

Nashville, Tennessee

Associated Baptist Press

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July 9, 1998

(98-51)

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Burned-out Florida residents return to pick up the pieces

By Ashlee Ross

PALM COAST, Fla. - (ABP) - Susan Mitri's mother sifted through the charred remains of Mitri's house -- one of 46 homes destroyed by wildfires that ravaged Florida's Flagler County in recent days.

She picked up a broken plate -- part of the china she gave her daughter as a wedding present. She added the fragment to the small pile of broken ceramics, figurines and china she had found. And she cried.

A charred child's bicycle rested beside Kathy Kollazo's front sidewalk. She and a friend dug through the remains of her house looking for anything to salvage. "It hasn't hit me yet," Kollazo said. But as her friend emerged with scorched pages of a Bible and burnt pages from a yearbook, suddenly the gravity of the situation did hit. Crying and shaken, Kollazo clutched her son.

Both families live in Palm Coast, one of the communities on Florida's east coast that suffered the most during more than a month of drought-fed wildfires -- more than 2,000 in all.

Dave and Martha Stump, members of First Baptist Church in Palm Coast, had friends and family members help them sift through what was left of their home. The house was completely destroyed. Yet in the front yard a statue of a boy praying was left untouched.

A mandatory evacuation forced all of Flagler County's 40,000 residents out of their homes for three days. They returned July 6 not sure what they would find. Some were fortunate. But 46 families found their homes completely destroyed. Another 179 residences were damaged. A total of 49,000 acres of land were charred in Flagler, the hardest-hit county.

John Beale's family was among the fortunate. Beale, a 17-year-old student at Flagler Palm Coast High School, said his family packed up "all the stuff we could think of, all the important stuff, all the stuff that couldn't be replaced," and headed to a hotel in Kingsland, Ga.

He called his house often during the evacuation, knowing that if the answering machine came on, his house was still standing.

Even people who didn't lose their homes seemed bewildered as they stood in their front yards and surveyed the devastation all around. Signs thanking firefighters and rescue workers dotted all major streets in Palm Coast.

President Clinton visited the area July 9 to thank firefighters, whom he said were "obsessed with saving every home," and to console victims, many of whom are still uncertain about what their future living situation will be.

Speaking in nearby Daytona Beach, Clinton added, "This summer, the real American heroes are not up in space fighting asteroids. They're in Florida fighting fires."

Clinton closed by quoting words of encouragement from the biblical prophet Isaiah (57:10).

Although only a few small fires remained as residents returned to their homes, fire trucks were still abundant, as were firefighting helicopters that dumped water on remaining hot spots.

Almost as plentiful as firefighters were people and organizations descending on Flagler County to meet fire victims' immediate needs, such as food, clothing and shelter.

The Florida Baptist Convention designated \$30,000 for those who had lost homes. Joe Courson, church annuity director for the Florida Baptist Convention, and Dennis Belz, missions director for the Halifax Baptist Association, which covers most of Flagler County, drove around Palm Coast's hardest-hit areas looking for people who needed money.

"What we want to do is, in the spirit of Christ, go and help those who are in need," Courson said. "Sometimes, you just need some real cash in your hands. A few dollars can make all the difference in the world."

Courson and Belz gave away money -- up to \$300 -- to anyone whose house had been destroyed, not just to Baptists or churchgoers. "The thing that always amazes me is that it doesn't matter what denomination you are, we can just help them," Belz said.

Although most were grateful for the money, some refused to take any and even blamed God for their situation.

Susan Mitri and her husband recently separated, her mother noted, leaving Mitri to care for their disabled son. "I don't know why God is punishing her," Mitri's mother said after taking the money.

"I think that's the first reaction people have," Courson said. "You would have a hard time convincing me that God caused this. I believe out of all of this, God is going to work good."

Counselors available at Palm Coast's First Baptist Church are preparing for the same tough questions: "Why did God let this happen?"

"God has allowed things to happen," said David Thomas, music and youth minister at the church. "He didn't start the fires. He didn't set the fires. But it should be used as a wake-up call for our state and our nation."

First Baptist Church of Palm Coast has set up a distribution center and a feeding line for firefighters and residents. Members from different churches in the Halifax Baptist Association are volunteering their time to work in the center.

"Whatever we have, we'll give it to them," said Joe Church, a contract worker for the Florida Baptist Convention and a leader of disaster-relief training.

David Thomas said Christians must meet people's physical needs before dealing with their spiritual needs. "I think the most important thing as Christians is to demonstrate the love of Christ," he said. "Christ dealt with people's physical needs many times in his life."

Counseling will be available at the church for those who want it, but "we're not going to run a witnessing booth," Thomas said.

The convention's disaster-relief team is well-seasoned, having ministered in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in August 1992.

"Even with this situation, it's not over," Belz said. "This is lingering for weeks. What we need is a disaster to relieve a disaster -- about 10 inches of rain."

Baptist relief workers said there are few comparisons between the damage caused by Hurricane Andrew and the damage caused by the fires.

"With Andrew, the devastation was almost complete where it hit, and the needs were immediate," Courson said. "People not only lost their homes, but many of them lost their means of livelihood."

"There are similarities. Losses are losses."

Tiny Florida church mounts big relief effort

By Ashlee Ross

ORMOND BEACH, Fla. (ABP) -- The kitchen at Rima Ridge Baptist Church is no bigger than the average home kitchen, but that didn't stop members of the church near Ormond Beach, Fla., from feeding 160 firefighters a day during the recent rash of wildfires.

Church members cooked and served every day for two and a half weeks, during the worst of the fires. Three times the church itself had to be evacuated as the wildfires crept closer. But each time, when allowed to return, church members resumed the feeding operation for firefighters, police and rescue workers.

Dennis Belz, director of missions for the Halifax Baptist Association, said the church's work was nothing short of amazing. "The church members have really kept it going," he said. The church has fewer than 100 members.

The Salvation Army supplied the church with the food. By July 9, with most of the nearby fires contained, the firefighters moved out of Flagler County, and Rima Ridge Baptist Church closed down its meal service.

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The Millennials: Will the next generation be the most spiritual yet?

By Sarah Zimmerman

(ABP) -- If you are a typical adult, you probably think of the alphabet as a series of letters beginning with A B C, all in order.

They might think of a group of letters -- A, E and F, for instance -- that all are made with straight lines, no curves.

You see events on a timeline, with things happening in sequence. They organize life by experiences, with value given only to what affects them *right now*.

You probably think life has a domino effect. One move triggers another and consequences are felt on down the line. They see life more like a spider web, where if you touch one part the entire surface is affected.

They are the millennials, the next "next generation," the kids who will come of age around the turn of the millennium. Born after about 1978, they are the ones going ga-ga for Hanson, bagging your groceries, dating your daughter, and clogging up America OnLine during prime time. And one thing's for sure -- they don't think like you do.

"There's a huge abyss between you and your children, perhaps the greatest in history," Phyllis Tickle tells adults. Tickle, contributing editor in religion for Publisher's Weekly, has written two books on faith in post-modern America. She says millennials -- especially those born since 1985 -- are prone to process information in ways vastly different from their parents.

Now there's an understatement. These kids were playing with interactive CD-ROMs while their parents still thought Windows were something you close when it rains. Today's teenagers could design Internet pages before they got their driver's licenses. They've been exposed to so much virtual reality that real reality -- whatever that is -- dulls in comparison.

Or maybe their issue is that reality is ugly by comparison. Their parents have divorced in record numbers. Their friends have contracted from AIDS. Their world is broken and can't be fixed with the latest high-tech invention. They easily believe in the invisible, but in their broken world they only trust things that work.

How will this wary generation ever come to faith in God? Boomers and busters have shown they approach faith in ways vastly different from their predecessors. And millennials likely will rearrange the faith furniture again.

"They value the supernatural, and they're more spiritually minded, but that doesn't always come out in classic Christianity," says Doug Pagitt, manager of the Young Leaders Network for Leadership Network in Dallas, a Christian think-tank. "The question used to be, 'Is God real?' This group would look at you like you're crazy if you asked that. Their question is, 'Whose God is real?'"

The next generation will be attracted to churches that demonstrate a connection to a gospel that has worked for centuries and continues to make a difference. In fact, some observers are predicting the spiritual awareness of this generation will open new vistas for Christianity. "The revival we've prayed for could be at hand with this group," Pagitt says.

The millennials are attracting attention if only because there are so many of them -- 73 million to 76 million, depending on which study you believe. They are often called "echo boomers" because they're mostly children of baby boomers -- and there are almost as many *of* them. Their parents, the largest generation in history, account for 29 percent of the U.S. population. Echo boomers, born roughly between 1977 and 1994, are 26 percent of the population. Sandwiched between these two generations are the baby busters, representing only 16 percent.

Millennials. Echo boomers. They are also called the Net Gen because of their computer expertise. They are the first connected generation, the first raised on the Internet. In fact, it would be easy to blame everything you don't like about them on the everpresent computer. Short attention span? Poor social skills? It's the computer's fault.

In a way, the Internet exemplifies what is different about this generation. The Internet lets you move randomly among endless information choices. Go to whatever web page interests you most. Disappointed there? No need to move through it in any order. Click a button to find something more appealing. No need to take it all in either. Just glean what you want. The Internet has changed the way people process information.

"Their brains are wired differently than ours," admits futurist Leonard Sweet, vice president and dean of the theological school at Drew University, a New Jersey institution affiliated with the United Methodist Church. "It's a cultural and almost physiological thing. The electronic culture creates interactive people. They cannot learn in traditional lecture method."

In their defense, Phyllis Tickle says their thinking patterns are a survival technique in a world of information overload. "They've learned to budget their perceptual time. They connect or go on and forget it."

Yet these teenagers are not attached to a computer like a fetus to an umbilical cord. They see computers as a helpful tool for homework research and typing papers, but they'd rather do something with their buddies. Youth interviewed for this story were unanimous: work with a computer when you must; play with your friends every chance you get.

If they learned to think using a computer but they're not at it every waking moment, what makes this generation distinctive? Perhaps more important than the computer in distinguishing these young consumers is their worldview.

They're post-modern. In fact, they are the first wholly post-modern generation.

Modern thought was "built on the assumption that the human mind could overcome all obstacles," Pagitt says. Perhaps that was easy to believe when agriculturists taught farmers to manage the Dust Bowl, American armed forces returned from world wars with definite victories, and engineers put astronauts on the moon. But millennials have all but abandoned such lofty goals.

"I don't know anybody who's trying to fix anything right now," says Scott Morris, a 17-year-old Atlantan. "Everybody's already done everything. And then you wake up one morning and India is testing nuclear bombs."

Another distinction between modern and post-modern worlds is thought patterns. The modern world trusted linear thinking -- timelines, flow charts and the like -- Sweet says. In the post-modern world, thoughts follow loops rather than a straight line.

Consider prime time television. "Bonanza" and "Father Knows Best" had one narrative line that lasted the entire episode. "Laugh-In" and "M-A-S-H" changed that to multiple plots in one show. Now "ER" is a classic example of a television show relying on looping information through multiple points rather than following one train of thought.

The four spiritual laws and the Roman road to salvation are based on linear thoughts as well. Those evangelism techniques assume the reader thinks in sequences. Don't be surprised if these youth don't get it.

But don't be discouraged either. "This is a much more exciting time to communicate the gospel," Sweet claims. "Post-modern evangelism is not saying anything but listening to their story, then showing the person how God is already there working with them." Complete the loop, in other words.

Remember that echo boomers are very pragmatic and only trust what works. They can believe in the invisible, but they want to see evidence that the God you worship affects how you behave in a broken world.

Alan Sherouse of Lakeland, Fla., understands that struggle.

"I went to an arts school where everybody thinks they have to be a non-conformist," he says. "They would pick the wackiest religion just to be different."

Of the 13 students in his high school senior class this spring, three were Christians. "It was quite a struggle for us at school," he recalls. "We tried to witness through our actions. I like to think we showed them what it's like to live a Christian life."

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To connect with millennials, think fast, active and visual

By Sarah Zimmerman

(ABP) -- Does anybody else see an irony here?

Millennials supposedly have an attention span of three to seven minutes. They are also the consumers who made "Titanic" -- a three-hour-plus movie with a predictable conclusion -- the biggest box-office hit in history.

Go figure.

Millennials are used to seeing thousands of visual images flashed before them every day. From billboards to computer screens, life is graphically portrayed in 10-second bites. Shane Whartenby, an 18-year-old in Louisville, Ky., blames television. "Take a 30-minute television show and subtract time for commercials and it's not very long. And the commercials are only 30 or 60 seconds. We're used to getting vital information in a shorter period of time. We have no patience for something that takes long."

Demographers say Shane has described his peers perfectly. "They can turn off and glaze over in a minute and a half. You have to hook them and take them to the next hook quickly or they'll shut down," says Phyllis Tickle, contributing editor in religion for *Publisher's Weekly*.

So how does a teenager with a notoriously short attention span sit through a three-hour movie like "Titanic," and then go see it again, and again?

"You were drawn into it with a lot of action and drama," explains Allison Stevens of Guthrie, Okla. She's a 1998 high school graduate who saw the movie twice. Hagan Scott, a 16-year-old Atlantan, only saw it once but says a lot of his friends saw it five times.

The movie did what Phyllis Tickle says must happen. It hooked them and took them to the next level quickly.

OK. But without Hollywood's budget, how do you hook this generation? Involve them in the action and involve them in your lives.

Unlike the preceding baby-buster generation, often described as a lethargic lot that would rather observe than participate, echo boomers -- as millennials also are known -- have heeded the bumper sticker's advice: Life is short, play hard.

Ten years ago when Aaron Weast became director of Texas' Camp Buckner, campers basically just wanted to be there, he says. They came, they experienced camp, they went home.

Today's campers "want to have a great time. They want to have fun and be crazy," he says.

Steve Graham, an Oklahoma City pastor, also observes youth during summer camp. "The older kids just watch us. They wanted to be *apart from*," he says. "This new group is not so neutral. They want to be *a part of*. They'll do role playing and all those silly games we put on the shelf for years."

Today's youth prize recreation over career, Weast says. He thinks that's because they see their parents working all the time but not having any fun. "They're not driven as much as the baby boomers to be successful. They're not driven to cure anything."

But they do value friendships. Weast keeps up with campers through e-mail, including sending devotions to them during the year. Through Internet connections, they stay in contact with each other and summer camp becomes a reunion of friends.

Doug Pagitt, a former youth worker now with the Leadership Network in Dallas, says friendships are really important to echo boomers because they don't plan to marry until their late 20s. They want good friends to be with until they settle on a life partner.

Pagitt and others who study this generation warn against assuming every baby boomer's child will fit this mold. Their cognitive skills and values will probably be different from their parents. But they want to be seen as individuals.

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Texas Baptists form Fellowship chapter

By Marv Knox

HOUSTON (ABP) -- A group of Texas Baptists has taken a step toward forming a state chapter of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The Fellowship was created in 1991 by Baptists disaffected by the Southern Baptist Convention's sharp turn toward the political and theological right in the 1980s.

Fellowship leaders steadfastly insist they have not formed a new convention. Still, the organization provides members with an apparatus for supporting convention-like functions. Its \$14.3 million budget funds 143 missionaries, helps underwrite ministerial training and facilitates various church-support and networking ministries.

Although Texas provides the Fellowship with its largest statewide base of financial support and membership, Texans have related to the Fellowship through a less-official steering committee and not an official chapter.

The stronger organization of like-minded Texans is called Texas Baptists Committed. It has focused on the political task of protecting the Baptist General Convention of Texas from an SBC-style "takeover," rather than the enterprise task of supporting Fellowship causes, its supporters explain.

Until recently, leaders of the groups have voiced ongoing support for that arrangement. Particularly, they have expressed concern lest an emphasis on development of a state Fellowship chapter detract from the work of Texas Baptists Committed.

Noting he previously affirmed that logic, a leader in both camps called for a new venture.

"The time has come for a CBF chapter in Texas," David Currie of San Angelo told several hundred Texans who attended a state gathering during the Fellowship's national general assembly in Houston in June.

Currie is the executive director of Texas Baptists Committed. He also is a member of the Fellowship's national Coordinating Council and will be its finance chairman next year.

The goal of a Texas chapter of the fellowship would be "not to duplicate efforts of the Baptist General Convention of Texas -- which is going basically the way we want it to -- but to support Cooperative Baptist Fellowship efforts/causes in Texas," Currie said.

However, the two organizations have different purposes and should remain distinct, he stressed.

"The goal of Texas Baptists Committed is to tell the truth about fundamentalism and to keep the Baptist General Convention of Texas from going the way of the Southern Baptist Convention politically," he explained. "The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship gives its emphasis to missions -- the only thing that ever united Baptists."

"The two groups work well together," he said. "As folks understand the dangers of fundamentalism, then they can look for participation in groups that are authentically Baptist."

At their gathering in Houston, Texas Fellowship members voted to direct their state Fellowship steering committee to develop a charter. The charter is to be presented at the group's next meeting, when the Fellowship holds its 1999 general assembly in Birmingham, Ala., next summer.

Creation of a state Fellowship chapter would clear the way for more focus on missions, predicted Bill Turner, pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston and the Texas Fellowship convener.

"We think the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship movement is mature enough that we can disengage from Texas Baptists Committed ... to the degree that we can look to the future proactively and focus on missions, theological education and Baptists principles, which CBF supports," he said.

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Church rolls swell by 90 million since '96

By Ashlee Ross

NEW YORK (ABP) -- The Christian faith can claim about 90 million more followers in the United States and Canada than in 1996, according to a recent study.

Published in the 1998 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, the study focused on the membership and financial data of American and Canadian denominations, the largest religion in the world.

In addition to the growth of Christianity, other religions saw significant growth in North America. The Muslim religion grew by nearly 3 million people, Hindus by more than 1 million, and New Religionists by 1.4 million. Jews saw a smaller rate of growth with 700,000 additions.

Falling under the Christian religion, more than 53.55 percent of all church members attend churches affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church.

"While religious freedom has spurred the proliferation of denominations in the United States, the patterns of affiliation have disproportionately favored the three largest denominations," the study reported.

Denominations with the biggest numerical gain include the Roman Catholic Church (927,460), Churches of Christ (595,000), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (88,500) and Assemblies of God (79,606).

Denominations with the biggest percentage gain include the General Conference Mennonite Brethren Churches (300 percent), Christian Churches of North America (134 percent) and the Liberal Catholic Church (132 percent).

More than 28,660 people joined Southern Baptist churches in 1996, a growth of 0.18 percent.

The United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ were among 27 denominations reporting drops in membership.

Financially, the Southern Baptist Convention takes in more money than any other denomination reporting its finances, with total contributions of nearly \$6.9 billion. However, the SBC distributes only 1.33 percent of its income to benevolences, which is the second lowest of all denominations reporting their finances.

"Per capita benevolence is declining both in real dollars and as a percentage of church total resources," the study reported.

Members of Southern Baptist churches gave an average of \$438 to their churches in 1996. This average falls in the bottom fifth of all denominations reporting their finances. Eight denominations had lower membership giving averages, and 45 denominations had higher giving averages.

Neither the Mormon Church nor the Roman Catholic Church submitted financial data to the yearbook.

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