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D.C. Christians prepare for consequences as Iraqi war looms on horizon
By Robert Marus
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WASHINGTON (ABP) – As a U.S.-led war on Iraq becomes imminent, life under "code orange" has never seemed scarier. But apparently young Christians who live and work in Washington are not an easily scared lot.

President Bush gave a March 17 ultimatum to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein: Leave the country in 48 hours or consider yourself subject to invasion and removal. Simultaneously, the Department of Homeland Security raised its nationwide terrorism threat assessment to level orange, or "high risk" of attack – the color-coded scale's second-highest level. The move confirmed predictions by many terrorism experts that a U.S. invasion of Iraq would immediately increase the risk for new terrorist attacks against Americans.

In Washington – generally considered to be the most prominent target of anti-American terrorists – government agencies took extra safety precautions and military agencies increased the frequency of their air patrols over the city, adding to the ominous atmosphere. A guest editorial in the March 17 edition of the Washington Post warned of the ease with which rogue states or terrorist groups could achieve nuclear bombs to set off in Washington or New York.

But in a city full of young, ambitious people who come from far and wide to chase their dreams, many Christians are thinking about their role as beacons of hope in a dark world, no matter their view on the advisability of the war.

"Safety, unfortunately, is never a promise that God has made to us. So, the real goal, I think, is reminding people that God is there," said Sterling Severns, associate pastor for young adults at Washington's First Baptist Church. He noted the Gospel of Matthew begins with the birth of a child named Immanuel – which means "God with us" – and ends with Jesus' promise in the Great Commission that he will be "with you always, even to the end of the world." Severns said he took great strength from that: "The whole gospel is encompassed with this reminder that God is with us and always will be."

Very few of the young Christians interviewed for this story expressed any fear for their own safety. "Since a terrorist attack and my mortality is not something I can control and dying really isn't that bad of a deal for a Christian, and I love working on Capitol Hill, I trust God to have it all under control," said 31-year-old Greg Foster, a Liberty, Mo., native who attends First Baptist and works as an aide to Sen. Kit Bond (R-Mo.). "I have faith that God gave me life and will end it when he sees fit."

Twenty-six-year-old Texas native Sherri King, who works for a Capitol Hill "think tank," said fear would get in the way of properly exercising her role as a believer in Christ. "I can't actively love and serve him and actively love and serve my neighbor if I'm paralyzed by fear," said King, who grew up Baptist but recently became an Episcopalian.

But that doesn't mean fearful thoughts don't plague her from time to time. "More forbidding than, say, instant vaporization is the idea of living another 10 or 20 years with the effects of radiation poisoning or perhaps irreparable and disfiguring nerve damage," King said, referring to risks associated with radiological or chemical-weapons attacks. "But Jesus didn't particularly relish the prospect of the cross – yet he submitted, although he was certainly honest with God about his desires."

And fear for the safety of loved ones is often a more powerful concern to these young adults – many of whom are single – than for their own lives. "When I think of my own death, I think in terms of seeing Jesus face to face and I'd love to do that," said Miriam Rajkumar, a First Baptist deacon who lives in Washington's DuPont Circle/Embassy Row area and works for an arms-control organization. "I'm not at ease about the death of my friends and loved ones, however." Rajkumar's parents, who are of Indian descent, now live in the Persian Gulf nation of Dubai. She also has a cousin who worships with her and lives in her neighborhood.

Severns' church – located only six blocks from the White House in the DuPont area – has been approached by federal emergency-management officials to serve as a medicine-distribution point in the event of a biological-weapons attack on Washington. It also has an agreement with the nearby National Geographic Society headquarters to serve as a rendezvous point for society employees in the event of that building's evacuation. But he worries for his 10-

month-old son, who is in the church's daycare program most weekdays. "[Being a parent] has given me a totally different perspective," Severns said. "And I get a sense from the other young parents who have kids here in the daycare center that it's very much on their mind as well."

But several of the interviewees described their fears – even for their friends and family – as rather insignificant in the face of what many people around the world face every day. "I think that to compare what we live in, and what other people suffer through every day is to trivialize just how awful their conditions are," said Erika Young, a 23-year-old Michigan native and First Baptist regular. "My chances of getting an education are higher than my chances of being raped, unlike in South Africa. I have a roof over my head, I can reliably expect to eat three times a day... and I don't have to worry about being blown up on a bus."

Likewise, Rajkumar said living under the threat of terrorism has given her some new insight into the lives of those who live in highly difficult circumstances. "It has served to make me think more about Palestinian people – and others here and around the world who may or may not be oppressed – who feel acute grievances, real and imagined," she said. "What sets us free from these chains?"

But is continuing life in Washington worth it – particularly when many young adults toil for long hours and mediocre pay in a city with an astronomically high cost of living?

Jerald Walz, 28, is a Methodist minister's son who works for the Institute for Religion and Democracy, located near the White House, and who lives just across the Potomac River from Washington in Arlington, Va. Like all of the other interviewees, he scoffed at the idea of leaving the nation's capital. "Where else could you work to have such a large impact upon the world?" Walz asked. "Whether in government, civil society, business, or the church, working in Washington affords an opportunity that is not to be found in other places. Being in such a place also carries a risk, but I've yet to observe great opportunities in human history that don't come at the cost of some risk."

In lieu of First Baptist's regular Monday-night Bible study for young adults, Severns led about 25 participants in prayer for the nation and world after listening to Bush's March 17 speech. He then invited them – many of whom are hundreds or thousands of miles away from their nearest relative – to gather in the church's ornate Gothic sanctuary for comfort if another terrorist attack hit Washington and it was safe to leave their homes. Severns said providing such comfort was the primary ministry of God's people in such a time of crisis.

"If you look at the [Christian] church at critical moments in world history when evil was truly present, there are beacons, people who stepped forward and said that here is what church is all about – that the Kingdom of God is at hand even in the midst of all this evil," Severns said. "So I view this as an opportunity for the church to be precisely what the church is supposed to be – a sanctuary."



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Church uses prayer, remembrance in ministry to military families

By Ken Camp

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HARKER HEIGHTS, Texas (ABP)—Mowing yards, repairing cars and offering support groups for families of deployed military personnel all meet valid needs. But the pastor of a Fort Hood-area church believes his congregation should provide something beyond what social service organizations offer.

"We've repeatedly asked the question, and I'm not sure we have a good answer yet, 'What can we as a church do that only a church can do?'" said David Morgan, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Harker Heights, Texas.

One thing Trinity Baptist Church did was to sponsor a "Disarming the Powers" prayer rally in early March.

"The objective was to say that God has intervened in the past, throughout history, and we want him to do it again," Morgan said. "When we talk about powers, we speak not only of military might but also those powerful forces of fear, prejudice, pride and stubbornness that lead to war. "It's a way of saying that we may feel powerless in all of this, but we're not. There is a better way."

The event grew out of an eight-week study of the Lord's Prayer, relying heavily on the writings of Duke Divinity School theologians William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, a Christian pacifist.

The order of worship included prayers taken directly from old armed forces hymnals, as well as prayers for church members who were deployed or waiting for deployment.

At one point, a worship leader asked for the names of people directly affected by deployment, and the congregation responded with at least 20 names. "I didn't handle it well. I started breaking down at that point," Morgan acknowledged.

In addition to praying for the American troops and their families, the worship service included prayers for the Iraqi people. The liturgy also included prayers of confession, as worshipers were urged to acknowledge their complicity in the sinful attitudes that lead to war.

Musical selections ranged from "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" to "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

"Often as pastors, we can become so involved in leading worship that we may not experience worship. That day, I worshiped," Morgan said. "It was one of the most meaningful services I've ever been involved in."

On March 30, Trinity Baptist Church will host a luncheon for the families of deployed military personnel. The goal is two-fold, Morgan explained. Church leaders will ask how the congregation can minister to families in appropriate ways. And, he said, the church will let them know, "We remember you."

Visible reminders of deployed church members and personnel related to church members will be a prominent part of services in the weeks ahead, Morgan noted.

The church will rope off one pew in the sanctuary as a symbol of those who are gone. Church members will have the opportunity to drop letters to military personnel into a basket in the worship center, and volunteers will sort and mail them.

Worship leaders at Trinity Baptist may light votive candles each week in worship services for military personnel. Scripture readings may be assigned to church members who have been deployed, with a note that another member of the congregation is reading the passage on behalf of the absent member.

In addition to praying for deployed church members, leaders at Trinity also plan to send church newsletters and

prayer lists of local needs to members overseas so they can continue to intercede for the people at home.

"Our church is not limited to those who are here on Sunday or even those who are still in town. Our church is a global church at this point," Morgan said.



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Scrapbooking offers more than memories for churches reaching out to women

By Cheryl Sloan Wray

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- A craft that has become the third favorite in the United States has now become a favorite church activity.

Scrapbooking, the craft of preserving photographs and mementos in special acid-free memory books, is now being used in Alabama Baptist churches as a way to reach out to the community.

According to the Hobby Industry Association, scrapbooking has become the third most popular craft in the nation, embraced by one in five American families.

Scrapbooking is a \$300 million-a-year industry. It's a hobby on which many women readily admit they are hooked.

Linda Smith, coordinator for a scrapbooking group that meets at Huffman Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., said she fell in love with the hobby when she wanted to preserve her family's memories. Eight years ago, she decided to share her hobby with others and began a group that now meets once a month at the church.

"We meet on a Friday night and stay from 6 p.m. till midnight," she explained. "We have 10-to-30 women come every meeting, and most of us spend the time cropping and just fellowshiping with one another."

"Cropping" is a term that refers to the act of working on scrapbooks, whether the activity is selecting photographs, journaling (recording) memories about photographs or designing scrapbook pages.

Most scrapbookers use a variety of tools -- everything from special papers and stickers to colorful pens and die-cut designs -- to enhance their scrapbook pages. At most scrapbook events, women can be found around tables using any number of these tools to create beautiful pages dedicated to the lives of their children, family vacations, everyday activities and ancestors.

Smith said the monthly crops have become a meaningful outreach.

"Probably half of the women who come are not members of our church," she said. "Some are friends who go to other churches or who don't go to church anywhere. Others are just people who heard about our crop and wanted to come because they love scrapbooking. And some of them have become involved in other ministries of our church because of this group."

At First Baptist Church in Alabaster, a group of about 30 women meet each month to share their love of scrapbooking.

Group organizer Amy Waldrop became involved in the group a year and a half ago after she became a Creative Memories consultant. Creative Memories, the nation's first and largest direct sales scrapbook company, offers a variety of products that are sold by thousands of consultants across the United States. Waldrop offers her products at the monthly crop in Alabaster.

Waldrop said the meetings are a great time for women -- both church members and visitors -- to get to know each other better and to share a common hobby. "It's designed to be kind of like the quilting bees from years past," she said. "It's a way to get women together and get them communicating. We like to call it a girl's night out."

"Some of our members say that this is the only way they can get their friends to church," Waldrop said. "Once they come to our crop, it's a great opening to invite them to Bible studies or to activities for their children."

Scrapbooking is also seen as an important outreach at First Baptist Church, Pleasant Grove, which has a crop on the second Friday of every month. Julie Bates, a Creative Memories consultant and organizer for the group, said

churches are a natural place to hold scrapbooking activities.

"Churches understand the value of family, they know that family is a priority," she said. "That's why churches are such great places for these groups to meet."

Bates said their crops, which usually attract between 15 and 25 women, have worked wonderfully as an outreach ministry.

"People who come to a crop might be looking for a church," she said. "It's a great way to help people get to know a church in a casual, friendly, fun way."

For all of these women, scrapbooking is a natural extension of their faith and is something they encourage Christian women to explore as a possible hobby. Waldrop discovered the importance of scrapbooking after her bout with cancer and the death of her grandmother.

"When my grandmother died we looked through her photographs and discovered that so many of them didn't have any documentation with them. We didn't even know who some of the people in the pictures were. It was really very sad," Waldrop said. "I want to leave a legacy for my children. After I have died, I want them to still have a piece of me through my scrapbooks."

Waldrop compiles a variety of scrapbooks for her family. Her children have their own memory books, she creates heritage books of her ancestors, and she works on "blessing" albums.

"My blessing albums are small albums that show how God has blessed our lives," she said. "The pictures and the journaling help us realize that yes, we have been blessed, and we don't want to forget that."

For Linda Smith, the hobby is an extension of her faith because family is so interspersed with her Christian beliefs.

"I think it's a great way to preserve family history and to remember the importance of family events," she said. "Many people do albums for their children or do heritage albums. It's a great way to pass along your legacy."

"It's not just a hobby, it's a real lifestyle change," Bates said. "I'm trying to teach women that their scrapbooks will really make a difference. We are telling stories behind photographs, we are preserving memories. We are both preserving the past and inspiring the future."

"It's more than a hobby," Waldrop said. "It's my heart and soul on paper."

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– Cheryl Sloan Wray is a correspondent for The Alabama Baptist. Photo available.



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