



WESTERN RECORDER

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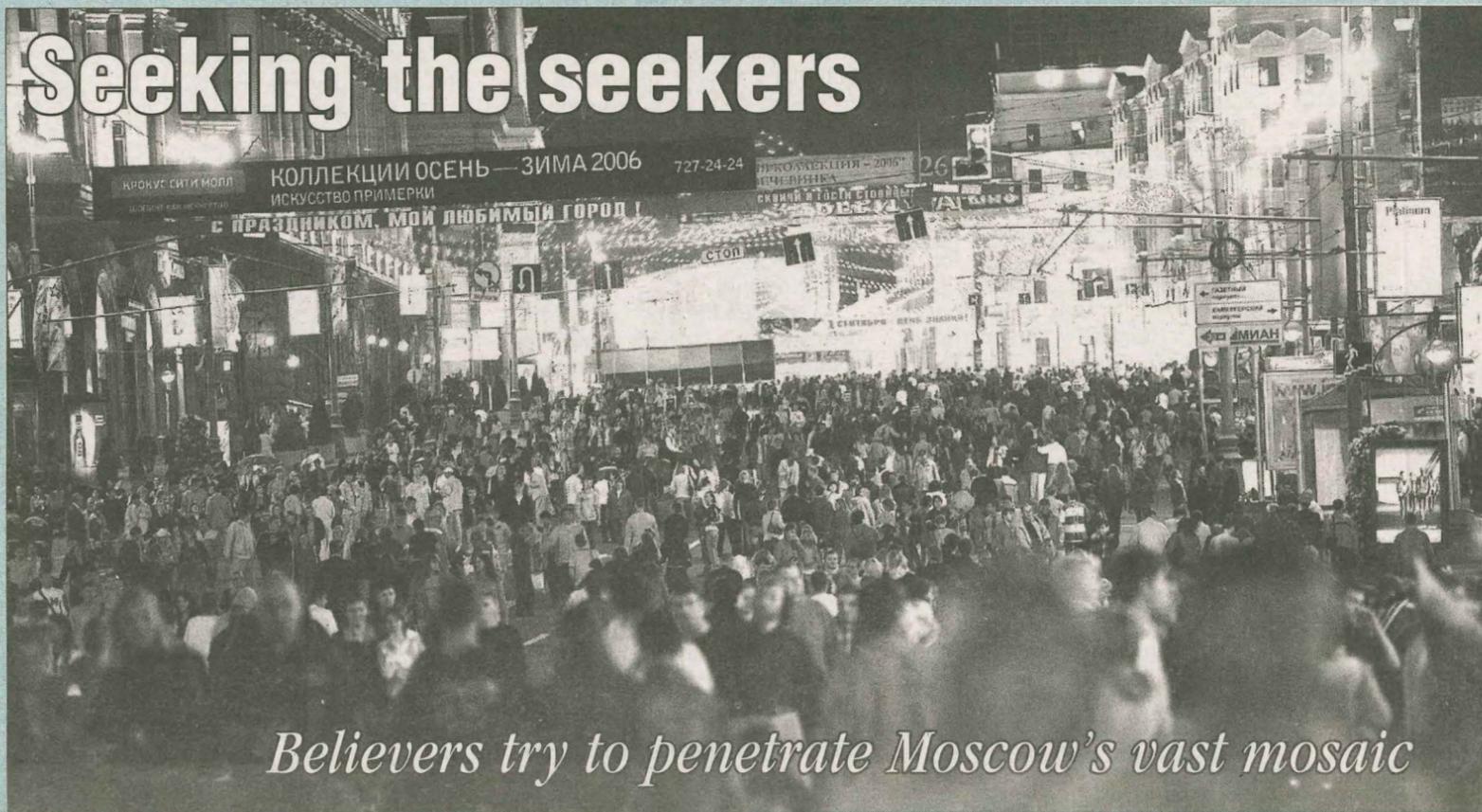
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Seeking the seekers



Believers try to penetrate Moscow's vast mosaic

Muscovites crowd the streets at midnight to celebrate Moscow's 859th birthday. The city has been the capital of a vast nation, stronghold of czars and heart of an empire—but its 15 million people need the hope of Christ. (BP photo)

By Erich Bridges
SBC International Mission Board

Moscow (BP)—How do you reach the 15 million souls of Moscow? One at a time.

The Metro, Moscow's renowned underground rail network, mirrors the city itself. It is huge, with untold miles of tunnels buried deep in the earth and escalators stretching out of sight. It's crowded; an estimated 9 million people ride daily. It's elegant and cultured, with chandeliers, marbled mosaics and works of art adorning more than 150 station platforms.

And it's dark. The people you see

there seem achingly alone despite the pushing crowds around them. "See their faces?" asked a missionary riding with a trainload of Muscovites. "See how sad they are? They've got no hope."

The Metro mirrors Moscow. And Moscow mirrors Russia.

Approaching its 860th birthday, Moscow has been the capital of a vast nation, the stronghold of czars, the seat of the Russian Orthodox Church and the center of Soviet communism.

"We know how to suffer," boast older Muscovites, who pride themselves on their combination of toughness and sophistication.

Communism did its best to destroy that spirit during 70 years of grim, gray conformity. Today, however, Moscow has re-emerged as the gleaming jewel of the "New Russia." It throbs with color, energy, life—and spiritual hunger.

"They have it," a missionary said of that inner hunger. "But they

don't realize it."

Red Square on a sunny day surges with young hipsters, families out for a stroll and ragged pensioners scrambling for loose coins. A demonstration by a small band of aging communists mourning the Soviet Union's demise attracts little more than a few curious onlookers.

"We are dying off," one of the communists bitterly complains. "Every year there are fewer of us. The youth don't care about anything. They only live in the present."

Actually, Moscow's new generation does care about something: See Missionaries work to ... *Page 8*



Study suggests new view of church planting among evangelicals

Dallas (BP)—Denominational growth in America has reached a plateau and in many cases has declined, but one would get the wrong idea to think the evangelical church is dying in the United States. A new study finds just the opposite.

Dallas-based Leadership Network, in cooperation with the director of LifeWay Research, has uncovered what they describe as striking changes in the number and type of new churches started in the U.S. that promise profound cultural implications for the future.

"While much of the North American church is in decline, a surprising number and increasingly diverse group of new churches are being started in innovative ways," said Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research.

"These churches are causing many Americans to reconsider churches they have rejected and to

re-think what church is," he added.

The "State of Church Planting USA" study was based on interviews with more than 100 leaders from a range of denominations, 200 church-planting churches and some 45 church-planting networks. Stetzer, who headed up the project, said the results surprised him in many ways.

"Church planting has grown in its scope, diversity and impact," he noted. "North American churches, networks and denominations are making church planting a growing priority."

Dave Travis, managing director at Leadership Network, added, "In commissioning this study, our goal was to review the current state of U.S. church-planting efforts and begin to assess what today's reality means for the next generation of planters."

Key findings of the six-months

research effort include:

Interest in church planting is growing rapidly. The pace of church planting has accelerated dramatically in recent years. It has become a preferred ministry option, with denominations and individual churches reporting that many of their "best and brightest" leaders are pursuing church planting as a primary ministry focus.

Local churches and church-planting networks are driving the trend. Historically, church planting has been a denominationally driven activity. Today, many of the country's most vibrant congregations see church planting as one of their central purposes.

"Affinity" strategies dominate. Church planters once based their efforts on geography, with a goal of placing new churches in "unserved" communities and areas. However, as Travis noted, "Through this study,

we learned that most successful church planters today are specialists who emphasize a particular style of worship or a specific demographic."

Survival and success are markedly greater than realized. Observers have long assumed that most church plants fail within the first year. Research reveals a very different picture, suggesting that 68 percent of the roughly 4,000 churches planted each year are still functioning four years later.

What do these results mean for the future of the U.S. church? Travis said he is hopeful "that this study and the growing number of outstanding church planting conferences and resources will inspire a new wave of planters in the years ahead. ... Launching vibrant new congregations is often a more feasible and more fruitful strategy than attempting to revitalize struggling congregations."

Dated material. Please deliver by Wednesday, Dec. 12.

Stand & deliver

'Knowing the people' among keys to effective preaching

By Ken Camp
Texas Baptist Standard

Dallas (ABP)—God chose “the foolishness of preaching” as the preferred instrument for communicating the message of salvation, the Apostle Paul wrote.

But when the time arrives to stand and deliver that message, how does a preacher measure whether it's an exercise in effectiveness or just plain foolishness?

“We don't always know,” Doyle Sager acknowledged.

Preachers can learn a lot by watching body language and facial expressions, as well as listening to honest critiques by trusted friends, said Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo.

But ultimately, he added, it comes down to “the witness of the Spirit.”

Something mysterious and wonderful happens when a preacher connects with his listeners—when God uses the words of the preacher to make the Bible come alive for worshippers, several pastors noted.

But sometimes, even the most diligently prepared, best-delivered sermons fall flat—particularly if the preacher doesn't keep in mind who is sitting in the pews on a given Sunday.

When Bill Shiell moved from Southland Baptist Church in San Angelo, Texas, to become pastor of First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., he was introduced to an important lesson early. In one of his first messages, as a way of engaging his listeners, he asked for a show of hands from anyone who had worked on a farm.

“In San Angelo, nearly everyone would have responded. Here (in Knoxville), only one hand went up,” he said.

Context helps convey message

Context matters. It takes time for a preacher to learn about the people in a particular congregation and how to communicate with them, Shiell noted.

“I preached a lot of great San Angelo sermons here that didn't connect,” he acknowledged, pointing out cultural differences between church members in rural West Texas and a larger university city in eastern Tennessee. “It takes a while to preach effectively in a particular place.”

Listeners intuitively will respond to a message that is “in their ZIP code” and tune out one that is not, Shiell said. “It has to resonate with the people who are in that room at that time.”

Preaching involves more than communicating information; it involves an invitation into relationship, said Kyle Reese, pastor of Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.

“I believe one cannot be an effective preacher without being active in pastoral care,” Reese noted. “We are preaching a gospel that is always incarnational.”

Joel Gregory, professor of preaching at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, affirmed that

sentiment.

“All preaching is venue-specific,” he said.

Gregory, who was pastor of Gambrell Street and Travis Avenue Baptist churches in Fort Worth, Texas, before his high-profile departure from First Baptist Church of Dallas several years ago, acknowledged that few preachers are suited to the kind of itinerate preaching ministry he has pursued in recent years.

“Very few are able to grow as a preacher without being embedded in a specific congregation,” Gregory pointed out.

Great preachers most often invest their lives in a “specific community of faith,” he noted. And listeners recognize the authority of the message when they realize the authenticity of the messenger, several preachers agreed.

A pastor who spends all his time cloistered in a study will find it hard to connect with listeners on Sunday morning, but the pastor who walks through life alongside church members typically will find a receptive audience, said Gary Long, pastor of Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Houston.

Address “particular season of life”

“Be a pastor first. Focus on knowing the people,” Long said when asked what advice he would give to young pastors. “Spend more than half your time living with the people and less than half the time working on a message to deliver to them. ... The authority to be heard comes when people know you love them and care for them.”

As he composes his sermons, Long said, he keeps in mind they are intended for “a particular community in a particular season of life.”

When the preacher is an attentive pastor who knows the congregation and the culture of the community in which they live, sermons become relevant to the listeners. But cultural relevance should not be seen as an end in itself, Long noted, pointing out that the gospel carries a counter-cultural message.

“Relevance is not our goal. It is just a tool,” he said. “Our goal is not to be relevant to culture. We want to be distinct from culture.”

Effective preaching involves an ongoing conversation between a pastor who loves the congregation and has earned its respect, Sager observed.

“All preaching is dialogical,” he said. “It is a conversation, even if the people are not speaking out loud.”

Sager, Reese and Shiell all noted the value in a preacher being able to make eye contact with listeners and read their body language to know if they are connecting with the sermon. For that reason, they preach without notes or manuscript in hand.

“I find that speaking from memory gives me access to the listener's world,” Shiell said.

But preaching without notes does not mean preaching without preparation. Shiell looks at themes about four months in advance and begins planning “the basic plot” of the mes-

sage two to three months before he delivers it. About two weeks before he preaches a message, he spends serious time studying, and then he typically writes a manuscript, which he memorizes.

Reese follows a fairly similar routine, planning in six-week blocks following the lectionary and the Christian calendar.

“I don't want to represent my style of sermon preparation as ideal for every preacher, but it is true to who I am,” he said.

Typically, Reese likes to preach in a narrative style, developing a plotline that leaves listeners with one main idea they can take from the text.

“Most people can deal with only one main idea,” he explained. “Sometimes as preachers we try to say too much.”

Although Reese and Shiell both prefer a storytelling approach in preaching, they stressed the literary style of the biblical passage—narrative, poetic, didactic or whatever—should shape the sermon. Some Scriptures lend themselves to retelling in narrative, and others demand a verse-by-verse exposition.

“Every sermon has a scaffolding—a framework. Some lend themselves to an exposed skeleton. Most of mine are hidden,” Shiell said. “I believe all of my sermons are expository, but they are not all expositional.”

Each preaching style has strengths and weaknesses, Gregory observed. A very linear, deductive, expository approach may work best in preaching from the Apostle Paul's writings and if the listeners are age 35 or older, he noted.

“If done wrong, it can become dull and predictable,” he said. “Done right, it can sustain a longtime pulpit ministry.”

Parables or stories from the Old Testament history books naturally lend themselves to narrative preaching in its varied forms, he observed.

Help listeners “connect the dots”

Younger listeners relate particularly well to a well-told story, and they are more open than older worshippers to an inductive style that raises a question, offers a “slice of life” situation and compels listeners to “connect the dots.”

“Done right, it may be the best way to preach to people where there is a high resistance to authority. ... Done right, it sneaks up on people and draws them in,” he said. “The weakness is that it requires a gift of creativity. ... It takes a rare creative gift to do good inductive preaching.”

When the preacher begins by doing serious exegetical work—digging into the biblical text either in the original languages or in several English translations—and then relates the text to a specific people at a particular place, the end result is a biblical sermon, style notwithstanding, Gregory observed. That's true regardless of the tendency of some preachers to elevate one preaching style over all others.

“We all like to baptize our preferences,” he acknowledged.

Offering envelopes can help promote stewardship goals

Nashville (BP)—The church of offering envelope, though sometimes overlooked, can be an effective way to encourage faithful giving, according to LifeWay Christian Resources officials.

In the past, many churches traditionally have sent church members one large box of offering envelopes in January to last the entire year. Ben Stroup, who coordinates LifeWay's envelope service, recommends implementing a mailing program instead—monthly, bimonthly or quarterly—as an effective method to increase per capita giving by reminding church members to be faithful givers.

“Now you can customize the design on the envelope, print in color or even order colored envelopes,” Stroup added. “There is so much churches can do now to encourage increased stewardship in their congregations.”

Jim Baker, associate pastor at Brentwood Baptist Church near Nashville, said his church has seen an average annual increase of more than 20 percent in giving since opting to send members envelopes monthly rather than annually.

Additionally, when Brentwood Baptist began raising funds for a capital campaign, a colored envelope was used to distinguish the capital campaign envelope from the typical tithe envelope, a step Stroup recommends.

“It is much easier to remember to place the ‘pink’ capital campaign envelope in the offering plate rather than designate funds on a specific line on your standard envelope,” Stroup noted. “The use of a colored envelope serves as a silent reminder to those present that the capital campaign funds are just as important as the general fund.”

Baker also decided to leave Brentwood's capital campaign envelopes in the offering envelope mix beyond the three-year campaign timeline. The result? An extra \$500,000 was raised.

Other tips for creative offering envelope use include:

- Using the postage already paid to include a small communication piece with the monthly envelope mailing with information about stewardship or updates on campaigns.

- It's never too early to teach stewardship: Generic or custom-made children's offering envelopes are available through LifeWay. Children's Sunday school classes can participate in designing a children's offering envelope and use the winning design among the youngest churchgoers.

Churches can learn more about LifeWay's offering envelope service and mail programs at www.lifewaystores.com/envelopes or by calling (800) 874-6319.

“Be a pastor first. ... The authority to be heard comes when people know you love them and care for them.”

Gary Long, pastor of Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Houston

Recorder editor resigns to accept VP post at Ouachita

Louisville—Trennis Henderson, editor of the Western Recorder, has announced his resignation effective March 1 to accept a position as vice president for communications at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark.

Henderson, who has been editor of the Western Recorder since 1999, has served more than 25 years in Baptist journalism. He previously was editor of the Arkansas Baptist News and managing editor of the Missouri Word & Way.

"It has been an incredible privilege to serve alongside Kentucky Baptists during these eight-plus years," Henderson noted. "Ministering with the Western Recorder staff and board on behalf of Kentucky Baptists has been among the major highlights of my ministry career.

"While it is difficult to say goodbye to dear friends and colleagues throughout the state, I also am looking forward to the new ministry opportunity God is providing at Ouachita Baptist University.

"It is always both exciting and challenging to seek and pursue God's will and timing as we move into a time of major transition," Henderson added. "I welcome the prayers of Kentucky Baptists as my wife, Pam, and I seek to make a positive impact on the Ouachita campus in the years ahead."

Linda Polley, outgoing chair of the Western Recorder directors, noted that "Trennis has made Kentucky Baptists proud as his commentary and leadership of the Western Recorder reflected scriptural accountability and an overarching commitment to integrity and fairness."

Polley, director of administration at Severns Valley Baptist Church in Elizabethtown, said Henderson's "keen understanding of moral, social and ethical issues allows him to provide factual and accurate reporting without concern for personal agenda.

"His wit and sense of humor add the finishing touch," she added. "On behalf of the Western Recorder board of directors, I express regret as the paper's loss will be another's gain."

Bill Mackey, Kentucky Baptist Convention executive director, described Henderson as "an excellent editor of an outstanding award-winning denominational paper that is recognized nationally.

"Trennis is compelled by a passion for missions, the local church and his family," Mackey noted. "Trennis has endeared himself to Kentucky Baptists by his balanced reporting of Baptist news and the ministries of Kentucky Baptists, especially missions.

"I have admired Trennis and his family for their active involvement in the ministry of Crestwood Baptist Church where Trennis and his wife, Pam, have taught Sunday school and small group Bible study for high school students," he added. "Trennis will be missed not only as an editor and friend but for his natural sense of humor. Tense and sometimes slow-moving meetings have come to life with his humor.

"Although we will miss Trennis," Mackey said, "we commend him to the Ouachita Baptist University family that will benefit from his commu-

nication skills, churchmanship, humor and his passion for family, missions and excellence."

According to Ouachita President Rex Horne, "I am delighted that Trennis Henderson will be joining our administrative team at Ouachita Baptist University.

"Trennis is well known in Arkansas and across the nation as an outstanding Christian journalist," he added. "He is a gifted writer and a highly respected spokesman on matters of faith, ethics and the Christian life."

Henderson "understands the value of the educational opportunities offered by Ouachita Baptist University," Horne emphasized. "As vice president for communications, he

will play a pivotal role with the public, prospective students, families, churches and others who are interested in supporting our important mission.

"I have known Trennis for many years," the Ouachita president noted. "He is a man of integrity, Christian compassion and strong character. I look forward to working alongside him. We welcome Trennis and his wife, Pam, to Ouachita."

Henderson, a 1983 graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, also is a graduate of the College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Mo.

A former national president of both the Association of State Baptist Papers and Baptist Communicators Association, he has served since 2000 on the Baptist World Alliance communications committee.



Trennis Henderson

Henderson has earned numerous journalism, photography and design awards from Associated Church Press, Baptist Communicators Association and Evangelical Press Association. He is a 2006 recipient of the University of the Cumberland's Moral Leadership Award.

Henderson and his wife, Pam, are members of Crestwood Baptist Church in Oldham County, where he is a deacon and she is director of Crestwood's Weekday Preschool ministry. Their two daughters, Emily and Audrey, are students at Taylor University in Upland, Ind.

Editor search committee named

In response to Henderson's resignation, the Western Recorder board of directors elected a search committee last week to seek Henderson's successor.

Skip Alexander, pastor of Campbellsville Baptist Church, will serve as search committee chairman. Other members include Chip Hutcheson, publisher of the Princeton Times Leader and a member of Southside Baptist Church in Princeton; Lanna Kilgore, an attorney and member of Living Hope Baptist Church in Bowling Green; Bill Marshall, retired KBC executive director and co-director of the Marshall Center for Christian Ministry at Georgetown College; and Linda Polley, director of administration at Severns Valley Baptist Church in Elizabethtown.

Newly elected Western Recorder board chairman Floyd Price, a former KBC president and associate pastor of First Baptist Church of London, will serve as an ex officio member of the editor search committee.

"Trennis has endeared himself to Kentucky Baptists by his balanced reporting of Baptist news and the ministries of Kentucky Baptists, especially missions."

KBC Executive Director
Bill Mackey

Warren Association DOM Oakley honored for years of service

Retiring DOM calls award 'capstone' of near 50-year career

By Drew Nichter
News Director

Bowling Green—Jerry Oakley recently celebrated his 68th birthday. As 2007 comes to a close, the long-time director of missions and pastor also will celebrate his retirement.

Oakley has served as director of missions for Warren Baptist Association for 13 years. In honor of his years of service, the Kentucky Fellowship of Directors of Missions recently honored him with the 2007 Director of Missions of the Year award.

Oakley called the distinction "the capstone of my career."

"That my career would honor me with such an honor was quite touching to me," he said. "It meant a lot to me because they're on the firing line, they know what I'm doing."

The award has become an annual tradition in the last 15 years, noted Larry Baker, director of the Kentucky Baptist Convention's new work/associational missions department.

While there is no written criteria, he said the award is based on a DOM's outstanding contribution in the areas of missions and evangelism. It also is based on the effectiveness of the ministries of the association that the DOM serves.

In Oakley's case, Baker added, "sometimes it reflects a career."

The award "was the recognition of the many years of super service he's given," he noted.

Oakley served as pastor of several churches in both Kentucky and Tennessee for 34 years, serving his longest tenure—17 years—at Springfield Baptist Church in Springfield, Tenn.

He came to Warren Baptist Association 13 years ago and has left his mark on the area.

Oakley speaks highly of the association's recreational program, which he touted as "the most effective ... in the state."

The program's facilities include two lighted fields used for everything from softball to flag football to Easter egg hunts. Oakley pointed out that there are activities going on all year long.

There are 50 teams involved in the association's summer softball leagues which, Oakley estimated, brings more than 1,500 people a week to the fields.

Oakley said the recreation program hosts an Upward flag football league in the fall and adult flag football leagues in the spring. The association also holds its annual Easter egg hunt at the fields, where as many as 800 children and their families gather.

Among his many achievements, Oakley oversaw the relocation of Warren Association headquarters to its new facility, which was completed in 1998. He noted that visitors to the building tell him it is "the prettiest one in the state."

Another "key achievement" of Oakley's that Baker pointed to is the establishment of an Hispanic congregation in Bowling Green called Nueva Vida.

The mission has grown from four people meeting at Forest Park Baptist Church in Bowling Green to 75 participants meeting at a new facility that was recently completed.

According to Oakley, 95 people have made professions of faith since Jan. 1 because of the Hispanic ministry work that Nueva Vida is doing.

Oakley noted that being a director of missions entails representing the association in the best way possible. "You are the face of the denomination to many people, especially outsiders," he explained.

He also noted that as a DOM, he is "a pastor to the pastors."

"You are someone that they can come to and have confidence in and share with," he added.

Wesley Pitts, director of missions for Long Run Baptist Association and president of the Kentucky DOM Fellowship, has known Oakley since

the 1970s when the two were pastors in Tennessee. Pitts said Oakley has done a "tremendous job."

"I think they'll say (Oakley) was fair and cooperative ... and would work with anybody who worked with him," Pitts noted.

Oakley said Dec. 31 will mark the end of his tenure as DOM for Warren Association, but that he and his wife will remain around Bowling Green. The couple calls First Baptist Church of Bowling Green home, where his wife serves as preschool director.



Jerry Oakley

EASTER EGG FUN

Children participate in Warren Baptist Association's annual Easter egg hunt at the association's recreational facility. Director of Oakley estimates that 800 kids and their families participate in the event each year. (Photo courtesy of Warren Association)



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Earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.—Jude 3

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Give them what they really want for Christmas

By Tom Ehrich
Religion News Service

New York (RNS)—Along about now, pulpits and church newsletters bristle with whining about the culture's theft of Christmas.

There's the so-called "commercialization of Christmas." The manic retail spending but limited church contributions. Bustling malls but empty pews. Spotlights on Santa Claus but not on Jesus. The "taking Christ out of Christmas." Need I go on?

We even gripe about the people who finally do show up on Christmas Eve and then scorn them for not being there every Sunday.

Never mind that these paradoxes are precisely the same as the cultural context into which Jesus was born. Never mind the teachable moment, the opportunity for compassion. Never mind that the religious holiday called Christmas has been a political and cultural icon from its inception.

This annual whining is a perfect expression of why many churches dwindle to irrelevance. This is "provider-driven" religion. We are blaming people for not wanting what we

provide. It would be far better for us to ask ourselves: Why don't we provide what they want—and need?

If people are hungry for food, why give them ritual? If people are hungry for meaning, why give them traditions inherited from former days? If people want to connect their lives with a living God, why condemn them for digging deep to buy gifts for their children or yearning for lost love?

If people want to sing Christmas carols, why would we force them to drone through Advent hymns just because the church calendar says it's technically not "Christmas" yet? Is there some virtue in denying people their legitimate needs?

Forget the patronizing attitudes. Our members aren't children who need to be taught the value of eating spinach. They are grownups who yearn for love, meaning, joy and community. They are smart enough not to bring those needs to congregations where the preaching is dull and the air is filled with year-end anxiety about money.

The mall meets people where they are, whereas we blister people for not being what we want them to

be. Who needs such abuse?

Meeting people where they are doesn't mean being slavish to their self-destructive ways. But it does mean comprehending those self-destructive ways—not as mindless appetite, but as yearning and hunger. Plodding through one more Advent hymn is no response, especially when Macy's is playing "Joy to the World."

Of all the possible roles to play, we seem to have chosen the least savory. We play the uncaring innkeeper: No room for you here as you actually are. We play the Roman census-taker: Do it our way, or else. We play the shepherds' employer: Stay out there in the cold, even though light is shining not far away.

I say, Stop the whining, and rev up the preaching. Let's touch their hearts, not tickle their ears. Let's love people, not berate them for spurning our treasured offerings.

If they ache to sing "Silent Night" in early December, let's do it. Why not do the Christmas pageant first, so that children actually connect Christ with Christmas?

It doesn't matter that we are expert in dressing up dull, stale traditions at the expense of meeting vital needs and making lasting connections. Stale is still stale.

COMMENTARY

Beware of creedalism

The recent article announcing the LifeWay doctrinal study of the Baptist Faith & Message for 2008 is the overt attempt to declare that the study document represents what Southern Baptists believe about God, the universe and assorted subjects.

There is little doubt that doctrine, while obligatory for definition, often disturbs the common ground of faith upon which all Christians attempt to walk. Doctrine, in the hands of some Christians, can become the "cutting edge" or the "hammer head" of dog-

matic demand that is presented as encompassing, but renders mostly judgment to those who disagree.

Southern Baptists, until some 30 years ago, were commonly known as mission-minded, soul competent, individual priests who believed that each convert possessed the inherent right to read, study and discern the individual revelation of God's Word. That day has passed.

The words incarnation, atonement, propitiation, substitutionary, etc., delve into the doctrinal nuances of faith that identify many Baptists. These words are not often used by the average Baptist and the thrust of

the Baptist Faith & Message has been more publicly identified as a mandate for employment.

The study document, adopted by a minority of Southern Baptists who are fundamentally oriented, will contain no data as to its creedal implications and the demand for allegiance to it by those who are employed by administrative bastions or academic institutions controlled by the convention's mandates.

It is at this point of departure that many Baptists reject both the creed and the creedalists who attempt to usurp the freedom of each Christian to stand on holy ground.

Edward Clark
Danville

Reaching North America for Christ

Recently, staff from the state conventions met with LifeWay Christian Resources and North American Mission Board representatives in Nashville for a summit on reaching North America for Christ. This was the first gathering of this type of these partners in ministry and was made possible by the new leaders at LifeWay, Dr. Thom Rainer, and NAMB, Dr. Geoff Hammond.

More than 700 people gathered from state conventions, LifeWay and NAMB to share concerns and to struggle with priority issues. There were presentations by each president and from LifeWay Research, small group discussions among participants and identification of major areas of concern.

The following are the broad categories that summarize the concerns that surfaced: mobilizing laity, leadership development, processes for implementation, cooperation, revitalization, lostness, resources and prayer.

There were four major areas that were addressed by the small groups

and reported on to the full session. Here are some of my notes from each area:

Evangelism. Prayer and spiritual preparation are necessary for effective evangelism. Evangelism must be customized for language cultures, and be made relational and personal for all people. Overcoming lostness requires sowing and reaping. Pastors and church leaders must model evangelism for laity.

Church health. It is recognized that the definition of church health is unique to culture. The real measure of health is how the church is impacting lostness in the culture. Only 40 percent of SBC baptisms are related to recent conversion. Church health results in transforming laity to fulfill their God-given mission. Church health involves deeper dependence on prayer for lostness of neighbors. Coaching, mentoring and networking need to be intentional for strategic Kingdom expansion.

Church planting. LifeWay, NAMB and state conventions are to be part-

ners in developing resources to support a transformational discipleship process. We must champion and celebrate a variety of church models. We must also develop and understand the strategy necessary to reach North American people groups. We can learn from a variety of church planting practitioners and models, and provide a central location for church planting resources. It is also important to create awareness and receptivity for lay and bivocational church planting.

Leadership development. Leadership development should permeate all discipleship—both personal and professional—and include coaching and mentoring leaders. The leadership development process should include young leaders and lay leaders, and a delivery process that involves state conventions.

These are just some of the findings from the summit. I am excited about the collaboration that has taken place and look forward to the results of even greater efforts.

Please be in prayer about ways we all can be more effective in reaching those who do not know Jesus.

Bill Mackey is executive director of the Kentucky Baptist Convention

FAMILY

What women need to know as they face widowhood

By Jeremy White

I broke the societal norm and married an older woman.

People often act surprised when they learn an age difference exists between Sharon and me. They often say, "Jeremy,

I didn't realize you were that much older than her." That's a testament to how good my wife looks and how gray my hair has become.

Marrying an older woman makes sense because women outlive men on average. My wife and I have evened out the life expectancy tables. But this is not the case for most couples. Seventy percent of all married women will experience widowhood.

Most of the time, widowhood begins as a surprise. The key question widows have is: What do I need to do when? My general advice is to be patient. Don't make any major financial or lifestyle decisions during the first year.

You must make some decisions, of course, but be careful about making any big choices immediately. Here are the steps I recommend you follow initially and beyond.

Immediately: First, look for funeral directions left by your husband. They may be found in his will or in a separate letter.

Second, order from either the funeral director or the county clerk's office 10 to 20 certified copies of the death certificate. This needs to be done right after the funeral in order to claim the benefits due you from company pension plans, Social Security, life insurance proceeds, annuities and so on. You also will need the documentary proof of your husband's death to change titles on cars and your home.

Third, arrange for someone to stay at your home during the funeral. Unfortunately, unscrupulous people prey upon widows, and a favorite ploy is to burglarize a home during a funeral.

Within the first two weeks: Have your attorney review your husband's will and file it in probate court if necessary. Collect any documents needed to claim death benefits (bank and brokerage statements, marriage certificate and birth certificate). Contact your insurance agent, investment advisor, spouse's employer and former employers, and the Social Security office to start the process of claiming benefits due you.

Next month, we will continue discussing the subsequent steps a new widow should take.

Jeremy White is a certified public accountant with Blythe, White & Associates in Paducah



How can parents help teens keep 'merry' in Christmas?

Q: It sometimes seems like "Merry Christmas" is an oxymoron in a home with teenagers. What do you suggest?

The cosmos-shaking magnitude of the birth of Jesus Christ is what you make it. Actually, that is not correct. It is always more. This realization means that we will always fall short in the reality of ascribing to the Son of God the glory due Him. Nevertheless, year after year Christians return to the event that Phillip Yancy has called "the Great Invasion." Recently Campbellsville Baptist Church Pastor Skip Alexander reminded our church that even as the baby Jesus cried out as He was born, Satan cried out in anguished recognition that this world would never be the same.

Let me address a battle strategy for helping prepare a home with teenagers for Christ's invasion this Christmas:

- Maximize time spent in God's Word and prayer.
- Minimize time spent in the malls and shopping centers.
- Maximize opportunities to give all family members a voice in determining the family schedule.
- Minimize unilateral decisions that lead teens to feelings of resentment.
- Maximize rituals and traditions that contribute to a greater sense of togetherness and meaning.
- Minimize boundless and unlimited time watching television.
- Maximize disciplined reflection on the path to Christmas through observing Advent.
- Minimize a crazed observation of the cultural Christmas through an overemphasis on gift giving.

Remember that teenagers need "buy in" opportunities for both major and minor occasions. Inviting them to talk about what would make Christmas meaningful and enjoyable will help them truly contribute to a "Merry Christmas" and be prepared for the Great Invasion.—Scott Wigginton

Q: Should I take my children to see "The Golden Compass"?

About a month ago, my inbox began filling with e-mails about the new movie, "The Golden Compass." "Poison for our kids" said one subject line. Up until that point, I had never heard of Phillip Pullman and the "His Dark Materials" trilogy. I began asking a few questions and doing some research.

Although the recently released movie was not out yet when I wrote this article, I have read the first book, "The Golden Compass." I have also spent some time talking with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien expert Perry Bramlett about Pullman, his books and the movie.

Based on the theatrical trailers, I think children are going to love the movie. Most of the objectionable material has been removed from the screenplay and downplayed by the film's stars, including Nicole Kidman. A devout Catholic, Kidman says, "The story is more about authority now, rather than religion, which was important to me. I've been raised as a strong Catholic, and my grandmother would not be happy, or my dad for that matter, if we'd followed that part of the book."

The books may be a different story. Bramlett believes they are not suitable for children, but might serve as key conversation starters for kids age 14 and up. However, it should be noted that Pullman's anti-religious agenda reportedly becomes clearer in the second and third books.

At this point, I would caution parents to proceed carefully. See the movie, read the books and decide for yourself. Either way, books and movies such as "The Golden Compass" challenge Christian parents to ask questions and do a bit of research instead of simply accepting and believing everything they hear or read.—David Garrard

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Send questions for Family Forum to Western Recorder, Box 43969, Louisville, KY 40253 or e-mail wesrec@earthlink.net.



Beginning a new season of life & ministry

Serving among Kentucky Baptists as editor of the Western Recorder for the past eight years has been the pinnacle of my 25 years as a Baptist journalist.

But as Ecclesiastes 3 eloquently declares, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven."

After extensive prayer, discussion and evaluation, my wife, Pam, and I have sensed God's leadership for us to begin a new season of ministry at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark., where I will begin serving March 1 as vice president for communications.

Candidly, it has been the most challenging ministry career decision we have faced during the past two and a half decades—not because of the move to Ouachita, but because of the intense heartache of leaving behind countless friends and colleagues throughout our adopted home in the Bluegrass State. We also will be leaving a church home we have grown to cherish as well as Pam's six-year ministry position as director of Crestwood Baptist Church's Weekday Preschool program. Even more significantly, we're moving several hours further away from our two college-age daughters.

From many people's perspective, it might not sound too sensible to pull up roots again at midlife and leave behind loved ones and comfortable surroundings to pursue a new ministry challenge.

But then our goal is not to make sense from the world's perspective. As the Apostle Paul emphasized in 1 Corinthians 1, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

Amid all our human shortcomings over the years, one thing Pam and I consistently have sought to do is to seek and pursue God's call in our lives—wherever and whenever that might lead us. While I don't pretend to fully understand the dynamics and details of discerning God's will, I am fully committed to pursuing it for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that's a unique or un-

usual decision for followers of Christ. I know there are thousands of pastors and laypeople throughout Kentucky and beyond who daily seek God's direction and wisdom and then faithfully follow—which is as it should be.

I recall interviewing the mother of a young missionary to Russia who began his overseas ministry shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I will never forget her words: "I would rather have a son living halfway around the world in God's will than living next door out of God's will." Amen.

While moving to Arkansas certainly doesn't compare to moving halfway around the world, it is a new beginning in a new ministry setting with new challenges, opportunities and adjustments.

Among the many positives, I'm excited about the opportunity to serve at a renowned Christian university that is ranked No. 1 this year among baccalaureate schools in the South in U.S. News & World Report's annual "America's Best Colleges" report. That speaks to the vision, integrity and service highlighted on Ouachita's university seal as well as the leadership and commitment of Ouachita President Rex Horne and the school's faculty and staff.

Having the privilege of helping communicate Ouachita's mission and message as well as interacting with students from around the globe promises to be an exciting, enriching experience.

In the meantime, I plan to spend the next few months assisting our Western Recorder board and staff as they also move into a time of transition. I am confident they will continue to produce the quality news publication Kentucky Baptists expect and deserve.

I covet your prayers for our family, the Western Recorder, the Kentucky Baptist Convention and Ouachita Baptist University during these coming months.

Together, we can joyfully affirm that there truly is "a time to every purpose under heaven." I'm thankful part of that time and purpose has included my pilgrimage alongside Kentucky Baptists as we have sought to impact our state, nation and world with the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

STRAIGHT FROM THE EDITOR



Trennis Henderson

The attitude of a servant

By Mark Moses

Fort Worth, Texas (BP)—As Southern Baptists find themselves in the midst of what is often termed the "Lottie Moon season"—the period around Christmas in which the denomination receives its annual offering for international missions—I can't help but think about my wife, Jan, a career Southern Baptist missionary who's celebrating her first Christmas in heaven this year.

This time a year ago, Jan was making what would be the final entry in her journal that had intricately chronicled her three-year "adventure" (as we called it) with melanoma cancer. In her journal, which she posted online for thousands of supporters to read, Jan had regularly and transparently poured out her heart about what transpired in her cancer battle. She sought prayers for whatever specific needs were at the forefront—for her treatment, for her doctors, for the emotional needs of our five children who would be left motherless with her passing.

But in this last journal entry, as the clock ticked away for Jan on earth, what do you think was the first thing she wrote about? What do you think was foremost on her mind?

The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions, of course.

Jan wrote, "Our 5,000-plus mis-

sionaries depend on these funds each year for their salary, housing, vehicles, evangelistic projects and medical needs (like us!!!) We are seeing amazing growth among people groups that were unreached in years past."

She continued to beseech, "Just a few dollars can go a long way in providing basic support and resources for those who serve in difficult places."

Within six weeks of this entry, Jan received her "promotion" into the presence of the Lord she served.

For the past 20 years, Jan and I have been blessed to be International Mission Board missionaries to the Philippines. In the primery of her life and ministry there, with five dependent children, Jan was diagnosed with melanoma in March 2004. A month later I was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Both cancers had less than 30 percent survival rates. Some people asked whether we resented the fact that our cancers possibly could have stemmed from serving overseas because of environmental concerns there.

Speaking at her memorial service in February, I posed the question, "What do you think Jan would have said to God, if 21 years ago, God would have told Jan, 'I want you to sign on to be My missionary to the Philippines. It will be hot and sweaty. You will have to move your

family and belongings more than 15 times. You will experience malaria, dengue fever, typhoid and amoebic dysentery. Then you will suffer for three years with terminal cancer.' What do you think Jan would have said?"

"I know exactly what Jan would have said: 'Lord, sign me up.' Jan would have none of us think that somehow she was deprived of anything here on earth. Indeed, Jan experienced a joy that few people ever find. Now she has eternity to enjoy the rewards of her faith and service."

By the way, "Lord, sign me up" continues to represent our family's motto, even in Jan's absence. With my cancer in remission, I hope to return, along with our two youngest next year to continue the work that, by God's grace, Jan and I began. Serving Jesus cross-culturally constitutes a joy that not even cancer can take away.

During this Lottie Moon season, I pray that Southern Baptists will take up the gauntlet that Jan left behind and, through their offerings, continue the support for missions that Jan so urgently sought. May "Lord, sign me up" be the attitude of every Southern Baptist in terms of praying, going and giving in whatever way the Lord leads.

Mark Moses, a Southern Baptist missionary to the Philippines, is the author of "An Uncommon Faith: The story of missionary Jan Moses and her journey with cancer."

Rob Bell's ministry proves 'divisive' in some religious circles

By Drew Nichter
News Director

Louisville—A Google search of the name Rob Bell yields nearly 300,000 results. Although not all of those Web pages refer to Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., a majority of them do.

One will find links to the Mars Hill Web site, a page promoting Bell's NOOMA video series and of course, his Wikipedia entry. One will also find a site promoting Bell's recent lecture tour, "The gods Aren't Angry," which made a stop in Louisville Nov. 29. The tour tackled the topic of religion and its origins throughout human history.

In an interview with the Western Recorder, Bell described the tour as a "way of answering the question, 'What is grace?' without ever using the word 'grace.'"

"I want people to be overwhelmed with grace," he added.

The up-and-coming young pastor certainly has been an overwhelming figure in recent years. Bell's Mars Hill congregation, founded in 1999, quickly became one of the fastest-growing churches in history, exceeding 10,000 members. He recently released the 18th video in his NOOMA series which has received "phenomenal response," Bell noted. In between all of that, he even man-

aged to write two best-selling books, "Velvet Elvis" and "Sex God."

With that success has come plenty of controversy, which Bell maintained he does not pay attention to. "I don't Google my name," he said.

If he did, he would find a Rob Bell "archive" on a Web site called Appraising Ministries.

The site is the work of Ken Silva, who describes himself as "an ordained (Southern Baptist Convention) minister who has dedicated himself to the study of comparative religions and non-Christian cults."

Silva has a long list of targets including Mormonism, Rick Warren, even the SBC. But he seems to take special note of Bell, with more than 100 entries criticizing his teachings, lectures and ministry.

Bell declines "emergent" label

The criticism most often leveled at Bell is his affiliation with the emergent church movement. He is often linked to Brian McLaren, the pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Maryland and a strong proponent of the emergent church movement. In 2005, McLaren was invited and then disinvited to speak at the Kentucky Baptist Evangelism Conference because of some controversial passages in his book, "A Generous Orthodoxy."

Bell's name even surfaced alongside McLaren's during discussions at September's "Convergent" conference examining the emergent church at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

When asked whether he is an emergent church leader or claims any affiliation with the movement, Bell simply said, "No." Discussing the role of the emergent church movement, he said he understood it to be "simply a conversation asking, 'What does it mean to be the people of Jesus?'"

Addressing anyone who is criti-

cal of such a movement, Bell said, "I wonder whether that person is a Christian. That seems like a conversation they ought to have."

Another charge that has been thrown Bell's way is that his teachings oversimplify the gospel for the postmodern generation. In his "The gods Aren't Angry" lectures, Bell asserts that God is not angry and that He has made peace with all of humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This principle prompted protests outside at least one tour stop.

Jeff Fuson, a longtime youth minister at Crestwood Baptist Church in Oldham County who recently became pastor of a new church plant, attended Bell's lecture in Louisville. Fuson agrees that while some of what Bell teaches can be seen as "divisive," it can help believers think about their faith.

"Even if we don't agree with (Bell), he still challenges us to think and to pull some things apart and to wonder about our faith," Fuson noted. "If a person can't think about their faith, then their faith may be too brittle."

Bell had much stronger words for those who are "scared" by those who offer a new approach to theology, calling them "the original Pharisees."

"They're obsessed with absolutely minutiae issues surrounding, 'What words do you use to define the Bible?'" he said. "They absolutely obsess about people who, in their minds, don't use the exact proper definitive language they've agreed upon somewhere."

And Bell insisted he is not worried about offending "fundamentalists," adding that each time he does so, "there are a thousand people who are now listening."

Fuson emphasized there currently is a "clash of worldviews," adding that "people are scared" of that.

"It's a very challenging debate



CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE Rob Bell during his recent "The gods Aren't Angry" speaking tour stop at the Brown Theater in Louisville. (Photo by Drew Nichter)

right now and it's way bigger than Rob Bell," Fuson noted.

He said that debate is between those who believe that in order to be a follower of Christ, one must adhere strictly to certain doctrines. On the other side are Bell and other "new thinkers" who are challenging some of that doctrine.

But Fuson added that they're all on the same team and could learn from one another.

"What the people talking about doctrine are trying to accomplish and what Rob Bell are trying to accomplish are actually the same thing," Fuson suggested. "This is to arrive at a place where you have people who are full-on followers of Christ. Both want the same thing, but they're attempting different methods."

"The reality is we probably need to learn from both sides."

KBC's Paulleta Dick retires from life of Baptist service

Louisville—After nearly 33 years of serving Kentucky Baptist and Southern Baptist institutions, Paulleta Dick will retire on Dec. 14 from her current role as ministry assistant for the Kentucky Baptist Convention's collegiate/young adult ministry group.

Her retirement marks the end of a career that included nine years of service at Clear Creek Baptist Bible College in Pineville, 10 years at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, and 14 years at the KBC's Mission Board staff headquarters in Louisville.

"Paulleta will be greatly missed here at the KBC," said Keith Inman, director of the collegiate/young adult ministry group. "She has always been consistent and faithful to her ministry here. She loved being part of sending missionaries all over the world."

A native of Monticello, Dick's ministry career began in 1974 when her husband, the late Joel Dick, enrolled at Clear Creek Baptist Bible College to pursue a call to ministry. She worked part-time in the college's public relations department while earning a seminary wives' certificate from Clear Creek.

She then transitioned to full-time as secretary for the department and went on to complete an associate's degree in church music in 1978. By that point, Joel was also working full-time for the college's public relations department.

The Dicks moved to Louisville in 1983 in order for Joel to further his studies at Southern Seminary. She worked as faculty receptionist for the seminary and continued in that position for 10 years.

In 1994, Dick joined the Mission Board staff as secretary for the family ministry department. She then transitioned in 1998 to her current role as ministry assistant for the student work department, now known as the collegiate/young adult ministry group.

Dick said she will leave her career with mixed emotions, but believes God has directed each season of her life.

"Most of my working days have been with Kentucky Baptists," she noted. "When I look back, I see how the Lord was leading me step by step. He had a plan for me in ministry as well as my husband."

Dick is a member of Lakewood Baptist Church in Louisville. She has one son, one daughter and one granddaughter.



Paulleta Dick

Senior Pastor for First Baptist Church of Leitchfield

First Baptist Church of Leitchfield, Ky., seeks for their senior pastor a visionary leader who is called by God to minister to people of all ages. This position requires strong communication and leadership skills, including the willingness to empower others to lead and to work with other ministers on staff. This energetic, dynamic man has a passion for community evangelism and soul winning as well as a loving, caring heart for guiding the spiritual development of others. His strong, disciplined prayer life will allow him to recognize God's calling him to this church and this ministry opportunity. Please submit a resumé to Ed Carter, Pastor Search Team Leader, PO BOX 411, Leitchfield, KY 42755.

Ministry goals and objectives

'Experiencing God' study helps shape core motives

This past week someone asked me to name some goals and objectives that I seek for our staff. I explained that our ministry goals are heavily influenced by biblical truths found in the "Experiencing God" Bible study.

The goals I have for our staff are to understand and live according to the seven key biblical truths in the study. Perhaps many of you have been through Henry Blackaby's Experiencing God study. Personally, this study has been instrumental in my life as our family has made significant adjustments both times I have been through the study. The first time, God led me to leave my secular employment for a call to ministry and the second time God led me to attend seminary.

The first truth is that God is at work around us. Next, God pursues a relationship with us and invites us to join Him. God speaks to us and leads us to a crisis of belief. We must adjust our life to Him. Finally, we can experience God

I believe one of the more difficult challenges in ministry is to realize that God is active around

us. It is not difficult to find people who will say, "I don't see God working in my life or in the world around me." According to the Bible, God is active all the time. The Bible says in Romans 3 that people don't seek God on their own. If someone is seeking God or asking questions about God then God is actively working in their life.

KENTUCKY BAPTIST ASSEMBLIES



David Melber

My prayer for our staff and for me personally is to recognize God's activity and seek to join Him. An incredible blessing of camp and conference ministry is that we get to come alongside thousands of people each year where we can be a first-hand witness to God's activity in their lives.

During 2007 we experienced our largest year of attendance at Crossings, but more importantly God was active in thousands of lives this year. Not only was He active in our guests, but in our staff as well. If we as a staff can recognize God's work, our focus will become very clear and the core motive of our hearts will be to join God in His plans.

David Melber is president of Kentucky Baptist Assemblies. Contact him at Box 99918, Louisville, KY 42069-0918; phone (502) 491-7000.

For Heaven's Sake

Mike Morgan



Church of the Covered Dish

Thom Tapp



Bible Crosswords

By Teri Grottko

Across

- 1 The prophet who went up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11)
- 6 A son of Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:1)
- 11 Moses' brother
- 12 Humble
- 13 "Even unto Ithiel and ____" (Proverbs 30:1)
- 14 Capital of Moab (Isaiah 15:1)
- 15 "That ____ should be a kind of firstfruits" (James 1:18)
- 16 Preposition
- 17 His Highness, abbr.
- 18 A snooze
- 21 Iron, chem. symbol
- 22 Giants (Deuteronomy 9:2)
- 25 A minor objection
- 27 Europium, chem. symbol
- 28 "____ tempteth he any man" (James 1:13)
- 31 "____, supposing him to be the gardener" (John 20:15)
- 33 The fourth son of Midian (Genesis 25:4 NKJV)
- 34 "They came to ____" (2 Samuel 24:6)
- 35 There were 70 ____ (Exodus 1:5)
- 37 Smallest state, abbr.
- 38 Reflection of sounds
- 41 Not consulted
- 42 Ahasuerus' chamberlain (Esther 1:10)
- 44 Last book of the Old Testament

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- 45 "I will praise thee with uprightness of ____" (Psalm 119:7)
- 49 "To the dwelling of ____" (Numbers 21:15)
- 50 French article
- 51 Los Angeles, abbr.
- 52 General Motors, abbr.
- 20 "David ... dwelt in strong holds at ____" (1 Samuel 23:29)
- 21 "His hands shall also ____ it" (Zechariah 4:9)
- 22 "____ the works were finished" (Hebrews 4:3)
- 23 Nehemiah, abbr.
- 24 To become absorbed in thought
- 26 Prejudice
- 29 One of David's wives (1 Chronicles 3:3)
- 30 17th camp of Israel from Egypt (Numbers 33:5-21)
- 32 Less soft
- 36 "____ I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Psalm 110:1)
- 39 Scorch
- 40 A son of Joktan (Genesis 10:28)
- 43 "Out of whose womb came the ____?" (Job 38:29)
- 44 Pa's wife
- 46 For example, Lat. abbr.
- 47 "I ____ Alpha and Omega" (Revelation 21:6)
- 48 Preposition

Down

- 1 "Two years before the ____" (Amos 1:1)
- 2 A note to follow So
- 3 Eldest son of Caleb (1 Chronicles 4:15)
- 4 Moses' mother (Exodus 6:20)
- 5 A son of Seir the Horite (Genesis 36:20)
- 6 A river of Damascus (2 Kings 5:12)
- 7 The general under Deborah (Judges 4:8)
- 8 "Surely the Lord ____ in this place" (Genesis 28:16)
- 9 "There is neither ____ nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28)
- 10 "____, every one that thirsteth" (Isaiah 55:1)
- 19 Pastry crust and filling

Last week's solution

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11			
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Leading Small Groups?

What influences faith development in adults? How do small groups function? Why do some small groups bond and others melt away? What are effective techniques and approaches for teaching small groups?

Why not register for the online course series in "Small Group Leadership"? Each of the three 4-week courses is highly interactive and provides opportunities for online discussion with the facilitator and other study participants. Facilitators have extensive experience in small group leadership.

Courses begin Jan. 15, Feb. 26, & Apr. 9

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WESTERNRECORDER



Missionaries work to sate Moscow's spiritual hunger

"People are searching for Christ—and we must search for them."

Mikhail Chekalin, leader of an association of Moscow Baptist churches

Continued from page 1

getting an education, scrambling for a good job, making money. Moscow is the social and economic dynamo of Russia. An estimated 80 percent of the nation's total wealth flows into and out of the city.

At least 4 million Muscovites are between the ages of 18 and 40. They include the heart of Russia's educated leadership class. Graduates of the city's 220 colleges and universities compete for the best jobs. The successful enjoy the city's shiny shopping malls and nightclubs. The rest of Moscow's millions hustle to make a living.

Underneath the bright surfaces of the city, however, lies a hard substratum of Russian pain. Six in 10 heads of Moscow households are alcoholic. Many men die young from drinking and despair. Many children seldom see their fathers. Mothers struggle alone to make ends meet. Dysfunctional families are the rule, not the exception.

Russians are proud of their heritage of great literature, music and art. But the revolutions, wars and mass dislocations of the 20th century tore away much of their history—and left nothing to replace it. Nearly all Muscovites are born into the Russian Orthodox Church, but few worship in its ornate, mostly empty sanctuaries.

Longstanding suspicion and hostility persist toward non-Orthodox religious groups—including Baptists, who have worshipped in Russia for 130 years. Even if they do not practice Orthodoxy, many Russians

feel they would be denying their "Russianness" by joining another church.

The novelty of post-Soviet religious freedom has worn off. In heady days of new openness in the 1990s, Muscovites would respond by the thousands to evangelistic campaigns. No more. Now it's a hard, slow effort to make committed disciples of Christ.

The biggest challenge of all is the sheer size of Moscow. An estimated 8,000 evangelical believers live among the city's 15 million people.

Mikhail Chekalin, 46-year-old leader of the association of 28 Moscow Baptist churches, understands the enormity of the task. As the grandson of a Baptist pastor shot for his faith under Stalin's reign of terror, Chekalin relishes the new freedoms.

"It's wide open," he said. "We can do evangelism without being reprimanded. ... We can preach like our fathers could not. People are searching for Christ—and we must search for them."

But how do you find them in a sea of 15 million?

As partners with Moscow Baptists in the evangelism task, Southern Baptist missionaries seek effective ways to help. A key strategy is to break the enormous city into smaller, more manageable pieces.

"You can't take on the whole city—it's too massive," missionary Ed Tarleton admitted. "But you can find avenues. If you find a responsive pocket, follow it, and it leads you to the next."

Living the Acts 1:8 Challenge

Oneida witnesses to its Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria & ends of the earth

Most Kentucky Baptists know by now that this year's KBC theme is "Empowering Believers in Missions." To support that goal, this passage from Acts 1:8 has been selected.

If you have ever been to our campus, you no doubt realize that for the most part we are in the middle of nowhere. Unless OBI is your destination or you have gotten terribly lost, you are not likely to end up in Oneida. In fact many people have a hard time finding us even though we are their destination. It is a bit mind-boggling to see how God has used this little ministry in the middle of nowhere to reach and witness to boys and girls from around the world. For the past 50-plus years, Oneida has had a growing ministry to international students. If you visit our campus, it would not take you very long to realize that we have students from many other parts of the world. When guests notice our international students, they often ask why a student from this or that country would come to the U.S. and Oneida. The answer to that question for most of our international students is about the same.

First, most colleges and universities require international students to have been in the U.S. one year before they can enroll. It is not important to explain why they have this requirement but they do. Second, most of our international students admit that the educational system in America is better than that in their home country. Our international students are concerned with making much better than just passing grades. For the most part, they are very intent on making all A's.

Let's come back to Acts 1:8. Oneida would like-

ly never have the opportunity to send missionaries or teachers to the four corners of the earth to reach these students. We do believe, however, that God has opened this door of opportunity so we can work with teens from around the world.

Not all, but many of these students come to us as Christians. Usually they are away from home for the first time. If you were sending your child halfway around the world, wouldn't you feel much better knowing that he or she was able to not only attend a Christian school but also be cared for by Christian people?

And for students who are not Christians, what better opportunity could we ask for than to have them come to us from "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth?"

We consider it a great privilege to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with students who may have never heard the good news before. Additionally, it is likely that many will enroll in colleges and universities where very little of what we believe as Christians will be shared with them. In fact, many will be taught about what is perceived to be wrong with Christianity in general and also specific belief systems. I hope you will agree that our international students provide us with many opportunities to share the gospel of Christ. This year we have students from these countries: Belgium, Canada, China, Ethiopia, Germany, Guatemala, Hungary, Japan, Liberia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Thailand and the United Kingdom. Thank you for allowing us to share the good news "to the ends of the earth."

W.F. Underwood is president of Oneida Baptist Institute, Box 67, Oneida, KY 40972; www.oneidaschool.org; e-mail: president@oneidaschool.org



W.F. Underwood

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'Southern Baptists care for missionaries'

Bartels family testifies to Lottie Moon blessings

A personal aspect always adds relevance to the importance of something. The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions is no different. We are reminded constantly how important this offering is in our churches each year at this time. There is no better way to stress the importance of this offering than to hear from someone who has been personally affected as a recipient of the offering.

Professor Richard Bartels spent 26 years on the mission field before he came to Clear Creek two years ago to serve on our faculty as director of Christian service.

"My family spent 16 years in Africa and 10 years in Europe," Richard said. "We found that people were most responsive to the gospel in Africa. Europe was different. We found that people there were very skeptical about religion in general, particularly Christianity.

"Missions work has changed a lot since the first years of missions," he said. "In the older days, those first involved in missions pretty much planned to stay on the field with no 'furloughs,' or time away from the ministry setting. But now, every

few years missionaries get to come back to what is now called a 'state-side assignment' where they get to speak in churches and share their ministry stories, take advantage of some continuing education opportunities, and receive any medical assistance that was not available to them on the field."

He knows from a personal perspective how important the offering is to all missionaries serving in the field.

"Southern Baptists take care of their missionaries," Richard said. "The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering has special meaning for me. The first years we were missionaries, the offering was something we

always looked forward to because it always allowed us ... to do some of the 'extras' and support things that we wanted to do. The last few years we were on the field, though, the offering went almost solely to the financial support we needed to stay on the field. The offering is important because it's what keeps missionaries out there serving in the mission field."

Donnie Fox is president of Clear Creek Baptist Bible College, 300 Clear Creek Road, Pineville, KY 40977; toll-free: (866) 340-3196; Web site: www.ccbbc.edu; e-mail: dfox@ccbbc.edu

CLEAR CREEK CHRONICLE



Donnie Fox

Christian Web site provides new alternative to YouTube

By Grace Thornton
Alabama Baptist

Montgomery, Ala. (ABP)—Move over, YouTube. Baptists have video cameras.

And they're using them, now that they have a "safe" place to share their videos online, said Bill Nix, CEO and president of Axletree Media.

Axletree's E-zekiel, a Web site builder and host used by churches and other nonprofits around the world, has come out with a video counterpart to its popular web service: E-zekiel.tv, which launched in early November.

"E-zekiel.tv is the answer to the question many churches have been asking," noted Nix, a member of First Baptist Church of Montgomery, Ala. "Many of our churches whose Web sites are on E-zekiel have been wanting to share videos online, but the option of going to YouTube wasn't an option."

With YouTube, Nix explained, the possibility always exists that users could encounter sexually explicit content.

"For instance, there was a church that posted their video on YouTube, and when one deacon finished watching it, (the next video clip) was inappropriate," Nix said.

Videos posted on E-zekiel.tv are monitored for such content so that the site remains Christian-based and family-friendly. And according to Nix, anyone can use it for free. "You don't have to have an E-zekiel Web site to use E-zekiel.tv."

Jim Jackson, director of missions for Elmore Baptist Association in Alabama, can attest to that. Nix handed Jackson and several others small video cameras at the recent Alabama Baptist Pastors Conference in Mobile, Ala., and asked them to give it a try with the E-zekiel.tv site.

Jackson tried it, and he said he is sold.

"It's very simple. You just have to sign in and create an account, then you can start uploading," he noted. Elmore Association's site is not powered by E-zekiel, but Jackson

said there are plans to link its site to E-zekiel.tv so videos can be posted.

"We've been thinking of some of the ways we could use it," added Jackson, who's already envisioning his churches using it for online videos welcoming visitors.

The site has already made an impact on his family as well. Jackson's son-in-law Brian Gay recently went to Guatemala and was able to upload videos of mission work in that nation while still on-site.

"It was really neat for us because he had left an itinerary behind so we could be praying for them," Jackson recalled. "But when we could see the video and see the folks they were working with, that made it even more real."

Nix pointed out that YouTube and GodTube.com, one of the pioneers in Christian video sites, plowed some of the ground for E-zekiel to get into this line of ministry.

GodTube, the self-titled "video-driven social network," launched officially in August and offers video-sharing, chatting, messaging and blogging.

Currently the Plano, Texas-based service is the largest broadcaster of Christian videos on the Web, with more than 500,000 unique visitors hitting the site each month.

Nix is getting on board with that trend, but said he has different plans for his site than the one-to-one relationship that happens on YouTube and GodTube.

"I imagine that there will be churches setting up groups and using this to communicate with their members," Nix explained.

"I can envision a person visiting a church, filling out a visitor card and providing the church with an e-mail address," he said. "Then when that person gets home, there's an e-mail invitation asking them to be a part of the church's video group online. That person then has access to videos explaining the church's mission, giving a virtual tour of its facilities and ministries—the list could go on and on."

Fox acquires Beliefnet Web site

New York (RNS)—Beliefnet, one of the country's leading Web sites devoted to religion and spirituality, is under new management as part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. and the Fox Entertainment Group.

The deal, announced Dec. 4, gives Beliefnet a new sense of permanence after it emerged from bankruptcy protection five years ago. The site is now profitable and gets 3 million unique visitors each month.

Steve Waldman, who co-founded the site nearly eight years ago, said the deal would give Beliefnet access to News Corp.'s advertising, video and technology expertise and allow "content collaboration that runs in both directions."

Financial terms of the agreement were not disclosed, although Waldman said he was approached by Fox. "There was no huge rush to sell the company," added Waldman, who will serve as president and editor-in-chief of the revamped company.

The acquisition adds to News

Corp.'s \$64 billion media empire, including the 20th Century Fox film studios, the Wall Street Journal, MySpace, the Fox Faith film division and HarperOne and Zondervan, two of the biggest names in Christian publishing.

Waldman explained that the site will retain its distinctly interfaith character even as News Corp. expands its mostly Christian media portfolio.

"We're confident that we will maintain our strong commitment to serving all faiths," he noted. "It's part of what enabled us to create our reputation, and our reputation is part of what they're buying."

Comparing the site to "The Simpsons," a sister Fox property, Waldman explained, "To look at the range of American spirituality, you can look at Beliefnet, or you can look at Apu (a Hindu), Krusty the Clown (a Jew), Lisa Simpson's Buddhism or Ned Flander's Christianity to get a sense of American faiths."

✻

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Mission Service Corps Missionary Becky Cotton of Louisville. Cotton serves the residents of two nursing homes through her ministry. She seeks to share Christ as she develops relationships through activities such as reading, Bible stories, listening, witnessing, prayer and hugs. Pray that Cotton's authentic witness will be received as she shares and visits with residents. Pray that residents will realize it is never too late to trust Christ and that those who haven't yet done so will invite Christ to be their personal Savior and Lord.

If you would like Kentucky Baptists to join in praying for a ministry of your church or association, please send the information to Eric Allen at Eric.Allen@kybaptist.org or call (866) 489-3530.

MOUNTAINS TO THE MISSISSIPPI

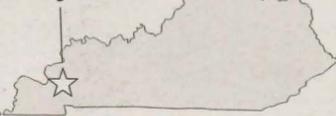
COMPILED BY STAFF

- **BARDWELL**—Bardwell Church's adult choir will present the cantata, "God's Great Love," Dec. 16, 11 a.m. **Rodney Bice** is pastor.
- **BEREA**—Roundstone Church's choir will present "Once Upon a Christmas" Dec. 23, 6 p.m. **Rick Reynolds** is pastor.
- **CAMPBELLSVILLE**—Saloma Church's children and youth will present a musical Christmas program Dec. 16, 6 p.m. The adult choir will present the musical, "Worship the King," Dec. 23, 11 a.m. For more information, call (270) 789-0082. **John Chowning** is pastor.
- **DRY RIDGE**—Dry Ridge Church ordained **Ray Hess, Joel Hubbard** and **Randy Magee** as deacons Dec. 2. **Joe Kitchens** is pastor.
- **ELIZABETHTOWN**—Newly elected officers of the Kentucky Fellowship of Directors of Missions are **Wesley Pitts**, president, Long Run Association; **Stan Lowery**, president-elect, Nelson Association; **Hamilton Valentine**, secretary-treasurer, Bates Creek Association; and **Rick Robbins**, newsletter editor, Northern Kentucky Association.
- **FREDONIA**—Unity Church recently called **Kirk Greenfield** as pastor.
- **FULTON**—**Wallace Smith** recently resigned as pastor of Crutchfield Church.
- **HENDERSON**—Ambassador Church recently called **Allen Butler** as pastor.

Bellfield Church recently ordained **Neal Reed** as a deacon.

Spotlight on ...

Eddyville



Pleasant Hill Church will present its 4th annual Live Nativity Dec. 18-20, 6 to 9 p.m.

Calvary Church recently called **Larry Jennings** as pastor.

■ **LEXINGTON**—Boone's Creek Church will host **Wade Hammond** in concert Dec. 23, 7 p.m.

■ **LOUISVILLE**—St. Matthews Church's choir will present "Be Not Afraid" Dec. 15-16, 6:30 p.m. **Les Hollon** is pastor.

■ **MOUNT VERNON**—Maretburg Church's choir will present "Come to the Manger" Dec. 23, 11 a.m. **Wayne Harding** is pastor.

■ **OWENSBORO**—First Church's sanctuary choir and orchestra will present "First Christmas" Dec. 16, 6 p.m.

■ **PRINCETON**—Caldwell Blue Spring Church recently called **Patrick Yates** as pastor.

What's going on?

Mail your happenings to Mountains to the Mississippi at Box 43969, Louisville, KY 40253. E-mail: wesrec@earthlink.net.



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

January

17-19 Shepherding the Shepherd, Radisson Plaza Hotel, Lexington.

24 Pastor/Staff Forum, Porter Memorial Baptist Church, Lexington.

24-25 Quarterly Prayer Meeting for Spiritual Awakening, Hartford Baptist Church.

25-26 Preschool/Children's Ministry Meeting, Baptist Building, Louisville.

25-26 Regional Women on Mission Retreat, Laurel Lake Baptist Camp, Corbin.

31-Feb. 2 Southeast Conclave, Chattanooga, Tenn.

For more information, call (800) 266-6477 or visit www.kybaptist.org

GuideStone announces expanded term life insurance options for ministers

Dallas (BP)—GuideStone Financial Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention will offer enhancements to its term life insurance coverage beginning Jan. 1.

GuideStone's term life plans—available exclusively to full-time salaried ministers and staff of Southern Baptist Convention churches and entities, their families and students of SBC seminaries and Bible colleges—will be available in amounts up to \$750,000 for employees, \$250,000 for spouses and \$100,000 for seminary students. Previous amounts were \$500,000 for employees, \$100,000 for spouses and \$50,000 for seminary students.

"We see this as a step forward in our mission to enhance the financial security of our participants," GuideStone President O.S. Hawkins said. "And we've been able to do this without increasing rates for more than a

decade."

How much life insurance a family needs depends on their financial circumstances. According to the GuideStone release, key questions are: "Does a family depend primarily on one income? What is their current debt amount? How much savings do they have?" Future factors such as funeral costs and college tuition also should be considered in determining individual life insurance needs, the news release stated.

GuideStone provides an online life insurance calculator that can help a family project future financial needs. To access the calculator, visit www.GuideStone.org. To get a quote for coverage or more information about enrolling in a term life plan or one of GuideStone's medical, dental, disability or accident plans, visit www.GuideStone.org or call (888) 984-8433.

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FOR SALE: New CD: "Christmas Harp Carols from the Hills," by harper Jan Hill. Send \$12 check to Jan at 449 Skyview Lane, Lexington, KY 40511.

SEEKING: Part-time minister to youth and children. Send resumé to Pigeon Fork Baptist Church, 5090 Hickory Ridge Road, Waddy, KY 40076, Attn: Youth Search Committee.

SEEKING: Part-time youth and children's minister. Please send resumé to Palomar Baptist Church, 2190 Ft. Harrods Drive, Lexington, KY 40515, Attn: Youth Search Committee. For details, call Kimberly Goard at (859) 963-1400.

SEEKING: Full-time associate pastor to children for Crescent Hill Baptist Church, an ABC/CBF-affiliate. Develop and implement a ministry to children and direct the church's after-school and summer childcare programs. Requires 2 years experience working with children and must meet Kentucky state requirements for childcare director. MDiv preferred. Submit resumé to CHBC Children's Minister Search Team, 2800 Frankfort Ave., Louisville, KY 40206; or crescenthillbapt@bellsouth.net.

SEEKING: Pastor for Friendship Baptist Church, Oakland, Ky. Please send resumé to Roger Snook, 2387 Carl Jordan Road, Oakland, KY 42159.

SEEKING: Full-time senior pastor for non-traditional, Spirit-led Baptist church. Looking for a shepherd to disciple a diverse community in a deeper walk with God, and to increase His Kingdom in the Greater Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky area. Will need to work with elders to develop a staff and rebuild our church family. Preferred requirements: master of divinity degree and five to 10 years experience. Send resumé to Highland Hills Baptist Church, 132 South Grand Ave., Fort Thomas, KY, 41075. Accepting resúmes through Jan. 31, 2008.

SEEKING: Full-time GL, AP bookkeeper for KBC accounting services department. Position requires 3 to 5 years related experience; offers competitive salary and benefit package. For more information, please submit resumé to the administrative services department through www.kybaptist.org/administrative by 12-21-07.

SEEKING: Full-time senior pastor for Piner Baptist Church in northern Kentucky. Our Southern Baptist congregation provides many ministries locally and internationally. Average attendance for Sunday services is 400. For more information, go to www.pinerbaptist.org. Resúmes may be sent to Wayne Diehl, pastor of administration, 15044 Madison Pike, Morning View, KY 41063.

SEEKING: Full-time children's minister. Calvary Baptist Church in Danville, Ky., is seeking an experienced, energetic and organized individual to lead and grow a ministry to children and their families. Send resumé to 214 Lincoln Ave., Danville, KY 40422; or email to ashleyfeather@calvaryindanville.com. Deadline for submission is Friday, Dec. 21.

SEEKING: Minister of music for a growing congregation in Hodgenville, Ky. Duties include leading a comprehensive music program, choir and blended worship services. Please send resumé, references and a DVD if available to: Music Minister Search Committee, South Fork Baptist Church, 4915 New Jackson Hwy., Hodgenville, KY 42748.

SEEKING: Pastor for Burlington Baptist Church, located near Cincinnati in Boone County, one of Kentucky's fastest growing areas. Contemporary and traditional worship services. Preferred is at least 5 years senior-pastor experience and a seminary degree. Send resumé to Pastor Search Committee, Burlington Baptist Church, PO Box 48, Burlington, KY 41005; or lkmc9@insightbb.com by Jan. 31, 2008.

SEEKING: Part-time worship/choir leader for two morning worship hours for outreach-driven church. Blended worship, early worship band, late worship choir/ensemble, seasonal cantata. Diverse congregation, long-tenured staff. Interested individuals forward resúmes to First Baptist Church, PO Box 296, Carrollton, KY 41008. Phone: (502) 732-4396.

SEEKING: Full-time pastor for First Baptist Church of Flatwoods, Ky. Please send resumé to: FBC of Flatwoods, PO box 1005, Flatwoods, KY 41139, Attn: Pulpit Committee; or e-mail resumé to ffbcmccarty@hotmail.com.

SEEKING: Senior pastor for Grace Baptist (Lexington), an older church with a rich history. Applicants must be seminary graduates. If interested, please send resumé to: Pastor Search Chair, 568 Grantchester St., Lexington, KY 40505, Attn: H.S. Durbin.

SEEKING: Pastor for First Baptist Church, a small Southern Baptist congregation nearing its 200th anniversary. Located in the heart of Newport, Ky. (near Cincinnati), FBC seeks a pastor to lead the church in growth as we continue to be an essential part of our changing community. Applicants should send resúmes to: Pastor Search Committee, c/o Michael Turner, 141 Ridge Hill Drive, Highland Heights, KY 41076.

SEEKING: Part-time children's minister (preschool-6th grade). Send resúmes to Locust Grove Baptist Church, 73 Locust Grove Church Road, Cadiz, KY 42211.

SEEKING: Full-time pastor for Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, Somerset, Ky. Please send resumé to Pastor Search Committee, 1685 Highway 3091, Somerset, KY 42503.

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We three kings?

Bible offers few clues about wise men who play huge role in Christmas story

By **Benedicta Cipolla**
Religion News Service

Union, N.J. (RNS)—They came. They saw. They gifted.

That is about all we know of the foreign visitors who traveled to Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus.

The scene ingrained in the public imagination—a stately procession of three kings in turbans, crowns, elaborate capes and fancy slippers, with an entourage of servants and camels trailing behind—isn't from Scripture.

In fact, there's no evidence in the Gospels that the Magi were kings, or even that there were three of them, much less that they sidled up to a manger on dromedaries exactly 12 days after Jesus' birth.

"Legends pop up when people begin to look closely at historical events," said Christopher Bellitto, assistant professor of history at New Jersey's Kean University. "They want to fill in the blanks."

Only the Gospel of Matthew mentions "wise men from the East" who follow a star to Bethlehem. In the original Greek, they were called magoi (in Latin, magi), from the same root that gives us the word magic. It has been speculated they were astrologers or members of a Persian priestly caste.

But what matters more than their exact number and status, say historians and biblical scholars, is the fact that they were not Jews.

"For Matthew, the magic star

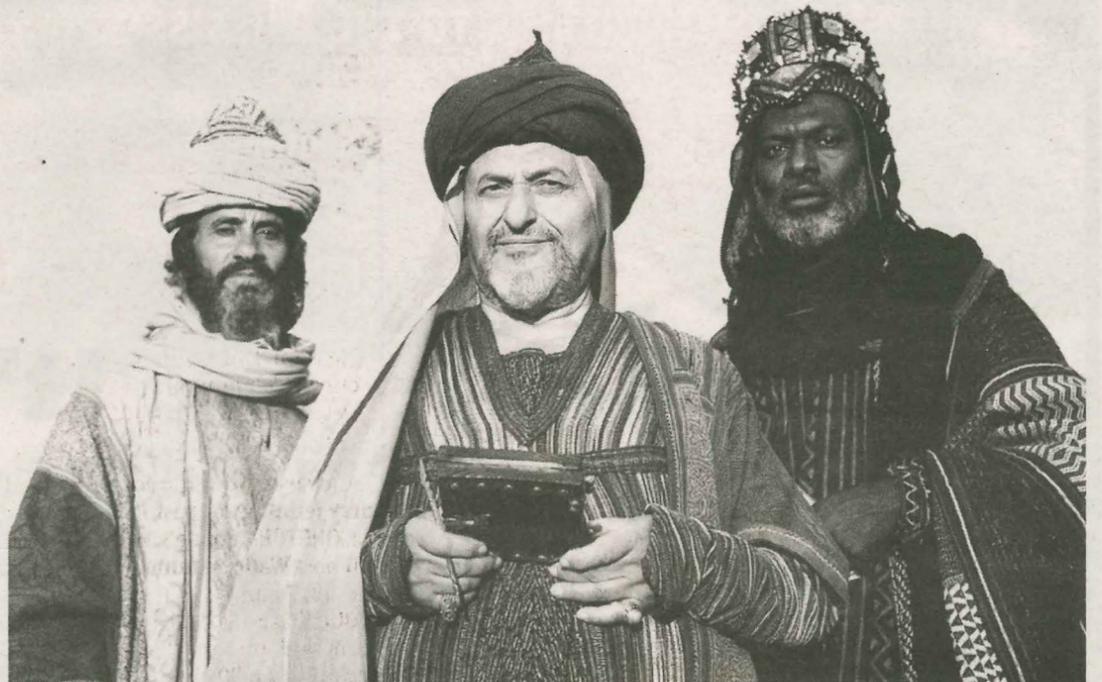
leading the wise men to the place of Jesus' birth is his way of saying what happened in Jesus is for the Gentile world as well," said Marcus Borg, professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University and co-author of the new book, "The First Christmas."

After being warned in a dream to avoid the murderous King Herod, the Magi returned home "by another road." Metaphorically, that suggests they were transformed by their experience. While Matthew does not say they converted to Christianity, popular legend holds that they were baptized by Thomas and died in Armenia in 55 A.D.

The first artistic depictions of the Magi are found in second century Roman catacombs, but it wasn't until the early third century, when Christian writer Tertullian referred to them as "almost kings," that they began to cultivate a royal air.

Their kingly designation also echoes biblical passages in Isaiah and the Psalms, keeping with the predictions of Jesus' birth recorded in the Old Testament. Prophecies foretold gifts of gold and frankincense, two of the three gifts the Magi brought. The third, myrrh, was a burial spice, which some believe foreshadowed Jesus' death and resurrection.

Around the same time as Tertullian, Origen—a theologian in Alexandria, Egypt—set their number at three, likely because they carried



three gifts, said Teresa Berger, a professor at Yale Divinity School.

Later, the wise men were portrayed as representatives of the three races of man as descended from Noah's sons—Semitic, Indo-European and African—which is why one is sometimes pictured as a black man.

Fast forward to the sixth century, when a Latin document recorded their names as Gaspar (or Caspar), Melchior and Balthazar, though the source is unknown, and different names exist in other languages.

By the time their relics arrived at the Cologne cathedral in 1164, after stops in Constantinople and Milan, some believers venerated the Magi as saints, and festivals sprang up to honor them. A 14th-century report of an Epiphany play described cos-

tumed "kings" riding through Milan on horseback with a large retinue, similar to contemporary three kings parades in Latin America and in Latino communities in the United States.

The Magi may get short shrift in the U.S. compared to other countries, but they play an integral part in the Christmas story, cropping up in songs and often stealing the show in pageants.

William Studwell, a retired professor at Northern Illinois University and an expert on Christmas carols, chose "We Three Kings of Orient Are" as one of two "Carols of the Year" for 2007 to mark its 150th anniversary. He recalls his own Magi days fondly.

"It's one of the only things I remember about third grade," he said, "being one of the kings."

FALSE IDENTITIES? Stefan Kalipha (Gaspar), Nadim Sawalha (Melchior) and Eriq Ebouaney (Balthasar) portray the Magi in the movie, "The Nativity Story." Scholars contend that the Bible makes no mention that the magi were kings or that there were even three of them. (RNS photo courtesy of New Line Cinema)

Churches push 'Advent Conspiracy' to teach real giving

By **Nancy Haught**
Portland Oregonian

Portland, Ore. (RNS)—The Christmas contradiction gives Pastor Rick McKinley a headache.

Americans will spend about \$475 billion this year on gifts, decorations and parties that many will not even remember next year. They will run themselves ragged—shopping, wrapping and celebrating. And some won't pay off their Christmas debt until March, if they are lucky.

"We celebrate Jesus' birthday by giving ourselves presents," McKinley said. "We don't give Him anything."

McKinley is pastor of Imago Dei Community, a Christian church of about 1,500 members that meets in a high school auditorium in Portland, Ore. It dawned on McKinley as he prepared an Advent sermon last year that the call today is to resist consumerism and give gifts like God does.

"These are relational gifts," he noted: God gives Himself to people, so people will give of themselves to the poor.

So McKinley and a few pastor friends from around the country hatched what they called the Advent Conspiracy. They challenged their congregations to spend less on Christmas, give relational gifts and donate the money saved to the poor.

Three congregations collected \$430,000—Imago Dei collected \$110,000 on a single Sunday—and



CONSPIRACY THEORY Sarah Blakeman (left) and sister Elli make their own Christmas gifts by knitting scarves. Their father, Clark Blakeman, joined the "Advent Conspiracy" last year to focus on relational gifts and donating money to charity at Christmas. (RNS photo by Doug Beghtel/The Oregonian)

gave most of that to Living Water International, a nonprofit project that digs wells in Third World countries.

In the following few months, word of the Advent Conspiracy spread over the Internet. McKinley and like-minded people such as "Purpose Driven Life" author Rick Warren discussed it every chance they got.

This year, more than 490 churches from 10 countries have joined the conspiracy, said Jeanne McKinley,

who directs the program from Imago Dei with her husband. World Relief, an evangelical mission group, has recruited 500 more churches to participate. About 1,700 individuals have joined on the Internet, she noted.

Pastor McKinley asks only one thing of his co-conspirators—that they donate at least 25 percent of their Christmas savings to clean water projects. The United Nations Development Program estimates that

\$10 billion a year would help solve the shortage of clean water.

"The church needs to be on the leading edge of solving this problem," he added.

Jan Carson moved to Portland from Northern Ireland two years ago. "Christmas is slightly different over there," she pointed out. "Here we spend a lot of time buying stuff, accumulating stuff and trying to make people feel better about themselves by giving them stuff."

Joining the Advent Conspiracy allowed Carson to "let go of the frenzy of gift-giving and made the run-up to Christmas more peaceful."

Clark Blakeman, another Imago Dei pastor and a conspiracy veteran, proposed it last year to his four teenagers as a first step toward a deeper understanding of Christmas.

"On Christmas morning, there were fewer gifts, but it was better than I ever would have expected," Blakeman recalled. "It was so obvious that the kids took greater delight in the gifts they had made and how they would be received."

And there was another benefit that neither Blakeman nor McKinley even anticipated. Families spend more time together as they plan and make gifts. It all becomes relational if people resist consumerism.

"We're not asking that you don't spend money on Christmas," McKinley said, "just that you do it with the poor in mind."



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FAST.**

REGISTER FOR CAMP.

Now is the time to register your group for camp! Cedarmore and Jonathan Creek are both filling up quickly, so secure your spot before the new year begins. Early Bird Pricing is available until February 14, 2008, so register now and pass the savings on to your students.

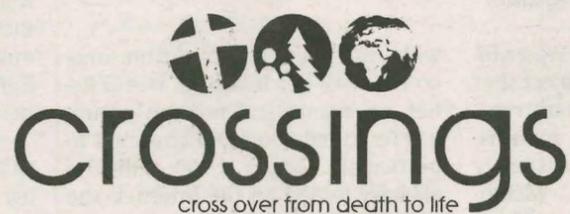
See how Crossings can partner with your ministry for an unforgettable week with your students.

how to register:

Visit www.crossingscamps.org and click register.

-or-

call 502-491-7000



www.crossingscamps.org