

Neo is the prototype in Brian McLaren's experiment to reimagine evangelism for a post-apologetic world. Neo's latest adventure is likely to stir some controversy as well, if not for the tortoise sex scene then perhaps because the hero extols evolution as testimony of God's creative imagination.

"Nature is God's artwork, God's text, showing us so much about the Creator," McLaren told FaithWorks magazine. "I am very respectful of what I can learn from nature."

The author is in fact a teacher-turned-preacher, a former English professor who's now pastor of a non-denominational church outside Washington, D.C. But he's more than a pastor with a knack for writing.

McLaren is often cited as a leading voice of the next generation of evangelicals. And he's a key figure in the "emerging church," a mostly under-the-radar movement of Christian leaders in their 20s and 30s that is beginning to toss a few waves on the shores of evangelicalism.

McLaren will lead a one-day Congregational Leadership Institute in Charlotte, N.C., June 26, immediately prior to the general assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He will discuss the strategies and leadership that churches need to be viable and effective in the 21st century.

In *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, McLaren is not just teaching spiritual object lessons from nature. His goal is much more ambitious. He wants to show that faith and science are not natural enemies, that together they tell the story of God's creative purpose.

"One of our crises, as we enter the postmodern world, is that Christianity has presented itself as a system of belief instead of a story. And we got on adversarial terms with science." When science sought to explain the world without God, it produced a story without meaning, McLaren said. And Christians, trying to recast the gospel in the language of science and reason, produced a propositional belief system that lost touch with the story that gave it power. "I am interested in seeing science and faith as collaborators," McLaren said.

What can nature teach us? Two key lessons are diversity and interdependence. Both will characterize the future church, in McLaren's view.

"Life evolves to thrive in many different niches." The same should be true among Christians, he said. "We need incredible diversity to fill many, many niches."

Interdependence, though imbedded in nature, is foreign to the Western individualism so ingrained in American Christianity. That's why McLaren's "new kind of Christian" often uses words like "journey" and "conversation" to describe Christian life beyond the postmodern divide.

Conversation implies Christians can learn a lot by interacting with -- and listening to -- the world, especially non-Christians. "Their questions are an essential facet of our discipleship," McLaren said. "They change us."

"Jesus said we shouldn't worry when people ask us questions; the Spirit will guide us. That says to me there are things we're going to learn when we engage people missionally that we would not learn any other way."

McLaren and his cohorts emphasize dialogue over debate, community over individualism, experience over proof. They willingly shed the modernist expectation that Christians should have all the answers. Critics accuse

them of abandoning all absolutes. But most postmodern Christians don't deny absolutes exist -- only that they can be proclaimed unequivocally, without hesitation or humility.

"Certainty is overrated," McLaren declares. "God calls us to faith and to seek the Kingdom." There is great danger in the quest to be right, he warns. "History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain and we found out they weren't."

Likewise, cookie-cutter formulas and go-it-alone strategies will be ill-suited for the church in the new world.

"Our theology and the way we treat people, this to me is really the big issue," McLaren said. He quotes a fellow staff member who contends their church could trade its contemporary worship style for the Episcopal liturgy and it wouldn't change the character of the church.

"All of the things people focus on -- style of music and so on -- are all much less significant than we realize. One reason we have to pay so much attention to 'cosmetics' is because we are trying to market a message that is very much flawed. We think the gospel is about how to get individual souls into heaven when they die, when for Jesus the message was about the Kingdom of God, which is a here-and-now experience, not just a heavenly one, and a communal experience, not just an individual one, and involves all of creation, not just an invisible part of us called our soul."

Such bold statements can sneak up on the listener, who's easily lulled by McLaren's soft-spoken and winsome manner. The unimposing pastor is not a likely suspect to lead a theological movement, or even to lead a church. "I'm a total misfit," he admits. "I'm a middle-aged bald guy without proper credentials."

His training is not in theology but in English -- a bachelor's and master's from the University of Maryland -- and he backed into the pastorate. While in graduate school, McLaren and his wife, Grace, started a Bible study in their home. It attracted mostly graduate students and faculty and in 1982 took the shape of a house church. McLaren led the church while teaching English composition at the university. But as the congregation grew, so did the demands. "I was either going to have to step back or step in." In 1986 he left academia to become pastor of the congregation, which became Cedar Ridge Community Church.

Although he never went to seminary, McLaren first bumped up against postmodernism much earlier than most seminary students or pastors. "In graduate school in the '70s, postmodernism was first hitting the academy through literary criticism. I was exposed to deconstructionism and postmodern thought. I remember thinking, if this kind of thought catches on, Christianity is in real trouble."

It would be another two decades before the conversation would migrate into Christian circles. But for McLaren, the questions raised in those classroom discussions always "simmered on the back burner." Then he began to detect something different about the young nonbelievers Cedar Ridge was attracting. "I thought, oh no, that new way of thinking is the way all the people who walk through the doors of our church are thinking."

He began to re-examine the way he understood the gospel story, particularly the modern, rational formulations and apologetic evangelism he picked up from his Reformed background. "I went through a real personal theological and faith struggle in the mid-'90s," he recalled. "I didn't know any other Christians who were struggling with these issues."

He stumbled upon *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, by Richard

Middleton and Brian Walsh (1995), and later the writings of Leonard Sweet. "I was so relieved to find at least a few people talking about these things." In 1998, he tried his own hand at voicing the new challenge for Christians with *The Church on the Other Side*, his first book. But then he began to explore "evangelism in a different key" with four books -- *Finding Faith* (1999), *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), *More Ready Than You Realize* (2001), and his newest, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (2003).

McLaren writes "to help get a conversation started" about the Christian faith, he said modestly, but also "to free our understanding of the gospel from these modern categories." *A New Kind of Christian* provoked a lot of conversation within the evangelical establishment, not all of it pleasant. Although most reviews were positive, a few were "blistering." The book was the subject of a four-part analysis in *Books and Culture* last year.

The book questioned Christianity's sometimes clumsy, sometimes costly, accommodation to modern rationalism. Critics said McLaren either offered nothing new or abandoned centuries of essential tradition.

"The people who dislike the book the most tend to be strict, high Calvinists," McLaren said. That makes sense, he adds, because Calvinism "is the highest expression of modernism." But he is heartened by the response he receives from other readers, most of whom praise its fresh approach. Some of that affirmation comes from older evangelicals who nonetheless recognize that traditional expressions of the gospel "have turned off their children and grandchildren."

McLaren seems untroubled that he may not be embraced by the evangelical mainstream. "What I'm really excited about is the next 20-to-30 young leaders who are planting churches, who are in seminary, women as well as men, minorities. They're getting to start so much further along."

This "misfit" has quietly earned the respect of the thought leaders, innovative pastors, church planters and entrepreneurs who make up the rag-tag "emerging church" movement. Although McLaren, 46, is older than many in the movement, they usually look to him for leadership. Those young leaders value not only McLaren's insights but the charitable tone he sets for the postmodern conversation.

"Brian has moved beyond simple deconstruction and stone-throwing to a much more productive combination of healthy critique along with future-thinking and praxis," said Mark Oestreicher of *Youth Specialties*.

To these younger leaders, McLaren's status gives him credibility. "I wasn't indoctrinated. I wasn't socialized into that. There's a certain perspective you have on the fringe of things," said McLaren.

Raised among the tiny Plymouth Brethren, shaped by the Jesus Movement, trained in the secular academy, impassioned by art, music, philosophy and nature -- McLaren doesn't fit neatly into any evangelical stereotype. But that works to his advantage in an era whose zeitgeist is eclectic, holistic and global.

"I'm not interested in saving evangelicalism or reforming evangelicalism, although others might have that calling. My dream is that there could be a conversation and a friendship among grass-roots leaders and theologians in evangelical, mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities, and in some small way that this kind of broad friendship could bring new possibilities to Christian churches around the world."

"I really see a convergence happening," he adds.

Already McLaren sees evidence that young Christians are more willing to look past doctrinal differences to find fellowship. They see

denominations as "structures for connection rather than barriers for isolation." They are more open to the wisdom and practices of the ancient church and non-evangelical traditions -- "resources grossly undervalued in recent decades."

Many of those young leaders are pastors of start-up churches, often meeting in inner cities or living rooms. The emerging-church movement places a lot of emphasis on church planting, largely because it's so difficult to get traditional churches to "transition" into something else. But McLaren says no one approach will suffice.

"I'm for all of it," said the non-denominational pastor, whose own church looks pretty mainstream on the surface. "We need new churches and we need transitioning churches. And we need for other churches to stay the way they are. There are resources we are gaining from the Orthodox tradition that, if they had not been very conservative, those theological perspectives would have been lost or even more marginalized than they are. The beautiful thing God does in the church is some people conserve things and they don't even know who they are conserving them for. And that's a beautiful thing."

"I am very against people being pressured to change who aren't called by God to do so."

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NAMB, BGCT at impasse
over altered agreement

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The North American Mission Board has postponed action on a cooperative missions agreement with the Baptist General Convention of Texas until at least October.

A motion passed during the NAMB trustees' meeting May 7 declared the Southern Baptist Convention agency and Texas convention had reached an "impasse" in negotiations over the agreement. The motion called for the mission board's leaders to appoint a "response task force" to study the situation. NAMB trustees will not meet again until Oct. 8.

Cooperative agreements provide structure for joint ministry between the SBC mission board and state and regional conventions across the nation.

The BGCT and NAMB do not currently have an agreement. The most recent cooperative agreement was drafted between the BGCT and the old SBC Home Mission Board, which coordinated Southern Baptist domestic missionary work until it was disbanded in 1997. At that time, NAMB replaced the old mission board.

Negotiations on an updated document have been under way for more than a year, and both sides at various points have rejected changes made by the other. The sticking point in the document is NAMB's requirement that jointly funded missionaries sign an affirmation of the 2000 "Baptist Faith & Message."

The BGCT has repeatedly declined to embrace the Southern Baptist Convention's new faith statement, although BGCT officials have said they are willing to work jointly with NAMB in supporting missionaries who are comfortable signing it. The BGCT also has said it will provide other means of funding for Texas missionaries who choose not to meet NAMB's mandate.

In early March, the BGCT Executive Board approved a change to the most recent agreement proposal from NAMB and then added one sentence above the space where BGCT officials were to sign the document. That sentence reads: "Approved with the understanding that this indicates neither

affirmation nor endorsement of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000."

The BGCT addition falls under an all-capitals heading that reads, "BAPTIST GENERAL CONVENTION OF TEXAS." It is distinct from a section below where NAMB officials are to sign, also labeled in all-caps, "NORTH AMERICAN MISSION BOARD."

The BGCT accepted a parenthetical rewording requested by NAMB officials elsewhere in the document that notes "NAMB's requirement" for jointly funded personnel "to conform to the Baptist Faith & Message 2000."

After the BGCT Executive Board signed off on the document with the clarifying statement above the signatures, NAMB's president and trustee chairman both criticized the Texans' action.

NAMB President Bob Reccord labeled the Texas board's addition of the statement to the document "regretful and frustrating." It "places at risk the possibility that we could once again work cooperatively to reach Texas and North America for Christ," he claimed.

NAMB trustee chairman Terry Fox called the Texas action "yet another step away from the Southern Baptist Convention."

Ironically, Fox and Reccord previously faxed the BGCT a letter opposing the BGCT addendum to the document precisely because it "states the obvious" and "does not alter how the agreement operates."

At their meeting last week, the NAMB trustees approved a one-sentence motion: "Given the fact that the North American Mission Board and the Baptist General Convention of Texas have come to an impasse regarding a new cooperative agreement, and rather than enter into an argument about semantics, we move that NAMB's president and chairman of the board of trustees jointly appoint a response task force to review the substantive issues underlying the impasse."

The NAMB trustees took no further action regarding the agreement, said the mission board's spokesman, Marty King.

"The members of the task force were not named, and no other direction was given the task force other than what is in the motion," King said.

E.B. Brooks, director of the BGCT's church missions and evangelism department, who has guided the BGCT's participation in the process, expressed disappointment with the NAMB trustees' delay.

Reccord and Fox already had written that the BGCT's clarifying statement does not "change the document in any way," Brooks noted. "With this in mind, we felt the agreement was affirmed," he said. "It was a simple matter of their board being informed as to what our executive board had done."

The possibility that the NAMB trustees would create a task force to consider "substantive issues" is cause for concern, Brooks added.

"We felt that any issues the NAMB had with us were dealt with when they adopted the cooperative agreement last October," he explained. "This action raises the potential of placing new issues into consideration of the cooperative agreement that they have already approved."

"I am afraid that our churches will wait several months, only to discover that the rules have changed and that we must consider a new cooperative agreement."

"I am praying that whatever 'substantive issues' are considered will be discussed with BGCT leadership and our churches will not be denied the opportunity to work with the NAMB in reaching North America for Christ," Brooks said.

Resigning missionary couple
says 'something is wrong'

By Trennis Henderson

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- For thousands of Southern Baptists, many of the international missionaries who were fired or resigned last week are more than just names on a missionary prayer list.

Don and Angie Finley, appointed in 1988 by the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, are prime examples. Serving most of their missionary career in Brazil, the couple worked closely with hundreds of mission volunteers in the early 1990s during the Kentucky Baptist Convention's partnership with Baptists in Espirito Santo, Brazil.

The Finleys, who submitted their resignation in an April 28 letter to their regional leader, are among 43 veteran missionaries who resigned, took early retirement or were terminated last week by IMB trustees. Their decision came in response to an ultimatum issued last month by IMB President Jerry Rankin for career missionaries to affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, resign or be dismissed.

The couple, in an e-mail interview, acknowledged the process "has taken a toll on us." "One of the hardest things is that when we left for the field, Southern Baptists promised to 'hold the ropes' and support us while we were overseas. Now it feels like our leadership has taken that rope and tried to hang us with it."

Why would a couple with 15 years' experience in international missions choose to resign their IMB positions rather than endorse the SBC's revised faith statement?

In a response a year ago to Rankin's initial directive, the Finleys explained that "our clearest point of difference with the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message is not in the text of the doctrinal statement itself, but in the preamble's assertion that this document is to serve as 'an instrument of doctrinal accountability.'"

Noting that they are "in basic agreement with the majority of the statement's text," the Finleys wrote that "as far as we know, we have never given occasion for anyone to make an issue over the integrity of our teaching, lives or doctrine."

They emphasized, however, that "our authoritative rule of faith and practice always has been, and always must be, the Bible alone."

In their April 28 letter of resignation to Robin Hadaway, the IMB's regional leader for eastern South America, the Finleys explained they were "not resigning because we have a problem with grassroots Southern Baptists" or "because we have done anything wrong" or "because of a change in our sense of call."

"There is only one reason we are resigning," they wrote. "Put simply, we no longer believe that the IMB offers us viable conditions for effective missionary service. When a Baptist missionary-sending agency demands doctrinal accountability on the basis of a manmade document rather than on the basis of Scripture, something is wrong.... When board leadership resorts to untrue accusations to justify the threat to terminate us, something is wrong."

In an e-mail interview with the Western Recorder, Kentucky Baptists' newspaper, the Finleys said affirming the 2000 faith statement "and the way it is being used would, in our view, compromise biblical authority and be a denial of our heritage as Baptists."

Though their decision to resign "has been very painful," the Finleys added, "Our call did not come from the SBC or the IMB. It came from God and it hasn't changed.... They can close one door; God can open any number of doors."

The Finleys, who were missionaries-in-residence at Kentucky Baptist-related Georgetown College during the 1992-93 school year, plan to return to Georgetown this summer to serve a second time as missionaries-in-residence.

Eric Fruge, Georgetown's director of church relations, said school officials look forward to the Finleys returning to campus. "We know them and love them and are excited about them coming," Fruge said. "We want them to use this year with us to find God's future direction for their lives."

-30-

Former missionary nurse prepares
nurses for mission service tomorrow

By George Henson

DALLAS (ABP) -- Knowing now what she didn't know then, Amy Roberts prepares nurses today for work as missionaries tomorrow.

Roberts, senior lecturer and coordinator of the family nurse-practitioner program at Baptist-related Baylor University's Louise Herrington School of Nursing, knows first-hand that a nurse must know a lot of things not taught in a traditional nursing curriculum to be ready for missions work.

Fulfilling a call she first felt as an Acteen, Roberts served in Tanzania as a nurse practitioner. While there, she developed what she termed "Nissan neck." The rutted country roads and worn suspensions jar travelers from village to village in a kind of perpetual whiplash. She worked with one missionary whose head veered so far off kilter he hit the side window and knocked himself out.

Roberts' own case of "Nissan neck" was exacerbated by a rollover in the Serengeti Desert, but she continued to serve there, waiting for her furlough to the United States for treatment. When she finally was headed home, X-rays in hand, her itinerary home had to be adjusted en route. She awoke in a London hotel after a layover to find she couldn't move. A ruptured cervical disc had suddenly gotten worse.

Even after surgery, she wasn't immediately able to use her right arm, which prevented her from returning to Africa. Accustomed to working all the time, Roberts began looking around for something to do and decided to return to seminary. While there, she wrote a thesis on the educational needs of missionary nurses.

"I chose this topic at the seminary because I wished I had this sort of training before I went to Africa," she said.

A member of the board that reviewed the thesis was impressed enough to pass it on to Baylor President Robert Sloan. Soon Roberts had an offer to make her thesis a reality.

The family nurse practitioner program offered at Baylor is a bit atypical, because missionary nurses need skills not deemed crucial in the United States.

"When you're on the mission field, you have to do advanced practice there whether you are trained or not, so we're giving our students the training they will need," Roberts said.

"Microbiology isn't something that is typically taught either, but you have to know at least some microbiology because you have to be able to hire someone to run your lab and you have to know if they are worth their salt," she added. "If you don't have a lab, your diagnostic capabilities are cut in half."

Roberts' students also are given a dose of tropical medicine and some things that used to be taught in American schools but no longer needed here -- like plaster-of-Paris casting of broken bones.

"We make them learn not just the latest but what they will actually have access to," she said.

It's also helpful for missionary nurses to be familiar with British drug names, something seldom taught in other American nursing schools. "This is all stuff I had to learn the hard way," Roberts said.

Student nurses are required to prepare a business plan for setting up a clinic, including how to go about getting drugs and medical equipment at reduced prices.

The nurses get hands-on experience with two trips to Mexico each year. Recently, the nursing school teamed up with Roberts' congregation, First Baptist Church of Arlington, Texas, for a medical-missions trip to the Texas-Mexico border city of Laredo.

Not only did the team provide medical and dental treatment, but the volunteers also showed a videotape of "Jesus," a film highlighting the life of Christ, almost continuously.

"One man accepted Christ through watching the 'Jesus' film," Roberts said. "It was on the TV, and they kept moving the TV to keep it in the shade, and he kept moving with it."

Health care can provide a pathway for evangelism, Roberts said. She had been concerned, however, that on previous trips the medical team was so occupied meeting physical needs that spiritual needs might have been neglected. This time, two seminary students accompanied the group for the specific purpose of meeting spiritual needs.

The Baylor nursing school also sponsors a conference in Africa every other year to train missionary nurses in the field. Students are allowed to accompany the missionaries back to their place of service to assist for six weeks as a part of their course work.

A maximum of 15 students per year are admitted into the nurse-practitioner program at Baylor, but the cap has not yet been reached. A total of 25 students currently are enrolled. Scholarships accounting for 75 percent to 100 percent of tuition costs are available.

Upon graduation, nurse practitioners can diagnose illnesses and prescribe medications. They are able to treat about 90 percent of all pediatric patients and 80 percent of adults, Roberts said.

Graduates of the nurse-practitioner program have landed in a variety of places of service. Some have gone into foreign missions, while others work in doctors' offices or have set up clinics in poor neighborhoods.

The program is tailor-made for people with an interest in missions, Roberts said. "We would like to get the word out to people who really would like to go into missions that we have a program designed just for them."

-30-

List of missionaries

fired by IMB revealed

By Lindsay Bergstrom

FRAMINGHAM, Mass. (ABP) -- Thirteen Southern Baptist Convention missionaries, who collectively have served on the foreign mission field more than 150 years, were fired May 7 because they refused to sign an affirmation of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

A story released last week in Associated Baptist Press reported the decision to terminate the missionaries by trustees of the SBC's International Mission Board at their meeting in Framingham, Mass., but the names were not made available by the IMB.

Seven were given the option to sign an affirmation of the document but declined. Their names and places and terms of service are:

- Ted and Frances York, Ghana, 1974-2003, serving 29 years
- Larry and Sarah Ballew, Macao, 1985-1987 as journeymen and 1996-2003 as career missionaries, serving a total of 10 years
- David and Susie Dixon, Spain, 1988-2003, serving 15 years
- Mary Katherine Campbell, Togo, 1968-2003, serving 35 years

Six were terminated without the option to sign the document:

- Rick and Nancy Dill, Germany, serving 20-plus years*
- Leon and Kathy Johnson, Mozambique, serving 20-plus years*
- Ron Hankins and Lydia Barrow-Hankins, Japan, 1975-77 as journeymen and 1981-2003 as career missionaries, serving a total of 24 years

Another 30 veteran missionaries resigned or took early retirement in recent days rather than sign the affirmation. They join 34 missionaries who resigned in protest last year.

Not counted among the 13 IMB missionaries terminated May 7 were Chris and Karen Harbin. The Harbins were fired last year for allegedly not teaching in accordance with the "Baptist Faith and Message." They served two years as journeymen, 1992-94, and as career missionaries 1996-2002, for a total of nine years.

The firings climaxed a series of events that began in February 2002 when IMB President Jerry Rankin, in response to suspicions he said anonymous sources had raised about IMB missionaries' doctrinal integrity, asked missionaries to endorse the doctrinal statement. They later were given a May 5 deadline to decide.

- Robert O'Brien and Mark Wingfield contributed to this story

* Precise dates of service for the Dills and the Johnsons were not available by press time.

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