

# Associated Baptist Press

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## Religious Freedom Restoration Act living up to its billing, observers say

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Heralded as the most significant law affecting religious liberty since the Bill of Rights, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act has lived up to its billing a year after its passage, church-state specialists say.

RFRA has had a substantial impact since President Clinton signed the bill into law last Nov. 16, said Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty watchdog organization in Washington, D.C.

Backed by a 68-member coalition representing nearly every point on the religious and political spectrum, the law restored a high level of protection for religious practice. In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court abandoned the standard it has used in previous rulings that said government must have a compelling interest, such as public safety, before restricting religious practice.

After the court handed down its decision in *Employment Division v. Smith* -- stripping the high level of protection for religious freedom -- more than 60 church-state cases were decided with religious claimants losing in nearly every instance.

The Free Exercise Clause of the Constitution's First Amendment "was all but a dead letter after Smith," Walker said.

But in the first year under RFRA, the tide has turned. More than 30 cases involving religious liberty claims have invoked the bill's provisions, Walker said.

And RFRA's impact goes beyond those numbers, said Melissa Rogers, the Baptist Joint Committee's associate general counsel. Under the law, the government is discouraged from adding restrictions on religious practice it might have tried to implement under the lower standard of the Smith ruling. There is no way to calculate the number of cases that will never go to court because of RFRA, she said.

Bob Peck, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, said he is aware of several instances in which school administrators abandoned policies restricting religious practice because of the new standard. ACLU representatives have met with school officials around the country, and once RFRA was explained to them, many administrators have chosen not to implement policies that would have burdened students' free exercise of religion, Peck said.

"Obviously, the full range of what is going to happen under RFRA is yet to be discovered," Peck said. "It will take several years before we get a full understanding, but the early signs are very encouraging."

Texas law Professor Doug Laycock said that while religious liberty claims stand a better chance of prevailing under RFRA, it's still too early to tell what the law's full impact will be. Cases are being argued differently under the statute, he said, but most of them have not yet been decided.

"It is still possible for this statute to make an enormous difference or to fizzle out," he said.

In only a couple of cases, Laycock said, has RFRA clearly influenced a decision. In one, a District of Columbia zoning board tried to shut down a Presbyterian church's feeding program. The church sued, citing RFRA, and won the right to continue to minister to the homeless, he said.

Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said that RFRA has "leveled the playing field for believers when confronted by heavy-handed government regulations or laws burdening religion."

"I think it also sent a message to government officials that religious exercise no longer is a doormat," McFarland added. However, it hasn't lived up to the fears voiced by opponents that it would go to the extreme of establishing religion. "The sky certainly hasn't fallen as some predicted," he said. "The government is still winning some cases."

One of the reasons RFRA has made an impact is its broad guarantee of religious liberty cuts across so much of society, Rogers said. In contrast, the Equal Access Act of 1984, for example, affected only a narrow segment of society -- public school students. But any person of faith in America could potentially make a claim under RFRA, she said.

The measure has prompted unusual support from the Clinton administration, Walker said. The administration has established two task forces -- one in the Justice Department and the other to work among various agencies -- to be "pro-active and systematic in their thinking" about RFRA, he said.

The Clinton administration has spread the word that agencies and the Justice Department are "to be nice to RFRA," Walker said.

The administration also demonstrated support for RFRA by reversing its position in *Christians v. Crystal Evangelical Free Church*, the so-called "tithing case." The president ordered the Justice Department to withdraw its brief siding with a federal court that ruled contributions made to a church by a couple before they went bankrupt must be turned over to creditors.

Clinton cited RFRA as an underlying reason for reversing the administration's position.

McFarland said he was gratified to see "a genuine, albeit belated, commitment by the administration to enforcing RFRA." President Clinton showed a real commitment by overruling his attorney general, McFarland said, but he added he would have preferred that the Justice Department argue for the church, rather than just withdrawing from the case.

"But we are certainly grateful the president recognized the error and acted, at some political expense, to correct it," McFarland added.

Laycock said Clinton, unlike his recent predecessors, "really cares about religious liberty" and took a personal interest in RFRA before it was enacted.

McFarland said it remains to be seen whether the government is "going to give lip service" to RFRA or will with the new department assignments interpret the bill in ways "meaningful for believers."

"It would be a rare and amazing thing to see the government police itself voluntarily," McFarland said, "but the administration has taken a step in the right direction."

Peck said while the administration's approach to implementing RFRA is "rare in recent times," it is not without precedent. During the Johnson, Nixon and Carter eras, agencies worked together to ensure civil liberties, he said.

"I think the major thing that RFRA is going to do is prevent the ignorant passage of rules by government where (bureaucrats) think something is a good idea aimed at one particular problem but have no clue it would hurt people of faith," Peck said.

In another recent development, Justice Clarence Thomas objected to a refusal by the Supreme Court to hear a case he believed had RFRA implications. The court, over Thomas' objection, declined Oct. 31 to hear a landlord's argument that Alaska's fair housing law should not force him to violate his religious beliefs by renting to unmarried couples.

The landlord, Tom Swanner, had asked the high court to reverse a ruling by the Alaska Supreme Court, which found that neither the religion clauses of U.S. and Alaska constitutions nor the Religious Freedom Restoration Act could excuse him from complying with Alaska's ban on marital status discrimination in housing.

In a five-page dissent, Thomas said the court should have accepted Swanner's appeal to "resolve whether, under RFRA, an interest in preventing discrimination based on marital status is sufficiently 'compelling'" to justify a substantial burden on Swanner's religion.

Noting that RFRA permits government to burden religion only to satisfy "interests of the highest order," Thomas said he is "quite skeptical that Alaska's asserted interest in preventing discrimination on the basis of marital status is 'compelling' enough to satisfy these stringent standards."

In addition to protecting the rights of citizens to practice their religion, RFRA may have another legacy -- enhanced dialogue and relationships among religious and civil liberties groups, the Baptist Joint Committee attorneys said.

The coalition, which has grown in number since RFRA's passage, meets quarterly.

"There continues to be a legacy of trust and cooperation that was born in the struggle to pass RFRA," Walker said, adding that groups who once fought one another are still finding new ways to work together.

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## **Gambling forces win in Missouri, New Mexico, lose big in Florida**

(ABP) -- It was win some, lose some for pro-gambling forces in a number of state elections Nov. 8.

Voters in Missouri, New Mexico, South Dakota and the Virgin Islands approved gambling initiatives on state ballots, while those in Florida, Colorado, Wyoming, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Rhode Island and on Indian reservations said no to gambling measures.

In Florida, voters rejected casino gambling for the third time in 16 years despite being outspent 10-1 in the most expensive political campaign in state history. Voters overwhelmingly defeated a referendum, 62 percent-to-38 percent, that would have allowed casinos at 47 sites, including hotels, horse and dog tracks and jai lai arenas.

Opposition from church leaders, including those of the 1 million-member Florida Baptist Convention, and from business leaders and Walt Disney World, Inc., won credit for the defeat.

John Sowinski, campaign manager for No Casinos, Inc., a Tampa-based group leading the opposition, called the vote "a good old southern butt-kicking" despite the "most deceptive campaign in Florida history" by

pro-gambling forces. But both sides predict the issue is not dead. "We can be assured of the fact that they (pro-gambling forces) will be back," said Don Hepburn of the Florida Baptist Convention.

Gambling opponents didn't fare as well in Missouri, where voters allowed slot machines on riverboats, or in New Mexico, where both a state lottery and video gambling won approval. In South Carolina, only 10 of 46 counties voted to ban cash payouts from video poker games.

In a non-binding referendum, Virgin Islanders voted for casinos, hoping to boost an economy ailing since Hurricane Hugo in 1989. But Navajos turned down casinos on their reservation, which stretches over Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Rhode Islanders also voted down casinos in five cities including Providence, the capital and largest city. Voters in western Massachusetts rejected a non-binding referendum for casino gambling proposed in Hampden County.

Colorado voters turned down slot machines at commercial airports, while Wyoming said no to slot machines, video poker, blackjack and poker. Minnesotans rejected off-track betting on horse races.

South Dakota, meanwhile, approved a video lottery for the second time. The Legislature approved the game in 1989, but the state Supreme Court ruled last summer the machines were illegal.

A proposed amendment to the Arkansas constitution allowing a state lottery and casino gambling at two racetracks was removed from the ballot Oct. 14 by the state Supreme Court, which found the ballot titles "misleading."

Other moral and social issues on state ballots included:

-- Euthanasia. Oregon passed a law allowing the terminally ill to get lethal medication, becoming the first state in the nation to exempt doctors from prosecution for assisting in suicides.

-- Abortion. Wyoming rejected a measure that would have banned abortion except in cases of rape, incest or to save the woman's life.

-- Homosexuality. Oregon and Idaho rejected propositions that would limit gay rights protection, outlaw school programs that suggest homosexuality is acceptable and keep books on homosexuality away from minors.

-- Obscenity. Colorado refused to adopt the U.S. Supreme Court's definition of obscenity, which relies on community standards. Oregon rejected a similar measure.

-- Crime. Georgia passed a tough "two-strikes" measure, sentencing repeat violent offenders to life in prison. California approved 25 years-to-life for three-time felons. Milwaukee and Kenosha, Wis., rejected handgun bans. Oregon approved stiffer penalties for violent crime. Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, Ohio, Maryland and Utah approved victims rights guarantees.

-- Illegal immigrants. California passed Proposition 187, which bars illegal immigrants from schools, social services and non-emergency medical care and requires health and school officials to report suspected illegal aliens.

-- Smoking. California rejected a measure to loosen an existing ban on workplace smoking. Colorado refused to add 50 cents to its cigarette tax to fund anti-smoking programs and health care for the poor.

-- Environment. Florida added a ban on fishing nets to its state constitution. Arizona banned use of leghold traps, poisons and snares on public lands. Oregon outlawed using dogs to hunt bears and cougars.

-- Term limits. Voters in Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, Washington, D.C. and Spokane, Wash., voted to limit terms of politicians. Utah rejected a term-limit measure.

-- Seat belts. Massachusetts, North Dakota and South Dakota all passed seat belt laws.

-- Language. Vermont approved gender-neutral language for its constitution. West Virginia removed from its constitution language requiring that "white and colored persons shall not be taught in the same school."

## Alzheimer's victims present missions challenge, experts say

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Termed "the funeral that never ends," Alzheimer's Disease affects 4 million Americans and 19 million family members.

Among them is the United States' former first family. Ronald Reagan recently went public with a handwritten letter sharing he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, in hopes of increasing awareness about the disease which kills more Americans than all other ailments except heart disease, cancer and strokes.

Alzheimer's Disease destroys brain cells, gradually causing memory loss, confusion and personality change in its victims. Unless there is a cure, Alzheimer's cases are expected to number 14 million by 2050.

Those numbers create a mission field, according to speakers at a recent seminar at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kentucky.

The disease is so debilitating and creates such deep issues for patients' families -- emotional depletion and feelings of guilt, loss of hope and abandonment -- that it can challenge simple concepts of the Almighty, experts say.

"As Americans we're taught that we have power over everything," said James Phillips, one of 15 participants exploring pastoral and congregational responses to Alzheimer's. The disease, he added, "makes us look at God's power."

"Too many people have a magical concept of God," added David Wentroble, who works in a nursing home in Connecticut. "Faith evangelists say, 'If you have enough faith, healing will come.' People expect a lightning bolt of healing in a case like this and it doesn't always happen."

Led by Nancy Ramsay, professor of pastoral theology at the Louisville seminary, and Kathryn Barlow Westmoreland, chaplain at Llanfair Retirement Community in Cincinnati, Ohio, discussions included a look at the theological and spiritual issues affecting Alzheimer's patients.

Using a case study of a couple named Carl and Ruth, participants explored reactions to the pain that afflicts many families. The example involved a woman whose husband of 53 years no longer remembers her, their children or anything else of the past.

"I never dreamed our lives would end this way," she told a neighbor. "I'm still married, but my husband is gone." Her feelings include:

-- Abandonment. Family members stopped coming by and friends quit offering dinner invitations. Although Carl had been Sunday school superintendent for 25 years, church officers visit only quarterly to offer communion and a bulletin.

-- Embarrassment. Carl mistook his daughter for his wife several times and said inappropriate things to her.

-- Fear. Ruth seemed each day closer to feeling overwhelmed. She questioned her ability to hang on and the reality of her faith.

While hypothetical, the case study struck close to home for those who minister to Alzheimer's patients and their families.

"A lot of people ask if it's okay to pray that (their loved one) die," said Georgine Buckwalter, a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and director of pastoral care for Presbyterian Homes and Services of Kentucky. "They say, 'I'm not sure how to pray or what to feel.'"

"I spent a (recent) night with a woman who asked questions like this," echoed another participant. "She said, 'Pastor, is there evil or death in me? Is evil taking me over and making me say things I wouldn't normally?'"

"You have an image of what hell is all about," added another. "There's no closure and it's like a burning fire that never goes out."

Alzheimer's, like other developmental disabilities, casts a new light on the biblical description of humans, "created in God's image," said Ramsay. She believes that refers to a relationship with the Creator rather than intellect.

"This invites us to rethink what it means to be the church," she said, "to be with those who are no longer able to understand what that relationship means."

"We can help people like Ruth know they are remembered," she said. "We are agents of God's remembrance. We want to be able to help that person remember their identity."

That statement hit home later when Phillips talked about his wife, whom he recently placed in a nursing home. He described an outburst during one of the last times they attended church together.

"The preacher was giving his message and said, 'Who are you?'" Phillips recalled, imitating the cleric's deep voice. "And my wife said, loudly enough for people to hear, 'I'm nobody!'"

Such feelings easily transfer to care givers -- particularly spouses -- when friends, church and family slowly fade from contact. That experience is common for many dealing with grief and suffering, observed Doug Lowry, marketing director of Wesley Manor Retirement Center and a member of Louisville's Walnut Street Baptist Church.

That is where the church can play such an important role, several people said, by lending its presence when others are "too busy."

Mark Baridon, a Presbyterian pastor from Cleveland, Ohio, encouraged churches to hold a service to reaffirm their commitment to care for the Alzheimer's patient and family.

Others agreed congregations must get involved in sticky situations. "The thing that frightens me about this is the pastor can't take it on alone," said Lawrence Noir, a minister from Fairmont, W. Va. "The entire congregation needs to see its relationship in this. I'm afraid most people would want to run away from the problem."

Not all do. The Louisville Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association relies heavily on volunteers. Only two professional staff are among the dozen persons needed to operate the area's only day care program for patients. It is housed at St. Matthews Baptist Church.

In addition, four church members are volunteers for the association, which provides education, referrals, in-home respite care and other programs, and operates 28 family support groups.

"I think most congregations are full of people who want to help, but don't know how," said Karen Ring, director of the association. "Though there's been a lot of talk about the disease, there's still some stigma attached to it. There needs to be more education."

Ramsay agreed. "My concern is that people's fear about this illness is leaving us more vulnerable to its devastation," she said. "My energies are directed at helping equip people to respond."

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## **Minister views Alzheimer's up close and personal**

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- As a longtime pastor and former missionary to Japan, James Phillips has dealt with many parishioners with Alzheimer's Disease. But none of that prepared him for his own experience.

Two months ago, after years of caring for his steadily deteriorating wife, Ruth, he placed her in a nursing home. He shared that experience at a recent seminar on Alzheimer's in Louisville, Ky.

"It's one thing visiting someone else who has this horrible disease and then seeing how it devastates you," Phillips said. "Some days my faith is stronger; many days it's weaker."

A Presbyterian pastor for nearly 40 years, Phillips is associate director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Conn. His presbytery assigned him to the independent missions agency 11 years ago.

It's a rewarding position, one that helps maintain a positive outlook in spite of his personal struggles. After 37 years of marriage, one of the emptiest feelings is going to bed alone, he said.

Then there is the emotional loss of a once-vibrant partner. A graduate of Ouachita Baptist University, a Southern Baptist school in Arkadelphia, Ark., Ruth Phillips once worked as an administrative assistant to a large law publisher in Chicago. She served alongside her husband for 17 years in Japan, where they raised two daughters.

Now she doesn't know them or her two grandsons, ages 3 and 1. The boys don't understand what's wrong with Grandma or why Grandpa doesn't bring her along on visits, Phillips said.

Phillips said he visits his wife every other day. "Some days I think she knows who I am, some days she doesn't," he said. "It's hard because she was a brilliant woman. But that's all been wiped out. In her mind she's probably living back in her childhood. It hurts, but that's the reality of this disease."

Ruth had suffered from paranoia for 15 years after they returned from Japan, but her doctors aren't sure if that was a link to the disease. After increasing stages of forgetfulness, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1991.

Phillips kept his wife at home, first taking her to two day care centers and then employing three women to help care for her while he was at work. However, Ruth constantly fell, both during the day and at night.

By then, their social life had already vanished. They had to quit attending concerts because she shouted in the middle of performances. Her appearance and eating habits grew messy. Her speech deteriorated into meaningless ramblings.

Despite his pastoral service, when Phillips first learned of the road ahead he felt an emotion familiar to many affected by the disease: fear.

Striving to learn more, he read a book (known in brief as "The 36-Hour Day") that outlined every possible hazard. Though "scared stiff" after reading it, many of his fears never came to pass.

While he learned to cope with many of the personal setbacks, recently he battled the anxiety of how to pay for the nursing home bills. Ironically, if he were penniless, some financial assistance would probably be available.

"As missionaries and pastors we had some savings, but not a lot," he said. "The nursing home bills are eating me out of that. So I'll have to rely on the Lord, friends and family. I finally decided that fear has to be put on the shelf."

Phillips finds strength in Scripture, particularly Psalms that talk about the Lord giving strength for each day as it comes. He is grateful, too, for the support of his co-workers, family and friends.

No one questioned his decision to place his wife in the nursing home; his oldest daughter urged him to do it 18 months ago. He resisted until they took one final vacation in Wisconsin so Ruth could reminisce one last time with her sister and other relatives.

He's grateful for the memories, but they don't ease the sting of living in the present. Referring to Matthew 20:22, he said, "I keep thinking of our Lord saying to his disciples, 'Can you drink the cup I'm giving you?'"

He paused as a tear trickled from the corner of his eye.

"This certainly isn't the cup I chose."

## **Ministry to Alzheimer's patients creates dilemmas for pastors**

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- If average church members cringe at facing the complexities of Alzheimer's Disease, they shouldn't feel alone. Many ministers who work with the elderly struggle, too.

Pastors may question why they should continue ministering to someone who can't remember their last visit, according to Kathryn Barlow Westmoreland, chaplain and program services director at Llanfair Retirement Community in Cincinnati, Ohio.

"People with Alzheimer's will not remember facts but they will retain some feelings," she said during a recent seminar in Louisville, Ky. She encouraged ministers and chaplains to remember that patients live only in the present, since yesterday is a faded memory and tomorrow a vague hope.

"Whether they're (thinking they live) in 1994 or 1948, if we walk with them, nurture them and listen to them, then there is a connection," she said. "I have found that they do begin to build relationships. They may not know we're a chaplain, but ours is a special voice they can trust."

Westmoreland also pointed out the special nature of worship for those with Alzheimer's. Old hymns, childhood songs and simple prayers ("now I lay me down to sleep") can trigger memories. Often, patients will join in a chorus after it's repeated a couple times, she said.

Still, other questions arise with ministers, such as:

- Should they serve communion to people who don't understand its meaning?
- How much time can they devote to Alzheimer's patients and families in light of other duties?
- How to convince spouses and families to acknowledge that part of a loved one is gone and is never coming back.

"Communication is the biggest challenge I face," Westmoreland said. "Communicating my love and the love of God in ways they can understand and feel. And letting them know they're not alone. Language and comprehension become increasingly difficult."

Chaplains and pastors should explore those types of issues before disaster strikes, said Nancy Ramsay, professor of pastoral theology at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary.

"We need to look at how God is present with us in such times and the nature of suffering," she said. "Hopefully, when you're confronted with a crisis, it's not the first time you've thought about those things. That's not a good time to construct a theology."

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## **List of what mother could do helps family cope with present**

(ABP) -- For many families, living with the present condition of Alzheimer's Disease can blot out memories of a loved one's productive life. One family in Cincinnati, Ohio, drew up the following list after a counselor asked them about the positive things their mother did during her life.

What she could do:

- Paint a house, inside and out and under the eaves.
- Lay linoleum, hang wallpaper and staple ceiling tile.
- Shingle a roof.
- Put up and take down 44 storm windows.

- Grow a garden and can peaches, beans and tomatoes.
- Lead a troop of Girl Scouts.
- Teach her kids to write and speak standard English.
- Keep double-entry books for her household.
- Stick to her budget and squirrel away money.
- Knit sweaters, scarves, hats, mittens and shawls.
- Type, transcribe and keypunch.
- Proofread for spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- Identify trees by their twigs and barks.
- Tell you the names of all the spring wild flowers.
- Swim and make sure her kids knew how to.
- Fix a hot meal for six people in half an hour.
- Put together a sailboat on the lawn.
- Cook a meal on a Coleman stove in a rain storm.
- Buy and sell property.
- Read stories, sing lullabies and wash mountains of diapers.
- Win at Scrabble.
- More than 40 other items which couldn't fit in this space.

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#### Alzheimer's Disease statistics:

- Approximately 4 million Americans have AD, with 19 million family members affected. Another 37 million know someone with AD.
- AD is the fourth-leading cause of death among adults.
- One in 10 persons over 65 and nearly half of those over 85 suffer from AD. Cases are now showing up in the 40s and 50s.
- A person with AD can live from three to 20 years or more after the onset of symptoms.
- The disease costs society approximately \$100 billion a year. Neither Medicare or private health insurance covers the long-term care most patients need.
- Home care costs an estimated \$47,000 annually. Insurance typically pays \$12,000 and the remainder comes from families and other informal care givers.
- Half of all nursing home patients suffer from AD or a related disorder. The average annual nursing home costs \$36,000, but is more than \$70,000 in some areas.
- The federal government will spend an estimated \$311 million for AD research in 1995.

(Statistics from the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Chicago. For more information, contact the association's Benjamin B. Green-Field Library, 312-335-9602.)

#### What pastors can do:

- Provide counseling for care givers and allow them the freedom to express their anger.
- Educate your congregation. Mention Alzheimer's from the pulpit. Explain the disorder in the church newsletter. Bring in special speakers on the topic. Help members to avoid insensitive comments, such as asking a patient, "Don't you remember who I am?"

- Find "bright spots" while the person is still able to function in public. Use the patient as a helper for a children's Sunday school class.
- Lead Bible studies for care givers, reviewing select passages and how they relate to the person's feelings.
- Organize a "Time Out" program where care givers can leave a loved one while they take care of personal business.
- Place resources in the church library, such as booklets, books, articles and lists of social services agencies.

What church members can do:

- Provide "respite care." Stay with the patient to allow the care giver time away from home or to attend Sunday services.
- Offer transportation.
- Take sermon tapes to the care giver if she or he is unable to attend church.
- Call and send cards to the care giver as a sign of remembrance.
- Play music. Old hymns and simple childhood songs often stimulate a patient's memory.
- Remember the importance of rituals. Serving communion in a care giver's home if the person is unable to attend church can be very meaningful.
- Visit AD patients in nursing homes. "When I look at the (visitors') log, I'm amazed at the lack of visits by pastors and churches," said Angela Flack, who works at a nursing home in Louisville, Ky.

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-- Ken Walker is a freelance writer in Louisville, Ky.

## **New suburban congregation redefines 'country church'**

By Brenda Sanders

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- A church band played country music. The pastor wore a plaid shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. The congregation enthusiastically applauded for the musicians, laughed at humorous skits and responded aloud to a rhetorical question posed by the pastor during his message.

Did the worship service take place in rural Texas? The Tennessee hills? Branson?

Try suburban Kansas City, in a growing area of new homes populated by young-professional families. The church, North Heartland Community Church, held its first worship service, Oct. 2, and 367 people came to see what the commotion was about.

The new church publicized its "contemporary country format" for weeks before the first service in newspapers, on a local "young country" radio station and through 35,000 direct mail pieces. As a result, the congregation at the opening service included a large number of area residents.

One man told pastor Rick McGinniss that he had never before attended church, but one day while listening to his favorite country radio station, he heard an advertisement for a new kind of church with a live country band. "I just had to come and see what this was all about," he said.

That was the kind of response McGinniss had hoped for.

"This church is designed for people not connected to a traditional kind of church," McGinniss said. "We're trying to provide an alternative for unchurched people."

Despite its down-home appeal, the church is high-tech. It meets in the auditorium of Kansas City's New Mark Middle School, employing a "seeker"-oriented worship service that features contemporary country music, drama and computer graphics displayed on a large screen.

"We're going to use every technological and visual aid we can to make the church come alive and speak to contemporary people," McGinniss said. "We already have the equipment and a few actors to do video and drama. If one day someone produces holograms that can be used effectively in church, we'll use that, too!"

McGinniss conceived the idea for a country-format church about two years ago while talking with his friend Steve Reed, who now serves as part-time director of administration for the church.

Reed lived "a couple of doors down" from country music superstar Garth Brooks during his college days at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater.

McGinniss remembers joking with Reed, "Wouldn't it be great if Garth came to church and did the music?"

The two laughed about the idea at first, but then McGinniss began to consider seriously the popularity of country music and the potential for using it as a forum to attract people to attend church. A former software engineer who left the field to earn a religious education degree from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, he felt a burden for his non-churchgoing friends and wondered if they might relate better to a more contemporary style of worship.

McGinniss approached Clay Platte Association director of missions Terry Lamberth with the idea and found him receptive. In fact, Lamberth and his wife, Janice, have moved their church membership to North Heartland.

"I think it's important for us to start many different kinds of churches to reach people with varying interests and needs," Lamberth said. "We need traditional churches as well as this new kind of church. As long as a church is grounded in the gospel and in Southern Baptist doctrine, we need that church."

Another early supporter was David Overman, pastor of Park Hill Baptist Church in Kansas City, where McGinniss served as associate pastor for six years. The Park Hill congregation donated \$100,000 in proceeds from a property sale to launch North Heartland Church.

"We had to close a mission that we had supported for many years because it was not located in a viable area and wasn't doing well," Overman said. "It just seemed providential that at about that same time, we learned the association was interested in launching North Heartland Church and felt that since our property originally had been set aside to start a church, we would donate the proceeds from the sale to help this new congregation. The church voted overwhelmingly to do this; we felt it was a part of God's plan."

A group of area pastors met regularly with McGinniss during the planning stages, offering advice and working through various issues involved in publicizing and providing support for the new congregation.

During the past year, McGinniss enlisted the help of a core group of about 35 adults to establish the church. The volunteers from churches in the North Kansas City area all had expressed a desire to reach unchurched people with the gospel message, McGinniss said.

In addition to McGinniss and Reed, the new church's staff includes Mike Palis, full-time director of creative programming (which includes music, drama and multimedia aspects of the worship services); Brad Marriott, volunteer coordinator of the church's "Friendship Groups;" and Kittie Homan, volunteer director of children's ministries.

The church will sponsor one weekly hour-long worship service on Sunday mornings. In addition, the congregation will host the Friendship Groups, which consist of six to 10 adults who gather each week for Bible study, prayer and encouragement in the homes of group members. Three Friendship Groups are under way, and the core group plans to increase that number as the church membership expands.

Some neighboring Baptists complained about the church's radio spots, but McGinniss said his efforts are not meant to denigrate existing churches. "We're not claiming our approach is better than anyone else's. We're just trying to provide an alternative," he said.

## Georgia minister makes strong case for preaching gospel through art

By John Pierce

ROME, Ga. (ABP) -- The absence of Christian art in Baptist churches concerns Frank Murphy. He fears many evangelicals have overreacted against the use of imagery in the Catholic Church. "We should not pull away from Christian art simply because it has been abused in the past," says the associate pastor for youth and outreach at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga.

"We've missed a way of expressing our faith. We have missed seeing what we feel inside expressed in a way that is very appropriate," Murphy said in a recent interview. "We are good in our churches in doing music as a form of art -- that we express very well -- but we don't express visually very well," he added.

Murphy states his case best with a paint brush. A recent exhibition of his works at Berry College, entitled "Looking Upward, Looking Inward," reveals talent and depth. His rendering of biblical scenes, often quite large, are expressive and detailed. The oil-on-canvas paintings feature contemporary faces on characters and in settings which otherwise suggest a Renaissance style.

Murphy said the visual influences for his paintings can be traced to his home church, First Baptist of Sylacauga, Ala., where he often gazed at "the most beautiful stained glass windows."

"I just soaked that in," said Murphy, adding the glass artwork affected not only his painting style, but also his conception of God. "That has a lot to do with who I am now as a Christian. That helped me to imagine the reality of Christ on earth."

Though he has drawn since his childhood, Murphy did not begin painting until the early '80s. His first works were in the tradition of Norman Rockwell. He then completed a few "photo realism" pieces including one of the legendary Alabama football coach which permanently hangs in the Bear Bryant Museum in Tuscaloosa. While a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., Murphy decided to try painting a biblical scene in the style similar to what he recalled from his childhood Bible. It created a challenge he had not known in his previous projects. "You have to think more about it (biblical scenes)... to imagine what is really going on in the hearts and the minds of these people," he explained.

Most of Murphy's works begin with a small sketch of a biblical character. The sketches are then drawn larger before the images are painted onto canvas. At times he does not know what size the painting will finally be until it is well under way. For example, after painting the central figures in "Christ and the Adulterous Woman," Murphy decided to add additional characters bringing the completed canvas to more than 5 feet by 8 feet.

Working in a studio at his home, Murphy often includes the faces of friends in his works. Occasionally, he will ask someone to sit for a portrait. More often he simply borrows a photograph since much of his work is done late at night. Murphy prefers to have freedom when commissioned to paint, such as a recent request which simply asked him to deal with a certain biblical story. "I like for people to give me some room," he said, which allows him to be most creative.

Though it is time-consuming, Murphy sees no conflict between his art and his ministry with the church. In fact, he resists the idea of giving up the church role to be a full-time artist. "I would hope that if I ever became a professional artist it would not stop me from the other things (ministries) I am doing. I don't intend for it to. I think it (painting) is an extension of what I do as a minister."

So, what does the future hold? "I'm waiting for some church to catch a vision and to have a project for me, or give me some leeway for a project," Murphy said. "I have an image in my mind of a huge crucifixion scene in a semi-circle -- 30 feet wide, so you can walk through the scene."

Murphy said he would also welcome invitations to exhibit his works. That is his quiet but compelling way to advocate a stronger emphasis on the place for visual arts in churches. "The only paintings gracing today's

churches are of a folk variety found in country baptistries," Murphy noted. "Whereas some forms of the arts -- music, sculpture, stained glass, and architecture -- have found an acceptable place in the modern church, painting seems to have lost its sublime role in expressing faith."

Viewers of the detailed and moving scenes of Frank Murphy's paintings see a faith expressed well.

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