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### **Ecology should be a central concern for churches, study group maintains**

By Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Ecology is not a social issue but a theological issue that ought to be a central concern for Christians, according to an Alliance of Baptists' work group.

About 40 people crowded into a workshop at the Alliance's March 12-14 convocation in Richmond, Va., to get a first look at "Care for the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action." Later, the entire convocation voted to "receive with gratitude" the 28-page report, the result of a three-year study.

"The thesis of this report is that ecology is not another issue on which the church must focus, but rather it is a central motif which must be interwoven into all areas of the church's thought, action, worship and spirituality for the church to minister effectively in our time," Alliance member Herman Greene wrote in an introductory statement in the report.

The report's aim is to lead Alliance Baptists to "interweave an ecological vision into the life and ministry of the church," wrote Greene, an attorney from Durham, N.C., and coordinator of the ecology work group.

Another member of the work group, David Wheeler, said conveying that message to Baptists is possible only if "we can convince people [it] is really a biblical theme."

Baptists and other Christians have missed the connection between theology and ecology, said Wheeler, a theology professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kan.

Most Baptists view theology as the interplay between humans and God and the earth merely as the “stage setting” for the divine-human drama, Wheeler said.

“The Bible is not about God and humanity exclusively,” Wheeler said. “The Bible is about God expressing God’s glory through the entire creation.”

Familiar Bible themes such as the fall and redemption are often treated as if they are “human” events, Wheeler said, but Scripture describes them as applying to the whole of creation. “Creation is cosmic in scope,” Wheeler said.

Another member of the work group, Elizabeth Barnes, concurred.

“Humankind is the human part of creation, not all of creation,” said Barnes, a theology professor at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

Barnes said her own education at a Baptist seminary included no mention of environmental theology, despite the fact that longtime Baptist professor Eric Rust had written extensively on the topic as early as the 1960s. She attempts to correct that deficit in her classes, she said, by trying “to weave ecological theology and ethics into every course I teach.”

Margie Latham, director of the Center of Eco-Ministries in Katy, Texas, said environmentalism has been viewed as “largely a secular” movement.

“There doesn’t seem to be any explicit focus” on leading churches to think about ecological issues, said Latham. Both a trained geologist and a seminary graduate, Latham said she formed the center out of a desire to merge faith and respect for the environment. “I see creation as our neighbor,” she said.

Mahan Siler, retired pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., said moving away from a human-centered theology is “a radical shift.”

“It’s not just something you add on to your understanding of the Bible,” Siler said. “It’s a transformation. If anybody has any intuition, they know if they get into this it’s going to change their ministry radically. I understand the resistance.”

“We are human beings, so the most natural thing in the world is for us to see things from our point of view,” Siler said.

Wheeler added that Christians should instead ask, “What does it look like from God’s point of view?”

Individual members of the work group wrote articles for the report.

In one, Barnes maintained that: “Related to God, other humans, and all of nature, we, as members of the human species, do not stand outside and above nature but within it.”

Humans “have broken our covenant with God our Creator, other members of the human family and nature,” Barnes wrote.

“Instead of gentleness, care and lovingkindness, attitudes of greed, arrogance and selfishness have defined our perspective toward Earth and our fellow beings in creation,” she continued.

“Despotically, we have dominated the creation rather than serving it with the intentions of friend and servant ... .

“Addicted to affluence, we have exploited nature for material excess, exhibited in lifestyles of conspicuous consumption.”

The report recommends that Alliance Baptists take a leading role in caring for the earth through preaching and teaching, organizing conferences and aligning with environmental groups in order to “translate ecological concern into ecojustice action.”

It also suggests support for “just and sustainable economic and agricultural practices,” both globally and locally, which promote “sustainable sufficiency” in place of “sustainable development.”

The report also suggests that Alliance members communicate environmental concerns to public officials and support candidates who hold ecological convictions.

“On a personal level, we can practice frugality in our lifestyles and patterns of consumption,” it continues, while “nurturing an appreciation for ‘non-consumptive joys’” such as family, friends, nature, art, music, work and play.

The report includes a liturgical reading affirming “nature as God’s handiwork, valuable to God and itself, apart from any value it has for human life.”

It calls Alliance members to covenant to engage in “prayer and contemplation of nature,” to “shun arrogance and imperialism” and to “bear Christian witness as ‘conscience of the community’ in matters of earthkeeping.”

“Finally and centrally, as members of the Alliance of Baptists, we covenant to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, including our neighbors of all creation,” the covenant concludes.

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CORRECTION: In the March 16 ABP story “Alliance of Baptists celebrates founding of Richmond seminary,” please correct the 10th paragraph to read as follows:

Most of the new schools are supported by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, another moderate Baptist splinter group that formed in 1991. With nearly 1,500 contributing churches, the Fellowship is larger and more geographically diverse than the older Alliance, which lists 115 affiliated churches and is strongest on the East Coast.

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## **Lyons steps down as president of black Baptist convention**

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (ABP) -- Convicted on state racketeering charges, Henry Lyons resigned March 16 as president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, despite an overwhelming vote of support by the convention’s board.

Meeting in a called executive session in St. Petersburg, Fla., leaders of the denomination accepted Lyons’ resignation “with deep regret” and elected Stewart Cureton of Greenville, S.C., as interim president. A permanent president will be elected to a five-year term in September.

The day after stepping down as president, Lyons pleaded guilty in federal court to five counts of fraud and tax evasion. In return for the guilty plea, federal prosecutors dropped 49 pending charges against him and agreed not to force him to testify against co-defendants Bernice Edwards and Brenda Harris, who are scheduled to stand trial in April.

In a statement to reporters, Lyons said: “When the devil tempted Christ Jesus, he tempted him with fame, power and wealth. I have fallen short of the standard set by Christ Jesus, for I am just a man. So let me speak to you now as a man. I made mistakes, and for this I am truly sorry. But besides being a man, I am still a servant of God -- appointed and chosen to lead. It is time I acted like a leader.”

“In 60 days or so, the state and federal government will take my body and lock it up, but my soul and mind will never be shackled and will always serve God,” said Lyons, who awaits sentencing on both state and federal convictions.

Lyons faces up to eight years in prison for his Feb. 27 conviction on state charges of racketeering and grand theft. One official predicted he would serve between 70 and 87 months for his federal sentence.

It is undecided whether he will serve time in a state or federal prison.

The state court convicted Lyons of bilking more than \$4 million from businesses who viewed him as a gatekeeper to a nation of black Baptists. He pleaded guilty to bank fraud, forgery and failing to report \$1.3 million in income in his federal trial.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Richmond seminary adds two to faculty**

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond trustees have approved two new faculty members to teach in the areas of church music and spirituality beginning this fall.

Meeting March 15-16, trustees approved Deborah Loftis Schoenfeld as assistant professor of church music. Schoenfeld, associate minister of music at Riverchase Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., will become the 8-year-old seminary's first faculty member elected to teach church music.

Also joining the faculty is Stephen Brachlow, who will be professor of Christian spirituality. He will replace Glenn Hinson, who is retiring at the end of this academic year.

Brachlow is currently professor of church history and Christian spirituality at North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, S.D., where he has taught since 1978. He has a doctorate from Oxford University in England.

Schoenfeld has a doctorate in musicology. She has been a music minister at several churches and taught as an adjunct professor at the University of Louisville, Samford University, McAfee School of Theology and BTSR.

The Richmond seminary has recently offered at least one music-related class each year, but the election of a full-time faculty position in church music "signals that we are moving to a new level of commitment in this area," said seminary President Thomas Graves.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Meredith College selects first female president**

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- A University of Michigan administrator has been named the first female president of Meredith College, a 108-year-old women's school in Raleigh, N.C.

Maureen Hartford was named the seventh president of the largest women's college in the Southeast Feb. 26. She has been vice president for student affairs at the University of Michigan since 1992.

At a news conference announcing her election, Hartford noted she was a member of the first freshman class at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill to include women and expressed a long-

standing interest in helping women feel more comfortable on college campuses. She said she is especially interested in the areas of engineering and sciences, where the attrition rate is high among women.

Though she is an active member of the Episcopal Church, Hartford said she is interested in visiting Baptist churches and getting to know the Baptists of North Carolina.

Meredith College, started as a Baptist school in 1891, has had a fraternal relationship with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina since college trustees began naming their own successors in 1997. Previously, trustees were elected by the state convention.

About a third of Meredith's students are Baptists.

A native of Charlotte, N.C., Hartford received undergraduate and graduate degrees from UNC-Chapel Hill, and earned a doctorate in higher education administration from the University of Arkansas.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Baptist layman dies while on mission trip**

JONESVILLE, N.C. (ABP) -- A North Carolina Baptist layman died March 12 in a swimming accident while on a mission trip in South Africa.

Otis Chipman, who was on a nine-member volunteer team, drowned when he and his wife, Glendora, were caught in an undertow at a beach near Durban, said their pastor, Ed Yarbrough.

Chipman's wife was hospitalized overnight in South Africa following the accident, said Yarbrough, pastor of Mineral Springs Baptist in Jonesville, N.C.

The team was there as part of an ongoing partnership between the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina and Baptists in Southern Africa.

Chipman was a trustee of the Mineral Springs church, where he and his wife were volunteer youth directors, Yarbrough told the North Carolina Baptist newspaper Biblical Recorder.

"They have been extremely faithful and supportive of all the programs of the church," he said.

In addition to his wife, Chipman is survived by a 19-year-old daughter.

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-- By ABP staff

## **\$21 million get-out-the-vote effort launched by Christian Coalition**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Christian Coalition has announced a \$21 million drive to distribute 75 million voter guides and "energize" 15 million Christian voters for the 2000 national elections.

The conservative agency's founder, Pat Robertson, announced the effort March 11 in Washington.

"We are launching effective today the most massive effort to mobilize the grass roots in our history," Robertson said, calling the initiative the most important in the Christian Coalition's 10-year history.

"The United States is faced with one of the major elections of its history," he said, adding he believes the next president will appoint three Supreme Court justices and 180 federal judges.

Robertson said the group will seek to raise and spend the \$21 million over the next 20 months. He also said the agency will increase its paid field staff tenfold and train 1.5 million "conservative activists who in turn will be responsible for 15 million energized voters."

He called on lawmakers of both parties to "recognize that these voters that we are recruiting are concerned about the moral issues facing America. But beyond that, they have a concern for lower taxes, they have a concern about the defense of America, they are appalled at the question of giving nuclear secrets and technology to the Chinese."

He said the group's legislative priorities, expected to be announced soon, will include proposals that "we think will be appealing to the voters we are going to recruit." At the top of the agenda, he said, will be inequities in the current tax code. He quipped that the code's 5.5 million words "far exceed" the number of words in the Bible.

Robertson became president of the organization for a second time earlier this year after Don Hodel, former Reagan administration official, resigned from the post.

Robertson said the coalition will distribute an unprecedented 75 million voter guides to churches across the country.

While Robertson claims the Christian Coalition voter guides are nonpartisan, he acknowledged that he favors Republican candidates. "Absolutely. There's no question about it," he said in an interview following the press conference. "Like it or not the Republicans right now come much closer to the evangelical moral positions on many issues. That isn't to say that there are not some Democrats who are dedicated Christians."

During the press conference, he answered questions from the media about his preference among current Republican presidential hopefuls. He said any of them "would be a lot more acceptable than Al Gore."

He also listed specific targets of the Christian Coalition's get-out-the-vote effort. Although the "strength of the coalition has been evident in the South," Robertson said, "we recognize the crucial importance in five of the key swing states." He listed Ohio, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Illinois.

Robertson also referred to House lawmakers involved in the recent impeachment process. "We do not intend to forget 15 brave members of the U.S. House of Representatives who have been targeted for defeat by members of liberal activists such as People for the American Way. Christian voters in these districts will be told the truth and they will be encouraged to exercise their rights of citizenship in these key races."

He criticized the Senate's acquittal of President Clinton on the articles of impeachment brought by the House. "The American people are going to turn on those who let him go scot-free," he said. "I really believe there's going to be a backlash against the Democrats who have joined in lock-step to defend the president."

Michael Lux, political director of People for the American Way, said the civil-liberties group started a political-action committee more than a year ago to counter the political influence of the Religious Right. He said the PAC has not targeted members yet, "but their leadership in the impeachment process will only be a part of our consideration along with their support for public education and separation of church and state."

"We wanted to do it in an above board manner rather than a sham like the Christian Coalition voter guides," Lux said. "If Robertson is trying to help candidates get elected, he ought to form a PAC and be honest about it instead of having these voter guides that are designed to mislead people."

Other Christian Coalition critics were quick to pick up on recent speculation that the power and influence of Christian Coalition is diminishing.

“Robertson is desperately trying to regain some momentum after a year of disasters, blunders and defeats,” said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. “Unless he can control his radical rhetoric and get his political machine running smoothly again, Robertson risks losing his ringside seat in the Republican ‘big tent.’”

At the press conference kicking off the Christian Coalition effort, Robertson denied allegations levied by pilots for his nonprofit Operation Blessing. According to news reports, pilots have alleged that Operation Blessing planes were used to carry out diamond-mining operations instead of flying medical and other humanitarian relief to remote areas of the world. The Virginia attorney general’s office is investigating the accusations.

Robertson told Associated Baptist Press the pilot did not understand “that he was getting paid by me.” Robertson added, “The newspaper just misrepresented it.” He said he expects the accusations to be resolved in the next few days.

During the interview, Robertson, a Southern Baptist, also discussed his hope that Baptists would join the coalition’s efforts.

Robertson said that he hoped “every single Baptist church would be interested in distributing nonpartisan voter guides. We need to turn people out for the Christians around this nation.”

He said the Southern Baptist Convention may not be able to contribute directly to the cause, but suggested that several key leaders, including Bob Reccord, Ed Young, Jimmy Draper, Adrian Rogers and Richard Land could help.

“This denomination is the biggest, and I think right now more active, in championing social moral issues than any group in the country,” Robertson said.

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## **City-sponsored creche harms religion, St. Louis clergy, BJC contend in brief**

By Larry Chesser

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Arguing that religion is harmed -- not helped -- by government’s support, a group of St. Louis-area clergy is asking a federal appeals court to uphold a ban on a city-sponsored nativity scene in Florissant, Mo.

They asked a federal appeals court to uphold District Judge Catherine Perry’s ruling that a city-sponsored nativity scene at the Florissant Civic Center violates the church-state separation mandates of the Missouri and U.S. constitutions.

Officials of the St. Louis suburb have appealed Perry’s ruling to the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which is expected to hear arguments in the case later this year.

As they had done for several years, Florissant officials erected a creche display in late 1997. The American Civil Liberties Union asked city officials, on behalf of a local resident, to remove it. The ACLU argued that the nativity scene was an unconstitutional endorsement of Christianity.

The city declined to remove the creche but added secular elements to the display, including an assortment of reindeer, candy canes, a Santa Claus, a snowman, gift boxes and lollipops.

The ACLU sued, and in September, Perry ruled that the display violated the First Amendment's ban on establishment of religion and the Missouri Constitution's ban on the use of tax funds to aid religion.

"The erection of the creche at the main entrance of the Civic Center impermissibly sent a message to the 'reasonable observer' that the Christian religion was relevant to the City of Florissant and thus to an individual's standing in the political community," Perry wrote.

The secular holiday figures the city added after the ACLU complaint "were insufficient to negate or muffle the earlier message of endorsement," Perry said.

The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld holiday displays mixing religious and secular symbols on public property but ruled unconstitutional displays near the seat of government that endorse religion.

In a friend-of-the-court brief asking the appeals court to uphold Perry's ruling, the St. Louis clergy, along with the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington, D.C.-based religious liberty agency, said the separation of church and state benefits religion.

"Church-state separation is not an anti-religious concept. It honors religious diversity and equality by ensuring that government remain neutral on religious matters, neither favoring nor inhibiting religion," stated the brief, filed by Clayton, Mo., attorney Cynthia Holmes.

The brief argued that "any attempt to turn a nativity display into a mere 'holiday decoration' is disingenuous and offensive."

"A nativity scene depicts a historical event which is foundational to the Christian religion," it said.

The brief emphasized that the clergy and BJC do not oppose nativity scenes.

"In fact they would applaud the placement of a nativity scene on the lawn of every Christian home and church in the community during the sacred season celebrating Christ's birth."

What is harmful to Christianity, the brief asserts, "is not the government being required to remove a symbol of [the Christian] religion from a secular holiday display, but rather the notion that Jesus' birth has become a mere seasonal, holiday tradition without religious significance."

"Equating the Christ Child with Frosty and Santa and Rudolph is highly offensive" to clergy, the brief stated.

Holmes said she is saddened by a public outcry for government sponsorship of religion.

"It is difficult to imagine why anyone would want to establish government-sponsored religion when we see the results of such establishment in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and the Mideast," she said.

Two conservative organizations -- the Rutherford Institute of Charlottesville, Va., and the National Legal Foundation of Virginia Beach, Va. -- have joined the dispute on the side of Florissant officials. The NLF contends the display is permissible, because the city does not coerce anyone's religious beliefs.

Eight Baptist ministers were among those who joined the brief filed by Holmes, who is a member of the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

They are: John Anderson, pastor of Third Baptist Church in St. Louis; Dale Jackson, pastor emeritus, and David Johnson, current pastor of Overland Baptist Church in Overland, Mo.; Norman Mohr, pastor of Kingshighway Baptist Church in St. Louis; Rudy Pulido, pastor of Southwest Baptist Church in St. Louis; Guy Sayles, pastor of Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis; Dean Stewart, a member of Hanley Road Baptist Church in suburban St. Louis; and Richard Taylor of St. Louis.

## **Court rejects appeal of teacher fired for students' profanity**

By Ashlee Ross

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court will not hear an appeal from a Missouri teacher who was fired after letting students use profanity in a classroom assignment.

On March 8, the high court let stand an 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision upholding a school board's decision to fire Cecilia Lacks, a teacher at Berkeley High School in suburban St. Louis.

"A school district does not violate the First Amendment when it disciplines a teacher for allowing students to use profanity repetitiously and egregiously in their written work," the appeals court said.

Lacks assigned students to write and perform short plays for an English class. A 40-minute videotape of the plays recorded more than 150 uses of profanity. After an investigation, the school board fired Lacks in 1995 for not enforcing the school district's policies against profanity.

Lacks sued the school district saying that her First Amendment free-speech rights were violated. In addition, Lacks, who is white, claimed her firing was racially motivated.

A federal district court sided with Lacks on both the First Amendment claim and the racial-discrimination claim. The jury awarded Lacks \$750,000.

But the appeals court reversed the district court's judgment saying, "Isolated instances of profanity had been overlooked or tolerated in the past, but what went on in Lack's classroom went far beyond the reading aloud of a novel containing the occasional 'damn.'"

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following articles appeared originally in FaithWorks magazine. They are used by permission. Photos accompanying these stories are available by request.

## **Body piercing goes mainstream**

By Laurie Lattimore

ANNISTON, Ala. (ABP) -- Some look as though they came right out of National Geographic. Others sport the tamer college favorites -- an eyebrow ring or belly hoop. Many have body piercings you can't see and probably don't want to know about.

No matter the location, type or frequency, experts say body piercing is no passing fad. Body modification -- as the shoptalk goes -- has finally made its way West and is attracting an eclectic but growing audience on the American scene.

The stereotypical biker crowd is not necessarily the largest, and certainly not the exclusive, customer base for body piercing. Instead CEOs, politicians, state troopers, clergy, teens and soccer moms alike are lining up under the needle. But most of the one-time customers have little concept of the origin and purpose of piercing.

"This has been underground for years, but it has finally gone mainstream in the last five to 10 years," says Radar Love, a body-modification artist in Anniston, Ala. "Western civilization, and the United States primarily, is the only civilization to shun body piercing. Everywhere else in the world it is a status symbol."

Body piercing has roots in both European and tribal cultures. Greek men who did not have their genitals pierced were not allowed to marry. In Victorian England, Prince Albert used a piercing to facilitate his daily ritual of hiding his privates underneath the grossly tight trousers popular in the 19th century. The "PA" has remained a favorite among the truly committed, Love says.

While many of today's piercings are primarily for decoration and self-expression, the main motivation for serious aficionados is to enhance sexual gratification.

The typical college coed who bops into a piercing studio for a belly button ring is clueless about the culture she is dabbling with. "Most of our young customers have no idea about piercings," Love notes. "They see their buddies with a cute girlie ring and two weeks later they are getting one just to have one too."

It's this kind of blissful ignorance that worries the religious and conservative communities who are concerned that body piercing is one more sign of society's plunge into moral chaos.

"The younger ones get it done as a fad," says Jeff Browning, owner of three tattoo-piercing shops across central Alabama. "They saw it on one of their friends or on MTV or on their favorite professional wrestler."

Ed Tweet, businessman in Ames, Iowa, helped a tattoo-piercing studio get started in that small college town two years ago. Claiming unofficially to be the country's only tattoo-piercing shop owner without any personal body modification, Tweet believes there is societal significance in the body-piercing trend.

"When the fringe of society gets more exotic, it allows the middle class to get more exotic," Tweet says. During his high-school days, Tweet says, it was unheard of for guys to have their ears pierced. Now a regular pierced ear is so mild, it is almost an affront to hardcore piercees striving for ever-larger-diameter hoops to go through their ears. "The fringe stretch our boundaries a little bit," Tweet explains.

But despite this gravitational shift away from the center, Tweet doubts body modification is going to get out of hand. "They stretch the boundaries, but they will reach a saturation point. We have a limited market of those who want more than one [piercing], but we have a growing market for those who want just one."

Meagan McCall, daughter of a minister and a senior at Gilford College, a Quaker school in Greensboro, N.C., pierced her nose about a year and a half ago because she liked the look of it. "I just think it is really beautiful," she says.

Her family didn't find the nasal adornment flattering but accepted it nonetheless. "At my family reunion, my Granny kept wanting to pull out the ring." The nose ring is a follow-up to a rather large dragon tattoo that colors her lower back.

McCall's friends sport eyebrow and tongue rings. And while she and her friends are quite aware of the sexual function for piercings such as the tongue ring and genital ornaments, McCall thinks the attraction is more about self-expression.

She is adamant about never getting pierced in more private areas. "No way! That gets into self-mutilation," she says. "Besides, I wouldn't want any of those guys at the tattoo parlors touching me."

Rob Abbott, a junior at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, until recently had belly button and tongue rings. His reason was just "to do something at a level of craziness" he could handle.

Abbott claims he chose to add a barbell-like tongue piercing after having a particularly frustrating day. "I just thought it would be cool to have," he says. "I didn't do it to be a rebel or anything like that. I could sure come up with better ideas than that to rebel."

Renee Mooney, married mother of three and a student at a Baptist college in Alabama, doesn't understand all the hype around getting a body part pierced. "It was no big deal," says Mooney, proud bearer of a belly-button ring.

"I had wanted to do it for a long time," she explains. She came "real close" to getting a tattoo, she adds, but thought that was too permanent.

"I don't know exactly why I wanted to get it," says Mooney, an active Southern Baptist whose husband is in the military. "I have this certain image as a soccer mom, going to church and going to school, and the belly ring is a way to show a different side."

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## **Piercing a rite of passage for many GenXers**

By Laurie Lattimore and Greg Warner

(ABP) -- Life is hard. Those who survive should have something to show for the experience. How about a nose ring?

Body piercing -- like its cultural cousin, the tattoo -- is more than a fashion statement or symbol of rebellion for many young adults. To them it's an indelible testimony that life's meaningful experiences -- good, bad and even the religious experiences -- should leave their mark.

"To pierce one's body is to leave a permanent mark of intense physical experience, whether pleasurable or painful," says Tom Beaudoin, author of *Virtual Faith*, a book analyzing the "irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X."

GenXers measure life more by meaningful experiences than by achievements or acquisitions. The popularity of piercing and tattooing among these young adults "reflects the centrality of personal and intimate experience in Xers' lives," says Beaudoin, himself a pierced GenX Christian with a theology degree from Harvard.

Not all GenXers look for the deeper meaning behind their nose rings or belly-button hoops. And many choose not to adopt those markings at all.

But for many young adults, getting a piercing or tattoo amounts to a "rite of passage" into adulthood that American society does not provide any other way, say Beaudoin and others.

American society is one of the only cultures not to provide an obvious transition from youth to adulthood, says Michael Murphy, an anthropologist at the University of Alabama. Outside Western society, piercings are one way of marking children as becoming adults after accomplishing certain tasks.

"In America, kids don't know if they are fish or fowl," Murphy says.

Piercing, tattooing and other behaviors outside the cultural mainstream allow young adults to create their own culture. "Where they are outsiders in the normal world, they become insiders in their own little world," Murphy says. "Our society is great at proliferating those little worlds."

Susan Holtham, a sociology scholar who has studied body piercing, notes that piercing in primitive cultures is used as a symbol of joining the elite group. In the West, piercing symbolizes separating from the norm.

Holtham's research found a number of motivations among piercees. For some, piercing is a way to symbolize a radical change either in their attitudes, their bodies or their lives. A number of respondents pierced their bodies as a way to denote regaining control of their lives.

Aesthetics, nonconformity and sexual enhancement were of course among the other answers. Although few respondents said they pierced as a way to "belong," Holtham, herself a piercee, observed that people often arrive at piercing parlors in groups.

For many GenXers, piercing is a spiritual experience, too. While other generations tend to separate the spiritual and physical dimensions of life, body and soul are inextricably linked for Xers, Beaudoin says.

Piercing, which is a common way of “marking” a spiritual experience in many religions, becomes a “sacramental” expression for many Christian Xers, Beaudoin says,

The tattoo on Mike Gray’s right wrist has deep spiritual meaning, the 25-year-old says. It’s a cross adorned with the Chinese script for “servant.”

“I was sitting in the airport in Phoenix reading First Corinthians, how we are servants and slaves to the Lord,” he recalls. The scripture moved him so deeply, he says, he got the tattoo to commemorate the experience. The script is in red to represent the blood of Jesus. He chose the location, the wrist, “because of where the nail was driven.”

Most of Gray’s nine tattoos have spiritual significance, he says. So do some of his 14 piercings. All were painful. But so was the sacrifice of Christ, Gray points out. “He took on the pain and the sins we are committing.”

Gray agrees many in his generation are looking for bodily ways to mark their faith, even if they are painful. “This generation takes its faith more seriously than our parents. Their faith doesn’t cost them anything, or they don’t teach that it does.”

Beaudoin says GenXers turn to body piercing partly because “religious institutions are unable to provide for deeply marking, profoundly experiential encounters.”

“Institutions that ignore the way Xers need to be marked, religiously branded and body oriented cannot fully minister to them.”

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## **Body piercing helps Christians relate to ‘alternative’ culture**

By Greg Warner

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Christians who pierce their bodies know they are misunderstood. But they say they will put up with that in order to be “culturally authentic.”

One group of pierced Christians in Waco, Texas, says it’s more important to take on the markings of the alternative culture where they live -- with its distinctive dress, music and “body modifications” -- than to be at home in mainstream Christianity.

“It’s just part of it, a look,” says Rob Forkner, who has four piercings -- a lip, one ear and two in his eyebrow.

The only justification anyone needs for such non-conformity is the example of Jesus, says piercee Mike Gray. “Christ did nothing socially acceptable, or to make him acceptable to people. He hung out with whores, beggars, and tax collectors. He died a criminal.”

“If I’m not accepted because of the way I look, I’m not the one who needs to question that,” adds Forkner. “I’m pretty comfortable with who I am right now.”

But he doesn’t mind making other Christians uncomfortable, if it helps them examine their stereotypes. Piercings among alternative Christians “really forces people in American Christianity to deal with it,” says Forkner, originally from Anchorage, Alaska, who works in a Christian ministry to the punk scene.

“When I got my piercings, I really didn’t even think about my Christianity as having any effect on it,” says Forkner, “because for me some of the most right-on Christians I know are people with Mohawks and piercings.”

But Forkner is aware his piercings stigmatize him in the eyes of many. “I have to realize before I walk out that door there are going to be people staring at me. If that’s going to bother me, I shouldn’t get them in the first place.”

Kim Robinson, a 19-year-old from Houston, agrees her pierced lip -- called a labret -- will invite some people to label her, “but it also opens doors to other people.”

Robinson, an African-studies major at Baylor University, says her piercing is “more about finding acceptance within another culture” than a sign of rebellion. She acknowledges many piercings carry sexual connotations. “But I know my motivations are not that,” she says. “I can’t really please everybody, so I’m going to seek out my own identity.”

She won’t remove her lip ring just to avoid the stigma it carries, Robinson says, but she would take it out “if it was necessary.” For a job, for instance? “Not for just any job, but if it was a job I really wanted.”

Most people judge the practice of piercing based on their own “cultural norms and stereotypes,” says Ravi Kapur, originally from Hawaii. If people have a negative image of piercing, he says, “they need to ask themselves how and why they came up with that idea.”

“But all it is is art,” says Kapur, who lives and works at a nonprofit agricultural-training agency in Waco. “If they see art on a wall, they will admire it and attach meaning to it. But because of their negative stereotype of body piercings, they can’t look at it as art.”

“Your piercings or tattoos should never define who you are,” says Kapur, who sports piercings in his septum, nostril, chin, lip and ears. “I’m fine taking them out. I’m not socially disabled without them.”

Mike Gray, 25, is serious about body modification. He has 14 piercings to go along with his nine tattoos -- all acquired since becoming a Christian. Some are merely “a cultural thing.” Others have spiritual significance, like the two crosses and inscriptions, one on each arm. The inscriptions, both in Chinese, say “Son of God” and “Servant.”

Gray’s body modifications are a kind of road map of his spiritual journey. For this son of a Baptist pastor who grew up in rural Texas, they mark a break with traditional culture and his search for his own identity.

“I’ve been a Christian for 15 years now. But my faith, up until about four years ago, was not my [own] faith but my father’s faith. I didn’t begin to develop my own personal relationship with God until I realized it was mine and I had to make decisions that were my own.”

Gray became thoroughly immersed in the alternative culture and took on all of its markings. His first piercing was in his nipples. “I just wanted to pierce something, but didn’t want my parents to know.” Eventually his punk markings became obvious -- pierced ears and nose, spiked hair, studded leather jacket.

Finally, after exhausting several piercing options, he got a “Prince Albert” -- a genital piercing named for the British royal who popularized it in Victorian England. That too is related to his faith, Gray says. “I got the Prince Albert for no good reason except I was not using it. Because of my faith and the fact I’m not married, I don’t have sex.” The piercing is “definitely a reminder” of his Christian commitment, he says.

Gray’s tattoos are a more explicit statement of his faith. In fact, his two elaborate cross tattoos have become witnessing tools, he says. “These two are my W.W.J.D. T-shirt,” he says wryly.

Gray and other marked Christians say their piercings and tattoos give them credibility within the alternative culture, and actually open doors to share their faith. “I can relate better,” says Kim Robinson. Without the markings of their culture, Gray says, “alternative kids would not take [us] seriously.”

Gray says his pastor father has a completely different way of relating to the rural Texas culture in which he ministers. "His style is fine for the people he is witnessing to. But my dad could never witness to my friends or the people I am witnessing to. He could try, but he could never be effective."

His father, Jim Gray, is pastor of First Baptist Church in Eddy, Texas. "He doesn't like the tattoos and piercings, but he is accepting of them," the son says.

Recently Mike Gray quit wearing almost all of his 14 piercings -- the ones that show anyway.

"I just kind of gradually took them out," he says. Part of his disaffection, he says, is that piercing is less of a countercultural statement since it went mainstream. "Now they're doing it because MTV says its OK." But that's not the only reason he quit wearing his.

"A lot of it had to do with the fact I didn't feel like an individual any more," says Gray, who works as a production assistant for a TV station. "I want people to be forced to know me and not my piercings. And it was an obstacle to some extent."

"Now I just feel like a blue-jeans-and-T-shirt type of guy. And I feel so much freedom. I'm a chameleon. I can fit in anywhere. I love it."

Gray says he hopes others in the alternative culture eventually decide to pass on piercing.

"I want them to get to the point where they don't have to do it to freak people out or to fit in."

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