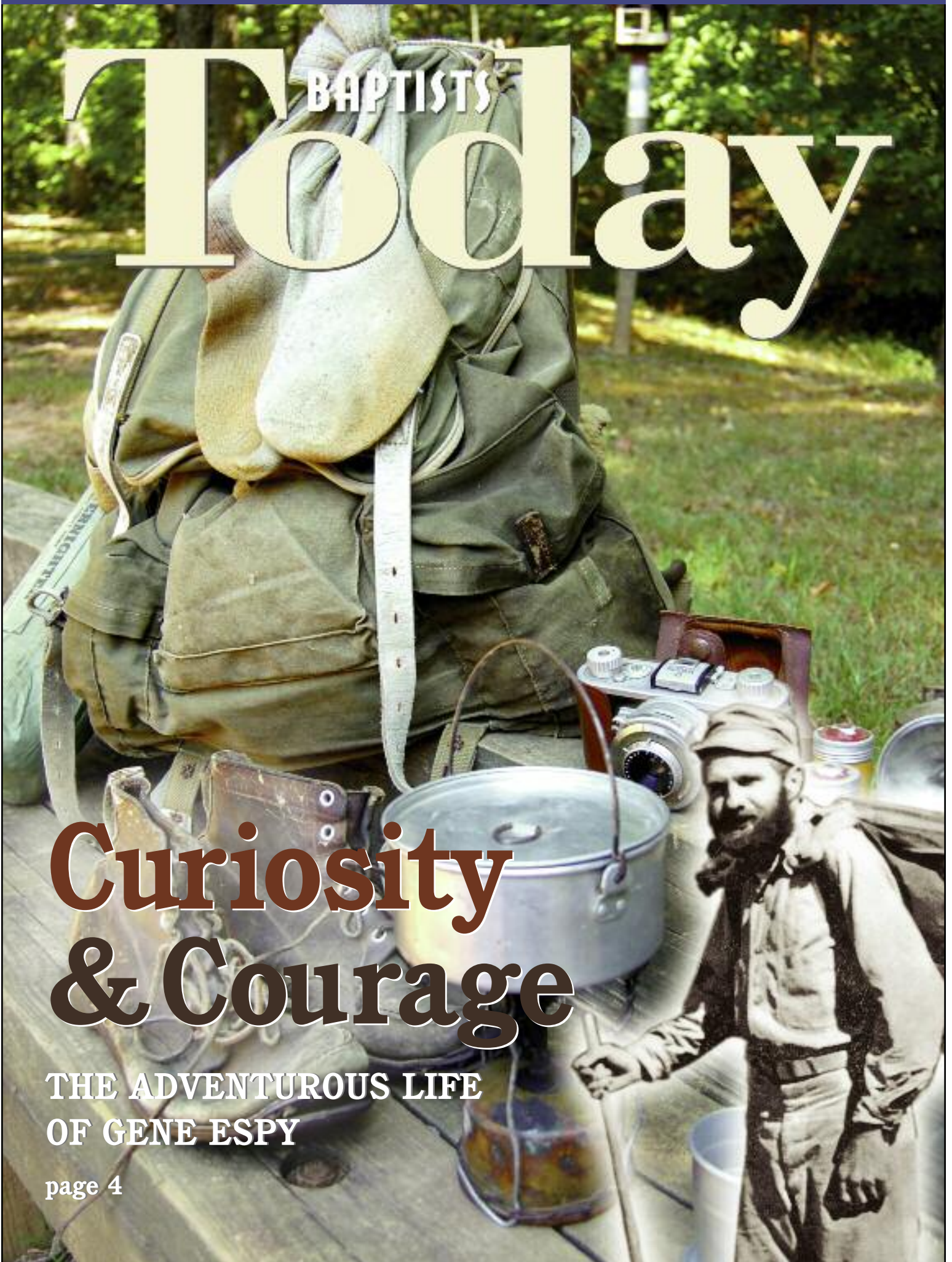


T BAPTISTS Today

Curiosity & Courage

THE ADVENTUROUS LIFE
OF GENE ESPY

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Photo by John Pierce. Baptist layman Gene Espy's life is filled with adventure, including his 1951 trek from Georgia to Maine as the second person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. **Story on page 4**



New *Baptists Today* website offers something old, something new

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Curiosity & courage

The adventurous life of Gene Espy

MACON, Ga. — “My lack of fear and my yearning to explore the world drove me to conquer new things,” said 83-year-old Gene Espy softly. The retired aerospace engineer and Baptist layman’s slightly built appearance belies the stories that he can tell for the millionth time as if for the first.

Gene is best known for being the second person to continuously hike the entire Appalachian Trail — from Georgia to Maine — well before its popularity. At times during his 2,025-plus-mile trek through 14 states over 123 days in 1951, the 24-year-old Georgia Tech graduate would walk for more than a week without seeing another person.

Some of the best stories flow when Gene takes his well-worn walking stick from its prominent perch above the sofa in the Macon, Ga., home he shares with his wife Eugenia. The first Eagle Scout from Cordele, Ga., Gene found the stick as a 12-year-old, and it has accompanied him on many adventures including the AT thru-hike.

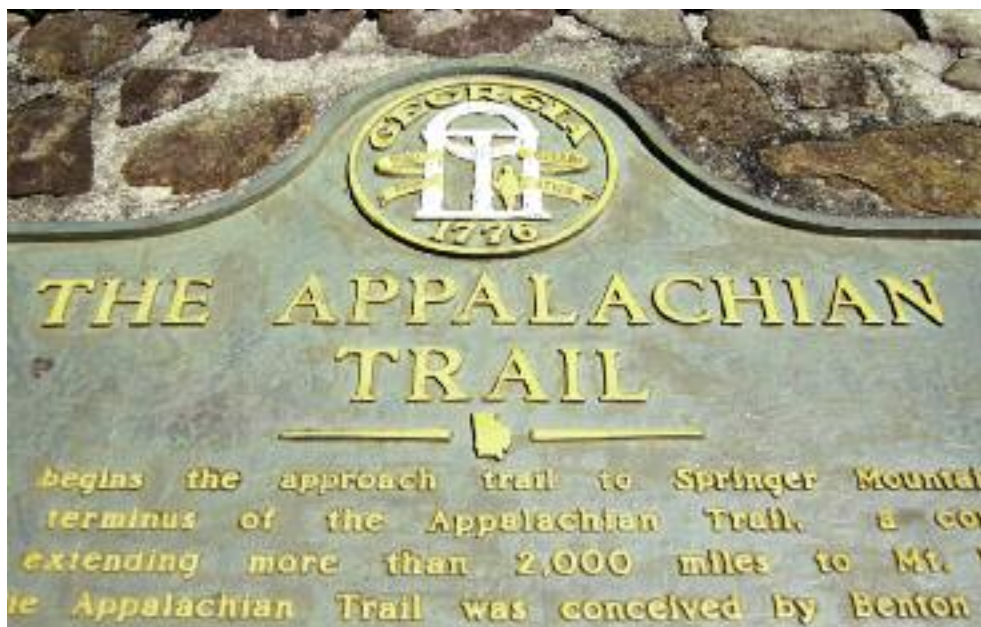
Gene explained that his walking stick is now a good bit shorter than when he started the world’s longest footpath, but not due to the daily wear of the trail.

“I killed several rattlesnakes on my trip,” he said matter-of-factly, noting that one well-placed swing took about a foot off his walking stick.

How many is “several”?

“I lost count at 15,” Gene replied with a shrug. “I killed all the rattlesnakes I saw.” And then there were some dealings with copperheads, “mostly in Pennsylvania.”

When Gene finally reached the end of the trail atop Mt. Katahdin in Maine, on a cold Sept. 30, 1951, there were no celebrations as are common for thru-hikers today. In fact, no one else was around. So Gene leaned his trusted walking stick against the sign



Georgia to Maine — The Appalachian Trail is the world’s longest footpath, continuing for more than 2,000 miles across the mountain range. Few knew of its existence in 1951.

noting the end of the trail and took a picture as evidence of his successful journey.

EARLY ADVENTURES

Gene grew up in the South Georgia town of Cordele and never saw a mountain until he was 16 years old. But his adventurous life started well before his thoughts of hiking the long and treacherous terrain of the AT.

A 10th-grade Spanish class led Gene to suggest to a classmate that they ride their bicycles to Mexico the next summer. But his friend’s father overheard the conversation and put an end to such nonsense.

So, instead, Gene set out on a solo bike trek from Cordele to Dothan, Ala., to Panama City and then to Tallahassee, Fla., across the state to Jacksonville, and then up through Waycross, Ga., en route to home.

“I’d never heard of gears,” said Gene with a smile. But with strong 16-year-old legs, an adventurous spirit and his balloon-tire bike, he completed the trek in a week’s time.

Gene said he would pitch his tent in cemeteries, schoolyards or church lawns. He had no contact with his parents until he rolled back into the driveway.

“But I enjoyed it,” he said in his usual understated fashion.

While he described his parents as “cautious,” they surely had seen evidence of young Gene’s ability to find opportunity and adventure where others did not. As a third-grader, he would buy Coca-Colas for three cents each, ice them down in a wagon, and sell them for a nickel to construction workers repairing homes damaged by a recent tornado. He would then wait patiently to retrieve the empty bottles to get back a deposit.

But he wasn’t above a little foolery. His older brother constantly bugged him about selling one of the Cokes to him at no profit. Finally, Gene agreed.

“It tastes kind of flat,” his brother said as he chugged the drink.

Gene confessed that he had poured the dribbles of Cokes from the bottles he had sold the day before until one of the empty bottles was refilled. Then he pushed a cap on top and added the replenished bottle to the ice.

“I told him that he got what he paid for,” Gene said with a big grin. “I already had his money.”



Tales of the Trail — Gene Espy tells stories of his adventurous life in an interview with *Baptists Today* editor John Pierce before a gathering of the news journal's directors and supporters in September. Photo by Bruce Gourley.

LIGHTING FUSES

When the Flint River was dammed to create Lake Blackshear near Gene's home, no one there thought about water skiing — except for Gene. He had seen a newsreel about skiing down at Cypress Gardens in Florida.

"I said, 'I've got to try that.'"

An ad for a make-your-own-water-skis kit in *Popular Science* magazine was all Gene needed to get started. He bought the needed lumber and rope.

"Then I got a broom handle and made a ski handle," said Gene. "I was in business then."

Because no one anticipated such water sports, the many stumps just below the surface of Lake Blackshear made skiing difficult and dangerous. So Gene, never one to give up, got a blueprint of the land before the lake was built and identified the location of the trees. Then he bought a case of dynamite to eliminate the stumps.

"I'd go down about three feet," said Gene, explaining his technique for attaching dynamite to the underwater stumps and lighting the fuses. After removing the selected obstacles, Gene marked a course in the lake for other boaters and future skiers to follow.

As a Royal Ambassadors counselor at Cordele's First Baptist Church, Gene used his skills and adventurous spirit in service as well. The local Baptist association had created a picnic area on the lake, but there was no bathroom.

So Gene and his RA's hauled an "outdoor privy" by boat to the location. However, "the ground was like cement" where the privy was to be placed. So Gene went over into the next county to get some dynamite.

While testing a stick of dynamite that had leaked, Gene accidentally started a grass fire that spread quickly and required going to the nearest home to call for a fire truck. After the fire was extinguished, one of the firefighters pointed to a sawdust pile near the edge of the burned area and said: "This fire must have started from spontaneous combustion in that sawdust pile."

Gene said he shook his head vigorously and said: "Probably so."

WATERWAYS

Gene also had another interest: "I made boats as a hobby." He even crafted the oars for his first 12-foot fishing boat constructed in his parents' garage as a high-school student.

During college breaks, he spent more than a year turning a kit into a 13-foot one-step racing boat with a souped-up 60-horsepower inboard Ford car engine. Gene, who got help from a race car mechanic, said he was pleased with the resulting performance.

"It did 50 miles an hour on half throttle."

At a more leisurely pace, Gene joined a classmate whose homemade 16-foot sailboat — with the aid of Gene's nine-horsepower outboard motor — took them down the Ocmulgee River to the Georgia coast. After

their Saturday night campout near Lumber City, Ga., the two students walked into town to attend a church service.

Upon reaching the coast at Darien, Ga., Gene left his motor at a service station and the mast and sails were put in place. However, an embarrassing incident came when they whistled for the low bridge leading to Saint Simon's Island to be opened — and then the wind died down.

"Cars backed up in both directions," said Gene, as the two boys sat in the motionless sailboat. "People were calling out unkind things."

His classmate's father, who had brought along a trailer to retrieve the sailboat, was among those in the traffic jam on the bridge. "But he didn't act like he knew us," Gene said with a laugh. Eventually the wind picked up enough for the twosome to head out to sea.

A few years later, Gene took a second waterways adventure going all the way to Daytona Beach and then hitchhiking back.

"The lack of other people interested in expending as much energy as I did in my exploits never stopped me," wrote Gene in his book, *The Trail of My Life*.

BY THUMB & DETERMINATION

Cordele, Georgia's first Eagle Scout and high school valedictorian received a scholarship to Georgia Tech, which opened new opportunities for Gene.

Aside from academics and military training through ROTC, Gene's curiosity about yet-unseen places continued to drive him to try what others might never dream.

He told some classmates that he was going to St. Louis for the weekend because, well, he had never been there. One of the budding engineers said he didn't think the Atlanta-to-St. Louis round trip could be done in such a short time for someone without a car.

Such doubts just motivated Gene. When classes ended on Friday, he took a small bag of essentials and stuck his thumb out toward passing traffic along U.S. Highway 41. After getting to Cartersville, Ga., about 30 miles northwest of Atlanta, Gene was picked up by two men headed for Indianapolis.

It was not a direct route to St. Louis, but Gene said he was "just traveling" and had never seen Indianapolis either. Next Gene flagged down an 18-wheeler with "Danger — High Explosives" emblazoned across the trailer.

The truck driver told Gene he was not supposed to pick up hitchhikers but that he

was having trouble staying awake. Gene asked what he was hauling.

“Dynamite,” the trucker responded.

“So I talked pretty good to him for 60 miles,” Gene recalled.

By 10:30 on Saturday morning, Gene was in St. Louis. He knew no one there, and simply sent a penny postcard back to his Georgia Tech classmate as proof of his journey.

Then he hit the road again, this time heading into Arkansas where he spent the night on a window ledge of a closed gas station in the town of Blytheville. Wrapped in a blanket with the Georgia Tech logo highly visible, Gene said he encountered no problems.

On Sunday morning he caught a ride to Memphis. Then two businessmen en route to Savannah offered to give him a ride. They bought him a nice lunch somewhere in Alabama and then dropped him off in front of his dorm at 5:30 pm, where Gene shared his adventures of thumbing 1,600 miles through 11 states in one weekend.

“And I only spent \$2.35,” Gene said proudly.

DISCOVERING THE TRAIL

Gene first heard of the Appalachian Trail from his seventh-grade teacher in 1939 — two years after its completion. He was intrigued that the Southern end reached into Georgia.

But he did not set foot on the AT until 1945 when a fellow Georgia Tech student invited him to walk a portion in the Great Smoky Mountains during a school break.

“I thought, ‘If I ever get the chance I’d like to hike the whole trail,’” Gene recalled.

After graduation and while working in a sales position he did not like, Gene decided to seize the moment and plan his biggest adventure. He waited until the school term ended in May so a 17-year-old Boy Scout from back in Cordele could join him.

Only three days before hitting the trail, Gene told his parents that he was planning a long hike and would be gone “for a few weeks” — but made no mention of tackling the entire trail.

He was meticulous in his planning, however: mailing supplies to post offices in nearby towns along the way and gathering trail guides — with the current maps kept under his hat each day for safety and easy access. On May 31, 1951, the 24-year-old Georgia Tech graduate and his younger friend took their first steps on the rarely used trail at Mt. Oglethorpe in North Georgia. But soon Gene would be alone.

“He had a lot of complaints about his



Seeing God in nature — The Appalachian Trail begins near Amicalola Falls State Park in North Georgia, where Gene Espy’s equipment (shown on cover) is displayed at the Visitors Center.

heavy backpack and the rough trail,” Gene said of his short-time companion. “To make a long story short, on the second day, he went back to Cordele and I hiked the rest of the trail by myself.”

Gene said he enjoyed the solitude and eagerly added miles to this long trek by taking side trails to see a waterfall or other scenic views. After taking a photo with his 35mm camera, Gene would head back to the main trail.

“I didn’t keep track of the mileage,” he said. “I just enjoyed it.”

Unlike the thousands who have hiked the well-maintained trail since, Gene would come upon places where trees had been blown down and the two-by-six-inch white trail markers were impossible to see. Bushwhacking and guesswork would be required to stay on course.

A HISTORIC TREK

In Southwest Virginia, Gene learned that only one other person had completed the entire trail in a continuous hike. He had assumed many others had done it.

He also discovered how little locals along the route knew about what some called “the government trail” — yet how kind some could be despite his scruffy appearance.

Today, Damascus, Va., is filled with AT hikers. But when Gene walked into town with a beard and backpack in 1951 to pick up supplies, he raised eyebrows and questions.

While in a restaurant, the town’s police chief asked what he was doing there. After explaining his adventure, Gene was offered a tour of Damascus in a police car. With darkness and stormy weather approaching, Gene



For many a mile — Gene Espy went through three pairs of L.L. Bean lightweight hiking boots, sometime repairing them with fishing line, during his historic 123-day hike through 14 states.

accepted an invitation to spend the night “down at headquarters” and hit the trail the next morning.

“Headquarters was the jail,” said Gene with a smile. But he enjoyed the comforts of the bunk secured to the cell wall by chains — “just like in the movies.” The police chief, who owned the local diner, also treated Gene to a good breakfast before his hiking resumed.

“They gave me a nice reception in that little town,” Gene recalled. Sadly, he learned years later that Police Chief “Corney” McNish had been killed in the line of duty in 1960.

Later, Gene became friends with Earl Shaffer, the only person who preceded him in walking the entire trail in a continuous effort. He had taken to the trail to deal with the grief of losing a close friend in World War II.

For Gene, his purpose was simple: “I wanted to see God in nature.”

‘BE PREPARED’

Some 11,000 hikers have thru-hiked the entire AT since Earl and then Gene blazed the trail. None has done so like Gene, with no flashlight and without building a single campfire.

Gene took a miner’s carbide light and a gas stove he had rigged to hold an aluminum boiler. A generous Boy Scout he encountered along the trail in Massachusetts gifted him with a new plastic container with a snap-on lid.

“I’d never heard of Tupperware,” said Gene. “But it sure came in handy.”

He used the container to prepare powdered milk and other dry mixes. Dehydrated potatoes, pudding and cornmeal, sweetened with sugar and raisins, were among his staples. He also ate a lot of sandwiches.

The Rest of the Story...

- *The Trail of My Life: The Gene Espy Story* (2008, Indigo Publishing) is sold at <http://www.geneespyhiker.com> and in L.L. Bean stores. Gene Espy can be contacted at (478) 746-0407 or gene@geneespyhiker.com.
- The Appalachian Trail Museum at Pine Grove Furnace State Park near Carlisle, Penn., where the AT’s history is preserved, is casting a bust of Gene for display there.
- Gene’s Army surplus backpack and other equipment used on his 1951 thru-hike are on display at the Amicalola Falls State Park Visitors Center in North Georgia near the start of the trail.

“I’d buy two loaves of bread and three jars of different kinds of preserves,” Gene said of the times he’d leave the trail to find a store. Before resuming his hike, he would make up the sandwiches and put them back into the original bread bags, alternating the flavors. They made for quick meals.

Gene would buy Baby Ruth and Hershey’s Chocolate candy bars and reward himself when reaching a certain destination. But he not only enjoyed the treat.

“I’d read the wrapper a couple of times,” said Gene. “It was my only contact with the known world.”

At times Gene had to be creative to keep the food to himself. One night he used his belt and shoestrings to tie himself and his sleeping bag to a fire tower some 50 feet above the ground after two wildcats visited his camp.

Gene wore out three pairs of L.L. Bean lightweight hiking boots and got great results from his Wigwam 100-percent nylon socks. “Two pair for the whole trip — with no holes in them.”

Gene said he was careful to wash his feet and socks each night. The newly washed socks would be attached to his backpack the next day to finish drying while he hiked.

Only once did Gene have doubts about his decision to hike the entire trail. It was a very cold September day in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The wind was so strong that he had to lean forward to stay afoot. In the distance he could see smoke coming from a couple of mountain homes

and thought of how comfortable those fires must be.

“I stopped and ate a Baby Ruth candy bar — and I kept wanting to sit there,” said Gene. But he remembered that such thoughts of giving up could lead to desperate consequences. So he got up and hit the icy trail.

“That was the only time I wondered what I was doing,” said Gene, a determined and adventurous man who described his military boot camp experience as “fun.”

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

After reaching the end of the trail to no fanfare at Maine’s Mount Katahdin on Sept. 30, 1951, Gene enjoyed the spectacular views in all directions and a strong sense of satisfaction.

“Then I knelt down and said a prayer of thanks to God for watching over me and allowing me to make this hike,” he said.

Gene spent a quiet night after his historic feat at nearby Katahdin Stream Campground where, the next day, interest was stirred by news of his accomplishment. Reporters who had heard some of the stories coming out of the campground showed up to interview Gene.

As Gene disposed of some remaining food, a nearby deer came over and licked his outstretched hand. An alert photographer captured the moment. Later a Maine artist created an oil painting of Gene feeding the deer that now hangs in the Espy’s family room.

Speaking to a Chamber of Commerce gathering and experiencing the warm hospitality in nearby Millinocket eased Gene back into civilization. He even received a discount on a new “Sunday suit” that — along with a visit to the barber — prepared him to head South. First he mailed his hiking equipment and a postcard back home.

“We only made long-distance phone calls if it was an emergency,” said Gene. “And I didn’t figure finishing the trail was an emergency.” However, his mother got the news ahead of the postcard when an Associated Press story about Gene’s hike made its way to Cordele.

Then Gene had to get himself home. “I was going to hitchhike back to Cordele.”

But after thumbing some 500 miles to Boston, Gene saw the road filled with soldiers and knew that a man in uniform would always get the first ride. So he flagged down a Greyhound bus and rode back to Georgia in relative comfort — satisfied with all he had experienced over many mountains and many miles. **BT**

Quotation

“ remarks ”

“Even a hot dog tastes better if you can eat it while fellowshiping with someone else.”

—Pastor Eugene Harold Coleman, of the Carpenter’s Cowboy Church of Chattanooga, on opening a gathering place for older adults who often spend time alone (thechattanooga.com)

“Most Baptists in Colonial America had no idea that they would ever be a significant numerical force in society at large. Baptist growth in America surprised the Baptists as much as it did the Episcopalians and Congregationalists.”

—Church historian Walter B. Shurden, Mercer University Minister-at-Large (Baptist Heritage)

“The fact is, where Christians restore, people get saved. They know that today’s typical outsiders aren’t likely to be reached through persuasive argument but instead through first experiencing an authentic Christian: someone who’s willing to roll up his or her sleeves and restore alongside them.”

—Gabe Lyons, author of *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America*, expressing optimism about the emerging generation of Christians to *The Christian Post*

“Anytime you talk about Jesus or Christianity respectfully the way he does, it is evangelization. He is preaching the gospel, but I think he is doing it in a very post-modern way.”

—Jim Martin, associate editor of the *Jesuit magazine America*, on Stephen Colbert of *Comedy Central’s “The Colbert Report”* who often pokes fun at religious matters including his own Roman Catholic Church (RNS)

“You may be a 58-year-old mustache-wearing, recliner-sleeping grandfather, but you have furthered the Kingdom of God with your dedication.”

—Erin Burdick-Inabnit, commending her father and others who serve their congregations as church treasurers (*The Sabbath Recorder*)

“Knowing how to cook corn doesn’t mean I know how to raise corn. Knowing how to attend church doesn’t mean I know how to manage a church. We’re the only institution I know where the recipients of a service automatically assume they know how to manage and provide that service.”

—Religion News Service columnist and Episcopal priest Tom Ehrich

“... People think very little but write a whole lot when they are hiding behind the screens of their computers.”

—Carra Hughes Greer, minister to families with youth at *Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.*, encouraging “virtual virtues” when using social media (ABP)

“The basic dilemma for Baptists in the 21st century is whether intelligence instead of ignorance, service rather than power, humility in place of arrogance, and seeking instead of certainty will save the Baptist ship from the throes of irrelevance.”

—Robert Richardson, professor emeritus at Mercer University (Baptist Heritage)

“I was never hesitant to discuss faith in Christ.”

—President Jimmy Carter, author of *White House Diary*, on conversations with heads of state who often quizzed him about his religious beliefs (RNS)

“The Christian population of Israel and Palestine, which six decades ago was as high as 20 percent of the total, has fallen to just 2 percent, largely because of economically driven emigration.”

—Religion News Service writer Francis X. Rocca in a story about a Vatican probe into dwindling Christian populations in the Middle East

“Westboro Baptist Church is about as Christian as house flies are canaries, but it would be nice to have somebody of the cloth loudly express disgust at how fringe groups can hijack a faith that preaches love and practice hate instead.”

—Columnist Dick Yarbrough on responding to the small anti-gay Topeka, Kan., congregation that protests military funerals (onlineathens.com)

“The real problem for the black church is that we haven’t found ways to talk honestly and lovingly about sexuality and relationships. And that includes all forms of relationships: gay, straight and even brothers on the ‘down low.’”

—Rev. Eric P. Lee, president of the California Christian Leadership Conference (RNS)

“I believe it is possible to virtually end widespread hunger and poverty within the next 20 years. Not all Americans know this, but the world has made historic progress against hunger, poverty and disease in the last two to three decades.”

—David Beckmann, a Lutheran minister, economist and president of the ecumenical anti-hunger group *Bread for World* (RNS)

editorial

Is the Fellowship up to asking, ‘What if...?’

By John Pierce

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) is taking a long, hard look at its structure, function and future. Led by Pastor David Hull of the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala., a task force is holding listening sessions to gather information and ideas about what shape the Fellowship might take as it moves into its third decade.

In October, Dr. Hull told the CBF Coordinating Council, the Fellowship’s governing body, that while “guarding principles we hold dear” the task force is listening out for good ideas that could lead to needed changes.

“We need to do some gardening, till the soil a bit,” he told the Council. “We might need to do something new.”

That’s a good metaphor. Guarding alone is for scarecrows. While needed, it is not enough for something new to spring forth.

Gardening is for those who know the difference between a weed and a seedling, those who can look for changing weather ahead, and those who don’t mind getting their hands dirty and blistered from hard, meaningful work.

For those of us who identify with and care about the Fellowship, this is a time filled with great potential for good. Yet it is also wrought with the possibilities of deadlock and dread.

Here’s the big question that impacts all others the task force might ask or be asked: Is the broader Fellowship family up for a serious round of “What ifs” — or will such needed questioning cause a retreat into the defensiveness of self-interest?

Can we put enough of the movement on the table so that those charged with recommending changes will have the pieces and the power to do what is needed? If so, it will take looser grips on the part of everyone involved.

Can we overcome the hypercritical nature that often marks this movement and thwarts attempts at needed changes?

Can important questions be asked and answered without defensiveness? How much will those of us with a particular stake in the Fellowship movement be willing to risk?

Turf protection — a catch-all term for putting one’s job security, organizational funding and positions of influence ahead of the greater good — will make it hard for some to engage in a serious round of “What ifs.”

But “what if” we did so — without fear of what might come to light? What if we looked at everything in a fair and honest way? Everything: partner funding, mission strategies, staffing, meetings, and so on.

Are there places of duplication or ineffectiveness? If so, where and how do we streamline? Can a new model emerge that reduces competition for funding among CBF entities and partnering organizations? Will a high road be taken that allows for honest dialogue without the loss of respect for those who might disagree?

Are state boundaries in the South the best place to divide CBF into smaller groups, or is this an old denominational model that needs to be reconsidered? Will some within the Fellowship be disturbed that such questions are even being raised here and within the task force’s listening sessions?

And, very importantly, can these sessions become places of honest conversations rather than advocacy for particular causes that those who are present embrace?

Most importantly, there is a bottom-line reality that has little to do with how much Fellowship leaders and partners value their own interests. Rather it has everything to do with the flow of dollars and confidence.

The vital question is the one being asked by cash-strapped churches: Why send

mission funds through CBF?

A convincing answer must come out of the task force recommendations and be implemented by the broader Fellowship movement even if it disrupts the status quo. In fact, a “new way” that doesn’t bring enough change to cause some disruption to current structures will demonstrate an inability to maximize the potential of this significant opportunity to refocus and re-energize.

No matter how diligent the task force is in its efforts, needed changes within the CBF structure will never happen if partners, staff, Coordinating Council, state and regional groups, congregational leaders, and other supporters react defensively.

The character of those who identify with the Fellowship is about to be tested. Will we be found faithful — putting the common good ahead of personal interests? Or will we slice and dice every word of the task force’s reports to the point that nothing really changes?

Can we open ourselves to big, new possibilities — even if familiar organizational structures get rearranged?

Several years ago I talked with Bob Edgar at his New York City office shortly after he took the helm of the National Council of Churches. He called for a serious evaluation of his organization that would likely bring drastic and needed changes.

Then he quickly added that he was open to all possibilities — even those that would put him out of a job or put the Council out of business.

Only that kind of honest evaluation can create an opening large enough for the Fellowship — with its many and varied parts — to envision and embrace a future brimming with possibilities. Only then can something fresh, divinely-inspired and exciting emerge that will re-energize Fellowship Baptists in their ongoing cooperative efforts.

Count me in. **BT**



Editor's note: This is the 12th 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 of Richmond, Va.

Can't be 'everything to everyone': Living in a glass house without cracking

By Molly Lineberger

"We ministers feel like we must be everything to everyone. That is often the nature of this calling. It's part of what makes ministry special. It's what makes ministry dangerous."

That is how Center for Congregational Health President Bill Wilson describes a pastor's role based on his own experience and 33 years of local church staff ministry.

Everything to everyone? We all know that is impossible. So how can pastors and their families live well in the glass house of ministry?

There must be ways to set healthy boundaries and manage impossible expectations. To find out how it can be done, I went to a few pastors, pastors' children and pastors' spouses who are succeeding in those roles.

Their churches and stages of life are different, but the themes are much the same: coming to terms with countless congregational expectations while striving to live authentically and care for themselves and their families.

Unwritten expectations

Jon Roebuck, the 50-year-old pastor of Woodmont Baptist in Nashville, Tenn., teaches a college class titled "Dynamics of the Local Church." Jon said not all expectations are in the job description; pastors need to discover the unwritten expectations and how important they are to job success.

He has found that most churches'

To hear more of these stories and to share your own, go to www.healthychurch.org/threshold.

expectations of pastors overlap little with pastors' expectations.

In his first year at Woodmont, which has a congregation of 1,350, Jon says he tried to "let the machinery of ministry" guide him, asking himself, "Does the church expect me and my family to be at this event?" The next year, he made adjustments.

Periodically, he asks the personnel committee for their expectations of him and he tells them what he thinks are the valuable things he does. Communication of expectations on both sides is important.

Jon is clear with the congregation about two of his expectations for himself: "that I will always be prepared when I come to the pulpit and that I will love the people for who they are." This gives him the freedom to admit that he does not have all the answers — in short, to admit that he cannot be everything to everyone.

Jon, like the other ministers with whom I spoke, guards his time off. Early on, someone gave him this wisdom: "If you don't plan your free time, someone else will." The conviction that he is of greater worth to the church when he is refreshed from time away helps him to set boundaries.

Jon seeks to model an authentic faith

for his children. A pastor's child himself, he remembers that his parents never expected him to behave a certain way because of his father's calling.

Alan Sherouse, of Metro Baptist in Manhattan, N.Y., is another pastor's child turned pastor. He recalls only one way in which expectations based on his being a pastor's child frustrated him.

At age 11 or 12, he was confounded by his parents' notion that if his sports team chose to practice on Wednesday nights he would not be able to participate; he would have to be at church. He hopes he will not expect his own children to be at church every time the doors open.

Identity outside the church

On the other hand, he says, his father made time for Alan's ballgames, family suppers, regular vacations and many hobbies. Alan says his father's "ego needs and sense of self are established in large part somewhere other than the church, which makes him a stronger pastor."

Alan's parents never discussed church politics or conflict in front of their children. His advice for the children of clergy: "Be who you are, but don't be afraid to see the work and passions of your parent as part of that."

Mary Oliver is a pastor's daughter and a pastor's wife. Husband, Mike, is pastor of First Baptist Church of Williams, Ala., a rural church with 300 in worship. As a pastor's child, Mary felt little pressure — for which she credits her mother, who went to college and earned two graduate degrees after her children were born. Mary says her mother was accountable to God, rather than the expectations of anyone in the church.



Partnership between spouses

Mary's identity includes being a high school teacher and mother of four as well as a pastor's wife. However, she is quick to point out that she sees her role at the church as a calling.

"It is important that I see what Mike and I do as a partnership," she said. They emphasize the need to take care of each other.

Mike recognizes his own sense of call. "I believe that Jesus called me to this work," he said. "If I focus there, it helps to clarify how I use my time, lead and set boundaries."

He encourages others to revisit their sense of call and to be forgiving of themselves.

"Churches need to understand that they have called a fallible human being as their pastor," Mike said. He tries to be the same in the pulpit, at church and at ball-games.

Despite the Olivers' deep involvement with their congregation, Mike admits that it is sometimes hard to be a friend and a pastor.

"I deal with people's intimate spiritual lives," he said, "and that can create some times of loneliness."

Mike and Mary know the importance of getting away for conferences and spiritual growth, and spending time with another pastor and his wife — close friends who understand the Olivers' lives.

Another couple expressed similar sentiments. Jessica and Chris Fillingham live in Liberty, Mo., a suburb of Kansas City. He is pastor of South Liberty Baptist, which has 50 in worship. Chris is 31, Jessica is 28, and they have two small children.

The Fillinghams knew there was a two-for-one expectation when the church hired Chris. They were willing to say yes to that, but admit that it helps when the congregation recognizes that and is appreciative.

Chris says his identity is not wrapped up in the identity of his church. He seeks to live authentically amid the various expectations for him and Jessica.

"It's hard work," he said. "I must be intentional about knowing myself and defining what is important."

He tells his congregation from the pulpit what they can expect of him. Jessica added: "I have to remind myself that I am

not perfect and I cannot live up to everyone's expectations."

Soul care

Chris and Jessica realize the importance of getting away — of taking time for soul care. Chris has found a spiritual director and both have occasionally attended a Taize service at another church on Saturday nights.

"We can show up and just sit and be," said Chris. "We are not in charge."

He advises those in ministry to be willing to say no, let others play a leadership role in the church, and get personal help when you need it — be it from a spiritual director, therapist or medication.

Pastors and their families can live in a glass house without cracking. These people all love the church and are seeking to serve God and others.

They recognize the challenges of ministry, the impossibility of meeting all expectations — their own as well as other people's — and the need for boundaries. **BT**

— Molly Lineberger is editor and writer for the Center for Congregational Health (healthychurch.org) in Winston-Salem, N.C.

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BAPTISTS
Today



Poll shows most-religious Americans claim the highest rates of well-being

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

The most religious Americans also have the highest rates of well-being, according to a new Gallup survey. The finding is based on a survey of more than 550,000 people about their physical and emotional health and their work environment.

Overall, the very religious received a score on Gallup's well-being index of 68.7 percent, while both the moderately religious and the nonreligious received a score of 64.2 percent.

The very religious were defined as those who said religion is an important part of their daily lives and they attend worship services at least every week or almost every week. Researchers did not

determine why the very religious had higher levels of health and happiness.

"It is possible that Americans who have higher well-being may be more likely to choose to be religious than those with lower well-being," the organization said in an Oct. 28 report announcing the findings.

But it is also possible that being religious can contribute to higher levels of personal well-being.

The survey was the result of a partnership between Gallup and Healthways, a Tennessee company focused on health. It involved a random sample of 554,066 U.S. adults between Jan. 2 and July 28 and had a margin of error of plus or minus 0.5 percentage points. **BT**

Who are **the Baptists?**

A century of expansion in Brazil

Baptist work in Brazil began with expatriates from the United States who were drawn to the emerging country in the aftermath of the Civil War.

As Brazil's political and economic leaders sought to develop the nation, they took note of America's success in building through immigration, and encouraged settlers from both Europe and the U.S. to plant themselves and their crops in the fertile soil of Brazil.

A group of colonists from the southern U.S. migrated to Santa Barbara d'Oeste in 1870, finding the land and the continued legality of slavery to their liking. Baptists among the immigrants founded a church for themselves in 1871, and later asked the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board to send missionaries to the predominantly Roman Catholic country.

The FMB complied, and sent two couples, William and Anne Bagby and Zachery and Kate Taylor, as the first SBC missionaries to Brazil. With the aide of Antônio Teixeira de Albuquerque, they organized the first Baptist church for Brazilians in the coastal city of Salvador in 1882.

Baptist work grew rapidly from that strategic location, spreading southward toward Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and other cities, northward toward Maceó, Recife, and Belém, then westward along the Amazon basin.

Brazilian Baptist leaders, largely of Portuguese descent, quickly emerged to play major roles in the expansion of



A choir of Brazilian Baptists sings during the 2010 Baptist World Congress in Honolulu.

Baptists, which was also augmented by ethnic Baptists from other immigrant groups who settled in Brazil during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Brazilian Baptist Convention (BBC) was founded in 1907 and grew to incorporate its own mission boards, sending missionaries throughout the country and to other nations. A longtime member of the Baptist World Alliance, the BBC celebrated

Editor's note: This is the third in a series of articles introducing readers to member groups of the global Baptist family.

its 100th anniversary in 2007 with then-BWA president David Coffey and Brazilian Fausto Vasconcelos, an eight-time president of the BBC who now leads evangelism and education efforts for the BWA, as special guests.

In 2009, the Brazilian Baptist Convention reported 1,045,500 members in 6,766 churches. A second BWA member in Brazil, the Convencao Batista Nacional (National Baptist Convention), is characterized by a greater emphasis on charismatic gifts. It reported 384,080 members in 2,831 churches in 2009. **BT**

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Four Baptists arrested in Azerbaijan raid

By Bob Allen
Associated Baptist Press

OSLO, Norway — Four Baptists in Azerbaijan received five-day jail sentences Oct. 31 after a police raid on a harvest festival in a private home, according to an international news service that specializes in religious freedom.

Forum 18, a news service based in Oslo, Norway, quoted witnesses who said about 80 Baptists were present when police raided the home of Ilgar Mamedov in Kusar in northeastern Azerbaijan, where the congregation was meeting for a worship celebration to thank God for the fall harvest.

Police reportedly first turned off gas and electricity to the home to stop worshippers from preparing a thanksgiving meal. They



then recorded names of and filmed and photographed people in the home before taking four members of the group to a police station for a late-night hearing held behind closed doors.

Mamedov and three others — Zalib Ibrahimov of Baku, Rauf Gurbanov of Sumgait and Akif Babaev from a nearby village — were each sentenced to five days in jail. Baptists told Forum 18 that authorities were threatening to give Ibrahimov a 12-year prison sentence.

An official with the Council of Churches — whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the authorities in any of the former Soviet states where they operate — called the penalties the heaviest to date on members in Azerbaijan.

While the Council of Churches argues that congregations have a right under Azerbaijan's Constitution to refuse to register

as a matter of conscience, churches affiliated with a separate Baptist group have complained of trying to register but running into bureaucratic roadblocks with local officials.

Zauer Balaev, pastor of a Baptist church in the capital city of Baku, served 10 months of a two-year sentence on what supporters called false charges in May 2007. He was released from prison in March 2008 after protests from officials of the Baptist World Alliance, European Baptist Federation and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter.

A second Baptist pastor, Hamid Shabanov, was convicted last in 2009 on weapons charges. Members of his church said the pastor did not own a gun, but police apparently planted one in his home as a way to intimidate religious and ethnic minorities.

Jehovah's Witnesses and members of a non-recognized Muslim sect also report abuses of religious freedom in Azerbaijan. **BT**

Air Force Academy cites progress in tackling intolerance

By Whitney Jones
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — A recent survey on the religious climate of the U.S. Air Force Academy showed that 41 percent of non-Christian cadets face unwanted proselytizing at least once during a yearlong period.

The Cadet and Permanent Party Climate Assessment Survey, which was released Oct. 29, analyzed religious, racial and gender relations within the academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. The survey detected an increasing trend in religious freedom since 1998, but points out persistent problems with proselytizing and religious tolerance.

"I'm encouraged by the mostly positive trends we saw from the survey, but I also know we've got some work to do in regards to the basics of respect and dignity towards each other," said Lt. Gen. Mike Gould, academy superintendent, in a statement.

From 2007 to 2009, the portion of non-Christian cadets who believed there was a low tolerance for non-religious people at the academy increased from 30 percent to 50 percent, the survey found, which was

down from approximately 75 percent in 1998.

Although the nine-year trend was positive, additional training on the constitutional right to the free exercise of religion was instituted in the 2010 basic combat training manual to address lingering issues of intolerance.

While the academy has made steps to address problems of religious intolerance, some believe the issues are being downplayed.

Mike Weinstein, an Air Force veteran who launched the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, said Gould is trying to "spin" the religious oppression as trivial. Weinstein, a longtime critic of the academy, was denied access to the official release of the survey.

"It is, of course, obvious why Gould barred MRFF," Weinstein said in a statement. "He cravenly wanted to silence all opposition and dissent to his farcical briefing."

The findings were based on the answers of 2,170 cadets (a response rate of 47 percent). Of the respondents, 1,337 were Christian, 128 were non-Christian and 252 stated no religious preference. **BT**

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Low marks: Americans say religious messages fuel negative views of gays

Most Americans believe messages about homosexuality coming from religious institutions contribute to negative views of gays and lesbians, and higher rates of suicide among gay youths, a new poll reports.

While split on whether same-sex relations are sinful, Americans are more than twice as likely to give houses of worship low marks on handling the issue of homosexuality, according to a PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll released Oct. 21.

A plurality (45 percent) of Americans, however, give their own house of worship an 'A' or 'B' grade on how it handles homosexuality.

After a recent spate of teen suicides prompted by anti-gay harassment and bullying, the poll indicates a strong concern among Americans about how religious messages are impacting public discussions of homosexuality.

Nearly three-quarters of Americans (72 percent) say religious messages about homosexuality contribute to "negative views" of gays and lesbians, and nearly two-thirds (65 percent) see a connection to higher rates of suicide among gay youths.

"I think we are, without a doubt, making progress," said Brent Childers, executive director of Faith in America, a nonprofit organization founded in 2005 to combat negative religious messages about homosexuality.

"There is a growing awareness and understanding about the harm that is caused when society places a religious or moral stamp of disapproval on the lives of gay and lesbian individuals, especially youths."

Other findings from the PRRI/RNS poll, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, include:

— Nearly half of Americans age 18-34



say messages from places of worship are contributing "a lot" to negative views of gay and lesbian people, compared to just 30 percent of Americans age 65 and older.

— More than 40 percent of Democrats say that messages about homosexuality coming from places of worship are contributing "a lot" to higher rates of suicide among gay and lesbian youth, compared to 17 percent of Republicans.

— More than 40 percent of Americans give places of worship a 'D' or an 'F' when it comes to handling the issue of homosexuality; only 16 percent would give them an 'A' or a 'B.' However, Americans rate their own places of worship significantly higher: 45 percent give it an 'A' or 'B,' and only 17 percent would give it a grade of 'D' or 'F.'

— White evangelicals are most satisfied with their church's handling of homosexuality, with 75 percent giving it an 'A' or a 'B.' Catholics are the most critical, with nearly a third — twice as many as any other group — giving their church a 'D' or 'F.'

When responses were broken down

demographically, along with political divisions, the PRRI/RNS poll found that women and younger Americans are more likely to approve of same-sex relations, as well as say that messages from religious bodies contribute to negative attitudes about gays and lesbians.

PRRI's research director, Daniel Cox, said previous studies have found that women — although more likely to regularly attend services and have higher levels of religious commitment — are more likely to have gay friends. Young people, too, are also more likely to know someone who is openly gay.

"Social relationships are one of the most important factors in determining whether someone will be supportive of gay and lesbian issues," Cox said.

Some faith leaders have modified their messages in light of the growing gap between public opinion and traditional religious teachings on homosexuality.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members poured millions into passing California's 2008 ban on same-sex marriage, has denounced anti-gay bullying, saying Mormons have a special responsibility to be kind to minority groups due to their own history of persecution.

But conservative culture warriors for whom homosexuality is a defining issue insist their message is needed now more than ever.

"There is no contradiction between Christian compassion and a call for holy living," Family Research Council president Tony Perkins wrote recently in *The Washington Post*. "But the life which is holy ... or even healthy ... requires abstinence from homosexual conduct. We would do no one a favor if we ceased to proclaim that truth."

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, was based on telephone interviews conducted of 1,010 U.S. adults between Oct. 14 and 17, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. **BT**

Nearly three-quarters of Americans (72 percent) say religious messages about homosexuality contribute to "negative views" of gays and lesbians, and nearly two-thirds (65 percent) see a connection to higher rates of suicide among gay youths.

Four Bible study writers tapped for 2011

MACON, Ga. — Throughout next year, four popular writers will provide the Bible studies found in the center spread of *Baptists Today* each month. Sunday school classes and other groups use these guides to enhance weekly Bible study or for teacher preparation.

Tony Cartledge, who wrote all the Bible commentaries for this series several years ago, will provide Bible studies based on Old Testament texts. He holds a Ph.D. from Duke University and teaches Old Testament studies at Campbell University Divinity School.



Tony Cartledge

A former pastor and editor of the *Biblical Recorder* newspaper in North Carolina, Tony serves as contributing editor for *Baptists Today* and is author of numerous books including the Smyth & Helwys commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel.

Kelly Belcher is a minister and freelance writer in Spartanburg, S.C., where she is an active leader in Fernwood Baptist Church. She is a graduate of Meredith College and Southeastern Seminary.



Kelly Belcher

Kelly has written devotional and Bible study materials. She also serves as vice chair of the Board of Directors for *Baptists Today*.

Mark Wingfield is an award-winning writer and former Baptist editor who now serves as associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. He is a graduate of the University of New Mexico and Southwestern Seminary.



Mark Wingfield

Jim Dant is a gifted communicator and published author who serves as pastor of Highland Hills Baptist Church in Macon, Ga. He is a graduate of Georgia State University, Southern Seminary and Columbia Seminary. A former columnist for *Baptists Today*, Jim writes on a wide variety of subjects for various publications.



Jim Dant

The Bible studies are based on the Formations series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing and provided, along with other faith-development materials, in partnership with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Congregational Life, led by coordinator Bo Prosser.

For information on group subscriptions to *Baptists Today*, visit www.baptiststoday.org, call (478) 301-5655 or email Julie Steele at jsteele@baptiststoday.org. **BT**

Still shaping society: Texas CLC waged racial reconciliation battle

By John Hall

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) — Born with “a dream and an ache in the heart” 60 years ago, the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission has challenged and helped shape the Lone Star State — and Baptists all over the nation — ever since.

In 1948, while hospitalized following a heart attack, Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Secretary J. Howard Williams first envisioned a prophetic arm of the convention that would challenge Texas Baptists to think and act according to biblical principles — a dream realized by the formation of the CLC in 1950.

The commission first pushed Texas Baptists to rethink their attitudes and actions toward African Americans. Building a case upon biblical passages, it waged a grass-roots battle for racial reconciliation. Because of its stance, a dislike for the commission quickly formed in some quarters. But in the end, the commission's viewpoint won out.

That effort set the precedent for how

the commission would operate for the next 60 years — waging passionate efforts to urge Texas Baptists to act biblically, making friends, encountering people who strongly disagree with their stances and seeing its stance prevail.

Former CLC Director Jimmy Allen, who fought for the end of segregated restrooms in the BGCT headquarters building and hired the convention's first African-American staff member, said CLC leaders worked at the local, individual, congregational and statewide levels, believing the Bible would change lives when put in front of people.

The CLC later would discuss church-state-separation issues, fight gambling expansion in the state and look for solutions to the nation's immigration matters.

In recent decades, the commission has helped Texas Baptists tackle hunger and poverty. In 2009, Texas Baptists gave more than \$900,000 — a record — to the Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger, a giving channel created by CLC.

Throughout the years, the commission has become a group of “happy warriors who bought into the vision of applied Christianity,” said former CLC Director and retired Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty head James Dunn. He was among those who celebrated the CLC's 60th anniversary at a gathering in Austin Oct. 18 that featured commission leaders past and present.

“We've fought these battles together,” he said. “How can we not be bonded together?”

The CLC has encouraged a faith based on the notion that a personal relationship with Christ should profoundly affect how a Christian cares about other people, said Dunn.

“We are only as good as the folks who have laid the foundation and held a lighted torch of their calling,” said Suzii Paynter, the CLC's current director. **BT**

— John Hall is news director for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

readers' responses

More 'too Baptist'

Editor: I enjoyed your column, "You were most likely raised too Baptist if ..." (September issue, page 29).

Just last Sunday some of us 70-ish ladies were talking after church, one of us relating how her house had been broken into that week — while she and her husband were out playing bridge on Wednesday night.

"You ought to have been at church," we laughed.

To which she replied, "Well, at least I wasn't dancing!"

We laughed harder, and I thought, "Most people wouldn't understand what's so funny."

However, you failed to mention "mixed bathing," a.k.a. coed swimming. No one I ever knew objected to this, but I can remember when it was forbidden at Ridgecrest [Baptist Assembly].

Crazily enough, boys were permitted to sit around and watch while the girls swam. Those were the days.

Carol Alley, Richmond, Va.

Reacts to Sweet

EDITOR: I get the free illustrations related to the lectionary each week from sermons.com which includes a "teaser-type" illustration by Leonard Sweet.

After reading the print version of the

interview with Sweet in the November issue of *Baptists Today*, I have a better understanding of his glitzy, catchy, often superficial material online. He obviously wears the description of doing "shallow well" as a badge of honor.

Perhaps he is to be commended for trying to nudge us Gutenbergs into at least the late 20th century, but I feel he often tries too hard to be "with it" for the Twitterers and Googlers.

Awhile back, in an effort to learn more about Sweet, I went to his website and came across the process for booking him as a speaker (www.leonardsweet.com/book). I was appalled to see that he requires an upfront, nonrefundable \$250 fee "for phone charges, mailings, and other office expenses incurred in the setting up of this event." If the contract is cancelled, there is a 20 percent cancellation fee.

It is specified that this fee is "separate and apart from the honorarium." I wonder whether his speaking requirements are Standard Operating Procedure for today's with-it preachers on the speakers' circuit.

Lawrence Webb, Anderson, S.C.

Appreciates Sacred Harp

Editor: I was delighted to see Greg Garrison's piece in the November issue (page 37) about the Sacred Harp National Convention in Birmingham this past summer. In the last

five years I have attended several singings in Northeast Alabama.

The heart of Sacred Harp Singing happens to be pretty much in my backyard. Admittedly I was kind of star-struck in the wake of national attention with the release of *Cold Mountain*. I wanted to see who my neighbors were that flew out to Los Angeles to sing onstage at the Oscars ceremony.

I have come across two grand books about the Sacred Harp that I recommend to all. Kiri Miller now teaches at Brown University and her *Traveling Home* is a version for the lay reader of her Harvard dissertation on the Sacred Harp. It is substantive, with a map about midway through leading to a singing about three miles from my front porch.

Also, Sean Wilentz who writes for *The New Yorker* and *New Republic* has a chapter on Sacred Harp, Barton Stone, Doc Watson and the history of the song "The Lone Pilgrim" that Bob Dylan himself stamps with his godlike touch in his version on a recent CD. I commend Wilentz's *Bob Dylan in America* as well.

I had a great Uncle Roscoe Jordan, who died before I was born, who attended the singings in the '30s and '40s. They called him "Cake" because he was always there for the dinner on the grounds and the great fellowship that is part of the tradition.

Stephen M. Fox, Collinsville, Ala.

This forum gives readers a chance to participate in respectful, though often passionate, dialogue on important issues. Your opinion is welcomed. Please include your name, address and phone number, and limit your letters to 200 words. Send by email to editor@baptiststoday.org, or by mail to Editor, *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318.

Study: Americans crave forgiveness but are choosy on dispensing it

(RNS) — Most Americans have a desire for more forgiveness in their lives, but they are more critical when choosing who to forgive, according to a new survey.

Sixty-two percent of American adults said they need more forgiveness in their personal lives, and 94 percent wanted to see more forgiveness in the country, according to a study by the Michigan-based Fetzer Institute.

"Americans express a near-universal desire for a more loving and unified world," said the "Survey of Love and

Forgiveness in American Society," released in October.

Researchers found that even though the U.S. is composed of people who are usually forgiving, more than half of Americans said there are situations where people should never be forgiven, including abuse, sexual crimes, murder and other intentionally committed crimes.

The survey found that a majority of Americans also believe forgiveness is conditional: 60 percent said "forgiving someone would first depend on the offender apolo-

gizing and making changes."

Most people said they sought the advice of friends and family rather than religious leaders when grappling with issues of forgiveness, while one in four said they did not know where to go for help with spiritual needs, and a third of them struggle with spirituality.

While most Americans are not running to churches and religious leaders for guidance with forgiveness and other personal issues, 60 percent said they are more spiritual now than they were five years ago. **BT**

Gay, lesbian persons not 'issue' to be studied

EDITOR: Barry Goldwater (in)famously said, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." This is probably the only time I will ever quote Barry Goldwater, but the second part of this quote has resonated with me lately.

I have been thinking about moderation as it relates to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship during the last few months. The August issue of *Baptists Today* reported the "Family Conversation about Same-Sex Orientation" at the June CBF meeting. Writer Tony Cartledge rightly noted, "It has been a long time coming."

During my life I moved from "homosexuality is a sin, end of story" to the very moderate view that, while God surely does not hate gay people, love between two people of the same sex could never be affirmed by the church. Gay people could be in the church as long as nobody knew they were in the church.

I was able to maintain this awkward stance for quite a few years, but it became increasingly hard to endorse this notion. After I came to understand that God loves gay people without any "but ..." attached, then I was able to work through half a lifetime of guilt-induced denial and realized that I am gay.

I had been in leadership positions in various moderate churches for years. I believe I was faithful to God and the church. And nothing changed about me when I finally came to terms with who I am, except that I am much more at peace with myself and with God.

I know this is a hard issue for many people. It was hard for me. Having gotten on the "other side" of the issue, I would like to make some observations on the conference session and on the larger issue among those

who claim CBF as their spiritual home.

First, it seems that the session was approached with much fear and trembling. That the presenters had to be drafted into their roles, and that a disclaimer was made that their views did not represent CBF is disheartening. Yes, this is a hard issue for many, but is it really that frightening? Is CBF still worried that the SBC will tag it as liberal? I believe that ship sailed quite some time ago.

I was most disturbed by one speaker's statement that homosexuality "is not what I would call God's Plan A." I wish the story had offered a further explanation of what she meant. Does it mean that the identity of gay people is somehow defective? Are we not made in God's image?

One misconception that many seem to have is that this is entirely about sexual attraction. As I work to understand myself better and get to know others, I think that it is not even mostly about sex. It is about who we are at the core of our being. This is about our identity, not our sexual predilection. No one chooses to be gay any more than someone chooses to be straight.

At least four teenagers committed suicide recently, apparently due to harassment based on their identity. Does being "moderate" about homosexuality not tacitly reinforce this form of harassment?

Homosexuality is not an "issue" to be studied. Homosexuals are human beings who desire, like every other human being, to be welcomed and affirmed by their fellow human beings. The real question is whether churches will welcome and affirm this particular group of God's children.

I will not go into challenging the traditional interpretation of scriptures that seems to condemn gay people; others have done a fine job with that. But please understand that when the church says that gays must remain in the closet and abstain from same-sex relationships

to be all right with God, this is not equivalent to telling someone to abstain from drinking alcohol or committing petty theft. You are requiring us to deny who we are.

God made me as I am, and just as I am, I come to God seeking to love God and embrace others in God's grace. Now that I see who I am, I am emotionally healthier than I have ever been. But at the same time, I must face the painful realization that my identity, my personhood, is rejected by many even among those who claim to follow the way of Jesus. I cannot even identify myself as I write this for fear of losing my job.

This brings me back to my starting point. How can one be "moderate" toward gay people? Either we are sinners for whom the church's message must be "repent or stay away," or we are people who are made in God's image and who should be fully embraced by the church. To say, "God loves you and we love you, but ..." is not only intellectually dishonest, it is hurtful.

Is there any other type of person that the church would ask to hide or repudiate their own identity before they would be welcome? The fact is that gay people are in many CBF churches, but we must hide who we are. Many others have given up on Baptists or on church altogether. What a waste. What a disservice to God's kingdom!

It is a step in the right direction for CBF to consider how to minister to homosexuals. But as long as churches see gays and lesbians as "those people we ought to figure out how to minister to," gay persons cannot truly be a part of the congregation.

When we are embraced as equal and integral parts of the whole body, and invited to minister with rather than be ministered to, only then will the "Family Conversation" be complete. I pray that it will be soon. **BT**

(Editor's note: As requested, the name of the letter writer has been withheld from publication.)

Baptist News, Baptist Views

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2010 ChurchWorks!

Good ideas for effective ministry

Brought to you
this month
by Jackie Riley



Preaching to develop donors who give out of their abundance

The statistics are telling: Persons age 55 (which I am) and up learned about stewardship at home (which I did). Folks from age 30-55 learned about stewardship at church (where it was reinforced for me). And, those under 30 know little or nothing about stewardship.

Increasingly, we have a culture of silence about money in the home and at church. Tithing seems to have gone the way of Training Union and family devotionals. Now, we're struggling just to teach the basics of stewardship.

Stewardship is not about loyalty to the institution or a church budget and operations or a capital campaign; it is about a belief system, a way of living. As Allen Walworth, president of Generis, says: "Christian stewardship is not so much about raising money as it is about raising people.... [S]tewardship-enhancing events are teachable moments God uses to open our hearts, our hands, and our hopes to greater maturity in Christian discipleship, greater unity around a church's vision for ministry, and greater joy in our experience of God's abundant life." This concept of stewardship calls for creating a culture that gives out of its abundance and sustains giving in lean times.

At the recent Mercer Preaching Consultation, Walworth gave some tips on preaching to develop generous donors who give out of their abundance. He spoke with passion as a Baptist pastor of 17 years, a New Testament scholar, and now as a Baptist layperson and successful stewardship consultant. The "evangelist of generosity" has a message for preachers that bears repeating here.

"Most preachers approach stewardship like a yearly physical: Grit your teeth and bear it!" But "there's a word worth saying, and the clergy is the best to say it."

Preaching should be the first word, not the last, said Walworth. Preach as if "someone is hearing [the message] for the first time and

Resources:

generis.com
cornerstoneconferences.com
churchgivingmatters.com

someone is hearing it for the last time." Convince the congregation that you personally are "convicted, converted and authentic." Draw the lines; give an outline; present the idea, but let your hearers color the lines or connect the dots based on their life experiences so that the Word becomes real to them and they understand why it matters.

Don't skip opportunities to work from many angles, he continued. Connect through prayer, study, unseen and small things, your love for the Scriptures and for people, and your calling. And, be open to "interruptions" from God, the Holy Spirit, and/or parishioners.

Walworth suggested several ways preachers can educate congregations about stewardship centered around abundance and generosity. First, a theology of abundance must be established. It is "not about getting something *from*, but getting something *for*." It's realizing that God is generous no matter the level of wealth and that Kingdom work is more important than finances.

To conceptualize the theology of abundance, help people tell their stories. Teach about being content with current possessions rather than accumulating more stuff. Issue bold challenges as Christ did — not to "do what you can" but to give sacrificially and to do something special. Disciple all levels of donors. Teach budgeting and money management to struggling donors. Lead stable donors to tithe or give regularly. Mentor donors with a surplus to know "how to give it away thoughtfully."

To develop a culture of generosity in the church, model generosity daily, be aware of

giving patterns of staff members and volunteer leaders, and encourage generosity from them. Coach through discipleship and spiritual formation. Lead the church to adopt generosity as a core value. Plan an intentional strategy to reach all types of steward. Lead the church to participate in a generosity audit.

Throughout the year, teach, ask, report and celebrate/thank. Weave stewardship into sermons regularly. Accelerate emphasis on giving for special seasons of opportunity. Align preaching on money with mission. Help people to extend the church's vision by giving beyond their lifetime.

Stewardship based on abundance and generosity nets telling results. According to the National Association of Church Business Administration, one-third of churches are ahead of their budget — and these churches emphasize generosity as a core value. Walworth has worked with a church where the pastor mentors a group of about eight of the most able givers. That church goes over its budget by 15 to 20 percent consistently. He helped one church to raise more than 15 times its annual budget in a single capital campaign. And then, there was the "Clint Eastwood" Texas rancher who was harder to convince.

This man "owned about half of the county" and had always given liberally to community causes important to his wife. He had shared \$50,000 of his wealth with the symphony and \$25,000 with the library, but had given very little to the church. After his wife died, his priorities changed. He told the finance group at church that when his wife died he heard from no one with the symphony or library but that every member of that church group had come and ministered to him. He quietly concluded: "You're my family. I told God if the preacher came asking, I'd give." ... And he gave very generously out of his abundance. **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 Jackie Riley, Managing Editor of *Baptists Today*. More ministry resources are available at www.thefellowship.info/News/subscribe and www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page.

2010 Bible Studies

These lessons follow the adult Formations studies from Smyth & Helwys Publishing www.helwys.com

January 2, 2011

God's Word is inspired

2 Timothy 3:10-17

"Inspired" is such a simple word. Yet defining it turns out to be incredibly complex. This very definition fell at the center of the controversy that ripped apart the Southern Baptist Convention in the last two decades of the 20th century. Under the rallying cry of "inerrancy," two determined individuals sparked a movement that reshaped America's largest Protestant denomination, wrecked the lives of many a pastor and denominational servant, and spawned at least two offshoot movements of dissenters. And at the root of it all was the question of the Bible's inspiration.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that "all Scripture is inspired by God," just what did he mean? Did he mean that minds and pens of the authors of our biblical texts were taken over by God in a Vulcan mind meld, a la Star Trek? Did he mean that the biblical authors had some Hallmark-type sentimental feelings from God that inspired their writings? Did he mean that the authors received a divine outline from God and filled in the rest on their own?

The battle among the Baptists over inerrancy was, on its face, about whether there is any room for error within the Bible. But behind that discussion, of necessity, was a debate about how these texts — inerrant or not — came to be. In the heat of this denominational conflict, the presidents of the six SBC seminaries in 1987 hosted a national Conference on Biblical Inerrancy at Ridgecrest, N.C. I had the privilege of running the newsroom for that event and a second event like it the following year. Reporters from far and wide descended upon the conference to digest the presentations of biblical scholars — both conservative and progressive — about what it meant to say the Bible was without error.

What we learned was that all the speakers, even those considered to be card-carrying

"biblical inerrantists" of the most conservative stripe, had to place numerous qualifications on the word "inerrant." At best, they said the Bible was perfectly pure and without error in its original manuscripts. The problem there, of course, is we no longer have the original manuscripts. We have copies of copies of copies, each of which has been subject to change by hand-copying and editorial insertion.

Before all this faldral, Southern Baptists had crafted a beautiful statement on the Bible that said its writings are "truth without mixture of error," which was an eloquent way of saying that what the Bible teaches is reliable and trustworthy throughout the ages.

Remember that none of our biblical writers knew they were writing for the Bible. Unlike me writing this commentary, with a specific assignment in hand and a knowledge of the intended publication date and format, the biblical writers simply wrote down what they knew and experienced. Some of their writings are historical accounts first passed on by oral tradition and then captured in writing at a time with different standards for historical accuracy and detail than we know today. Some of their writings were personal letters to the faithful. Some of their writings were originally poems or hymns that got bundled together later.

The Bible, then, is a collection of these varied works, pulled together by others long after the original documents were penned. And so to say that all Scripture is "inspired" must have a broader meaning than some cookie-cutter vision of God's work in the world.

Among biblical scholars, there are many nuances in defining biblical inspiration. At one extreme is the claim that God dictated each and every word of the Bible, so that the authors were merely conduits of God's direct speech. At the other extreme is the claim that the Bible is inspired in only the vaguest of ways, being purely the product of human hands. In between are all shades of nuance. The most common view among moderate or progressive Baptists is that God worked

LESSONS FOR: Sunday, Jan. 2–30, 2011

Written by Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas.



through ordinary people who used their own words and styles to write under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, just as pastors may preach with help from God's Spirit or believers may bear witness to God's work in their own lives with the help of God's Spirit.

This makes the Bible unique among holy books. The Mormons, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for example, are guided by the Book of Mormon. This book was written in whole by Joseph Smith, who claimed to have received the text on golden plates from an angel named Moroni, a resurrected Native American who wrote in "reformed Egyptian" that required translation to English. Muslims believe their holy book, the Koran, was revealed to one man, Mohammed, directly from God over a 23-year period.

Our Bible is a collected witness to the work of God in the world over millennia. It is not one person's story; it is the story of many people told in many voices. Jewish and Christian Scriptures capture the collected narratives of generations, all pointing toward a common thread of God's redemptive story. Thus, the Bible is like a collection of personal testimonies that together paint a full picture.

The root of the Greek word used in 2 Timothy that we translate "inspired" may also be translated "God-breathed." This is a beautiful illustration of how the Spirit of God blows into the lives and minds of frail humans as they capture for all time the words that point us back toward God.

John the apostle made this appeal in his first letter: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us" (1:1-3).

Inspiration, then, is God's work in the world that leaves behind a story worth writing down.



Cooperative Baptist Fellowship provides these Bible study resources to church leaders through this supplement to *Baptists Today*. For more information on how CBF is "serving Christians and churches as they discover their God-given mission," visit www.thefellowship.info or call 1-800-352-8741



January 9, 2011

God's Word is dangerous

Jeremiah 20:7-9

Persecution has become a badge of honor for some American Christians who hardly know what the word means.

To hear a certain segment of evangelical Christians tell it, they are “persecuted” because their political candidates don’t always win, their children cannot blatantly evangelize in their public schools and some people in their communities dare to think differently than them. Sorry, but not being able to enact Christian domination in politics, education or any other secular sphere hardly rises to the level of persecution.

In contrast, as I write this commentary, a group from our church has just landed in a country in North Africa where we have friends trying to live out the Christian gospel in a place where Islam is the only official religion and Christianity is banned. This place is the opposite of what some of our overly zealous Christians would like America to be. It’s a one-religion place, but Christianity is not the religion.

In this North African country, Christians truly are persecuted. Believers have been rounded up, hauled into jail, separated from their families, interrogated, beaten and worse. Christians have been prevented from adopting orphan children because the government’s philosophy is that orphans would be better off dead than to be cared for by Christians.

Our friends who live in this country — who we help support with gifts to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Offering for Global Missions — face possible deportation every hour. They fully expect to be rounded up and put on a plane without warning. And yet they keep on doing what they believe they’re called to do for as long as they can do it.

Most American Christians have no idea what it means to be persecuted for their faith. Our biggest challenges often are of our own making. Yet we have Christian brothers and sisters around the world for whom real persecution is a daily reality — not only in North Africa, but also in parts of Asia and the Middle East and other places on the African continent.

In these places, to dare to declare “Thus says the Lord” can be the end of the road. That puts proclaimers right in line with the

Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who reached his own dead end in speaking the word of the Lord. Our passage from Jeremiah 20 falls in the middle of a titanic struggle between Jeremiah’s prophecies and his own people. Jeremiah had the ill fortune to be called to speak the word of the Lord against his people, his country’s leaders, his faith group’s leaders. His was a call to repentance, with the foresight to know that without repentance, his people would become captive once again to foreign invaders.

It seems the hardest criticism to hear is that which comes from within one’s own family. And yet Jeremiah was persistent, dogged even, in calling his own people to turn back. We might liken Jeremiah to a performance artist. He often acts out his messages in dramatic ways — not fully realized plays but simple illustrative acts. In chapter 19, the Lord commands Jeremiah to purchase an expensive pitcher and take it to a prominent location with some of the religious leaders in tow and dash the pitcher upon the rocks as a symbol of what God will do to his own people if they do not repent and return to true worship.

This performance got Jeremiah arrested, beaten and thrown in the stocks overnight. With that kind of track record, is anyone else interested in signing up now to be a prophet of the Lord?

Jeremiah had what we moderns would call a “thankless task.” But like Martin Luther at the door of the Wittenberg Church, he could “do no other.” We can wonder all day about why Jeremiah was treated the way he was, but the real wonder is that he agreed to take on this mantle at all. Why would anyone take on such a thankless task?

For that matter, why do our friends stay at their task in North Africa? Why does anyone continue to live as a Christian in Iran? Why do young believers from America shun domestic mission work and rush off to the uttermost parts of the earth, where they are sure to receive anything but a welcome for their message? The answer boils down to call. Jeremiah reminds us that speaking the word of the Lord can be dangerous indeed. But Jeremiah also reminds us that when we are called by God, we must respond as he did: “Here am I, Lord.”

Jesus urged his followers to “count the cost” of following him (Luke 14), but he didn’t say not to follow him. Instead, Jesus called his followers to be wide-eyed and fully informed of the decisions they made to follow him.

It’s not that any of us have to create ways to offend people for the sake of the gospel. Being faithful to God’s word will create offense on its own — sometimes and in some places more so than others. Our call, like Jeremiah’s, is to be faithful to God’s Word despite the danger.

January 16, 2011

God's Word points to Jesus

John 5:39-47

Many years ago — back in the days of typewriters, darkrooms and rubber cement — I was a junior high journalism student. The youth minister at our church asked me to organize a monthly youth newsletter. And so I called together a meeting of all my fellow youth who would be interested in contributing to the newsletter. More than 30 years later, I can still see the room and the befuddled faces of those young friends seated around the chalkboard where I outlined the plan.

Best I can recall, most of what I lectured the group about had to do with the mundane mechanics I had learned in junior high journalism: The importance of double-spacing typewritten submissions and probably even the importance of including the –30– at the end of each submission. Looking back, I marvel that everyone didn’t get up and walk out in protest of my pedantic silliness.

We never got the first issue of the youth newsletter off the ground, probably because no one ever wrote anything. I was so fixated on proper form that I failed to inspire anyone to actually write anything down. Obsession with the requirements I had learned in my journalism class created an insurmountable obstacle to these volunteers becoming productive.

Jesus addresses a similar problem in our text today from John’s Gospel. The religious leaders of Judaism had become so focused on the mechanics of faith that they prevented people from finding faith at all. They were drowning in process and getting no results.

If you would truly comprehend the words before you, you’d know that I’m the fulfillment of Moses, Jesus says, appealing to the most authoritative figure in Old Testament history. The answer is right before you, if you’d just look with open eyes.

New Testament theologian Tom Wright sums it up: “Jesus’ charge against his contem-



poraries is thus that they have been looking at the right book but reading it the wrong way. ... It is easy to be attracted to the study of the text as an exercise in intellectual brilliance.”

As a pianist in competitive events in junior high and high school, and then taking my own children to such events later, I saw this principle played out in another way. Listen to enough student pianists, and you'll notice the difference between those who know the mechanics of playing a piece — technically correct in every way — and those who both know the piece and can play it with feeling. Mechanics can only get you so far; internalization is required to bring meaning to the mechanics. And, truthfully, hearing a pianist who can interpret the piece but isn't mechanical is the best of all options.

That's the beauty of jazz. Our twin sons are jazz musicians, and we've learned through watching them that you've got to master the fundamentals of scales and chord progressions first, but that alone isn't enough to play jazz. You've got to breathe life into what's written on the page. You've got to let the fundamentals become second nature to you, so that you no longer think about them but are guided by them without effort.

Notes written on a page don't make music. Someone has to play the notes to bring them to life. And that's the way it is with Scripture. Merely knowing tons of Bible trivia doesn't do you any good outside of quiz shows. Knowing the books of the Bible and their order isn't of utmost importance. Knowing the number of the tribes of Israel isn't the end-all. You've got to let the Scripture lead you to the point of the story, and that point is Jesus.

Have you ever been to a meeting when someone raised his hand to speak and dread fell upon the room? You know the kind of person I'm talking about. Let that person start talking, and what once was clear to all will become muddled and fuzzy. Some people have the gift of making simple things complicated. Others have the gift of droning on endlessly without ever saying anything.

The object of our lesson today is to get to the point. And that point is Jesus. You've perhaps heard the old joke about the little boy who raised his hand in Sunday school before the teacher completed the question she was asking. "I know the answer," the boy said firmly. "How could you? I haven't even asked the question yet," the teacher replied. "But the answer is always 'Jesus,'" the boy declared.

Jesus' birth, death, burial and resurrection are the answers to the Bible's primary questions. Jesus represents the breaking in of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, a prelude to God's plan for eternity.

While it's easy to criticize the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day for having their heads so buried in the text that they missed the fulfillment of the text, we face similar challenges today. What are the things that absorb the focus of you and your congregation and take your eyes off Jesus?

Remember, you can have all the chairs lined up in the classroom, all the Bibles out and open, all the roll sheets neat and tidy, all the coffee mugs spit-spot and still not point people to Jesus.

January 23, 2011

God's Word must be obeyed

James 1:22-27

At Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., these words are etched in stone above the arched exit from the sanctuary: "Be ye doers of the Word." What a perfect reminder as worshippers leave that sacred space to re-enter the world in which they live. We come to worship to hear the Word of God, but we leave to obey the Word of God. The message of the Book of James is that you can't have one without the other.

The "be ye" of James 1 could more accurately be translated from the Greek as "keep on becoming," implying continuous action. It is not that we walk out of church one time and become doers of the Word but that we put the Bible's words into action each time we leave the place of worship.

Recent research finds it takes 10,000 hours of practice to master a skill, whether that be playing an instrument or fly fishing or doing brain surgery. The same would hold true, we assume, for learning to be doers of the Word. It takes repetition of hearing the Word of God in order to be able to practice doing the Word of God. To put this in perspective, it would take 200 years of weekly worship attendance to accumulate 10,000 hours of practice. So none of us can say we've been to church enough to last a lifetime.

One of the great chasms of modern American Christianity is the divide between those who only want to devote their time to

hearing the Word of God and those who only want to devote their time to doing the Word of God. There are those among us who are Bible study junkies, who cannot be in too many weekly Bible studies, watch too many preachers on TV, listen to too many Bible studies on audio recordings or read enough devotional books. And there are Bible study programs that make the simple truths of the Bible so complex that a person feels like a lifetime is needed to comprehend it all.

The simple reality of time management is that if you're going to a Bible study several days a week, you're not likely to have time for any practical implementation of what you're learning. These are the people who love to study and revise the blueprints but never get around to building anything.

On the other hand are those who won't take time to draw or consult a blueprint; they just want to swing a hammer. They are the doers who are well intended but have no firm foundation beneath their labors. Their work is shallow in the sense that they are not ready at all times to give answer for the hope they have in Christ Jesus (1 Peter 3:15). If faith without works is dead, so is works without faith. Anyone who is not a believer can perform good works without an iota of faith. But good works motivated by faith should make a more lasting impact — thus the statement in verse 27 about what constitutes pure and undefiled religion.

This dichotomy is the same one that faced Mary and Martha, the friends of Jesus. When Jesus came to visit, Martha fussed over the cleaning and cooking, while Mary ignored the household chores in order to listen fully to what Jesus had to say. The answer we learn from Jesus is that both perspectives have value and we shouldn't have to choose between being doers only and being hearers only.

The author of James explains that doing the Word of God helps us remember the Word of God. This simple principle is the same one behind homework assignments in math class. A student may sit in a classroom day after day and hear a teacher expound on the concepts of math, but those concepts only gain meaning and memory when they are practiced with repetition. Through the practice of multiplying, dividing, adding and subtracting, we internalize the concepts in such a way that they become second nature to us.

Last summer we took our church's youth choir on a mission choir tour to the Dominican Republic. Our mostly affluent



teenagers have talked about poverty, both in the school classroom and in youth group activities. They've all seen homeless people in our city and contributed to various charitable activities. But few, if any, of them ever had experienced poverty on the scale they saw in just one week of concerts and sports camps and art camps and Bible story-telling in both urban and rural barrios of the Dominican Republic. One of our students wisely said in a report back to the church: "Today, I have put a face on poverty." That face was in the form of hordes of children who swarmed our Bible school and eagerly embraced us from the moment we arrived.

Any of our youth could have traveled to equally impoverished places with school groups, tour groups or even in passing on family vacations. What made this different was the combination of seeing *and* believing. No longer did the Bible say God loves some people somewhere; now it said God loves these children right here. Nor was our purpose merely to entertain these children for a few days; rather, our mission was to embody for them the presence of Christ so they would know that Jesus really does love them.

Each time the youth choir sang, the song that had the biggest impact was one the American kids sang in Spanish — and every time children and adults in the audience began to sing along: "Christo me ama. Christo me ama. Christo me ama. La biblia dice asi." In those moments, beauty surfaced because the text and the context merged: "Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."

That's what the author of James is driving toward: Memories are made when we hear the Word of God and see the Word of God in action, a remarkable dance of grace.

January 30, 2011

God's Word must be interpreted

2 Peter 1:16-2:3

"So, then, William Tyndale died in vain?" That was my closing salvo in a recent conversation with a colleague as we discussed biblical interpretation (or the lack thereof). His point had been that it did little good to make the biblical text accessible to the masses without teaching the masses how to interpret what they read — thus my intentionally flamboyant

response about the man who was the first to translate the Bible into English for lay readers and was rewarded by being both strangled and burned at the stake.

Of course, Tyndale didn't die in vain. The fact that you are preparing a Bible study lesson in English, reading from a text available in your own home, is validation of his sacrifice. But my colleague had a point as well. The Christian church has paid a lot more attention to handing out Bibles in many languages than to teaching people in any language how to understand the book they hold in their hands.

It's not that you have to earn a seminary degree to understand the Bible or that only a few people are worthy or capable. In fact, some of the greatest abusers of biblical interpretation I know hold seminary degrees, even doctorates. The problem is that too many people assume — or pretend — that the Bible is either (a) just like a novel or textbook that can be read sequentially or (b) just like a reference book that can be read in small sections as you have need of a how-to answer.

As noted in the first lesson in this series, the Bible is more like an anthology, a collection of writings, that should be comprehended as a whole. Without the wider scope of the Bible's collected teachings — without seeing the overarching storyline — the individual parts easily can be abused, either intentionally or unintentionally. The New Testament makes a whole lot more sense when you've read the Old Testament. And Paul's writings make a lot more sense when you've read the Gospels. And not all verses or books should be given equal weight. For example, there's a reason someone came up with the red-letter edition of the Bible: The words Jesus spoke carry ultimate authority.

Here's another way of understanding the challenge before us: In the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, we have a huge new stadium for the Dallas Cowboys. "Ginormous" is a more fitting description of this behemoth building.

Inside this spaceship dome, there's a big-screen complex that hangs over the playing field like an escape pod. The two sideline-facing screens span nearly 60 yards — from one 20-yard line to the other 20-yard line. The thing you soon realize about the big screen — all 11,520 square feet of it facing either sideline — is that it's mesmerizing. Because the stadium also features cameras sliding across an elaborate zip line and mounted on moving platforms around the field, watching the screen

puts you in the middle of the play. So your eyes gravitate toward the screen rather than watching the game on the field. When we recently attended a college football game there, my wife kept saying to me, "Look down! Look down!" I was mesmerized by the big screen.

It turns out there's a difference between watching the big screen and getting the big picture. Watching the plays up-close on the jumbo screen shows you what's happening with the football, but it deprives you of context. Most of the time, you can't tell whether the play is happening on the 50-yard line or the 10-yard line. Even though the picture is big, it's not the "big picture."

Likewise, we can zoom in on small portions of Scripture and lose all context, which leads us to read the Scripture wrongly. For example, more than a few TV evangelists and at least one mega-church pastor/author I can think of have built their empires teaching that God wants all believers to be wealthy. To reach this conclusion, they appeal to selected verses of Scripture and ignore other verses that get in their way. But we don't get to pick and choose which Scriptures we like and which ones we don't like. Jesus had more to say about money than just about any other subject, and most of Jesus' words are about being prudent, being wise stewards, being faithful — not about amassing wealth for your own sake.

... Thus the warning we read in 2 Peter about "false prophets" and "destructive opinions" and "deceptive words." These first-century warnings do not preclude individual believers hearing, interpreting and understanding the Word of God. The warning is against misreading or failing to read properly what God has revealed through the prophets. New Testament scholar A.T. Robertson (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 6) explains: "No prophet starts a prophecy himself. ... Prophecy is of divine origin, not of one's private origination."

We sometimes espouse beliefs or interpretations in search of a Scripture to back them up. This is backward. We must approach the Word of God with openness and let it speak to us, rather than us fruitlessly trying to reshape it. Otherwise, we make God in our image rather than allowing ourselves to be shaped in the image of God.

A test given here is similar to the point of our third lesson in this series: God's Word points to Jesus. The author of 2 Peter warns us that our interpretations of Scripture and of prophecy should point to Jesus, not to ourselves. **BT**

Pastor: The First Baptist Church of Spring Hope, N.C. (www.fbcpringhope.org), affiliated with CBF and the Baptist State Convention, is seeking a full-time pastor. The candidate must be a graduate of an accredited seminary or divinity school, with experience preferred. Send résumé to: Pastor Search Committee, P.O. Box 1076, Spring Hope, NC 27882.

Senior Pastor: Greystone Baptist Church, located in the growing and diverse area of North Raleigh, N.C., is prayerfully seeking a full-time senior pastor. GBC is a contributing member of CBFNC/National, and is affiliated with the Raleigh Baptist Association and partners with local ministries for mission opportunities for our 750+ members. Our church affirms/ordains men and women to serve in leadership roles, including those of deacon and minister. We are seeking a caring spiritual leader, a provocative teacher and an outstanding preacher as well as a collaborator/administrator to join our ministry team. Our watchword is "Every member a minister." We are seeking a spiritual leader who will inspire our members to exemplify this guiding principle in daily living. Candidates must have earned a minimum of a Master of Divinity from an accredited seminary or divinity school; a doctorate is preferred. If you feel God is leading you to our church, please send your résumé to: Senior Pastor Search Team, 4209 Redington Dr., Raleigh, NC 27609. Please also visit our church website: www.greystonechurch.org.

Pastor for Congregational Life: Northminster Church, Monroe, La., is seeking a pastor for congregational life. Duties will include pastoral care; ministering to youth and children; preaching regularly in consultation with the Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, pastor for preaching and worship; leading the educational ministry of the church; administering church programming; and engaging in outreach. Northminster Church is a progressive church established 21 years ago, has approximately 250 members from various denominational

backgrounds, averages about 100 in worship and is affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists. Persons applying should have at least a basic theology degree. For more information, visit www.northmin.org. Interested candidates should send résumés to: peggygburns@yahoo.com or to Search Committee, Northminster Church, 2701 Lamy Ln., Monroe, LA 71201.

Pastor of Music and Worship: Second Baptist Church of Lubbock, Texas, is seeking applications for a pastor of music and worship. Located in the South Plains of West Texas, our 1,500-member congregation has a strong appreciation for lectionary-based and liturgy-focused worship. Interested applicants should have strong vocational clarity to the ministry of worship and the ability to oversee a comprehensive music program for all ages. Vital skills include intentional planning, a team approach to ministry and creative familiarity with a broad spectrum of musical traditions. A seminary or other advanced degree is preferred. Please send a cover letter, philosophy of ministry and résumé to: ryon@secondb.org.

Associate Pastor for Youth and Children: First Baptist Church of Marion, N.C., is seeking candidates for the position of associate pastor for youth and children to serve as the staff coordinator for all programs and ministries for children (birth-grade 6) and youth (grades 7-12), as well as supporting ministry efforts to their families. The person who holds this position should work to engage the children and youth of the church and community with the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they may become the faithful disciples whom God has created them to be. Candidates should have (or be completing) a Master of Divinity degree or its equivalent. The congregation's primary partner for global missions is the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Please submit résumés to: Associate Pastor for Youth and Children Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 99 N. Main St., Marion, NC 28752 or scott@fbcmarion.org.

Part-time Minister of Youth and Children: Candidate must hold accredited degrees and be sympathetic to both CBF and SBC. Send résumés to: Search Committee, First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 663, Fairmont, NC 28340.

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in the know

Keeping up with people, places and events

Stephen Cook is pastor of Second Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., coming from the pastorate of First Baptist Church in Danville, Va.

Marv Knox, editor of the *Baptist Standard*, received the Distinguished Alumni Award from Hardin-Simmons University.

Norman Jameson resigned as editor of the *Biblical Recorder*, a position he held for

three years, after the North Carolina Baptist newspaper's board did not back him when one of the state's directors of missions threatened to seek defunding of the publication unless he was removed.

John Sundquist is director of spiritual service and advancement for American Baptist Homes of the Midwest. He is the former director of International Ministries for American Baptist Churches USA.

welcome

NEW GROUP SUBSCRIBER

Central Baptist Church
Richmond, Va.
David Turner, pastor

guest commentary

The wisdom of middle age

By *Cathleen Falsani*

RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

I recently crossed that dreaded threshold into middle age, and it got me thinking about what, if any, spiritual wisdom I might have accumulated in my 40 years in this mortal coil of ours.

Here are a few things I've learned — from experience, from other people, and (I hope) from God:

1. Begin each day by looking in the mirror and saying, "It's not about me. It's not about me. It's not about me." While looking in the mirror, try not to judge yourself. You are beautifully and wondrously made. Period.
2. Do not be afraid of doubt. Certainty — not doubt — is the opposite of faith.
3. Often we must make a choice: You can be kind or you can be right. Choose kindness.
4. God will not fit in a box of our making, or anyone else's.
5. The things we think we know about God usually say more about us than about God.
6. Perfect love casts out fear. And even imperfect love does a pretty good job.
7. Jesus is the water of life. Stay hydrated.
8. Listen to children. They know more about God than we do.
9. We can learn the most from the people we think are the least like us.
10. God doesn't believe in "us" and "them."
11. God chooses all of us.
12. Pay attention to the things that bring a lump to your throat or a tear to your eye; they indicate the Holy is drawing closer.
13. God does and will use any and all means possible to get your attention.
14. Pay attention. Listen to your life. All moments are key moments.
15. God is a go-between who makes connections for us with the people we'd never connect with otherwise.
16. God can be found just as powerfully between people — in relationships — as in people.
17. God doesn't "give" people hardships, heartaches or other horrors. But God walks with us through hardship, heartache and horror.
18. God is with the poor. We should be, too.
19. Whether you believe in God doesn't make a lick of difference to God. God still is and still loves you, even if you don't believe it.
20. Just like sunshine, rain, wind and the stars, God's grace is for everyone.
21. Grace is the oxygen of religious life. Without grace, religion can suffocate you.
22. Sometimes being grace for another person means holding space for them until they're ready to move into it.
23. If you happen to be in the room when Grace starts to dance, you should probably dance, too.
24. Prayer doesn't change God's mind, but it can change ours.
25. All truth is God's truth, no matter who says it or where it comes from. If it's true, it's from God.
26. None is worthy but all are welcome in God's house. So what part of "all" don't you understand?
27. When Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek," he didn't offer a caveat such as, "Unless they're really mean, wrong, offensive, stupid, ugly or your enemy."
28. God doesn't sweat the small stuff, but doesn't mind helping us out when we do.
29. God has only one enemy: Hatred.
30. Every good, beautiful, perfect, inspiring, moving, joyful, sustaining, edifying, unifying, loving, gracious, whimsical, happy, life-giving, soul-stirring, paradigm-shifting, kind, generous alive thing is a gift from God.
31. If you can pry your sweaty, white-knuckled hands off the reigns of your life and trust God to take them, it'll get better.
32. Sometimes when you think you can't do it, if you just lean in the right direction, it's enough.
33. When Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000 with two fish and five loaves of bread, the miracle didn't happen until his disciples gave away the two fish and five loaves of bread.
34. Usually God doesn't hand us our luggage until we're about to board the plane.
35. When the student is ready, the teacher appears.
36. When you start making plans like you're in charge, God begins to chuckle.
37. God has a tremendous sense of humor and irony.
38. Faith is a gift, just like the ability to tap dance, surf, make a soufflé, play by ear and breathe.
39. There is nothing we can do that would make God throw up God's hands, stomp out of the room and slam the door.
40. God loves you. You can't do anything to make God love you less. And you can't do anything to make God love you more. **BT**



—*Cathleen Falsani is the author of Sin Boldly: A Field Guide for Grace and The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers.*

commentary

Call them now

By Tony W. Cartledge

I've been trying to track down the original source of a quote relative to women pastors that goes something like this: "If you don't want God to call them, don't baptize them." Or a variant form, "If you don't want God to call women, don't baptize girls."

Or the more straightforward "We ordain women because we baptize girls" (which Chuck Poole has been known to say).

The truth is so self-evident, I suppose, that it's been said in many contexts and over many years. In poking around on the web, in fact, I found it applied more often in Roman Catholic contexts than in Protestant conversation.

The situation of the Catholic Church suggests one reason why Baptists who believe it's God's business to call people should give serious consideration to calling a woman as pastor. Catholics have suffered from a serious shortage of priests for some time now. Many churches have gone for years without a priest, and are served by lay leadership with occasional visits by someone who has the ordination papers required to perform functions limited to priests.

The Catholic situation suffers from a double-whammy because priests must not only be men, but unmarried men, and hopefully capable of remaining chaste. Protestants are more than happy to accept married men as pastors: indeed, most churches prefer that the pastor be married, thinking that he'll be more stable and hoping his wife will be actively involved in church, giving them two-for-one.

But, even among Protestants, there's a shortage of good pastors. Not necessarily a shortage of people willing to be pastors: one could argue that there's actually a surplus, though that's mainly limited to the fact that lots of people want to serve in big churches, where there are fewer opportunities and ministers are reluctant to retire. On the seminary level, the number of students who say they want to be pastors continues to fall.

I don't recall a time when there have been more churches (moderate Baptist churches, at least) without pastors, or when the process of

calling a pastor took so long. According to Executive Coordinator Larry Hovis of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina, of the 350 or so churches that contribute to the CBFNC, 70 are without pastors — that's a fifth of CBF-connected churches in the state. Churches still get big stacks of résumés from would-be pastors, but the number of well-qualified, gifted, experienced applicants is far smaller.

Churches could expand the pool of qualified and experienced pastors if they'd be willing to call some of the well-prepared and very gifted women who feel called to the work. I'm not going to argue here the theological case for women pastors — those who oppose it because they take a literal view of certain scriptures are unlikely to be convinced otherwise, at least until one of their daughters feels the call.

I'm more concerned with individuals and churches who say they believe women can serve as pastors, but won't actually consider calling one. I don't think it's just that smaller churches, where most pastors begin their careers, are more conservative and thus blocking the gate. I think it's because too many of us are bound by tradition and custom — and fear of the unknown. Search committees will often say, "I believe women can serve as pastors, but our church isn't ready yet."

When will churches be ready to give women a chance? Some of them have, and the vast majority that I'm familiar with have had very positive experiences. I know one small church that has called three consecutive women pastors with women interims in between. I know of another that called two consecutive women.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons some men oppose women pastors — maybe they're secretly afraid that the women will perform better, show them up, and become more popular.



In any case, a part of being faithful in kingdom living is to call out the called, to prepare them for ministry, and to give them opportunities to serve. Divinity schools are turning out a number of well-trained, very capable women — most of whom have to switch denominations to find a church they can serve as pastor.

It's time for moderate Baptists who claim they support women pastors to quit paying lip service to the notion and actually call a woman. In most cases, I'm confident that they'll be glad they did — and the work of God's people will be stronger for it. **BT**

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Dallas church implodes buildings to make way for \$115 million project

DALLAS — One of Southern Baptists' most historic and prominent congregations has officially embarked — with four simultaneous Oct. 30 building implosions — on what it is calling the biggest church renovation-and-expansion project in modern history.

Members of the First Baptist Church of Dallas joined dignitaries gathered to observe the demolition of the buildings, which stood on land the congregation will use for a \$115 million project to build a new, modern sanctuary and recreate the church's historic campus.

"The last time anyone has seen this view of our church was 1927," said First Baptist Pastor Robert Jeffress, according to a press release. "And now, we are seeing the sanctuary in a whole new light."

"This is a very positive [thing] for the city of Dallas," said Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert, a First Baptist member. "The best part of the story is yet to come. This change is a new gateway into an important part of Dallas. It will give the entire downtown area a different feel."

Demolition experts used 450 pounds of dynamite to bring down the church's Burt Building — which dated from 1927 — as well as its Christian Education Building, Ruth Ray Hunt Building and Veal Building. The Truett and Mary C buildings will be demolished by wrecking ball.

Once debris is cleared, construction will begin on a facility that includes a glass-enclosed sanctuary seating 3,000 as well as educational facilities and a large public green space surrounding a cross-topped fountain. The project is one of several massive building projects ongoing or recently completed in downtown Dallas, and church officials expect it to be completed in time for Easter 2013.

"As I look around downtown, I see spectacular temples of commerce, culture and government — many new, some restored to



Four buildings were imploded on Oct. 30 to make way for a massive \$130 million renovation-and-construction project at the First Baptist Church of Dallas, seen here from above in an architect's rendering. (Image courtesy First Baptist Church)

former glory, and all intended to stand for generations," said Jeffress. "The Kingdom of God needs a home to equal them — a spiritual oasis in the middle of downtown."

Demolition experts took special care to shield the church's historic sanctuary from potential blast damage by boarding up its stained-glass windows and erecting a massive earthen berm to prevent pieces of debris from bouncing off the street and damaging the

sanctuary. The ornate worship hall — much of which dates to 1890 — served as home base for two of the nation's most legendary Baptist pastors, the late W.A. Criswell and George W. Truett.

Once the new sanctuary is completed, the historic building will continue to be used for weddings, funerals and other special services. Church officials say they already have pledged secured to cover the project's price tag. **BT**



A rendering of the new sanctuary and cross-topped fountain that will be the centerpiece of the First Baptist Church of Dallas' construction project. (Image courtesy First Baptist Church)

'Righteous among nations'

Project explores Muslims who saved Jews

ST. LOUIS — In 2003, Norman Gershman was looking for some of the righteous. What he found astonished the investment banker-turned-photographer, and led him toward a project displayed recently in a St. Louis synagogue, Congregation Temple Emanuel.

The Righteous Among Nations are gentile rescuers who make up "a small minority who mustered extraordinary courage to uphold human values," according to Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial museum.

They are, the museum says, "the few who helped Jews in the darkest time in their history."

Gershman's story begins during the Holocaust and involves Albanian Muslims — villagers, peasants and farmers — who risked their lives and the lives of their families to shelter Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.

Italy invaded Albania in 1939 and occupied the country until the overthrow of Benito Mussolini in 1943. Germany then took over the Albanian occupation.

Before the war, Gershman estimates from his research, only about 200 Jews lived in Albania, a country that is about 70 percent Muslim.

During the years of occupation, 10 times as many Jews streamed into Albania to escape persecution from Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Greece and Italy. Gershman says it was the only country in Europe where the Jewish population grew by the end of the war.

Most of the hidden Jews either fled to Israel or back to their native countries after the war. Albania's postwar communist regime made it impossible for the Jews who had been hidden to stay in touch with the Albanian Muslims who had provided shelter.

In 2003, New Jersey native Gershman heard hints of the story and began doing research, eventually traveling to Albania to

begin interviewing those Muslims who took part and who were still alive. Gershman said it wasn't just Muslim families who shielded Jews from the Nazis, but also Orthodox and Catholic families.

All of them were motivated by an Albanian code of honor called "besa," a concept that can be translated into "keeping the promise," Gershman says. The Albanian villagers were motivated to risk their lives by the simple concept of helping one's neighbor.

said saving a life is a universally acknowledged Muslim value. Protecting a life, Karamustafa said, "has always ranked at the very top of moral and legal categories articulated by legal and theological scholars in Islam."

The exhibit has been traveling the world since 2006, opening in Yad Vashem in Israel, the United Nations in New York, and synagogues, mosques, college campuses and Holocaust museums from Turkey to El Paso, Texas.



Rabbi Justin Kerber of Temple Emanuel in St. Louis, left, looks at an exhibit of photographs by Norman H. Gershman of Albanian Muslims who saved Jews during the Holocaust. RNS photo by Chris Lee/The St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

The exhibit of 30 photographs includes one of Lime Balla, born in 1910, who told Gershman that a group of 17 Jews came from the capital city of Tirana to her village of Gjergi in 1943 during the holy month of Ramadan.

"We divided them amongst the villagers," Balla said, according to Gershman. "We were poor. We had no dining table, but we didn't allow them to pay for food or shelter. We grew vegetables for all to eat. For 15 months, we dressed them as farmers like us. Even the local police knew."

David Sherman, president of Temple Emanuel, said the synagogue "decided it could be an opportunity to educate the public

about this piece of history that was a model of dialogue and tolerance."

The synagogue's rabbi, Justin Kerber, said one of the Reform congregation's goals with the exhibit is to combat a common depiction of the modern relationship between Jews and Muslims.

"There's so much coverage about Muslim-Jewish strife and conflict," Kerber said. "It's important to tell people that's not the whole story, and these are examples of Muslim-Jewish respect, tolerance and love. This was a good opportunity for us to be part of that conversation." **BT**

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

"We chose to focus on the Muslims because, who ever heard of Muslims saving Jews?" Gershman said in a telephone interview from Israel, where he was at work on his next project.

Gershman's research eventually led to an exhibit of his photographs, "Besa: A Code to Live By," and a book, *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II*.

The exhibit makes the case that the Muslim Albanian villagers who sheltered Jews from deportation to concentration camps did so from a sense of religious obligation.

"Besa is a cultural idea, but for the Muslims in Albania it was ingrained in their faith as well," Gershman said.

Ahmet Karamustafa, professor of history and religious studies at Washington University,

the lighter side

Be the bear

By Brett Younger

Mercer University has recently begun a promotion meant to grab the attention of prospective young scholars. Billboards, banners and pesky pop-ups on selected websites are broadcasting “Be the bear.” This clever campaign announces: “In a dog-eat-dog world, bears rule.” “When do bears attack? After graduation.” “If you think bears are aggressive in the wild, you should see them in the courtroom.”

“Be the bear” is a wonderful slogan to recruit students to Mercer’s fine law school. If I need a lawyer, then I want a bear. The call to beardom is a first-rate invitation to the business school. We want assertive negotiators. “Be the bear” is an excellent catchphrase for the nursing school. Nurses should be care bears. Strong arguments could be made for bears in the schools of education, medicine and engineering.

“Be the bear” does not, however, strike one as fitting for the school of theology. “If you think bears are aggressive in the wild, you should see them in the sanctuary” has a peculiar ring.

Part of the difficulty is that while I am a big fan of Mercer Bears, bears in general seem like bad news. Grizzlies tend to be angry. The only time I want to see a bear claw is when it is dusted with confectioners’ sugar. Bears in children’s stories don’t usually come across as particularly ministerial. The three bears frightened Goldilocks, though it’s not clear that they actually did anything wrong. She did break into their house.

The Bible includes several inspiring bear stories. Isaiah 11:7 promises that one day “the cow and the bear shall graze together.” Isaiah understood that many bears are vegetarians, but most cows are uncomfortable guessing which ones eat only salads. Amos 5:19 says the

day of the Lord will be “as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear.” This text doesn’t cast bears in the most gracious light. In 1 Samuel 17:36, David tells King Saul that he “has killed both lions and bears.” Those aren’t the bears you want to be. The prophet Daniel had a dream that included a beast that “looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, ‘Arise, devour many bodies’” (7:5). This is not a verse that seminaries use in their brochures.

The most memorable bear story in scripture may be the heart-warming bedtime tale in 2 Kings 2. Elisha is out for a walk when a big bunch of small boys start calling him “Baldy,” “Chromedome” and “Curly.” Elisha curses the Boy Scouts “in the name of the Lord.” Two she-bears come out of the woods (I am not making this cheery story up) and

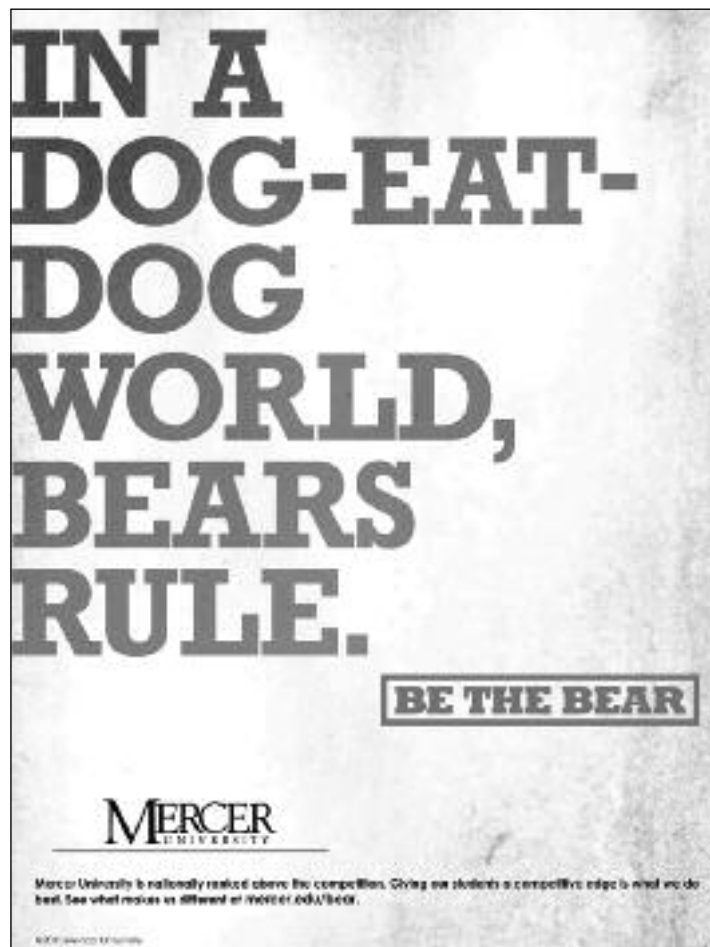
maul 42 of the boys. Speaking as one with a rapidly receding hairline, I’m not sure why we don’t preach on this text more often. While it might not be a great story for preschoolers, it sounds like a helpful lesson for middle schoolers.

Mercer is not the only university whose mascot may not be the perfect fit for the divinity school. Duke Divinity School would be pulling for the other team if its slogan was “Be the devil.” Wake Forest would be only slightly better off with “Be the demon deacon.” (Do we really need to encourage deacons in this direction?)

Most ministers have moments when they want to “be the bear,” but those aren’t the best moments. Preachers who growl aren’t the ones we want to hear. Teddy bears have a hard time being pastors. Polar bears seem cold. Teddy Ruxpin is irritating. Br’er Bear isn’t known for his honesty. Yogi Bear isn’t known for his intellect. We want ministers who are smarter than the average bear.

And yet, if you get past the bad press, “Be the bear” has possibilities. We need ministers who are strong as Mike Ditka and compassionate as Winnie the Pooh. Corduroy is cute. Baloo would be fun at church fellowships. Who doesn’t love Gummi Bears? Most Alabamians would love to have Bear Bryant as their pastor. While the papa in the Berenstain Bears would not be an effective minister, the mama would be excellent. Smokey the Bear would make a good shepherd. On Sunday, see what the reaction is when you encourage your minister to “Be the bear.” **BT**

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



How many Bibles do you own?

By Tony W. Cartledge

Posted Oct. 22, 2010

www.baptiststoday.org/cartledge-blog

A story from Religion News Service reports that if someone could gather up all the Bibles either being used or gathering dust in American homes, the stack would be 29 million feet tall — a tower that would rise more than 5,400 miles. For comparative purposes, the International Space Station's orbit is only 278 miles at its highest point.

Why do we have so many Bibles? The growing number of new translations and niche versions is one reason. Bibles generate huge profits for the publishing industry, so they're constantly trying to capture new markets with specialty versions for people of different ages and with different occupations or hobbies (think teens, truckers, fishermen, etc.).

I'm sure that's not the only reason we own so many Bibles, however. Unlike many other books, it's hard to throw away a Bible. I mean, who wants to put a Bible in the trashcan? Wouldn't that bring down the wrath of God? It's hard enough to donate one to Goodwill or another charity. Somehow, getting rid of a Bible feels like admitting that we don't really read or use it.

I've done my part to contribute to the high population of Bibles. Those in the photo are what I have at home; there are nearly that many more in my office. The Barna Group says the average American family owns three: I probably own more than 30 print editions in English alone, along with versions in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and a variety of modern languages. I could add more than 100 additional Bibles if I counted those I have access to in Bible software programs, but they wouldn't add much to the stack.

Owning a tower of Bibles or displaying a giant coffee-table version may appear impressive, but we all know the Bible's true message doesn't seep out by osmosis, or else Americans would be a far more just and righteous people. Our Bibles do us no good unless we take time to read them, meditate on the stories they tell and seek God's guidance in understanding what it means to live as Scripture teaches.

Maybe the important question is not how many feet of Bibles we own, but whether our Bibles put feet to our faith. **BT**



Good reasons for not being a Christian

By John Pierce

Posted Oct. 14, 2010

www.baptiststoday.org/johnpierce-blog

Bad songs and political ads have me hitting the scan button on my car radio quite often. Yesterday that exercise led to my discovery of some good reasons to reject Christianity.

Jay Sekulow was hosting his talk show on Freedom Radio and promising to protect my religious freedom. But he and his callers were more intent on questioning the faith commitments of President Obama, increasing listeners' anger over what he continually called "the Ground Zero mosque," and railing against those who do not share a simplistic view of abortion or an irrational

fear that gay and lesbian persons are putting "the sanctity of marriage" at risk.

Then there were the same old denunciations about "the Social Gospel" and "liberation theology" — and how real Christians must agree with their narrow theological and political agenda because that's what God believes.

Whether this brief listening period is representative of this station, show or "Christian radio" in general, I don't know. But it was all that I could stand to hear. The host and the callers he incited came across, at least to me, as aloof, hostile, condescending and way too sure of having cornered the truth.

No wonder the Christian Church is losing ground. What in this kind of talk

would attract anyone other than those who are fearful and in need of a safe cocoon of certainty that doesn't permit serious inquiry?

If such fear and ignorance represent what it means to be Christian, then I can see why so many have no interest. For neither do I.

And if Christianity continues to be defined and branded by these on-air "Christians" and others who confuse the Gospel with far-right politics, then someone needs to come up with another name for those who want to follow Jesus without getting lumped in with such nonsense.

I should have just endured the silly political ad and that Billy Currington song about drinking beer. **BT**

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Bartholomew's Passage

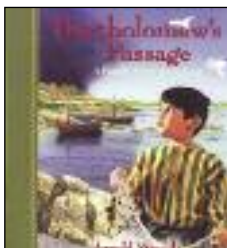
A Family Story for Advent

By Arnold Ytreeide

Kregel Publications | \$13.99

Roman soldiers destroy Young Bartholomew's village and disperse his family. He becomes enslaved to a tyrannical master, but then escapes with his new friend Nathan.

On his way to be reunited with his family, Bartholomew makes a new friend, Jotham.



Arnold Ytreeide, an excellent storyteller who knows how to heighten reader's senses through much imagery and conversation, takes us along on Bartholomew's adventures while teaching the principles of Advent.

Bartholomew's Passage is nicely designed. Its large-size print and detailed, colorful cover will appeal to grade-school children who enjoy reading on their own. Its varied content is ideal for family devotional time and the lighting of Advent candles. Each daily reading is a short story in itself, but ends with discussion and life-application material.

In addition, the introduction tells how the celebration of Advent started, about customs associated with it and some ways to celebrate in homes today. Parents will find

helpful notations on interpretations and implications for the book's use. Also, the author assists readers in determining which parts to read each day of the week, depending on which day Christmas Eve falls. The book ends with an informative chart that shows the starting date of Advent and the day of Christmas Eve through the year 2080.

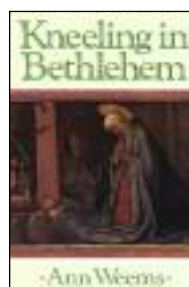
Kneeling in Bethlehem

Poetry for Advent and Christmas

By Ann Weems

Westminster John Knox Press | \$16.95

The beautiful wintry scene on the cover is a perfect lead into the imagery created by the words found inside. Ann Weems is a gifted poet who writes in an unmetred, free-flowing style of insightful and thoughtful musings. Using events and images of long ago, she skillfully reflects on the mystery of the Christmas season by bringing real-life applications to contemporary situations.



Kneeling in Bethlehem is one of several volumes of poetry written by Weems. Its 11 sections contain 26 new poems along with popular selections from her earlier works.

This large-print volume would make an excellent gift for adults of any age. Its con-

tents merit use for personal devotional time, at family gatherings or in worship services.

Epiphany

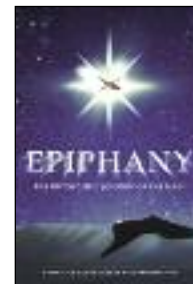
The Untold Epic Journey of the Magi

By Paul Harrington

\$17.99

With a prologue and epilogue that leave readers in wonderment, seasoned writer Harrington takes us on an adventurous pilgrimage with the Magi in this his first novel.

Written as a tribute to the characters in T.S. Eliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi" — which greatly intrigued Harrington as a high school student — he brings to life in *Epiphany* the mystery and symbolism associated with the Magi.



Through use of detailed images, descriptions and conversation, readers can feel a part of the Magi's expedition to witness the birth of Christ. Along the way we learn much about the history and politics of first-century Israel and Rome, the challenging terrain, the supernatural, and betrayal.

For persons who enjoy historical fiction, *Epiphany* provides a unique way to explore the meaning of the birth of Christ and the impact it had on the Old World. **BT**

Christmas

Festival of Incarnation

By Donald Heinz

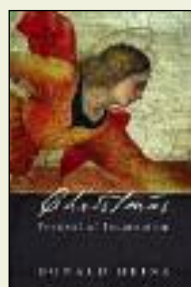
Fortress Press | \$17.50

The elegant dust jacket invites readers to a pilgrimage of insights and experiences, sights and sounds that will appeal to all the senses.

Patrons of the arts will discover inside *Festival of Incarnation* a 16-page gallery of glossy, full-color art along with inspiring script, characters, set and music. The section titles hint of what is to come: "Plotting Incarnation: Divine Scripts and Human Actors," "Theater of Incarnation: The Church as a Festival House," "Incarnational Extravaganza: All the World's a Stage." Within each section are intriguing chapters such as my favorites, "Motley Crew: Pilgrims on Holiday" and "Hearing Christmas: Musical Incarnations."

Persons interested in sociology,

anthropology, history, politics, economy or theology will find challenge in the various viewpoints on the celebration of Christmas past and present. In addition to an examination of incarnational theology, Donald Heinz looks at the religious and cultural history of Christmas along with social and economic practices.



Heinz seeks to give readers a view of Christmas with "wide-angled amazement" and to challenge us to re-think Christmas in a consumer-driven, materialistic culture and to reflect critically on the tension created between Christianity and consumer capitalism. Rather than criticism, he helps us understand and to be sympathetic to the celebrations of Christmas that have evolved; to see how this holiday will continue to be

meaningful despite the modern-day focus on "more."

Readers cannot help but ponder with the author: "... the celebration of Christmas becomes the uneasy record of how God and religion and humans are faring in the modern world." The title of his conclusion is telling: "The Risk of Incarnation: Fare Well, Christmas."

Heinz's professional experiences as a clergyman, religion professor, and dean of humanities and fine arts mesh well in this volume. *Festival of Incarnation* is a good blend of art, theology, sociology and history presented in a gifted style of challenging but accessible writing. It would make an excellent study piece not only in an academic setting, but also for study groups such as "Christ and the Arts." The book includes extensive annotated references for each chapter for readers desiring further study, followed by a well-prepared index. **BT**



Ready to Serve — A volunteer crew from First Baptist Church of Chattanooga dishes up mid-day meals at the Community Kitchen while Vera Jackson passes out trays. This team is one of several from a variety of area churches that serve faithfully on a scheduled basis.

Serving up compassion

Community Kitchen volunteers carve turkeys, extend care

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — The parade of turkeys at the Chattanooga Community Kitchen began in early November and will continue unabated into late December, when all the cold-storage compartments at the Kitchen are filled.

Over that same period, approximately 350 meals will be served daily to homeless and hungry people.

Five years ago the Community Kitchen served a total of 123,197 meals; last year it was 171,000 and the numbers this year will be equally high. These figures are a reflection of a deepening economy with many more hungry people finding their way to Kitchen doors.

The Community Kitchen was started 28 years ago by seven downtown churches that sought a better way to help needy people than simply doling out a meal now and then to those who came begging at the church door. It was a slow beginning.

On that first day in the fellowship hall of Christ Episcopal Church, two volunteers

went out onto McCallie Avenue and persuaded two homeless men to come in for a lunch of homemade soup and sandwiches. As the word got out and numbers increased, more space was needed.

Soon an abandoned warehouse on 11th Street was purchased. Not only have the num-



Turkey Time — Faith McKenna carves up one of the hundreds of turkeys that provide tasteful meals for the many homeless people who come to the Community Kitchen.

bers being fed increased, but also the number of supporting churches and religious organizations has also grown to more than 40.

Much of the work is done by volunteers from churches and other organizations, along with those assigned to community service.

Most of the five paid workers were formerly homeless, according to Faith McKenna, who is now the assistant food service supervisor.

She understands the people she sees each day. Two years ago she was homeless, a victim of domestic violence who was dropped off penniless outside the Community Kitchen.

A Homeless Health Care caseworker sent her and her young daughter to St. Catherine's Shelter for Women and Children and after 45 days there she was moved to the Chattanooga Room in the Inn for three months. She had worked in food service for 14 years and was able to get a part-time job at the Kitchen, put her daughter back in school and find an apartment.

"My daughter is doing good in school,"

McKenna said, “and I love my job. It feels so good to be back where I came from.”

Vera Jackson has been working part-time at the Kitchen for the past four years. She had always worked in restaurants until five years ago when she was out of a job for a year and on food stamps. Her caseworker suggested she might volunteer at the Kitchen and in only a few weeks her enthusiasm, cheerful smile and hugs won her a regular job.

First Baptist Church in downtown Chattanooga was one of the original churches to launch the ministry and continues to have several crews working on a regular basis. Edith Yantis began volunteering shortly after the Kitchen opened and continues to head one of the crews from First Baptist.

She is the longest serving volunteer. When the Kitchen was renovated it was named for her in recognition of her many years of service. “It was a big surprise,” she said.

Volunteers, most of whom serve twice a month, are there to help with whatever McKenna needs. It takes a lot of hands to carve up the many turkeys that are used in countless ways throughout the year.

McKenna and her crew do an amazing job of combining whatever they have to work with and always come up with an entree, two vegetables or fruit or salad, bread, dessert and drink at lunchtime. Most of the food is donated.

In addition to individual donors, food comes from overstuffed stores, restaurants and sometimes from churches. Whatever comes in is used in some way.

Occasionally the Kitchen buys food from the Chattanooga Food Bank or from vendors for needed items that are not donated. While the overall operation serves many needs, food continues to be the focal point.

There are three meals daily: breakfast, lunch — which is the main meal — and a light supper. There is no charge. Anyone is welcome in the open doors as long as the few rules (no liquor, no drugs and decent behavior) are followed.

At mealtimes the dining room is filled with voices raised in laughter and happy conversation. Most eat quickly so the 80 tables can be cleared for others waiting in line for a place to sit.

Charles Hughes, a member of White Oak Baptist Church, has been director of the Community Kitchen for 11 years. It has been during his tenure that much of the expansion has occurred.



Honor and Service — Charles Hughes (right) is director of the Chattanooga Community Kitchen, which is widely recognized for its service to homeless and hungry persons. The renovated kitchen was named in honor of Edith Yantis (left), an active member of Chattanooga’s First Baptist Church and the program’s longest-serving volunteer.

The compound now stretches for an entire city block. Ten apartments were constructed for working homeless families with children so they can learn to manage a home and finances, and how to avoid becoming homeless again before finding their own apartment.

In addition the Kitchen has worked with the Interfaith Homeless Network (see related story on page 36), which houses homeless families in participating churches, and with the Hamilton County Health Department, which uses the Kitchen facilities to provide a variety of health-related needs.

The final one-third of the facilities is Hughes’ pride and joy, a day center where homeless people can gather and participate in classes and Bible study, learn life skills, shower, do laundry, make phone calls, and receive mail and foot care.

There is a place for prayer and meditation and also a medical respite ward with 10 beds for homeless people who have been hospitalized.

“The staff realized there was a need for a place to congregate,” Hughes said, “a place where people could be stimulated to get on with their lives.”

Three years of planning culminated when the center was opened in May 2009.

This is a busy time around the Kitchen. Seventy-five percent of the donations of food,

clothing and finances come in during the last three months of the year.

Thanksgiving and Christmas are big days. Last Christmas Day nearly 1,000 meals were served and gifts were given to more than 500 adults.

And those turkeys? Each year Moody Radio Station WMBW 88.9 FM hosts a food drive the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. In 2009, 11.8 tons of nonperishable food and 807 turkeys were contributed. That’s not counting the turkeys and other food contributed directly to the Kitchen.

In January 2010, when the temperatures dropped well below freezing, Hughes opened the facilities at night so people could come in and wrap up in a blanket and sleep on the floor. More than 100 people spent nearly two weeks sleeping there. The Community Kitchen was the only place in town where men, women and children of any age could spend the night.

“Our numbers are up,” Hughes said. “Every day we see new faces and they look scared. I am grateful for all our donors and volunteers. I am hopeful that together we will meet these great needs. But, like our clients, I am sometimes scared.” **BT**

— Ruth Robinson is a veteran religion news writer in Chattanooga, Tenn., and a member of the city’s First Baptist Church.

Something old, *Baptists Today* launches expanded web presence

something new

MACON, Ga. — The independent news journal, *Baptists Today*, has a new web presence (www.baptiststoday.org) that incorporates popular features from the former site with expanded offerings.

Daily News, uniquely collected and presented from a wide variety of sources by Online Editor Bruce Gourley, remains an integral part of the site. Stories from major news outlets as well as from more-obscure sources are pulled together each day to give the reader a quick and trusted online destination for staying abreast of religion-related news.

A selected story from Religion News Service, the largest distributor of its kind, is also displayed prominently each day.

The blogs of Executive Editor John Pierce and Contributing Editor Tony Cartledge, which alternate daily, have been fully incorporated into the new site for easy accessibility to both current and past postings. Additional blogs can be found on the web site as well.

Ongoing book reviews can be found under “Jackie’s Bookshelf” by Managing Editor Jackie Riley. And the “Younger Voices” blog provides an outlet for expression by under-40 clergy and laity. (Send submissions to editor@baptiststoday.org.)

In a blog titled “Baptists Yesterday,” Online Editor Bruce Gourley, who is also



Executive Director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, provides information and observations about Baptists of yesterday that can benefit Baptists today.

Starting this month, Baylor University doctoral student Aaron Weaver, who blogs at thebigdaddyweave.com, will post “Weaver’s Weekly Wrap-up” on the new *Baptists Today* site each Friday. He will identify various news items from the current week and give an analysis of how these stories might impact churches and persons of faith.

One added feature provides news stories from the campuses of colleges, universities and schools of theology. These are posted as “Campus News” under “Resources.”

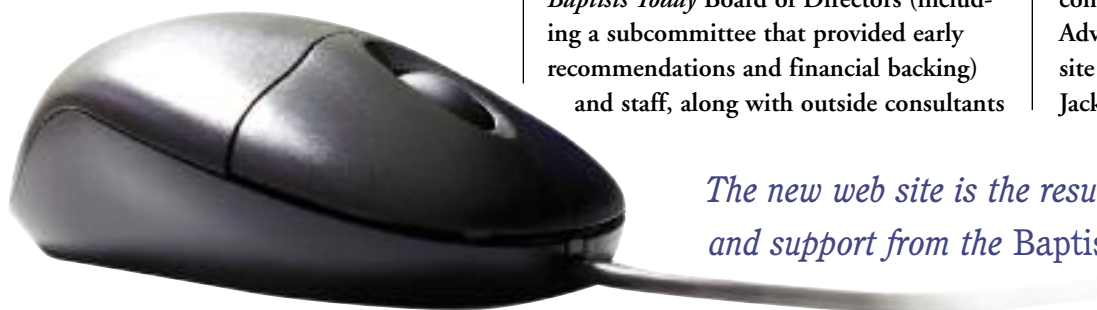
The new web site is the result of much careful planning by and support from the *Baptists Today* Board of Directors (including a subcommittee that provided early recommendations and financial backing) and staff, along with outside consultants

and designers.

The goal was to provide a web site that is appealing, easily navigable and expandable. The *Baptists Today* web site is designed to complement the print edition of the news journal that contains unique content found nowhere else.

Subscribers have a choice between having the monthly print edition mailed to their homes or accessing the news journal in a high-quality digital format on the web site. Digital back issues (older than three months) are placed under “Resources” on the site to allow research of previous articles at no charge.

The site also provides enhanced opportunities for advertisers to reach a specified audience. Display and classified ad space is available on the site or in combination with print advertisement. Advertising information is available on the site or by contacting Managing Editor Jackie Riley at jackie@baptiststoday.org. **BT**



The new web site is the result of much careful planning by and support from the Baptists Today Board of Directors.

Closing the back door

Why do people leave churches?

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Many churches and denominations put a lot of effort into attracting new members only to lose many of them through a “back door” — a term used to describe people who regularly attended a church in the past but stopped.

“Churches have gone to great extreme effort to get people in the front door of the church,” Brad Waggoner of LifeWay Christian Resources said in a 2006 podcast. “There’s been some success numerically in that strategy, but very few people are talking about the back door of the church ... The back door is just as important as the front door in determining the health of a local church.”

LifeWay President Thom Rainer, in an article on ChurchLeaders.com, described a meeting with more than 200 church leaders where nearly 90 percent indicated their churches had a problem with closing the back door.

“For years, the primary focus in many churches has been on the ‘front door’ — people coming into the church,” Rainer said. “While such an emphasis remains the Great Commission priority, our research shows that churches and their leaders must not neglect the issue of the back door, commonly called assimilation.”

George Bullard of The Columbia Partnership, a Columbia, S.C.-based organization that helps churches pursue and sustain vital ministry, said churches face an “assimilation challenge” in the first year after new people begin attending to influence whether they become part of a community or slip through the back door.

“Church growth is a pretty simple concept,” Bullard said. “You get more people who have not been regular attendees and members to become regular attendees and members. You get more regular attendees and members to deepen their involvement in their church and its disciple-making activities. You get fewer regular attendees and members to become bored, apathetic or offended and leave the church.”

Four things need to happen within the first year for people to assimilate into a new church, Bullard said.



Make attendance a habit

First, he said, they must have established a pattern of regular attendance. By today’s standards, “in a culture that no longer sits around on Sundays,” Bullard said, regular attendance is between 39 and 42 Sundays a year.

Research indicates that American churches, by and large, went through a period of more than 10 years when they significantly lowered their expectations of members and attendees, Rainer said. The result was an exodus of people from the church.

“Why would I want to be a part of something that expects nothing of me?” Rainer quoted a former active church member saying to the research team. Many churches now are attempting to remedy the problem with new-member classes, where expectations of service, stewardship and attendance are clearly established.

Get connected

Second, Bullard said, they must have connected with some kind of teaching/learning experience such as a small group or Sunday school class.

“Churches that close the back door seek to get as many of their members as possible into small groups,” Waggoner said. “In some churches, these groups meet in homes. In other churches, the small group is a Sunday school class that meets at the church. The key issue, according to our research, is that the small group is an open group, meaning it has no predetermined termination date, and anyone can enter the group at any point.”

Develop deep relationships

Third, Bullard said, they need to have developed friends “they call at 3 a.m.,” a reference to Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign national-security ad featuring a ringing phone in the White House at 3 a.m. and posing a question to voters about who they want answering the phone.

Win Arn, a pioneer in church growth, showed years ago that if somebody can make five friends at a church, they are much less likely to drop out, Waggoner noted. “We need to create opportunities for people to build friendships and to get to know folks,”

The more new members connect with longer-term members, the greater the opportunity for assimilation, Rainer said. One twist the research found, he said, is that most such relationships develop before the new member ever comes to church. In other words, members first developed relationships with people outside the walls of the church and then invited them after the relationship was established.

Go to work

Finally, Bullard said, they need to get “some kind of job,” whether elected, appointed or as an ongoing volunteer.

“There’s no doubt about it that when you involve people in the ministries of the church, they are much more likely to give and much more likely to stay,” Waggoner agreed. “If they’re just pew sitters, they are more vulnerable to become disillusioned, and we’ll lose some of the people”

The earlier a new member or attendee can get involved in a church’s ministries, the higher the likelihood of effective assimilation, Waggoner said. “Churches that close the back door have a clear plan to get people involved and doing ministry as quickly as possible.”

While not a primary motivation for assimilating new people, Bullard added, an “unintended consequence” is that people who buy into the church with their time give five times more money than those who do not invest their time and energy. **BT**

Promises kept

Churches taking family homelessness personally

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. —Like congregations of different sizes and denominational affiliations around the country, Ball Camp Baptist Church has found an ongoing and rewarding ministry opportunity with homeless families. And, through Interfaith Hospitality Network (a.k.a. Family Promise), they have found a good model and needed connections.

“How do you say no to homeless people?” asked Catherine Carter rhetorically, when telling of her response to Pastor Ed Sunday-Winter’s request that she pray about coordinating the monthly hospitality efforts for the Knoxville church. “I didn’t have to pray about it.”

The Knoxville effort, which is repeated by cooperating congregations in settings across the nation, was started five years ago following the recruiting efforts of the wife of a United Methodist pastor who moved to nearby Oak Ridge, Tenn. Two years of planning preceded the launch.

Ball Camp was the second church, following the United Methodist congregation, to make a commitment to Family Promise. Knoxville’s First Baptist Church was among the varied congregations to engage early on in the cooperative effort to minister to homeless families with children. Others have joined in too.

Tim Hardy said he and other Ball Camp members were quickly enlisted to help.

“I told Catherine that it was a good idea and she said, ‘Good, you’re associate coordinator,’” Tim said with a smile.

The Ball Camp team was quick to say that any church can participate in this program as a host church or a supporting church that helps provide food or volunteers. Typical church facilities work just fine.

“You have to have a place to sleep and a place to eat,” said Tim. “That’s it.”



Warm hospitality — Caring for homeless families answers many questions about being ‘missional’ said Pastor Ed Sunday-Winters (center), joined by some of the many church volunteers.

Most churches, like Ball Camp, temporarily convert educational space into bedrooms. A Family Promise truck with bedding and other supplies comes to the designated church ahead of the families. Typically, a church will host families for one week four or five times a year.

Ed said the church’s buildings and grounds committee insisted on adding showers and laundry facilities during a renovation, but these are not required of host congregations since the Family Promise Day Center provides those services.

The local Salvation Army and various social services typically refer families to Family Promise. Often these are single parents carrying shame that they cannot provide adequately for their children. The program is designed to give help and hope for a brighter future.

Getting to know these families during their brief stays at Ball Camp keeps the volunteers energized and engaged, said Tim. He recalled family after family he has gotten to know over the past five years.

He told of a man whose wife had to be

institutionalized. Then he lost his job and their home. Soon he and his children were sleeping in and living out of a car.

Typically, families stay in the program for three months — with additional programs to help them move into a more stable future. Ball Camp volunteers said it is important to offer good hospitality so those coming into their church will feel at home during that week.

Catherine and Tim said they greet the children warmly when they step off the school bus at the church in the afternoon so they will encounter friendly and familiar faces.

“They are made to feel at home,” said Scarlett Carpenter, one of more than 40 church members who cook or provide other services when the families come to Ball Camp. Two volunteers stay overnight each time.

“We try to provide some normalization,” said Tim, noting that the church’s youth come over to play with the kids after school and Sunday school classes volunteer to provide food.

Pat Shelby is often in the kitchen whether it is for Family Promise or some other good

cause. “I think I cooked for all of Knoxville last week,” she said with a laugh.

Her pastor, Ed, added: “That’s just barely an exaggeration.”

A maximum of 14 guests are hosted each time, which usually represents two to four families. Only parents with children participate. The program’s goal is to keep families together and solidify those relationships rather than divide them before providing services.

The program has gained a good reputation in the Knoxville area. The Episcopal Church of the Ascension provides office space for Family Promise. The local school system picks up the children for school and delivers them to their destination in the afternoon.

The Day Center, located on a public bus line, provides a home base for the families—with a phone number and mailing address—to assist with job searches, social services and steps toward finding permanent housing.

“These are not chronically homeless people,” said volunteer Ben Carpenter, noting that those with long-term issues such as drug addiction and domestic abuse are sent to other places for treatment.

“The reason this model works,” added Ed, “is it doesn’t get dragged down by things it’s not qualified to do.”

Hospitality is the main ingredient, and Ball Camp members love dishing it out.

“Our people just love it,” said Catherine. “It’s who our people are.”

Every volunteer she enlisted five years ago is still deeply engaged, she said. There is no burnout because of the fulfillment that comes from engaging these families.

“I don’t ever have a problem getting workers,” she said.

Tim said he and other volunteers don’t hide their Christian faith, but avoid coming across as pushy. The emphasis, he said, is on showing a person that God loves them and the



‘Our people just love it’ — Catherine Carter, who coordinates Family Promise hospitality at Ball Camp Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., has no problem recruiting volunteers.

people in this church do too.

So he begins by greeting these guests upon arrival and spending time getting to know their interests.

“I find a subject they like to talk about,” Tim said. “The kids and I talked a lot about SpongeBob last week.”

“Too often they are not treated with dignity,” chimed in Ben. So he and other Ball Camp volunteers offer respect along with food and housing.

Every year the congregations and larger community turn out for a big Pasta Cook-off to raise money for Family Promise’s ongoing operations. Tim said the interfaith effort spills over into the hospitality as well — with members of neighboring congregations coming to help when Ball Camp is hosting the families.

“It’s like going on a mission trip four times a year without going anywhere,” said Ed.

Pat added that she is not able to go on mission trips her church sponsors: “But I can cook.”

Ed said he gets questions sometimes from church members about what it means to be

“missional,” a term used by many congregations today to convey the idea of living out of one’s faith in every sphere of life. Family Promise, he said, is a “good answer to a lot of questions” — including that one.

Tim, who works for a local media company that produces television programming such as HGTV, said it is the joy of personal relationships that keeps him coming back for more.

“It’s not anonymous,” he said of the Family Promise hospitality effort. “I can close my eyes and see person after person.”

And he added: “You know you were there to make a difference.” **BT**

For information on the Knoxville, Tenn., program visit www.familypromiseknoxville.org.

For information on the national volunteer-based nonprofit organization, based in Summit, N.J., visit www.familypromise.org.



Tim Hardy enjoys talking to kids about whatever interests them, including SpongeBob Squarepants, during their time at Ball Camp.



The church’s education space is converted into bedrooms when the church hosts homeless families for one-week periods during the year.

Christians, pagans compete for Salem's souls

SALEM, Mass. — Paying customers were lined up outside witch houses and psychic parlors when 20-year-old Casey Sholes of Willimantic, Conn., finally stumbled across a place offering dream interpretations for free.

Inside, two interpreters at “The Vault” assured the aspiring nurse that despite her weird dream, the Creator has blessed her with special talents and a heart for the elderly. It wasn't until she got up to leave that she learned she had just gotten a spiritual reading from Christian evangelists inside a church.

“I didn't even notice that this is a church,” Stoles said, leaving the former bank building that's now home to a congregation called “The Gathering.” “I'm just here for the spirit thing ... But (the interpreters) were pretty accurate. I love old people. So they're pretty good.”

Every October, an estimated half-million visitors flock to this city that hanged witches in 1692 and wholeheartedly accepts them now. Amidst the costumed revelry, pagans and Christians said they sensed genuine hunger for spiritual depth and are striving to help tourists embrace their respective traditions. And at this year's festival, both sides made a point not to vilify the other.

Founded 12 years ago, “The Gathering” has become so friendly with local witches that the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel cut its ties and funding, according to Pastor Phil Wyman. But Wyman, whose church brings free personalized readings to about 3,000 people each October, has no regrets. He trains counselors not to fear witches and to disavow an “aggressive, warfare” mentality.

“A dialogue is the only way that we're really going to find out what people think, what they really believe and where they stand,” said Wyman said. “We have to be willing to hear what they believe as well as say what we believe. There's a give and take.”

Local Spiritualists, who regard Jesus as “a great medium,” tell fortunes at their Angels Landing store, and invite the seriously curious to attend weekly circles for communicating with the dead. But in this city best known for images of broomsticks



Salem's historic Tabernacle United Church of Christ commissioned five overseas missionaries — including Congregationalists-turned-Baptists Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice — in 1812. Photos by John Pierce.

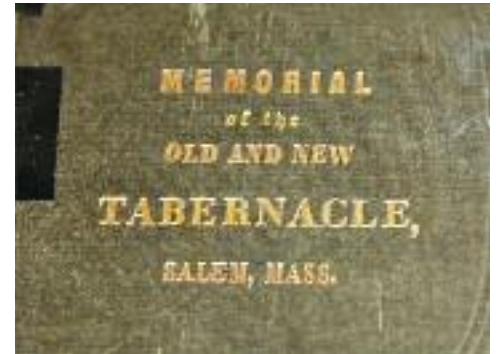
and bubbling cauldrons, most people want to engage the witches, who worship both gods and goddesses in pagan rites that include casting spells and connecting with ancestral spirits.

“People come to Salem because of witches,” said Rosemary Ellen Guiley, author of *The Encyclopedia of Witches, Witchcraft and Wicca*. “It's been a flash-point, a focal point and a Mecca for reclaiming witchcraft and for teaching it.”

Laurie “Lorelei” Stathopoulos, who describes herself as a high priestess of witchcraft, called advice-seeking Catholics “my best clients” at her store, Crowe Haven Corner.

“They come in, they get readings, and they still stay Catholic,” she said. “Their religion has had its ups and downs, so they're quite confused. They're not looking for a new religion, but they're looking for a little more hope and stability ... They don't want to go to the church (for advice), but they'll come to me.”

Salem's witches tout their lifestyle as a peaceful one that honors humanity, animals and Earth alike. Lori Bruno, a local witch in her 70s, says witchcraft is the only religion



whose practitioners never killed in the name of God.

“We hope more people will embrace the craft,” Bruno said, “because it is for peace. It's not a religion that espouses war. We want mankind to shine — like they were meant to. If you sat down with Jesus Christ, I'm sure he would say the same thing.”

Witches here equip the curious to read books on witchcraft and to adopt individual practices, but they say no one — not even Christians — needs to renounce another religion in order to practice witchcraft.

“I'm not trying to convert anybody,” said Kyri Spencer, a Salem witch with 30 years experience. “I encourage people to embrace witchcraft and their own belief system.”

Both camps readily acknowledge that the other side sometimes wins converts. April Alario, 29, grew up nearby and often visited local witchcraft museums as a teenager. One October, she accepted a free reading from The Gathering, and the conversation inspired her to learn more about Jesus.

“It was not Christianity as I was used to it, which was someone with a sign on the street, yelling at you,” said Alario, who is now a Christian and attends The Gathering. “I went in to argue with them, but they were basically just very relaxed. They were asking me what I thought and believed. As I shared, I got to thinking: what do I believe?”

There are also moments of conflict. Wyman said some merchants who charge for readings — from \$35 to \$150 — have occasionally complained about his group's no-cost sessions. But occasional setbacks haven't kept Christians from getting involved in what they call a promising alternative to “classroom-style” Christianity. **BT**

What do these churches have in common?

*Through group subscriptions to Baptists Today, they keep up with
the latest issues facing Baptists.*

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