’ ‘contemporary,’ or even ‘emerging’ labels get off track. People connect with a church, regardless of music, if they feel noticed, welcomed, accepted and plugged in.”

—Worship consultant *Dave Nyland* of *Florida (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship)*

“It was a very tumultuous time. In fact, it was just warfare. A time of great strife, disagreement, hardship in everybody's life.”

—Former *Southern Baptist Convention* President *Charles Stanley* reflecting on the 1985 SBC gathering in Dallas during a video tribute to him at the *June SBC Pastor's Conference* in Orlando (BP)

“In early May, I was having breakfast with a group of businessmen when one of them asked me sincerely, ‘Do you think the Gulf could be the next Dead Sea?’ I think it was at that moment I realized the historic, ongoing, long-term impact this oil spill is likely to have on the Gulf Coast.”

—Barry Howard, pastor of *First Baptist Church* of Pensacola, Fla.

“There is no Pharaoh-like dominion over the Earth. There is a Christ-like stewardship of the Earth.”

—Resolutions committee chairman *Russell Moore* to reporters after the *Southern Baptist Convention* passed a resolution condemning the *Gulf oil spill* (ABP)

“It has been a place where we could either become Baptist or remain Baptist.”

—Executive coordinator *Daniel Vestal* on the *Cooperative Baptist Fellowship* in his report to the 20th annual assembly in June

“I have decided to create a new body with the aim of promoting a renewed evangelism.”

—Pope *Benedict XVI*, naming Italian Archbishop *Salvatore Fisichella* to lead a new office aimed at reigniting Catholic faith in the West (RNS)

“Senator Byrd's simple faith in God and his love of family and service to our nation will be greatly missed.”

—A statement from the *American Baptist-affiliated West Virginia Baptist Convention* on the late Sen. *Robert Byrd* (D-W.Va.) who was raised in *Crab Orchard Baptist Church* in Crab Orchard, W. Va., and was baptized into the *First Baptist Church* of Beckley, W. Va.

“... Nothing strikes fear in the hearts of the leaders around CBN than (Pat) Robertson when he is not speaking carefully.”

—*Auburn University* scholar emeritus *David Edwin Harrell*, author of a new biography, *Pat Robertson: A Life and Legacy*, on the *Christian Broadcast Network* founder's annual predictions (RNS)

“... The sort of radical Christianity exemplified by [Manute] Bol is rarely understood by sports journalists. For all its interest in the intimate details of players' lives, the media has long been tone deaf to the way devout Christianity profoundly shapes some of them.”

—*Jon A. Shields* of *Claremont McKenna College*, on the 7'7" former basketball player and Sudanese Christian who died June 19 at age 47 after years of serving those who suffer (Wall Street Journal)

“I don't want to be a part of the generation that leaves our children with a less free nation.”

—*Mercer University* President *Bill Underwood*, speaking to a *Baptist Joint Committee* luncheon in *Charlotte* on threats to religious liberty from those seeking government support of sectarian beliefs

President chooses American Baptist pastor to serve as religious-freedom ambassador

By Robert Marus
Associated Baptist Press

WASHINGTON — President Obama has responded to more than a year of speculation and criticism among advocates for international religious freedom by naming an American Baptist minister as the nation's top diplomat for religious freedom.

But some international-religious-freedom advocates are questioning the nomination of Suzan Johnson Cook as the State Department's ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom because of her lack of professional experience in foreign policy.

In June, the White House announced that Obama had tapped Johnson Cook for the post, which had remained vacant since Obama's inauguration a year and a half ago.

Johnson Cook has been a teacher, pastor, motivational speaker and political adviser for three decades. Most recently, she served as the founding pastor of Bronx Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in New York.

Before founding that congregation, from 1983 to 1996, Johnson Cook was pastor of the historic Mariners' Temple Baptist Church in New York — which meets on the oldest Baptist worship site in Manhattan, dating to 1795.

Mariners' Temple and Bronx Christian Fellowship are both aligned with American Baptist Churches USA, and Johnson Cook's ordination is through the denomination.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton released a statement praising the choice. "Dr. Johnson Cook is an experienced religious leader with a passion for human rights and an impressive record of public service," she said. "President Obama could not have found a more fitting choice for this important position."

Johnson Cook's name had been floated for months as a potential choice for the long-vacant post. But the pick may not have placated activists for global religious liberty, many of whom have accused the administration of soft-pedaling the issue since Obama and Clinton took office.

Thomas Farr, the first director of the office Cook will oversee, praised her résumé as a pastor, but told Religion News Service that the position needs someone with a strong grasp of, and experience in, the complex field of foreign policy.

"If the Obama administration were



Johnson Cook

taking this issue seriously, it would choose an expert in international religious freedom with experience in foreign affairs. It would choose a proven leader who can change things at the State Department and re-energize our flagging [religious-freedom] policy," he said. "Perhaps Rev. Cook will surprise the skeptics and prove to be that leader. I hope so, and will certainly do everything I can to help her."

Robert Seiple, who served as the first international-religious-freedom ambassador after the position was created by a 1998 law, said the job is a delicate one even for experts in the field.

"You don't get a lot of grace in the State Department for on-the-job training," he said, according to RNS.

Johnson Cook holds degrees from Emerson College, Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary and United Theological Seminary. She is the owner of Charisma Speakers and has served since 1990 as a chaplain for the New York Police Department.

She advised President Bill Clinton on race relations and also advised Obama when he was a senator. *The New York Times* has called her one of the best preachers in New York and described her as "Billy Graham and Oprah rolled into one." **BT**

Study: Devout are less stressed than non-believers

TORONTO (RNS) — Religion may provide a "buffer" allowing the devout to feel less anxiety when they make mistakes, compared with non-believers, according to new scientific research.

Researchers at the University of Toronto measured "error-related negativity" — people's defensive response to errors — and compared it to religious belief. Their findings were published in the journal *Psychological Science*.

In the experiments, participants had electrodes measuring their brain activity as they performed cognitive tests. One test of 40 students involved making a grammatically-correct sentence out of jumbled words; some of the sentences contained words with religious connotations, like

"sacred" or "divine."

Another experiment required participants to identify the color of words that flashed on a screen. Some words were depicted in their correct color while others were not.

They were then asked to quantify their belief in God on a scale of zero to seven.

The study found that those who were religious or claimed belief in God "showed low levels of distress-related neural activity" when they learned of their test errors, compared with nonbelievers.

By contrast, atheists demonstrated a "heightened neural response" and reacted more defensively when they learned of their errors, wrote the study's lead author, Michael Inzlicht, an associate professor of

psychology at the University of Toronto.

Inzlicht and co-author Alexa Tullett added, "Thinking about one's religion, consciously or otherwise, acts as a bulwark against defensive reactions to errors; it muffles the cortical alarm bell."

The authors note that many "varieties of belief" — not just religion — can produce a similar calming dynamic as long as it provides "meaning and structure" to one's life.

"If thinking about religion leads people to react to their errors with less distress and defensiveness ... in the long run, this effect may translate to religious people living their lives with greater equanimity than nonreligious people, being better able to cope with the pressures of living in a sometimes-hostile world." **BT**

Baptist Seminary of Kentucky relocating

School also reaches accreditation milestone

By Bob Allen
Associated Baptist Press

LEXINGTON, Ky. — The Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, an 8-year-old theological partner of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is moving to the campus of Georgetown College, a historic Baptist school that loosened ties with the Kentucky Baptist Convention in 2005.

The move comes on the heels of another milestone. Member institutions of the Association of Theological Schools voted June 23 in Montreal to grant associate-member status to the seminary.

“Seminary personnel are very excited with this entry-level status which the accrediting body encourages for 8-year-old schools

like BSK,” seminary President Greg Earwood said June 29.

Launched in 2002 in the education building of Calvary Baptist Church in Lexington, Ky., Baptist Seminary of Kentucky since 2005 has rented space on the campus of Lexington Theological Seminary, which is affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Baptist seminary began looking for a new location last year when Lexington Seminary indicated it would likely downsize and move out of its campus in downtown Lexington.

The seminary will remain independent from the college, while leasing space and sharing resources like a 55,000-square-foot library completed in 1998. Georgetown



Greg Earwood

College President William Crouch told the *Louisville Courier-Journal* that while it is a business relationship, “we look at it as if we’ve added them to our family.”

The first Baptist college founded west of the Allegheny mountains, Georgetown College traces its history to an academy started in 1787 by a Baptist minister named Elijah Craig.

Earwood, a former longtime Kentucky pastor who taught three years as an adjunct professor of Old Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in nearby Louisville, said that Baptist identity was “certainly a strong point” for attracting the seminary to Georgetown. Fall semester classes for the seminary will be offered in August.

Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, which started with 14 students in the first class in the fall of 2002, enrolled 53 full- and part-time students in the most recent academic year. **BT**

Bread for the World wins top anti-hunger prize for programs

By Ankita Rao
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — The president of a Christian anti-hunger lobbying group won the premier award for fighting world hunger.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton awarded the World Food Prize to Bread for the World President David Beckmann at the State Department on June 16.

Beckmann, an economist and ordained Lutheran minister, shared the \$250,000 prize with Jo Luck, president of Heifer International.

The World Food Prize Foundation recognizes individuals “who have advanced human development by improving the quality, quantity or availability of food in the world,” according to their website.

Bread for the World focuses its work on nutrition programs, development assistance and political advocacy. The organization works with Christian

churches — Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox — to advocate for hunger causes on Capitol Hill and within their congregations.

Beckmann is also the author of *Exodus from Hunger*, and the president of the Alliance to End Hunger, which connects diverse religious and scholarly groups to political leaders.



David Beckmann

“The progress the world has made against hunger and poverty is God moving in our time, and God is calling us now to get our country to do more to provide help and opportunity to hungry people,” Beckmann said in a statement.

Norman E. Borlaug, winner of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for his work with wheat production, created the prize in 1986. Iowa businessman John Ruan sponsors the program. **BT**

Four in 10 Americans think Jesus will return by year 2050

By Ankita Rao
Religion New Service

Four in 10 Americans believe Jesus Christ will return to earth by 2050, while a slightly larger portion (46 percent) don’t believe they’ll see a Second Coming by mid-century, according to a new survey.

As part of *Smithsonian Magazine’s* 40th anniversary issue, 1,546 adults were asked to guess the forecast of war, energy, science and religion in the next 40 years for a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for People & the Press.

Evangelicals were most likely (58 percent) to predict a Second Coming, followed by 32 percent of Catholics, and 27 percent of mainline Protestants.

Fifty-two percent of people living in the South, and 59 percent of people without a college degree, expected a Christ comeback more readily than their counterparts, according to the survey. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. **BT**

Laxness, liability in the laying on of hands

Historian urges Baptists to give attention to ordination

CHARLOTTE — Many Baptist churches have such lax approaches to ordination that they will lay hands “on most anyone who shows up with limited preparation, evaluation or systematic process,” said Baptist historian Bill Leonard. “Then we complain when we get what we deserve.”

Leading a June 25 workshop at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, Leonard noted that other denominations, from Presbyterians to Methodists to the Assemblies of God, have more stringent ordination requirements that may include mentoring, a seminary degree, knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, passage of exams in theology, history, church polity, or even a psychological profile.

Baptists have practiced ordination throughout their history, and in some cases Baptist associations have exercised some influence on the practice, but the principle of church autonomy allows individual congregations to set the requirements for ordination.

As dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School, responsible for working with students from a variety of denominations, Leonard said he was “stunned” at how little attention most Baptists give to those matters. The churches’ failure to take more responsibility on ordinations is exacerbated by several current realities, he said, including the declining influence of denominational systems on the new generation of candidates, the limited previous church involvement of many who seek ordination, and the litigious nature of American society.

“If for no other reason, in today’s society, you need to hone your ordination practices because your church could be held liable for illegal actions by persons you ordained,” Leonard said.

An added wrinkle is that churches are being called upon to ordain persons who have not yet found ministry-related employment. It was once common for churches to ordain only those persons who had been called to a church position, but that doesn’t work for an increasing number of candidates who want to serve in chaplaincy, where ordination is required for licensure, and licensure is required for employment.



What should churches do? Leonard suggested several procedures drawn from Baptist history and practice that churches might follow before laying hands on future ministers:

- **Develop a strategy for mentoring persons to ministry inside your own congregation.**

When divinity schools were not available, Leonard said, prospective candidates used to “read theology” with established ministers and learn from them.

- **Develop written, church-approved procedures to be given to ministerial candidates long before they seek ordination.**

These procedures — which set forth a clear process to be followed before ordination is offered — could include granting a “license” for ministry for a set period of time prior to ordination; requiring the candidate to make a formal, written request well in advance; requiring the candidate to provide written statements about basic theology and beliefs, especially related to a theology of pastoral ministry and ecclesiology, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and pastoral identity; and some evidence of formal or informal study. Leonard said churches should require ordination candidates to submit to a criminal background check as well.

- **Develop a process for moving through the ordination process that gives time for evaluation.**

Guided by an ordination committee, a candidate would be required to read selected materials before a recommendation is brought to the deacons and the church. Whether the committee is a standing committee or appointed for a particular candidate, members should be well versed in their responsibilities and given plenty of time to read all materials and interview the candidate.

Ordination committees should never be convened on the same day as the planned ordination ceremony, Leonard said: “Candidates should know that ordination requests can be approved, postponed for more evaluation, or rejected.”

After recommendation by the committee, the church should take some action to indicate formal approval, at which point the candidate can help to shape the actual ordination service. At minimum, services should include a report to the church from the committee, a statement by the candidate, and the “laying on of hands.”

In some churches, only ordained persons participate in the laying on of hands, but other congregations allow all persons present to participate. That practice “is very meaningful and worth doing so all can bless the person in that high and holy moment,” Leonard said.

Approved ordination policies establish an impartial and consistent method of examining candidates, said Leonard, and may be cited in legal cases, if necessary, to show that the congregation has done due diligence in examining those it chooses to ordain.

- **Give serious attention to and documentation of a congregational theology of ordination and its relationship to the church’s overall mission statement.**

Ordination practices should be “intricately related to the congregation’s understanding of the nature of the church and its congregational responsibility to the church and denomination at large,” Leonard said.

As a new generation of Baptist students prepares for ordination, churches need to see how much promise they hold, Leonard said.

“They’ve decided there’s something about being Baptists that galvanizes, shapes and centers them,” he said. “For all the struggles we feel about church life and the changing nature of culture, there is promise here.” **BT**

Homeowners weigh morality of walking out on mortgages

By Amy Green
Religion News Service

ORLANDO, Fla. — Lynn Thompson quit paying the mortgage on her investment property — not because she couldn't afford the payments, but because she thinks walking away is better for her long-term financial health.

Thompson bought the property here for \$175,000 in January 2007, just as the housing market began its slow downward slide. At the time, she planned to rent the house and eventually sell it for a profit.

Today, she estimates the house is worth \$85,000, maybe less.

Unable to find renters to help cover the mortgage, she tried to convince her lender to allow a “short sale” — selling below the loan amount, with the lender forgiving the balance. When the lender declined, Thompson decided to walk away.

“I would have basically no money left every month if I made the payments,” said Thompson, a single 39-year-old pharmacist. “If I tried to sell the house in, say, 10 years from now, I still would have to come up probably with, say, \$75,000.”

Desperate homeowners like Thompson have raised an ethical debate: Is it ever OK to walk away?

Nationwide, up to 25 million homeowners — about one in four — are “underwater”: like Thompson, their mortgages are worth more than their homes. Those who do walk away face an array of financial consequences, from damaged credit to the prospect of a lender suing to recover the balance. Yet for many, the question fundamentally is a moral one. Is it the right thing to do?

It's unclear how many homeowners, like Thompson, are opting for strategic defaults — allowing their homes to go into foreclosure even when they can make the payments. Many feel their homes are decades away from regaining value and they see no other options.

But especially in hard-hit places such as greater Orlando, where 55 percent of homeowners are underwater, the question is nagging at more homeowners, and the number of strategic defaults appears to be rising.

Strategic defaults accounted for 31 percent of all defaults in March, up from 22 percent the year before, according to an April



Photo by Casey Serin

report by Paola Sapienza of Northwestern University and Luigi Zingales of the University of Chicago.

That doesn't mean, however, that homeowners are walking away without feeling like they violated some ethical or moral code about not buying something they can't afford. Some are left with a deep sense of debtor's shame.

Brent White, a law professor at the University of Arizona whose writings include *The Morality of Strategic Default*, said more than 80 percent of homeowners still think defaulting on a mortgage is immoral, and those who do it usually make the decision not for financial reasons but emotional ones, he said.

In other words, it takes more than a dismal financial reality to push homeowners to default. Often underwater homeowners feel angry, depressed or hopeless, he said.

“People walk away because they're angry at their lenders,” he said. “They have been unable to work with them, and the government hasn't done anything to help underwater homeowners who are trying to make their mortgage payments. If people were acting purely on a rational basis, they would walk away much sooner than they do.”

At the heart of the question are biblical concepts of promise-keeping and neighborliness, said James Childs, theologian and ethicist at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, who noted that one neighbor's default can sink another neighbor's property values.

“The simple answer is we make certain promises when we move into a neighborhood that we're going to be good neighbors,” said Childs, author of *Greed: Economics and Ethics in Conflict*.

“If my greed ... is realized at the expense of my neighbors and I say I'm free to do that, then I've missed an ethical point entirely.”

Yet in an economy that rose and fell on the backs of unaffordable mortgages, homeowners aren't the only ones to blame, ethicists say.

White, from the University of Arizona, believes the housing market and economy could recover more quickly if homeowners could rid themselves of negative equity, allowing housing prices to hit bottom faster. The longer homeowners remain underwater, the longer they feel poor and spend less money. What's more, a job loss or medical illness could be even more devastating.

For now, Mike Booth will remain in his home. He and his wife bought their first home in 2008, two years after they married, for \$205,000 — a bargain since the house was appraised at \$240,000.

Today, he estimates the house would sell for \$165,000, but the 30-year-old engineer is taking the long view on what he and his wife call “our little castle.”

“We've entered into a binding moral contract,” said Booth, who lives in suburban Orlando. “... Really we don't think about it being underwater. It's kind of like being in a long-term investment, and tracking it daily doesn't make sense.” **BT**

Churches torn over child molesters in pews

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

“All are welcome” is a common phrase on many a church sign and website. But what happens when a convicted sex offender takes those words literally?

Church officials and legal advocates are grappling with how — and if — people who’ve been convicted of sex crimes should be included in U.S. congregations, especially when children are present:

— On June 23, a lawyer argued in the New Hampshire Supreme Court for a convicted sex offender who wants to attend a Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation with a chaperone.

“What we argued is that the right to worship is a fundamental right, and the state can only burden it if it has compelling interest to do so, and then only in a way that is narrowly constructed,” said Barbara Keshen, an attorney with the New Hampshire Civil Liberties Union who represented Jonathan Perfetto, who pleaded guilty in 2002 to 61 counts of possessing child pornography.

— On June 28, the Seventh-day Adventist Church added language to its manual saying that sexual abuse perpetrators can be restored to membership only if they do not have unsupervised contact with children and are not “in a position that would encourage vulnerable individuals to trust them implicitly.”

Garrett Caldwell, a spokesman for the denomination, said the new wording in the global guidelines tries to strike a balance between protecting congregants and supporting the religious freedom of abusers in “a manifestation of God’s grace.”

On July 1, a Georgia law took effect that permits convicted sex offenders to volunteer in churches if they are isolated from children. Permitted activities include singing in the choir and taking part in Bible studies and bake sales.

Pastor Madison Shockley, of Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Carlsbad, Calif., whose church publicly grappled with whether to accept a convicted sex offender three years ago, said he hears from churches several times a month seeking advice on how to handle such situations.

On July 1, a Georgia law took effect that permits convicted sex offenders to volunteer in churches if they are isolated from children. Permitted activities include singing in the choir and taking part in Bible studies and bake sales.

“The key lesson for churches is this: The policy, however it winds up, must be a consensus of the congregation,” Shockley said. “I talked to so many pastors who decided they’re going to make the decision because they know what’s theologically and spiritually right — and that’s absolutely the wrong thing to do.”

Shockley’s church will soon commission a minister to address prevention of child sex abuse; the church also distributes a 20-page policy on protecting children and dealing with sex offenders.

Shockley declined to say how the church handled its admission of a known abuser in 2007, citing the congregation’s limited disclosure policy.

Beyond the thorny legal questions, theologians also find that there are often no easy answers to the quandary of protecting children and providing worship to saints and sinners alike.

“My own theology of forgiveness is not that it’s a blanket statement — ‘You are forgiven; go and sin no more,’” said Joretta Marshall, professor of pastoral theology at Texas Christian University’s Brite Divinity School. “Part of what we have to do is create accountability structures because damage has been done.”

Sometimes, legal and religious experts say, crimes are so severe that convicted offenders must lose their right to worship.

New Hampshire Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Cort argued in court documents that Perfetto should not be permitted to change the conditions of his probation to attend a Manchester congregation because “restricting the defendant’s access to minors was an appropriate means of advancing the goals of probation — rehabilitation and public safety.”

Barbara Dorris, outreach director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), said it may be possible for convicted offenders to attend worship if “proper safeguards are in place,” but offenders “forfeit many rights when you commit this kind of a felony.”

In other cases, the wording of laws has made it difficult for offenders who want to worship to be able to attend church legally.

In North Carolina, attorney Glenn Gerding is representing James Nichols, a convicted sex offender who is contesting a state statute that made it illegal for him to be within 300 feet of a church’s nursery. He was arrested in a church parking lot after a service.

“Technically a person could go to an empty church and violate the statute if that church has a nursery,” said Gerding, whose client was convicted in 2003 of attempted second-degree rape and released from prison in 2008.

In Georgia, the Atlanta-based Southern Center for Human Rights successfully argued for the removal of a legal provision that would have prevented registered sex offenders from volunteering at church functions, said Sara Totonchi, executive director of the center.

Experts say churches need to abide by state laws and be prepared to handle the possible presence of sex offenders, which could mean ministering to them outside the church building.

Steve Vann, co-founder of Keeping Kids Safe Ministries in Ashland City, Tenn., said children’s safety must be paramount, but giving convicted abusers social support could help reduce additional offenses.

“We talk about covenant partners,” he said, using his ministry’s phrase for chaperones. “They’re not just there to watch what the person does. They’re there to assist the person in spiritual growth.” **BT**



Madison Shockley

Broadway play explores evangelical faith, gay life

By Solange De Santis
Religion News Service

NEW YORK — A new Broadway play that was nominated for a couple of Tony awards features a character that might seem rarer than a unicorn: a gay evangelical.

Next Fall, by Geoffrey Nauffts, won the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best New American Play on Broadway, and was nominated for Best Play and Best Director at the Tony Awards in June.

The production is particularly timely, given the conflicts taking place within many denominations about the place of gay Christians and whether the Bible condemns homosexuality.

The title *Next Fall*, which has the ring of Genesis about it, refers in the play to when the evangelical character Luke, played by Patrick Heusinger, plans to reveal to his parents he's gay.

But as the play opens it looks like he might not get the chance.

He's been in a severe automobile

accident and is comatose in a hospital. His partner of four years, Adam (played by Patrick Breen), paces the waiting room, along with two friends and Luke's divorced parents.

Nauffts alternates scenes between the hospital and flashbacks to Luke and Adam's relationship to tell a faith story of subtle ambiguity.

Adam, a classic urban neurotic with no faith, first realizes his partner holds beliefs he might not share when Luke does something weird before eating: pray.

"Is that an everyday occurrence?" Adam wants to know. He asks whether Luke is really gay, since all the Christians he knows consider homosexuality a sin.

Luke, a Southern boy, who seems to have found a serene way to accept both himself and his faith, cheerfully answers, "We're all sinners. This one happens to be mine."

Since he has accepted Christ as his savior, he explains, he will go to heaven despite his sins. Adam wonders if killers, such as those who murdered gay victim Matthew Shepard, would go to heaven if they had accepted Christ, while Shepard, who was not a Christian, would not.

"Can we change the subject?" Luke responds.

As the play develops, it becomes apparent that Luke is more conflicted than he wishes to admit. When his father, Butch, (played by Cotter Smith) phones to say he'll be dropping by, Luke rushes around trying to "de-gay" the apartment, hiding the Truman Capote biography, erotic photographs, and Adam, who he asks to disappear.

Their relationship is either an unlikely pairing, or a testament to the enduring mysteries of love. Adam hangs in there despite what he sees as Luke's quirks: "He's afraid I'll die before I accept Christ and we won't be in the afterlife together."

Perhaps their union isn't so far-fetched. Among Internet postings in response to the play, one man writing on *The New York Times'* website as Brian, from Philadelphia, said he has "endured" his partner's "ingrained, intractable Catholicism," and even attended Mass with him.

"It is because I love this guy that I allow him to be what he apparently needs to be," he wrote.

What lifts the play above the level of polemic is that none of the characters are



caricatures, and the acting and directing are poignant, such as when Luke asks Adam, "Is it so wrong that I want you to go to heaven?"

Luke is clearly liberal: he approves of abortion rights and embryonic stem cell research — areas where he would differ from many evangelicals. His father, Butch (the character names are a bit obvious), takes a more conservative view — marked in the play by his distrust in Darwin's theory of evolution.

But Butch and one of Luke's friends, Brandon (played by Sean Dugan), who is even more deeply conflicted about homosexuality and Christianity, are not written or played as monsters.

At the play's conclusion, after a crisis at the hospital concerning Luke, Adam says, "finally, I believed."

He may be referring to his relationship with his partner or to religious faith. He follows by telling another character, "My name is Adam," an intriguing reference to the first man of the Bible and a sense of renewed life.

Is his new life enriched by faith or blessedly free of it? *Next Fall*, like life, doesn't provide easy answers. **BT**

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Can we talk — about homosexuality?

During the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's (CBF) General Assembly in Charlotte, more than 300 people packed a conference room that promised "A Family Conversation about Same-Sex Orientation."

It has been a long time coming. Ten years ago, facing charges from critics that the Fellowship was too friendly to gays, the Coordinating Council adopted an organizational policy declaring that CBF would not knowingly hire homosexual persons or fund groups that affirm homosexuality. Program planners clamped a virtual lid on discussion of the topic in workshops or elsewhere.

Sitting on the issue has not been comfortable, however. Some CBFers, especially younger ones, yearn for greater inclusion and want to talk about it. Thus program planners agreed to the "Family Conversation" on June 25, but with considerable control.

The session was conducted with much seriousness and almost palpable fear that outsiders might criticize or that more conservative insiders would bolt. In near-funereal tones, facilitator David Odum of Duke University noted that none of the participants had volunteered for their assignment and then read a disclaimer that opinions expressed were those of the presenters and not of CBF as a whole. The workshop was presented in the form of a solemn worship service, with verses of a hymn sung between each segment of the discussion.

Odum called to mind the divine vision that impelled the Apostle Peter to be a witness to the Gentiles. Peter was criticized "for being a witness to people he shouldn't be a witness to," Odum said, leading to several rounds of debate among leaders of the early church.

The question of "How is God calling us to be the family of God to people of same-sex orientation?" should be conducted in the same spirit of debate and compromise, he said. "I agreed to facilitate this discussion because I believe congregations are healthier if they talk about things that are important."

Two prominent CBF pastors had been recruited to share their personal perspectives on the issue. Both noted that they and their congregations did not always agree.

Joy Yee, pastor of Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco and a past moderator of CBF, said her personal view is



Pastors George Mason of Dallas (left) and Joy Yee (center) of San Francisco share in a "family conversation about same-sex orientation" moderated by David Odum (right) of Duke University during the June assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

that homosexuality "is not what I would call God's Plan A." But, "not much of the human journey in history or even in the Bible has followed Plan A," she noted, while "there has been a lot of redemption through Plan B or C or D."

Where we deal with passages condemning homosexuality, Yee said, "we also have to deal with passages condemning condemnation."

Yee said members of her church run the gamut of perspectives and that they have no specific policy on same-sex orientation because "We need to hear each other's stories and hold them in respect," while "policies can stop conversations before they begin."

"Loving someone whose sexual orientation is different from mine is no different from loving people who are different in other ways," Yee said.

George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, said "I can tell you that my mind has changed and I am seeing differently on this over time."

That has disappointed some people, he said. "As a pastor, I have known the pain of people who have left the church I serve because I was too conservative about the matter — and people who have left because I was too liberal about the matter."

"A family conversation about same-sex orientation is not necessarily about behavior," Mason said. "Some people think different orientations don't exist, that there is only acting gay and sinning as a result. Others say people are simply born one way or the other."

"I'm not certain about either position," Mason said. "It seems that people are more on a continuum about their orientation. That's uncomfortable."

Mason noted that the few biblical texts that mention homosexual behavior are more likely to be about specific acts such as rape or pederasty, and that "the Bible seems to be silent about orientation."

Mason recalled a time when divorced people were often shunned or denied leadership positions by their churches, but most people since then have found a way to read the scripture to include people who were divorced. "My suspicion is we are trying harder than ever now to read the scripture in a way to create space for people who are gay among us to have a life among us."

"For some that extends to ordination and being fully welcoming and affirming," Mason said. "Others are more reticent, and I hope we will be patient with them, because they are trying to be faithful to the gospel, too."

Both Yee and Mason offered helpful perspectives, and the session provided a hopeful beginning of future conversation. People who are willing to talk about the matter — and to include people of same-sex orientation in the conversation — are increasingly coming to see the issue as a question of justice, and not just morality.

As people who are called to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8), the least we can do is to talk about it. **BT**

guest commentary

When faithful people become friends

By David M. Weatherspoon

Amid growing religious diversity in the United States and a more accessible global community, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and the White House Office for Social Innovation and Civic Participation invited a group of 110 people to gather at the White House June 7 for a discussion on “Advancing Interfaith and Community Service on College and University Campuses.”

The group included college and university chaplains, presidents, professors and NGO representatives. I was fortunate to represent both the American Baptist Campus Ministries Association and Franklin College where I serve as campus minister.

With the realization that many of the world’s conflicts stem from religious assumptions and misunderstandings, participants discussed the need for a concentrated effort to increase communication and interaction across faith lines.

Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core and author of the book *Acts of Faith*, spoke of the need for colleges and universities to take a leadership role in promoting interfaith dialogue and education as they have effectively done in issues of race and the environment.

Given the vast and diverse dogmas among religious and nonreligious communities, it is necessary to begin with some common ground that can often be found in

acts of service. Most religious traditions place a high value on serving other humans. Therefore, this becomes a place to work across faith lines and establish the foundation for interfaith engagement to begin.

I use the term engagement because I believe it is not enough simply to build an awareness and tolerance for people of different faith backgrounds.

As Baptists, we have been engaged in the preservation of religious diversity and identity from the beginning of our nation’s history. Baptists have been at the forefront of the conversation about protecting all faiths, from the pioneering demands for religious freedom by such leaders as John Leyland and Isaac Backus to Roger Williams, who founded the colony of Rhode Island to forge a safe haven for all who wished to practice their faith free from persecution. Even today, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty serves to ensure that space is provided for all faiths to practice their beliefs freely in the context of the First Amendment.

The meeting in Washington D.C. provided the impetus for the next step — moving beyond having a safe space in which separate faiths can practice to building a platform for

dialogue and cooperation across faith lines. The effort should begin with service because it is hard to work alongside someone and not build some type of a relationship.

Gross religious generalizations are overcome when we are able to say, “My friend who happens to be (insert faith tradition) believes ...” as opposed to saying, “All Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, believe ...”

The religious ignorance that leads to many harmful outcomes is overcome when faithful people become friends. This is what conference participants will begin trying to achieve on college and university campuses.

President Obama hopes to have 500 campuses partnering with the White House and participating in interfaith and community service by the end of his first term in office. By engaging in this goal, we can become a nation that not only is aware of other faith communities, but also we will be able to dialogue and work together in ways that will make us better members of our own faith traditions, even as we extend the hospitality that is at the heart of our various faith communities to others.

As a Baptist Christian, this means loving my neighbor as I love myself and, thus, being transformed further into the image of God. **BT**

— David Weatherspoon is campus minister at Franklin College in Franklin, Ind.



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Sept. 5, 2010

Trusting God's Supply

1 Kings 17:1-24

"I lift up my eyes unto the hills. Where will my help come from?" (Ps. 121:1). In times of difficulty where can we turn? In the psalmist's case, even the hills could not provide security in the midst of life's difficulties. Only faith in the LORD God could provide hope.

In the face of the difficulties of the 21st century, our culture often looks to the government to provide military and economic security. People have not changed much, and in ancient Israel, the king was expected to provide that security. Kings insured military security and were expected to provide for the fertility of crops. In other words, the king was thought to be responsible for the rain much in the same way contemporary culture associates the economy with a president.

In 1 Kings 17, that expectation falls on Ahab, the king of Israel. It is Ahab's responsibility to provide for his people, and God wants that provision to come through Ahab's surrender to Yahweh. In an ironic (but all too common) twist, Ahab and his government are unwilling to surrender to God's authority, but they do enthusiastically support the storm god Baal. Perhaps it is reasonable to believe that supporting the rain god brings rain. God, however, wants the unreasonable sometimes.

To confront the people of Israel and their king, God makes a profound theological and political statement in 1 Kings 17. Yahweh calls an unknown to bring the divine's message to Israel. Though "Elijah" is a familiar biblical character now, he comes onto the narrative scene from nowhere. Elijah then models what God expected Israel to do — rely on the divine provision. This loud, hairy and presumptuous prophet announces that drought is coming on the land by the hand of Yahweh. It seemed reasonable for Ahab to dismiss the message of this crazy nobody, Elijah. Yahweh's

drought, however, shows that Ahab needed to accept Elijah as a true prophet. God holds back the rain, and Ahab is impotent as a king.

After providing Ahab with Yahweh's message, Elijah leaves the kingdom of Israel and the circle of influence of the king. Elijah then lives out what he challenged Israel to do: he trusts in God's miraculous provision. Elijah trusts in Yahweh, and Yahweh provides.

Still outside Israel (where Ahab can receive no credit for Elijah's successes), Elijah moves on to take up one of the great causes of Yahweh. Psalm 68:5 says, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling." Elijah meets a widow who is at the end of her supplies. She has enough for one last meal, and then she knows that death is coming. She has no more hope in this life and no one to care for her.

She knows of Yahweh, but when speaking to Elijah, she does not claim God as her own (v. 12, "Yahweh your God"). This widow, however, is willing to do the unreasonable — she provides for Elijah's need. When she steps out in faith, she experiences Yahweh's provision.

When her son dies, she believes that Elijah's presence in her house has called God's attention to her and her sinfulness. She would be on the lowest rung of the social ladder, perceived to have nothing meaningful to contribute to society. Against everyone's expectations, God does the unreasonable. Yahweh provides grace and revives her son.

After witnessing God's provision and power, the widow is able to confess, "The word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." Yahweh is now her God.

In this story, Elijah demonstrates what Ahab was unwilling to admit. Though it seems to make sense, do not trust in the things of this world. Yahweh is truly king in Israel. It is Yahweh who controls the rain. It is Yahweh who can provide food. It is Yahweh who gives life.

LESSONS FOR: Sunday, Sept. 5-26, 2010

Written by Robert Wallace,
assistant professor of
biblical studies at Judson
University in Elgin, Ill.



Why is a foreign widow better able to accept this unreasonable Elijah and believe in Yahweh? Shouldn't the great king of Israel be closer to God? Maybe it is because she had nothing to lose and no illusion of control.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20), he was likely met with guffaws and an incredulous audience. What "blessing" did Jesus mean? The poor could see their need, and in their position of powerlessness, they could easily give God control. The rich were used to having power and being in control, and that too often gets in the way of trusting God. "Surely it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle ..."

We may not reject God by turning to the storm god Baal, but our lack of faith is just as real. What god do we trust more than Yahweh? If we have ever uttered the phrase, "If I just had a little more money, I would be okay," then we know what it is to replace God with an idol. Our god is just as seductive as Baal. It promises to provide the necessities of life. It is tangible. And most insidiously, it is not jealous. Money does not mind if you worship God as long as you worship it as well.

A foreign widow did exactly as God requested and received miraculous blessings. May we never trust in our finances more than in an unseen and unpredictable God. May we never set aside faith because it is difficult. Faith is always difficult. May we truly pray, "Give us today, our bread for the day." And may we trust in God to provide each day — sometimes in unreasonable ways.

Sept. 12, 2010

Trusting God's Direction

1 Kings 18:1, 17-40

Can you remember a time when you were riding with a friend, and that person didn't go the way you expected? You had driven this route several times, and your friend wasn't



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going the way you thought best. Maybe your protest was polite, “Oh, I didn’t know you could go this way,” or maybe it was a little more forceful, “I think you’re wasting gas/time going this way, and now we are going to be late.”

Giving up control when we are convinced that we know best is difficult. The stakes are higher when we move to matters of our life. Surely we know what is best for us; and yet, when God is driving, we can often take a different exit from the one we planned.

In 1 Kings 17, God says a drought will come to Israel. Ahab and the people do not want to accept God’s word on this; they want rain. So, Elijah issues the challenge to Ahab to establish whose plans are best — a winner-take-all fight on Mount Carmel for the heart and mind of the nation.

The nation to this point has been “limping between two opinions.” Rather than commit to Yahweh and trust him only, the people are willing to trust in whatever has the most promise to deliver rain. They are not sold out to doing what is necessary for Yahweh to achieve the divine purpose in this world. The people want their own prosperity, and they are willing to commit to whatever promises to benefit them. So the nation has placed its trust in Baal, the god of the storm.

Elijah wants to demonstrate to Ahab and the nation that they have placed their confidence in a fake. Yahweh is God. Baal is powerless. Perhaps to be sporting, Elijah gives the prophets of Baal every advantage in the contest. Bulls were often used to represent Baal, and Elijah suggests they use this not-so-subtle image as their sacrifice. The numerous prophets of Baal are allowed to choose first, and a lightning strike should be no problem for the god of the storm.

Elijah quietly waits and watches the prophets of Baal all morning as they try to get Baal to answer them. After lunch, however, Elijah begins to harass them. The Living Bible still provides the most vivid characterization of his trash talking. “You’ll have to shout louder than that ... to catch the attention of your god! Perhaps he is talking to someone or is sitting on the toilet or is away on a trip or is asleep and needs to be wakened!”

The prophets of Baal do everything in their power to justify the support they received from Ahab and the people of Israel. They even shed their own blood to encourage Baal to answer. Though the prophets are frantic and loud, Baal’s silence is emphasized

in verses 26 and 29. The prophets are all alone with no answers.

After the frenetic activity of the prophets of Baal, the actions of Elijah seem anticlimactic. Elijah repairs the altar, further handicaps Yahweh by soaking the sacrifice with water, and prays. Elijah asks that Yahweh answer so that the people of Israel will know who is truly God and who is truly a prophet. Yahweh’s answer is immediate and complete, winning the contest and showing Baal to be nothing.

The prophets of Baal, who have been on government subsidy, have been deceiving Israel. They have taken the support of the people and the blessing of the monarchy, and it is now obvious they have been lying. They claimed to have the power that is reserved for Yahweh alone, and for that, they are killed.

“Yahweh indeed is God!” is a cry that would resonate with most Christians. Great care must be taken, however, that we do not go “limping between two opinions.” The people of Israel were seeking anything that would accomplish their will. They wanted rain, so they turned to the Baal, the god of the storm. They wanted fertility, so they turned to Baal’s consort Asherah. Israel refused to accept that obedience to Yahweh meant pursuing Yahweh’s will wherever that led.

It is easy to see ourselves in the lives of those ancient Israelites — bending to whatever promised help, assuming that their plans and God’s plans must be the same. They were trying anything they could to end the drought, but they never considered it was Yahweh’s will to bring the drought. They had something they wanted to accomplish, and they were going to use any means necessary to accomplish it. If Yahweh was leading elsewhere, they would turn to Baal.

If we are willing to sing the old hymn, “Wherever He Leads I’ll Go,” we must always take care to avoid the prayer, “God bless our plans!” That is what ancient Israel wanted. We need to pray instead: “God, these are our plans, but what do you want? Please conform our desires to your plans.”

God’s plans are often unexpected and difficult. In 1 Kings 18, it is God’s plan for there to be a drought for three years. In the Garden of Gethsemane, God’s plan took Jesus to the cross. Ancient Israel’s decisions showed a self-serving faith of convenience. Jesus’ life showed a faith that humbly sought God’s will. What does our life show?

Sept. 19, 2010

Trusting God’s Voice

1 Kings 19:1-17

Depression after success is not unusual. Often, the gold-medal winning athlete wakes up the next morning wondering, “What now?” Like the athlete, Elijah had just had an amazing success. The nation had seen the power of Yahweh and supported Elijah. The prophets of Baal had been killed. The drought was finally broken, and the storms the people needed had finally come. Finally, a national revival! Finally, the people will turn their hearts to Yahweh and experience a new beginning. Except ...

Those plans are interrupted by a simple verse, “Ahab rode off to Jezreel.” (1 Kgs. 18:45). Elijah knew Jezebel would soon find out what he had done. So, Elijah picked up his robe and ran from Mount Carmel to Beer Sheva (the traditional border of ancient Israel). How intimidating must Jezebel be if Ahab’s simple “I’m telling!” sends the great prophet of Yahweh fleeing into the wilderness and ready to give up.

Maybe Elijah knows that Jezebel will quickly swing the popular opinion back to her and to Baal. Maybe he thinks it is better to die on his own terms than to give Jezebel the public relations victory that would come with killing the premier prophet of the Lord. Emotionally and physically exhausted, and perhaps to escape the difficulties of life, Elijah goes to sleep under a tree.

I was told years ago that the angels who are in your life are the ones who say, “Don’t worry” and “Eat something.” Elijah has an angel of the Lord feed him two meals while he finds the stamina to meet the Lord on his holy mountain. The last time Israel’s people worshiped God on a mountain, God’s presence was accompanied by fire and lightning. Just before that, the great wind of God blew the sea, and Israel crossed over on dry ground. Elijah would definitely need his rest to face that challenge.

This time, however, God is not in the wind, the fire or the earthquake. Elijah knows that God can be flashy and obvious. Yahweh had just brought the fire from heaven and consumed the sacrifice on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), beating Baal at his own game. God did sometimes move in ways that might look like the other gods of this world.



Sometimes, though, God will move in ways we do not expect. Instead of the big, multimedia light-and-sound show, God speaks to Elijah out of the sound of silence. Elijah might have been craving the reminder of the Lord of Hosts who drowned pharaoh's chariots. He might have wanted a display of God's almighty power. God felt what Elijah needed was a voice in the quiet of his soul, reminding him of his calling.

Twice God asks Elijah why he came to Horeb. Twice Elijah answers that the people have sinned and his life is in danger. Elijah's depression seems to be motivated by his fear of Jezebel and the futility of his calling. He has been passionately, singularly and utterly devoted to God. That devotion is now the source of his difficulty. Elijah is convinced he is the only person left who truly understands how to serve Yahweh, and he is confident that he will soon be martyred. All of his work and sacrifice accomplishes nothing.

Fear of Jezebel is one thing, but the feeling that the calling to which he has devoted himself faithfully does not matter had to cause a great personal crisis for Elijah. All of us want to feel needed. All of us want to believe our life is moving forward to something. Elijah wanted to believe he was doing Yahweh's work and moving the nation to greater things. Unfortunately, Elijah realized he risked his life to convince people who will ultimately turn whichever way the wind blows.

How many life crises have begun by looking in the mirror and asking, "What am I really doing with my life?" Elijah has that time of introspection and has decided he is doing nothing. Jezebel has material resources, the army, the will, and Elijah stands alone. He decides it is better to die in the wilderness than face a life of futility.

Into that crisis, God speaks the words Elijah needs to hear. God reminds Elijah he is not alone. Elijah does not bear the burden by himself, and it is time to get back in the game. He gets up, goes where God instructs, and never doubts again. The dramatic movement of the chapter carries Elijah from despondency to fresh energy and militancy.

We all have moments of doubt. We all look around in frustration when we see faithfulness bring empty results. May God speak in the quiet of our souls to remind us: God is God, we are not finished, and we are not alone.

Sept. 26, 2010

Trusting God's Future

2 Kings 2:1-14

"How can I be sure what God's will for my life is?" How many times have we asked this question? Every day, people face life-altering questions: "Should I major in chemistry or ministry?" "Should I take the new job or stay put?" "Should we try to have children?" We seek godly counsel that leads one direction, and then someone gives us godly counsel that leads another.

Following God means we listen to a voice we cannot hear. We follow a path we cannot see and are led by a hand we cannot hold. Is it any wonder that questions about "God's will" are so difficult to answer?

Elisha is faced with a difficult choice. A prophet of the Lord, Elijah, had told Elisha to stay at Gilgal. Instead of obeying his mentor, Elisha protests, ignores Elijah, and decides he wants to go a little farther.

The two of them go on to Bethel where prophets of the Lord come out to meet them. "Stay here," Elijah says. Bethel is located in the central hill country of Israel. Elisha would have easy access to whomever God has called him to speak an oracle against; and obviously, a prophet of the Lord can find work there. Instead, Elisha protests, goes with Elijah, and sees the Jordan part. He sees fiery chariots and whirlwinds — all because he wanted to go "a little farther."

Elisha could make the safe choice and stay with those other prophets. It does not seem as though Elijah is trying to guilt Elisha into coming with him. He could simply be saying, "Elisha, this is a hard mission with hard choices ahead. If you want to get off this ride now, you can. You can serve God here anonymously. Consider the cost. You can make the safe choice."

When considering the life of a prophet, who could blame Elisha for making the safe choice? A prophet speaks an unpopular

message from God to an unwilling religious audience, who at best dismisses the prophet as crazy and at worst tries to kill the faithful messenger. When Elijah, the great prophet of the Lord, told him to stay, Elisha could have said, "Well okay. This is a long and uncertain walk. So, let's say our goodbyes here. I am going to be one of these numerous prophets."

It is the safer choice to be one of those prophets in the city. Of course, the prophets who chose to stay are not remembered in the biblical story. Instead of the safety of anonymity, Elisha chooses to go. Elisha even asks Elijah for the "double share" of his spirit. In other words, Elisha asks Elijah to make him his "firstborn" (see Deut 21:17). He is asking Elijah, "Let me carry on your work. Let me inherit your mission and your calling. I am willing to go as far as God calls."

How far are we willing to go? It is a tough question to answer because we rarely know how far we are going. Elijah never told Elisha that they were going to make a big circle from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho and back through the Jordan. God did not tell Mother Teresa in Albania that she would be a nun teaching in India and never see her mother again. God never told Saul of Tarsus, when he was on the road to Damascus, that he would eventually die in Rome as the great missionary to the Gentiles. And, unfortunately for us, God does not send a roadmap for our lives giving instructions on God's perfect will.

Paul could have had a quiet ministry in an Antioch church. Instead, he was willing to go a little farther and become that great missionary (and writer of a considerable percentage of the New Testament). Amos could have kept on serving God as a shepherd in Judah, but went a little farther to be God's mouthpiece in Israel. Elisha could have kept on plowing his field when Elijah called him. He could have stayed at Gilgal or Bethel, but he was willing to go a little farther.

As a result, Elisha sees the waters part, the winds blow and the chariots burn. And we know his name. **BT**

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2010 ChurchWorks!

Good ideas for effective ministry

Brought to you
this month
by Sarah Stafford



How to put excitement back in your older children's choir

Several years ago I was looking for an idea to bring energy to our older children's choir. After visiting with my mentor, Maryann Tyler from First Baptist Church in Roswell, Ga., I had an idea: take the children on a trip. I visited with our minister to children, Julie Girards, to get her ideas and with our minister of music, Doug Haney, to get his input on ways we could incorporate some of the activities he uses with the youth choir.

Julie and I came up with a music/mission trip. We decided to use a point system to help boost the children's attendance throughout the year. We then had to decide where and when we were going, how much money the church could contribute, how much each child would pay and other important information. We planned to have a parents' meeting at the beginning of the new music/mission year to share our plans.

We decided on an overnight stay that would include a ride on a chartered bus, a mission project, a fun experience, hotel lodging, and singing at a church. Arlington, Texas, about 45 minutes away from our church, was our destination. I contacted Tillie Burgin, founder and director of Mission Arlington, to investigate what kind of project our 4th-, 5th- and 6th-graders could do. She put us on the Mission's calendar. I then checked the Six Flags Over Texas website for group-rate ticket prices.

The hardest part of the planning process was finding a hotel that would fit our needs. Wilshire's policy is that we have at least two adults per group of children. I searched for hotels/suites that had adjoining rooms. After numerous phone calls I found a hotel with enough adjoining rooms to take care of our group. (Reservations are best made months in



advance, and condominiums are probably a better option than hotel rooms.)

After reserving hotel rooms, I asked Mission Arlington if our children could sing in one of its churches. The Mission arranged for them to sing at the South Side Baptist Church located in an old telephone building, which would provide a wonderful new worship experience for the Wilshire children.

Months before the trip I reserved a charter bus and then began working on the budget, which included the bus, one night's lodging, four meals, Six Flags tickets, a tip for the bus driver, costs for the sponsors, a few scholarships and miscellaneous items. I made a proposal to our minister of music and associate pastor, asking if the church could cover the cost of the charter bus, which it did.

I selected music for the choir to learn over the entire choir year, which we could use for the end-of-year spring program and also sing at the mission church. Julie planned several mission projects for the children so that they could earn extra points throughout the

year. The children received 10 points for every choir rehearsal they attended and 10 points for every mission session they attended. I gave extra points for the times our choir led in worship and participated in the Christmas program. I also gave extra points for each hymn the children memorized for the Hymn Memory program. The children were required to earn at least 75 percent of the basic points and could earn extra points if needed.

On the Wednesday before we left on Saturday, we had a parents' meeting to discuss the plans and to collect permission slips and notarize the required paperwork.

I divided the group by grade and gender, with two sponsors per group for each site. We had a wonderful experience. The children bonded in a significant way outside the four walls of the rehearsal space, and also experienced helping others outside their comfort zone. Tillie Burgin at Mission Arlington made the children feel so special about their project.

We decided the children's music/mission trip experience was worth repeating. This year we repeated the mission project at Mission Arlington, but ate at the well-known Joe T. Garcia Mexican restaurant in Fort Worth, went to the Fort Worth Zoo, played at Main Event (bowling and laser tag) and sang at Agape Baptist Church in Fort Worth. We had our 6th-graders lead the Saturday evening devotionals as well as help with the Sunday morning Bible study. The older children enjoyed the leadership responsibilities and were wonderful role models for the 4th- and 5th-graders.

Even after leading children's choirs for more than 30 years, I have learned that there is always an opportunity to try fresh ideas and add new excitement, not only for the children but also for myself. **BT**

ChurchWorks! is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by Sarah Stafford, associate minister of music at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. More ministry resources are available at www.thefellowship.info/News/subscribe and www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page.

First Baptist Church of Spruce Pine, N.C., is accepting résumés for **senior pastor**. FBC is a moderate congregation of approximately 350, and has two Sunday morning services (traditional and contemporary) and supports missions through both BSC and CBF. Applicants should have a minimum of a master's degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school. Please send résumés and references to: Wanda Henline, Pastor Search Committee, 125 Tappan St., Spruce Pine, NC 28777.

First Baptist Church of King, N.C., near Winston-Salem, seeks an experienced **senior pastor**. Averaging 400 in worship services, we are a progressive, mainstream fellowship, friendly and loving, that empowers purpose-driven ministry regardless of gender or race. Excellent preaching skills, genuine pastoral desire and strong leadership abilities are expected. Direct inquires to: fbcpastorsearch@windstream.net or the church office (336) 983-5252.

Heritage Baptist Church, located in Cartersville, Ga., is seeking a visionary leader to serve as **lead pastor** of our diverse congregation. Heritage is a covenant congregation that seeks to honor and praise God through its missions, ministries and programs that are structured around fulfilling the covenant commitments we have made with one another and God. Heritage is looking for a lead pastor whose life is characterized by a spirit of service, humility and prayer. At Heritage the lead pastor serves as the spiritual leader for the church family and leads the congregation in worship through preaching from God's word. The lead pastor is also charged to work with and provide guidance and supervision to the church staff as, together, they provide spiritual instruction, pastoral care, and leadership to the congregation. This is a full-time position with a competitive salary. For more information about the

position and Heritage Baptist Church, visit www.HBC Cartersville.org. To apply, send a résumé to: Heritage.Resumes@gmail.com.

Temple Baptist Church, a CBF church in Durham, N.C., is seeking a full-time **minister of music**. A full job description is available at www.tbcdurham.org.

College Parkway Baptist Church of Arnold, Md., is seeking candidates for the full-time position of **associate pastor for music and faith development**. This staff member, a spiritual leader in the church, will be responsible for music leadership, involved with worship planning in partnership with the senior pastor, and providing leadership and oversight of faith development programs for all ages of the congregation. Additionally, we seek a person who especially values the role of children and youth in the life of the church and has strong skills in directing youth ministry programs. The candidate should have an appreciation for our current traditional/blended worship style while possessing the skills to lead the congregation into a contemporary setting. A degree from an accredited seminary and ministry experience are strongly preferred. For more information, visit www.collegeparkwaybaptist.net. Please send résumés by Aug. 31 to: cpbcsearchcommittee@gmail.com.

Baptist Temple, a historic church located near downtown Houston, Texas, with ties to CBF, SBC and BGCT, is seeking an **associate pastor** to join our ministry team. We seek a person with energy, creativity and strong faith who feels called to an urban church setting. The ideal candidate would have a willingness and ability to contribute to many areas of our church's overall ministry and mission. A seminary degree and ministry experience are preferred. Submit résumés to: personnel@baptisttemple.org.

Milledge Avenue Baptist Church, a CBF-affiliated church in Athens, Ga., is seeking an **associate pastor for youth and education**. Candidates should have specific skills in the area of youth ministry and general skills in spiritual formation and pastoral ministries. A Master of Divinity degree and experience working with youth are preferred. Send résumé, references and a statement of faith to: Lucy Bell at lbsilver42@bellsouth.net.

Calvary Baptist Church of Lexington, Ky., is accepting résumés for a full-time **minister of youth**. The responsibilities for this position and additional information are posted at www.calvarybaptistchurch.com. Résumés may be submitted to: Youth Ministry Search Committee, Calvary Baptist Church, 150 E. High St., Lexington, KY 40507.

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PEOPLE

Chris Adams is student minister at First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C.

Gwendolyn Belton Brown, a graduate of Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology, received the Addie Davis Award for excellence in pastoral ministry by Baptist Women in Ministry. Brown also received McAfee's William Ollie and Nell Ray Key Excellence and Leadership Award during the School's May commencement in Atlanta. She currently serves as pastor at In Christ We Trust Christian Church in Grayson, Ga.

Sam Chase will become the next general secretary of the Canadian Baptist Ministries, an association of four regional and language-based Baptist conventions in Canada. He succeeds

Gary Nelson who held the post for 10 years. Chase, who was born in England, raised in Ontario and served his entire ministry in western Canada, is of Indian descent. He is the first non-Anglo to hold this leadership role.

David John Hailey is youth ministry intern at First Baptist Church of Burlington, N.C.

Ruth Harris is working with Springdale Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Okla., to start Hispanic house churches around the city. Harris previously helped start Hispanic Baptist churches in Brunswick County, N.C., and Franklin County, Va., after serving 14 years in Arlington, Texas, with Iglesia de la Comunidad Peach (part of Mission Arlington).

Clarke Hawkins is pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Mechanicsville, Va., going from a

12-year pastorate at Mooreland Baptist Church in North Garden, Va.

Dennis Herman, pastor of the Greystone Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., for the past 11 years, will retire on Aug. 31.

Travis Russell is minister to children, youth and families at First Baptist Church of Whiteville, N.C.

William J. Shaw has been named to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom by President Obama. He has been pastor of White Rock Baptist Church in Philadelphia since 1956, and is immediate past president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

Robert Wallace is assistant professor of Old Testament at Judson University in Elgin, Ill. Previously he served as assistant professor of religion and director of international programs at Shorter College in Rome, Ga.

guest commentary

Americans' charitable giving draws attention

By Martin E. Marty

The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* chronicles — you guessed it — philanthropy, and in the June 17 issue reports on “Giving USA” for 2009. While the category of religion may not always overwhelm casual readers of trend-reports, religious giving is much watched.

There is much to watch. According to another monitoring agency, *Empty Tomb*, “religion” last year raised 100.95 billion dollars, which means that it represents 33 percent of all charitable giving.

While such giving is from the heart and so, on that level, is secret, it is also very public, thanks to the Internal Revenue Service and the reports of the congregations and agencies, most of which must, and do, give scrupulous accounting of the funds.

The public knows that the financial crisis and recession have hit philanthropy hard. The big givers held back most: Gifts in the over-one-million-dollar class were down 63.6 percent!

Giving to colleges and universities was down 17.8 percent and to hospitals, down 11 percent.

On such a scale, religion held up well. Analysis of 1,247 religious organizations in

the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability showed giving was down only 3.7 percent there, all according to the “Giving USA” reckoning. *Empty Tomb* found that overall giving to religion, after inflation, was down only 0.3 percent.

The first question about statistics is: How accurate are they? One gets the impression from the numerous people quoted in the several *Chronicle* articles that a) they recognize the surveyors as conscientious, their methods ever-improving, their intentions good, b) but the results are not fully trustworthy.

Many observers think that the decline in most of the areas, including religion, the least-declinist, is more steep than reported. These analysts look at annual reports and balance sheets of religious organizations, most of which have had to cut back on personnel and projects because there are smaller funds with which to work.

They talk to development officers and

financial stewards and draw the conclusion that almost across the board, there's been a decline of more than 0.3 percent. You might say that the professionals can “feel it in their bones,” trading anecdotes, looking in the mirror, and reading e-mails about unemployed relatives who, no matter where their heart is, cannot keep up with pledges or match those from earlier years.

Why is accuracy important? Consultant Edith Falk says “people want to have these numbers so they can benchmark against national numbers.” They are “also important because they are used to measure just how generous Americans are.”

Joblessness, market jitters, and other factors can take a spiritual toll. It is also important to see where priorities are.

Dan Busby, president of the Evangelical Council, rightly says that “the impact of the recession has been spotty. Rescue missions and child-sponsor groups in many cases have done well, while others are impacted more significantly.”

Favorite causes and those that have commanded loyalties over the years fare best.

In the Great Depression, many religious groups suffered a great depression, so in this Great Recession it is natural for a parade of leaders to experience some, if not great, recession.

Those who stress religious motivations, and speak of the bounties from God and the values of community, will not and should not be satisfied with the giving levels in still-prosperous America. But comparing international and local cultural trends, one can only conclude that great numbers of Americans, moved by their faith, can be counted on. **BT**

— Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago where he taught for 35 years. This Sightings column comes from the Martin Marty Center at the university's divinity school.



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guest commentary

Adolescent challenges no laughing matter

By Tom Ehrich, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

NEW YORK — My heart chilled when I read about teenagers who gather on the Great Lawn of Central Park and flaunt laws against underage drinking. Many attend the independent schools lining the park, including the school from which my 18-year-old son just graduated.

Yes, my son grimaced, he knows all about these kids. They are 11 to 14 years old. They walk onto the lawn carrying six-packs of beer. They buy margaritas for \$5 from a young man who works the crowd with a white cooler.

Their obnoxious behavior is driving older teens like my son away from the Great Lawn. The last straw came when Margarita Man saw cops coming and hid among my son's friends (not his customers), thereby putting them at risk in any ensuing bust.

At a Faith & Addiction conference that I coordinated recently, a speaker from Partnership for a Drug-Free America said that half of the nation's more than 22 million active addicts are younger than 30. A growing number are teenagers.

Parents are dangerously clueless about the alcohol and drugs flowing into the lives of children ages 9 to 17.

The keynote speaker, Teresa McBean, of the Richmond, Va.-based NorthStar Community, said alcohol and drugs (including marijuana cigarettes laced with heroin)

are flooding local schools. "(Experts) tell us that, if nothing changes, America won't have a capable work force in 20 years," she said.

As a former teenager myself, I know that it is a solemn duty of youth to irritate and worry grown-ups. I also know that kids grow up, and their adolescent fascination with danger fades.

Yet it seems truly worrisome to have an entire generation entering adulthood with an addiction, bodies bloated by junk food, inadequate skills for holding a job, or self-esteem crushed by self-absorbed parents.

These aren't deficits that maturity will erase. Like years lost to imprisonment, these deficits can have permanent consequences: low graduation rates, higher likelihoods of incarceration, lower lifetime earnings and the myriad negative consequences of addiction, ranging from depression to premature death.

Moreover, deficits carried from adolescence into adulthood are a setup for predators who are already waiting. Look at the payday loan shops and used-car hucksters that ring military bases, preying on the underpaid and anxious. Look at debt-settlement firms that pounce when debts

accumulated while trying to maintain yesterday's unaffordable lifestyle get high.

Look at expensive colleges that steer students into the clutches of debt merchants, and financial institutions that have discovered it's more profitable to prey on their customers than to serve them.

The young man who prowls the Great Lawn selling margaritas to middle schoolers is just an early introduction to a predator-run economy.

Who is going to curb the predators? That should be our question.

We parents need to start by reclaiming adolescence as basically a safe and survivable condition. Being clueless and career-driven parents simply cannot excuse damage being done to our kids. This isn't 1964 or 1984. Parents need to get smart and push back.

A recent epidemic of cyberbullying in a New Jersey middle school is a sobering reminder, because parents apparently aren't taking action, such as canceling their kids' Blackberrys and confronting the bullies' parents.

Parents, faith leaders and community leaders must join forces against the predators — even when doing so gets in the way of work. **BT**

— Tom Ehrich is a writer, church consultant and Episcopal priest based in New York.



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Is criticism of Israel anti-Semitic?

By Michele Chabin
Religion News Service

JERUSALEM — Veteran newswoman Helen Thomas' suggestion that Israelis should "get the hell out of Palestine" and "go home" to Poland, Germany and the U.S., was widely seen as anti-Israel. But was it anti-Jewish?

As Israel faced unprecedented censure from the world community — including economic, academic and cultural boycotts — the Thomas incident raised the question of when, if ever, anti-Israelism equals anti-Semitism.

It's a question that's simmered long before a Long Island rabbi caught Thomas' outburst on videotape.

In 2005, former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky (now head of the Jewish Agency for Israel) said Israel was a proxy for lingering anti-Semitic hatred toward Jews. While "classical anti-Semitism" was aimed at the Jewish faith or the Jewish people, "the new anti-Semitism is much more subtle," Sharansky wrote in *The Forward* newspaper, "directed as it is against the Jewish state."

Sharansky proposed a "3-D test" — demonization, double-standards and de-legitimization — that has become an unofficial yardstick to measure whether criticisms directed against Israel are, in fact, really directed at Jews.

1. When critics compare Israelis to Nazis — the embodiment of evil — and Palestinian refugees to survivors of Jewish concentration camps, that's demonization.

2. When Israel is singled out for criticism while other governments are not, that's a double standard.

3. And while it's no longer condoned in polite company to deny the legitimacy of the Jewish faith, when Israel is portrayed as an illegitimate or rogue state, that's de-legitimization.

Sharansky resurrected the 3-D test at a

June conference on anti-Semitism sponsored by the New York-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Five years later, he said, the test still works:

If all other peoples, including Arabs and Muslims, have the right to live securely in their homelands, "then the Jewish people have that right as well," Sharansky has said.

Yet not all Jews share Sharansky's analysis, or even the idea that criticism of Israel is somehow out of bounds.

"There can be someone who thinks the existence of the State of Israel is wrong because the creation of Israel is an injustice to

Israel's three-year blockade of Gaza, which is intended to prevent weapons from reaching the militant group Hamas. Nine members of the flotilla were killed in the early morning raid, and several Israeli commandos were injured.

In the time since, the ADL compiled a hefty volume of cartoons in the Arab media that they say depict Israelis — in the guise of stereotypical hook-nosed Jews in black hats — as "blood-thirsty monsters, sharks and other marine wildlife swallowing up or crushing" the flotilla.

While some cartoons used the iconic Star of David that's emblazoned on Israel's flag, others used purely religious imagery — an Israeli soldier attacking an activist with a menorah, for example — to link the state of Israel with the religion of Judaism.

James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, is highly critical of these cartoons, even as he supports "legitimate criticism of Israel and its behavior."

"If it goes from Israel's policies to 'this is typical Jewish behavior,' that's crossing the line," Zogby said.

Some Arab-Americans say there can be legitimate criticism of Israel without dabbling in anti-Semitism. Nabil Mohamad, vice-president of the American-Arab

Anti-Discrimination Committee, said Israel should be held "accountable" when it "routinely violates international law."

At the ADL conference in Israel, national director Abraham Foxman said "criticism of Israeli actions or policies is not by its nature anti-Semitic," yet he remains troubled by the recent rhetoric.

"If Helen Thomas had told Hispanics or blacks to go home, everyone would understand how racist this is. To say Jews should go back to Poland is like telling them to go back to Auschwitz," said Foxman, a Holocaust survivor. **BT**



A cartoon that appeared in *Al-Watan*, a newspaper in Qatar, criticized the Israeli raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla with the words "Terror State" in Arabic. RNS photo via Anti-Defamation League.

the Palestinians," said Adam Keller, a Jewish Israeli and spokesman of Gush Shalom, a liberal organization that is critical of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. "While I would not deny that some people are using criticism of Israel as a mask for anti-Semitism, I think there is a systematic campaign that tries to label everyone who criticizes Israel an anti-Semite. Doing so does not make me a self-hating Jew."

The comments that cost Thomas her front-row perch in the White House briefing room came in the wake of a May 31 Israeli raid on a flotilla that was trying to break

Baptists sending aid to strife-ridden Kyrgyzstan

By Bob Allen
Associated Baptist Press

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — Baptists have begun sending aid to Kyrgyzstan, home of a growing humanitarian crisis stemming from violence fueled by ethnic intolerance that has killed hundreds of ethnic Uzbeks and driven tens of thousands more from their homes since June 10.

Baptist World Aid, the relief-and-development arm of the Baptist World Alliance, pledged June 18 to send an initial \$5,000 in response to an appeal from Baptists in Russia who are providing assistance to those affected by the violence.

“The Baptist World Alliance is deeply troubled by the disturbing reports of conflict in Kyrgyzstan,” said Raimundo Barreto, director of the BWA’s Division of Freedom and Justice. “We urge the worldwide Baptist family to pray for our sisters and brothers who are in the midst of the violence and have been forced to flee to makeshift refugee camps. We pray that order and peace may be restored soon and urge the national authorities and the international organizations to do all at their powers to ensure the safe return of refugees to their homes.”

Observers say violent protests that led to the resignation and expulsion of President Kurmanbek Bakiy in April reignited old ethnic hostilities in the former Soviet republic, which gained independence in 1991 following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

An interim government, meanwhile, has been unable to enforce order in the southern part of the country as fights between rival gangs have driven more than 100,000 ethnic Uzbeks into refugee camps in neighboring Uzbekistan. The refugees have been reporting tales of brutal beatings, killings and rape in the southern Kyrgyzstan city of Osh.

“We fear for our lives,” a Baptist eyewitness wrote in an e-mail that circulated on Russian-language websites and was quoted by *Christianity Today*. “Hear our desperate cry!”

Kyrgyzstan’s 5.5 million people are nearly 70 percent Kyrgyz. Uzbeks comprise



National Historical Museum of the Kyrgyz Republic.

about 15 percent of the population, but they are concentrated in the south, where ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods have lived peacefully side-by-side for the last 20 years.

Political instability has allowed unresolved animosity over land ownership and employment to rekindle. In 1990, more than 300 people died during similar clashes before Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev sent in troops to quell the violence.

The Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists in Kyrgyztan reports 64 churches with a total membership of 3,100.

That is down from about 13,000 Baptists in 1987, as Uzbekistan’s emigrating Russian population has dropped from 45 percent to less than 10 percent.

The ethnic-German president of the Kyrgyz Baptist union said recently he sees a bright future for starting ethnic Kyrgyz congregations in the country, William Yoder, who works in the external-relations office of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Russia, wrote in *Christianity Today*. That’s despite a draconian law passed in 2009 to stop the conversion of Muslims, who make up 75 percent of the population.

Yoder said the Kyrgyz Baptist Union reported that its churches in Uzbek neighborhoods of Osh and the heavily Uzbek city of Jalal-Abad had so far escaped damage, thanks to government tanks and soldiers that managed to repel approaching mobs. The government has been criticized

for what some view as a weak response to ethnic violence.

Baptists in Central Asia are part of the European Baptist Fellowship, one of six regional fellowships of the Baptist World Alliance.

“We have all been saddened to learn of the violent conflict which has broken out in the south of the Central Asian Republic of Kyrgyzstan, especially the attacks on the ethnic Uzbek community,” Tony Peck, general secretary for the EBF said in a news release. “We are appealing to the member Unions of the EBF for some immediate help.” **BT**

— Bob Allen is senior writer for
Associated Baptist Press.



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the lighter side

To sit where Jesus walked

By Brett Younger

When I was growing up, I had no desire to go to the Holy Land — which is what we always called it at our church, never “Israel,” always “The Holy Land,” as if there were no flies there.

People came back with what might be considered tacky souvenirs — holy water drawn by the woman at the well, tiny crowns of thorns and Lily of the Valley perfume. The excited travelers made us watch slides of them making funny faces while eating strange food, riding on a donkey that was “the direct descendant of the one Jesus rode into Jerusalem,” and pointing at the empty tomb as though they are angels in the Easter pageant.

They usually had no pictures of Jewish people or poor people, but they had multiple shots of Floridians baptizing one another. When my fourth-grade Sunday school teacher went, she brought back yarmulkes for everyone. (The previous summer we got mouse ears from Disneyworld.)

Veterans of the Holy Land decorated their living rooms with commemorative mustard seeds, widow’s mites and wooden donkeys. They made Israel seem like a theme park — “Jesusland.”

I pictured the Holy Land like “Six Flags Over Palestine” with rides where you climb “Zacchaeus’ Tree,” ride out a “Storm on the Sea of Galilee” or herd demon-possessed pigs. I assumed there were “Loaves and Fishes” restaurants and police officers dressed like Roman soldiers — sort of a biblical Branson.

Mark Twain said that the second coming was never going to happen because Jesus would not want to go back to Israel. The neighbors must have invited the Twains over to see their slides.

It is, nonetheless, time for me to go to Israel, because I have started to feel like the French teacher who has never been to Paris (and I have not marked anything off my bucket list since I went to a Jimmy Buffett concert). I think I can be trusted not to give little shakers of Dead Sea salt as Christmas presents. If I ride a camel, I will not force



The Jordan River.
Photo by David Bjorgen

someone to take a picture. I realize I will have to be strong. Clever salespeople with miniature wood nativity sets, praying hands and key chains made from the Cedars of Lebanon are waiting for people like me.

Will I be able to resist Nazareth candles, Bethlehem incense and Jerusalem honey?

What if I am offered what looks like a good deal — I am not good at math, so I will not be completely sure — on Christmas tree ornaments, parchment scrolls or Song of Solomon Anointing Oil? What if I



Brett Younger

see some fine-looking myrrh and know a friend back home needs some? What if I come across Holy Land soil inserts so that I can “walk on Holy Ground”?

My trip with the inimitable church historian Loyd Allen and 18 pastors is more of a pilgrimage than a tour. We will spend a week in a monastery in Galilee and a week in Jerusalem. Each day we will share morning prayers and then travel to a holy site. Each

afternoon we will study a biblical story that took place at the spot we have just visited. The stereotypical trip to Israel is to hurriedly “run where Jesus walked.” Our hope is to reverently “sit where Jesus walked.”

I trust that the picture of Jesus in my head will soon look more like a Middle Eastern Jew and less like the pictures in children’s books. When I sing “born is the King of Israel,” it may seem different.

I want to see the Garden of Gethsemane, the Jordan River and the Mount of Olives, but I may appreciate the common sights more than the crowded sites. I look forward to praying where Jesus prayed, worshipping where Jesus worshipped and listening where Jesus listened.

I am not planning to come home and kill conversations by starting every sentence with “When I was in the Holy Land . . . ,” but the more I think about it, I cannot make any promises. **BT**

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

Holy mackerel ... uh, marlin!

By Tony W. Cartledge
Posted June 23, 2010
www.tonycartledge.com

Can you conceive of a competition in which you won \$1.2 million — then watched it swim away because of a technicality?

Imagine the heartache felt by the captain of the *Citation*, a fishing boat participating in Morehead City's Big Rock Blue Marlin tournament.

Early in the competition, one of the anglers on his boat hooked a record-setting 883-pound specimen, and the crew safely brought it on board and in to shore. Through the rest of the competition no one else came close to matching the catch,

which had the potential of netting the boat \$912,825 in first-place winnings and a \$318,750 bonus for catching a marlin that exceeded 500 pounds.

Alas, any celebrations were premature. One of the crew members realized that he had failed to purchase a North Carolina recreational fishing license, so he went out and bought one before the fish was weighed in — but hours after it was caught.

Then he was caught, and the lack of a \$10 ten-day license cost the team more than \$1.2 million. The prize went to a boat that had landed a 528-pounder.

Can you imagine how sick he must feel — and how angry his shipmates must be?

Little things can make a big difference. **BT**



Baptist bureaucracies in the bull's eye

By John Pierce
Posted June 22, 2010
www.johndpierce.com

The Great Commission Task Force report that was overwhelmingly approved by messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention on June 15 has its roots in a chapel address given by Southeastern Seminary President Danny Akin in April 2009. In that address, but not in the adopted report, is an expressed concern over “bloated bureaucracies” in the denominational structure.

Nothing gets bloated bureaucrats more agitated than someone bringing up bloated bureaucracies. But clearly Baptist bureaucracies get a closer look when money dries up or when some loyalists become concerned that too little of it is getting to the preferred location — in the case of the SBC, that is the international mission field.

How the recommendations of this report play out in SBC structures are uncertain and likely varied. But staking down turf is sure to increase.

More than anything, the vote for the task force report and the election of Georgia pastor Bryant Wright as SBC president — whose congregation splits its SBC mission giving between the unified budget (Cooperative Program) and

direct support of international missions (Lottie Moon offering) — signal that change is coming. However, restructuring old systems is more likely to result from the vote of congregations with the direction of their funding than any report or self-initiated insider trimming.

Likewise, the much younger and smaller Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is looking at restructuring. During a retreat of Fellowship leaders and partners in April, there was much discussion about how the CBF has evolved over the past 20 years and how it might need to evolve structurally over the next several years.

Coming out of the singularly controlled SBC, the Fellowship made every effort to be structurally free from the possibility of a takeover. But such looseness has its own challenges.

For example, theology schools have emerged in much greater number than the six that are owned and operated by the SBC. These schools relate to CBF to various degrees along with ties to other institutions and agencies.

Other independent partners (including *Baptists Today*) work in voluntary cooperation but have no clear divisions of responsibilities (like SBC entities). And state and regional CBF groups that have emerged over the past two decades are autonomous as well and require funding

for their own operations.

Also worth noting, these groups dip into the same limited pool of resources for funding.

CBF leadership left the retreat with a promise to explore some ways the Fellowship could be restructured. Many of us are eager to hear these ideas and to have the chance to respond.

To that end, a 14-person task force has been appointed to take a serious look at CBF structure and funding over the next two years with updated reports along the way.

Change is never without pain and is rarely initiated by those who feel it the most. But it is often necessitated by realities (such as funding and other strong indicators of need) and dealt with because simply “staying the course” will not work.

Such efforts can be done with clinched fists or open hands. Yet, if change is inevitable, the latter sure seems to produce better results than defensiveness and territorial protection.

It takes a certain amount of openness — to fresh thinking, new methodologies and even personal risk — to consider a future that is unlike the past. But the results are often worth the pain, if an organization comes out leaner, healthier and more effective. **BT**

Cookies, cooking & caring



Hardin-Simmons University President Lanny Hall (left) receives the 10,000th dozen of chocolate chip cookies baked by Bill (right) and Janis Altom to benefit students and campus ministry programs.

Altoms serve their alma mater, larger community

ABILENE, Texas — In the front yard of their home on Abilene's north side, Bill and Janis Jensen Altom sprinkle their favorite rub on 75 pounds of brisket. A fire is burning hot in a smoker sitting by the curb while fragrant smoke can be seen and smelled from several blocks away.

They are cooking for a Bible conference at First Baptist Church of Abilene. But it is nothing new; the Altoms have a long history of volunteerism.

At the start of the fall semester, the Altoms can be found with their smoker near the pond at Hardin-Simmons University cooking hamburgers for a Baptist Student Ministries (BSM) welcome party.

Bill and Janis open their home to all Hardin-Simmons students anytime, day or night. In fact, there have been many nights when students simply come over to wash clothes or bake a cake at the Altom home.

Both Bill and Janis graduated from Hardin-Simmons, Janis in 1969, and Bill in 1971. The Altoms live close enough to the campus that students have been known to go to their home just to watch television.

But the Altoms also have a way of bringing their home to the campus.

Since 1983, Bill and Janis have been baking chocolate chip cookies for students and delivering them to a cookie jar that now sits in the Connally Missions Center on campus. Next to the cookies is another jar for students to drop their change into when they get cookies. That money supports BSM summer missions.

In the very first year, the Altoms delivered 1,300 dozen cookies to Hardin-Simmons students, and have continued to do so for the last 28 years. The practice started in part because business slows down for the Altoms in the winter, and they have more time.

"Back in 1983, Janis suggested that there might be some volunteer opportunities at the



Bill and Janis Altom fire up the smoker to feed participants in a Bible conference at First Baptist Church of Abilene. Their volunteerism is seen on the local campus and throughout the community.

HSU campus," Bill recalled.

So Bill and Janis started helping students who were involved in BSM by going with them on mission trips. That, in turn, sparked the idea for the cookies as an ongoing ministries fundraiser.

The Altoms have been known to turn out as many as 300 dozen cookies in just eight hours. One year, when the BSM convention was coming to town, the Altoms and 40 Hardin-Simmons students baked enough chocolate chip cookies to give one to every student who lived on campus as a reminder to participate in the activities.

Bill says they have kept up with the cookie count on a calendar. Every new month, they put the total number of dozens from the last month at the top of the new month.

So, how many cookies can you make in 28 years plus a few months? The Altoms delivered their 10,000th dozen to Hardin-Simmons President Lanny Hall in April.

That's 120,000 cookies!

Ask Bill or Janis why they have baked cookies for Hardin-Simmons students for so many years and they will tell you, "It's one of the most enjoyable things we do."

As for the cost, Bill just says, "I don't think we've suffered for it, the Lord just continues to help us stretch our dollars." **BT**

— Janlyn Echols Thaxton is director of public relations at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas.

Va. businessman puts faith into action

Several years ago, Charles Pond and his wife, Juanita, were dining at Shoney's in Waynesboro, Va., when they had an unexpected opportunity. With their meals before them, they held hands, bowed their heads and prayed.

Their server came over and quietly asked, "Do you believe in prayer?"

"We really do," Charles replied, "or otherwise we wouldn't do it."

The server asked if they would be around when she finished her shift, and Charles said they would. The couple talked and prayed with the young woman, who had recently separated from her husband. They agreed to stay in touch and encouraged their new friend to go to church.

The end of the story is what Charles enjoys sharing the most. The young woman began attending church. She and her husband reunited. She became her church's youth Sunday school teacher, and, years later, her daughter became the youth director.

"You just don't know where and when you will touch somebody and will bring that person to Christ," said Charles. "Wherever you are, somebody may look at you and be affected by what you say or do. Good or bad, you represent your faith by your own action."

These words have guided Charles' life for almost seven decades. He grew up in Suffolk, Va., and attended Chowan College (now Chowan University) for two years. After completing his bachelor's degree at the University of North Carolina, Charles went to work for the highway system, but soon left when his father became ill and needed help managing his business, Nansemond Cold Storage.

Charles continued successfully

operating the company — which provides refrigeration to commercial customers storing peanuts, cashews, Brazil nuts and a host of other foods — after his father died a few years later.

Ten years ago, he expanded by buying Taylor Freezer Sales in Chesapeake, Va., and growing his business into a thriving company with offices throughout the Southeast. The company sells and services restaurant equipment, from milkshake machines to ice makers, to the original slushie machine.

A soft drink, milkshake or ice cream cone from McDonalds, Burger King and Chick-fil-A, especially in the Southeast, mostly likely is being dispensed from a machine sold by his company.

Charles has infused his faith into his business practices.

"Treat others as you would be treated, try not to argue with anybody, and take a portion of what your company makes and give it to various religious organizations to help promote Christianity," says Charles of his business practices. "Our motto is we live by what we tell you."

Charles serves on numerous boards, including the Suffolk Center for Cultural Arts, the Suffolk Education Foundation and the Colonial Virginia Council of Boy Scouts of America. Among his longest terms of service are his 30 years on the Board of Trustees of Chowan University and 17 years on the board of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR).

After first joining the BTSR board in the early 1990s, Charles decided to pursue his longtime interest in the Bible as a student and enrolled in the master of divinity program. "I had always had a strong desire to become more educated in religious work," he explains. While he left just short of completing his degree, his biblical studies

have been put to good use. He has given sermons at more than 40 churches and has taught Sunday school for at least 20 years.

Charles strongly believes in the importance of sharing Christianity with young people. A former Boys Scouts leader, he enjoys telling how his troops always had 100 percent attendance at their devotionals — a detail he is more eager to talk about than the fact that he is a recipient of the Silver Beaver Award, the highest honor presented to a scouting volunteer, and the Good Shepherd Award from the Association of Baptists for Scouting.

He is one of the founders of the Christian Service Association at Chowan University. In addition to providing scholarships to young men and women who plan to go into the ministry, the organization helps with mission trips for students to assist and minister to people in need.

"It is important that we reach out to our young people and teach them our Christian values and beliefs," he said. "They will be the ones to carry them forward. If we don't take the time to do this — to care enough to support the effort to do this, who will?"

One of the reasons Charles enjoys reading *Baptists Today* is learning about people who are promoting Christianity and the Baptist principles he has followed throughout his life.

"It helps me feel connected to people who have similar beliefs and values," he said. "I think as more people read about those people and what they are doing, it can have a great impact on spreading Christianity."

Charles has assured his wife that he is going to slow down from all of his board and community activities so they can enjoy seeing more of the country in their motor home.

"She has always been very supportive, but we would like to travel more," he said. "But I do have a heart for doing things for the Lord." **BT**



Charles Pond

One of the reasons Charles enjoys reading Baptists Today is learning about people who are promoting Christianity and the Baptist principles he has followed throughout his life.

Sex, violence warnings come to Christian movies

ST. LOUIS — To get to the movie section at Lifeway Christian Store in Bridgeton, Mo., customers pass by shelves of books, CDs and greeting cards. The rack of Christian DVDs isn't huge, but it's twice as big as it was a year ago and "growing all the time," said manager Francine Evans.

Some of the Christian titles these days, she said, tackle "touchy subjects" such as drugs, domestic violence or abortion.

"These are movies that deal with issues real people deal with," Evans said. "Sometimes that's what's necessary to reach people for God. But the seals are needed. They're a good idea."

The seals are part of a new system developed by the Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Dove Foundation to gauge the Christian values in films that contain sex, violence and drugs.

For 20 years, the Dove Foundation has placed a blue "dove" seal on any DVD it considered family-friendly, from *Star Wars* to *Toy Story 3*. A new purple "Faith-Based" seal warns of raw images or language in otherwise Christian-themed movies, and a new gold "Faith-Friendly" seal indicates a Christian-themed movie that's safe for a family audience.

The launch of the new seals was part of the International Christian Retailers Show held here in June.

Book and music purchases represent a significant portion of the Christian stores' annual \$4.6 billion market. As music sales increasingly go digital, retailers are expanding their DVD offerings to recapture those sales, said Curtis Risky, executive director of the CBA (the former Christian Booksellers Association).

In 2009, Christian retail sales of music declined by 1 percent from 2008, but Christian retail sales of videos increased by 26 percent, according to the Christian Music Trade Association and Nielsen Christian SoundScan.

By contrast, general market stores' sales of all music decreased by more than 10 percent, and video sales decreased by 23 percent. The growth of the Christian DVD market means retailers need guidance for their customers.

"A consumer looks to Christian retail to find family-friendly entertainment," Risky said. "The ratings system helps identify for the Christian consumer the kinds of things they can expect in a movie."

To caution parents that some Christian films can also contain un-Christian behavior or situations, the Dove Foundation's new "Faith-Based" seal will carry letters indicating the offending content: "V" for violence, "D" for drugs and alcohol, "S" for sex, etc.

Many movies don't make Dove's original "Family-Approved" cut at all. The group's

doesn't help him make that determination."

The Dove Foundation's new gold "Faith-Friendly" seal will alert consumers that a movie is not only family-friendly, but that it contains a Christian message. DVDs of movies such as *The Blind Side* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* will receive the foundation's gold seal on their packaging.

While the foundation's purple "Faith-Based" seal will register as a caution for parents, those in the film industry say they're not worried it will have a chilling effect on Christian writers and directors concerned about DVD sales.

Dave Austin, vice president of sales and marketing for the Bridgestone Group, which distributes Christian films, said the "Faith-Based" seal is actually "a positive step for filmmakers."

"As a distributor, if we look at a film that's not approved by Dove at all, we might ask for it to be edited slightly to get that Dove approval," he said.

Christian filmmaking has flourished since Trinity Broadcasting Network's 1999 ode to apocalyptic cheesiness, *The Omega Code*. In 2004, the \$371 million made by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* opened Hollywood's eyes to the financial potential in Christian movies.

The success of Christian films inspired a new generation of Christian auteurs who have since introduced variety into the Christian film market. Fans of Christian movies can now choose between squeaky-clean evangelistic efforts like Sherwood Films' *Fireproof*, about a firefighter's marriage, and *Facing the Giants*, about a football coach's trust in God, and grittier fare, like this year's *To Save a Life*, about teen depression, suicide and bullying; and *Preacher's Kid*, about domestic violence.

The latter two films "have some rather graphic scenes in them of inappropriate sexual behavior, drug and alcohol use, and violence," Rolfe said in an interview. "However, they also have very powerful stories of redemption through Christian faith." **BT**

— Tim Townsend writes for The St. Louis Post-Dispatch. This article was distributed through Religion News Service.



review of the recent comedy *MacGruber*, says: "Unfortunately, despite some good acting and fighting sequences, the violence level, not to mention the strong language and sexual content, clearly prevents us from awarding this film our Dove 'Family-Approved' Seal."

"It's the retailers that really want there to be a rating system to help them serve their customers," said Bobby Downes, a Christian producer, whose latest movie, *Like Dandelion Dust*, with Mira Sorvino, will be in theaters this fall.

"If a pastor walks into a Christian bookstore and wants a movie he can show to his entire church, the current rating system

Mormon influence runs deep through 'Twilight'

LOS ANGELES — Ever since Bram Stoker's "Dracula" began haunting the imagination in 1897, popular culture has identified Christian symbols — crucifixes, Communion wafers, holy water — as weapons to ward off a blood-thirsty vampire.

The "Twilight" novels and film franchise have religious associations, too — but most of them come from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons).

As the film's "Twi-hard" fans watched the third "Twilight" installment, *Eclipse*, that opened in theaters on June 30, few likely recognized the religious references in the film based on the novels by Stephenie Meyer, herself a Mormon.

"I think people make up all these Mormon references just so they can publish 'Twilight' articles in respectable publications like *The New York Times*," actor Robert Pattinson (Edward, the film's central vampire character), told *Entertainment Weekly*. "Even Stephenie said it doesn't mean any of that."



Robert Pattinson

It's possible that Meyer never set out to weave Mormon imagery into the 'Twilight' background. Yet intentional or otherwise, it's hard to ignore:

- The story's teenage heroine, Bella, avoids coffee, tea, alcohol and tobacco — not unlike the Mormons' "Word of Wisdom" health code. Bella also advises her father to "cut back on steak," much like the Mormon teaching to eat meat and poultry "sparingly."
- Feminists have questioned Bella's frequent cooking and cleaning — household chores that reflect a strong Mormon work ethic and traditional roles for women. The official motto for heavily Mormon Utah is "Industry," and its symbol is the beehive.
- A crucial Mormon belief is that humans can become divine. In the "Twilight"



series, the Cullen family of vampires was once human but now lives without death in a resurrected condition. Their immortality is a kind of probationary period for eternal life. Meyer describes the Cullens, particularly Edward, as "godlike" and "inhumanly beautiful."

- Mormons believe angels are resurrected beings of flesh and bone. The most familiar is Moroni, who stands high atop Mormon temples, trumpet in hand.

The Book of Mormon says Moroni was a fifth-century prophet who visited founder Joseph Smith in 1823. Smith described Moroni as radiating light and "glorious beyond description."

Bella describes her vampire boyfriend Edward as an angel whom she can't imagine "any more glorious." Edward's skin sparkles in the sunlight, and he visits Bella's bedroom at night.

But Mormon angels don't have wings; in the "Twilight" film, Edward sits in the science lab, the outstretched wings of a stuffed white owl just over his shoulders.

- A unique Mormon teaching is that marriages are "sealed" for eternity; spouses are referred to as eternal companions and eternal partners. Bella describes her relationship with Edward as "forever."
- Bella and Edward's marriage, and her

quick pregnancy, underscore the Mormon emphasis on the family. But Bella's half human/vampire fetus nearly destroys her, so her distraught husband suggests an abortion and artificial insemination. Mormons permit abortions if the mother's life is in danger, and artificial insemination is an option for married couples.

Bella quickly vetoes both abortion and artificial insemination, reinforcing the essential Mormon teaching of individual choice, or "agency."

Meyer has said that the apple on the cover of the first "Twilight" novel represents Eve's choice in the Garden of Eden. The poster for *Eclipse* includes the line: "It all begins ... with a choice."

The patriarch of the vampire family, Carlisle Cullen, supports Bella when he explains, "It wouldn't be right to make such a choice for her, to force her."

- By the conclusion of the "Twilight" series, Bella's Quileute Indian friend, Jacob, "imprints" on her daughter, meaning he will marry the girl when she's older and establish a genetic link to her vampire family. Mormons believe they share a common heritage with Native Americans through ancient Israel.
- The Book of Mormon teaches that a remnant of these ancient people came to America around 600 B.C.; their descendants, the Lamanites, are among the ancestors of the Native Americans.

twilight

Quileute names in the series are decidedly Hebrew: Jacob, Paul, Sam, Ephraim, Jared, Seth, Joshua, Levi, Rebecca and

Rachel. Jacob's last name is Black, a reference to the Lamanites' "skin of blackness" (metaphorically, a religious rather than an ethnic distinction).

Bram Stoker probably never imagined that vampires would actually represent a religious doctrine. But more than a century later, "Twilight" shows that these nocturnal creatures can accommodate just about anything. **BT**

— *Angela Aleiss teaches film and religion at the University of California, Los Angeles.*

Huddle up!

Coach Bill Curry talks about race, faith, forgiveness

At a stage in life when many coaches throw in the towel, Bill Curry is launching a new college football program in Atlanta. Georgia State University's first-ever football game will be played Sept. 2 when the Panthers host Baptist-related Shorter University in the Georgia Dome — a home field shared by the NFL Atlanta Falcons.

It's not like Curry needs to pad his résumé. At Georgia Tech and in professional football he played for legendary coaches Bobby Dodd, Vince Lombardi and Don Shula. As an NFL center he snapped the ball to quarterbacks Bart Starr of the Green Bay Packers and Johnny Unitas of the Baltimore Colts.

During his college coaching career he led the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets, the Alabama Crimson Tide and the Kentucky Wildcats. Off the field he has served as a television analyst for ESPN and built a leadership program for the Baylor School in Chattanooga, Tenn.

But this fall, Coach Curry will be on the sidelines again with a brand new, untested team — that will be well tested up to the end. Georgia State's final game on the 2010 schedule is set for Nov. 18 in Tuscaloosa against the reigning national champions.

Baptists Today editor John Pierce and Coach Curry got together at the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in Macon, Ga., for this conversation.

BT: The great Willie Davis was your teammate with the Packers when you were drafted. What influence did he have on you as a rookie?

BC: There are a lot of us in the public eye who sincerely talk about our faith and then don't

live it so well. I've been guilty of that. I pray about that every day and ask for forgiveness.

But Willie David didn't have to say anything about the basis of what he was doing because his actions spoke so loudly.

In 1965 I was the [Packers'] 20th round draft choice — which was the last round — and was an undersized offensive center. I was a white kid with a Southern accent from College Park, Ga. We were in the middle of the civil rights movement — and I had never been in a huddle with an African-American teammate in my life.

I was not scared to run into those guys. If you won't hit, then you won't be there the second day. I tried hard on the field. I wanted to make the team desperately. But mostly I was concerned about being rejected.

[Coach] Vince Lombardi won more titles than anybody else in part because he was not a racist. There was a quota system in the NFL in those days. Most teams had one or two African-American players. He despised discrimination.

If you said one of the wrong kinds of words, you were gone — because he had experienced it being an Italian-American. He couldn't get a head job because of his last name for the longest time.

On that 40-man roster he had 10 African-Americans. He would have had 25 — he didn't care. On there were Herb Adderley, Willie Wood, Dave Robinson, Elijah Pitts, Lionel Aldridge, Marv Fleming and then the most dominant one of all was Willie Davis, the defensive captain from Grambling State University. He got his masters degree in business while being captain of the greatest football team of all time.

I just thought these guys were going to reject me and run me out of there as soon as they heard my Southern accent.



Willie walked up to me one night after the [team] meeting and said, "I'd like to speak to you." I thought, "Oh, no. This is it. He's going to tell me to get lost."

He said, "I've been watching you at practice and I think you've got a chance to make our team. And I'm going to help you."

I said: "What? You are going to help me, really?" He said yes and told me about his big disappointment early in his career.

He said, "We went to play in the championship game against the Eagles and got beat. I didn't play well, and I realize I left regrets on that football field. I made up my mind that will never happen to Willie Davis again. So you watch me practice, Bill. You come out there and practice like I practice, and you'll leave no regrets on the field. You'll have a chance to make our team.

"And when you don't think you can take it another minute; when Vince Lombardi is screaming in your face and Ray Nitschke is breaking your nose, you come find me and I'll get you through it."

That's what I did. We called him "Doctor Feelgood."

Sure enough Nitschke would be killing me and Lombardi would be screaming at me and I wanted to quit — I was just a baby. I'd go find number 87 and ask him: "How do you feel, old man?" He'd say: "Feel good; you can do it."

Many years later I asked him why he did that. First, he said, "I don't know."

So, many years after that, recently, I asked him again: "Where did that come from, seriously?"



“It came from my faith,” he said. “I grew up in the church, and we were instructed that Christ said we were to love everybody — especially if they are different. I took that to heart.”

So while he was not standing up pounding on a Bible, he didn’t have to. In my heart of hearts I knew where it came from. But it was really interesting to hear him say that.

BT: How did your college coach, Bobby Dodd, shape you as a person and a coach?

BC: Utterly.

His speech was something like: “Men, if you are not a good football player, that’s not your fault; that’s my fault because I’m the one who invited you here. I’m going to be good to you, and I’m going to love you. We’re not going to have many rules, but the ones we have we are real serious about ... We want you to graduate. My only two rules are you’ve got to go to Sunday school and you can’t cut class.”

Well, I didn’t believe him so I cut class. And they got me up and ran me up and down the west stands ’til I could not stand up. Somewhere about the 50th time of running through my own vomit I decided that chemistry class at 8 in the morning was a real good thing.

People chuckle when I tell that story, but here’s what matters. I didn’t cut another class because my football coach loved me too much to let me self-destruct when I could not see my own potential God had given me.

So I graduated from a school where I didn’t belong academically; I wasn’t prepared for Georgia Tech. I graduated because I respected my coach — and, frankly, feared him. I found out if you go to class and sit on the front row and take notes and pay attention, that school is not such a bad thing.

That became not only a part of my life as a student athlete, it became my career. It’s what I love to do to this day. Every day I get to do that.

BT: Are there moments when you’re coaching now and see evidence of Coach Dodd in what you are saying or doing?

BC: Oh, yes. You know, my father was a great coach and I had a great high school coach. And I played for Lombardi and Don Shula and a whole lot of other great coaches. You hopefully learn something from all of them.

But, being back in the college ranks, my role model is Bobby Dodd.

BT: I’ve heard you say before that going from having Bobby Dodd as your coach to Vince Lombardi was quite a contrast.

BC: I hated Coach Lombardi because he was not Bobby Dodd. I couldn’t forgive him for not being 6-foot-2 with a Southern accent.

That was infantile. It was discrimination on my part. Stupid. Immature.

Later I went to his hospital room to apologize to him when he was in his last few months. I’m ashamed that I had to do that. I was pushed into it by a teammate — and by a greater force.

Coach changed my life in that moment. I went in there and stammered around because I had said some ugly things about him publicly. I’m ashamed of that, but I did.

I said, “I came to tell you, Coach, that I’m sorry and that you meant a lot to my life.”

He squeezed my hand and said: “Well, you can mean a lot to mine if you will pray for me.”

Whew. What had he done? He forgave me when I least deserved it. If I’m not mistaken, that’s what our faith is all about.

So Willie Davis had forgiven me for whatever racist tendencies had arrived with me. Coach Lombardi had forgiven me for being ridiculous and immature.

BT: Where are you currently involved in church in Atlanta?

BC: Peachtree Road United Methodist. We love that church. It’s active in the community and out in the streets.

My wife Carolyn and I are particularly engaged with Actions Ministries — a ministry to mothers who are alone without housing. It is just mind-boggling what happens when those ladies have an opportunity to get into spiritual counseling, rehab programs when necessary, interim housing and food, tutoring for the children — and to watch them come out on the other side.

We also provide occupational training. To see moms come out of these horror stories with new lives — the kind of transformation we’re charged with — has meant a great deal.

Two of the children of these moms have become valedictorians of their high school classes. When they were 9 years old, they were homeless.

BT: Why did you take the job at Georgia State?

BC: A lot my friends called me up and said: “Are you nuts? Are you crazy?” I said: “Yes, but we established that a long time ago.”

When I was 15, my high school coach asked me if I wanted to be a day-camp counselor. I had my little group of guys and in two weeks I knew what I was supposed to do with my life.

I’m a youth worker; that’s what I do. Even when I was working for ESPN, I’d end up sitting down counseling young people.

When I say “young people,” I’m talking about anybody younger than me and I’m 67. So that is just about everybody.

To be back in an educational environment with a group of young men — and women who work in our program and are more and more involved — my responsibility is for the education and emotional and spiritual welfare of all those young people. It’s what I love to do.

I also love football. And I think the huddle is the place in which every teammate learns that he needs every teammate to survive on every play.

It doesn’t matter what color somebody’s skin is, or what his religion is, or what his politics are. That’s your teammate. You love him regardless.

It’s supposed to happen in the church, and sometimes it does. It always happens in the huddle. You never see a good football team unless the people learn to accept each other. **BT**



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Ammerman: Story is in church attendance stability

By Alfredo Garcia
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — A new Gallup Poll found that Americans' self-reported church attendance has increased slightly since 2008.

When asked "How often do you attend church, synagogue, or mosque?" 43.1 percent of Americans in 2010 said they attended church "at least once a week" or "almost every week." That's up from 42.8 percent in 2009 and 42.1 percent in 2008.

"There has been well-publicized speculation about the possibility that church attendance has risen over the past two years as Americans became more despondent and worried as a result of the economic recession," Frank Newport of Gallup writes. "However, trends ... reflect just the opposite pattern, with both church attendance and economic confidence increasing from 2008 to 2009, and now into 2010."

Conservatives, non-Hispanic blacks and Republicans demonstrated the highest participation, with 55 percent of each group reporting frequent church attendance. Liberals



Photo by James Steakley

"If you go into any church on any given weekend, you will find less than 43 percent [of the U.S. population] in the pews."

and young adults (18 to 29) rounded out the bottom, with 27 and 35 percent respectively.

In its report, Gallup says "the small increase in attendance between 2008 and so far in 2010 is statistically significant,

suggesting that there has in fact been an uptick in religious service participation in the real world over the last 2¹/₂ years."

Others are more skeptical.

"Frankly, I wouldn't put much store in a 1 percent increase in the attendance rates," said Nancy Ammerman, a Baptist who teaches sociology of religion at Boston University. "It's just too small to make a very big story of. That number, the 42-44 percent range, has been so stable for so long that that in itself is a story."

Ammerman added that these figures are not demonstrative of actual American religious participation.

"If you go into any church on any given weekend, you will find less than 43 percent in the pews," she said, citing a more realistic figure of 20-25 percent. "But that in and of itself is quite striking, that a quarter of the population of any given country will be found in a religious service on any given week."

The poll is based on more than 800,000 interviews since February 2008, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 1 percentage point. **BT**

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Megachurches on a building boom

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Mega-churches here in the heart of the Bible Belt are thriving enough to support a major building boom despite a sluggish economy.

First Baptist Church of Gardendale has built a \$19.7 million, 2,700-seat sanctuary about 15 miles north of Birmingham. After a small arson fire in April delayed the opening, the first service in the new building is now set for Aug. 8.

First Baptist Church of Trussville is in the midst of a \$7.5 million expansion that will include a new, larger home for its preschool, expected to be ready in January.

A new \$4 million, 1,000-seat youth sanctuary is under construction and expected to open this fall at the Church of the Highlands, and Dawson Memorial Baptist Church in Homewood is getting ready to



break ground on a \$9 million children's building.

"It's certainly a difficult time in the economy, but it appears we're staying on track with our budget," said Chris Byrd, chairman of the building committee at Dawson.

Churches are finding that with housing construction in a downturn, they can save money when they invite bids on their building projects.

"It's a tough time to build a new building, but on the flip side it's a good time to go out and get bids," Byrd said. "We expect to get better prices."

Even in a down economy, megachurches are growing as families look for programs that serve children and young adults. The new children's education building at Dawson Baptist is needed to accommodate new growth, Byrd said.

"Our church is really growing as far as young families with school-aged children," Byrd said. "That's our motivation behind this completely. It's because of the church growth."

While the slower economy has meant cheaper construction costs, many megachurches have held steady in their budgets.

"We're still on track with our giving," said Lance Pate, associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Trussville. "We're doing very well in spite of the economy."

In March, First Baptist Church of Gardendale erected a 125-foot-tall stainless

steel cross — spotlighted to make it visible for miles — that will be a dominant feature of its new campus.

At its current campus, Gardendale First Baptist has average attendance of 3,300 to 3,500 across three Sunday services. In 2008, the church scaled back its budget because it foresaw tougher economic times, pastor Kevin Hamm said.

That has helped keep the budget balanced, while the church continued to fund its building project from its regular budget, he said. There was never an appeal for funding above and beyond regular tithes and offerings, Hamm said.

By waiting a few years to start construction, saving the money designated for the project and then getting bids during a tough economy for construction, the total cost savings was about \$1.8 million cheaper than previous estimates, said church administrator De Allen.

At Church of the Highlands in Irondale, the auditorium for students in junior high and high school will become home to the Wednesday night youth ministry service, said associate pastor Layne Schranz.

"We are on budget and on schedule to open in September," Schranz said. "The youth ministry is going to really benefit."

On Sundays, it will serve as an auxiliary auditorium with its own worship team that will watch pastor Chris Hodges' sermons on video screens. The youth have been crammed into an undersized room, Schranz said.

In 2007, Church of the Highlands opened its \$15 million campus with a 2,400-seat sanctuary. Four satellite campuses and a fifth expected to open in August feature on-site worship teams with a satellite feed of Hodges' sermon. The church draws weekly attendance of more than 10,000, making it one of the largest churches in the South. **BT**

— Greg Garrison writes for The Birmingham News in Birmingham, Ala.

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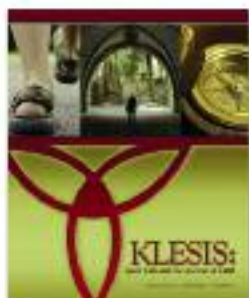
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