Preparing for the breakthrough/calamity: that's what we spend most of our time doing. The breakthrough speech that will change everything, or the giant insight that opens every door. We fret about the apocalyptic ending, the big crash, the slam climax as well.

Of course, it almost never happens that way. Products and services succeed one person at a time, as the word slowly spreads. Customers defect one person at a time, as hearts are broken and people are disappointed. Doors open, sure, but not all at once. One at a time.

One at a time is a little anticlimactic and difficult to get in a froth over, but one at a time is how we win and how we lose.

- Seth Godin
not - and God's vision for your ministry will be fulfilled because who He is.

"What if?" Ex. 4:1. Why take the risk? Why go after God's vision if there is no guarantee of success? God replied by asking Moses, "What is that in your hand?" In other words, let me show you that a piece of dead wood is enough for me! God is not dependent upon our abilities. His glory will be revealed in our weaknesses. Go dependent. Go by faith.

"I am not good enough!" Ex. 4:10. God's vision sounded impossible. God replied, "Now go! I will be with you as you speak." When you stand in front of your church, cast your God-given vision for your church on His authority.

"I'm scared - send someone else" Ex. 4:13. God said, "Better yet, you will go with someone else." God sent Aaron with Moses, a man who had the right gifts to help and encourage him. Ask for the same in your ministry.

"It's only bringing trouble!" Ex. 5:22. God was leading - and the enemy never likes that. God's vision brought trouble to the people. He was leading them out of a painful situation, but also out of their comfort zone and into a life of faith. He told Moses "Now you will see what I can do!" Ex. 6:1. So don't panic if your God-given vision arouses the enemy. Expect it.

"I can't do it!" Ex. 6:12. Things got worse before they got better. After meeting with Pharaoh and, it seemed, failing, Moses again went back to looking at himself. This time, God's answer was a command to action: "Lead the people of Israel out of Egypt."

What are your excuses for not leading? God has called you. He will equip you. He will protect you. He will guide you. He will give you success. Just be faithful. Lead the people by being led by God.

Discuss this article with Harold on our Facebook page.

Missional Videos

3 Great Sources For Short Video Stories on Faith
Are you looking for that perfect testimony of faith to illustrate your sermon, to show illustrations of the Adventist Church around the world, or to play during missions time during Sabbath School? Between these three sites there are hundreds of Adventist stories available for download to play on the big screen. And the best part is that there are no download fees!

Adventist Mission - Produces a variety of story lengths to fit in with your schedule. The stories from around the world center not on the stories of highly-educated super-Christians performing exceptional feats. They are the stories of everyday people who answer the call to touch the lives of others in the name of Jesus.

Spotlight on Mission - features stories that come from the North Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This is a YouTube link so you may have to use a YouTube downloader such as www.bestvideodownloader.com to save to your hard drive so you can project them to the congregation.

Church Applied Stories of Faith comes from the Pacific Union Conference and tells stories of individual members and churches who are involved in Ministry. Let your congregation see what God is doing in Hawaii, California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona.

Reading for Pastors

The Mormons have hired top ad agencies to build up the image of their church. Is this something we should be doing for our church? (Here's a Seventh-day Adventist reflection on "the Mormon Moment").

Christians on Christmas. Are these good messages for the church to give - or not?

- Say no to Black Friday, and replace it with "Bless Friday."
- "If you don't see Merry Christmas in the window, don't go in that store."
- A unique application of Vacation Bible School: Do it during Christmas break!
Cancel church because it falls on Christmas Sunday? (The last time this happened in '05, even Willow Creek canceled!)

Does the fall of Crystal Cathedral herald a bursting mega-church bubble? Some researchers think so. Quote: "Megachurches have become so big that their economics are unsustainable."

The mark of a dying church? Here's what Tony Morgan says. Quote: "When churches become inward focused and start making decisions about ministry to keep people rather than reach people, they have also started to die."

A particularly good summary of Paul's view on the issues of women in ministry, from Craig Keener. Quote: "Increasingly, secular thinkers attack Christianity as against women and thus irrelevant to the modern world."

How proactive should you be in defense of your beliefs? In Iowa, a Christian baker refused to make a wedding cake for a lesbian couple.

The new atheism: the vast majority of atheists are white - though there's a new movement among African Americans. Are we prepared to counter the fastest-growing (non)affiliation in the western world?

To the Point

The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the Word...This feeding is of the essence of the office of a pastor, as unto the exercise of it, so that he who doth not, or can not, or will not, feed the flock is no pastor whatever outward call or work he may have in the church.

- John Owen

A decision without tradeoffs isn't a decision. The art of good decision making is looking forward to and celebrating the tradeoffs, not pretending they don't exist.

- Seth Godin

The direct use of force is such a poor solution to any problem, it is generally employed only by small children and large nations.

- David Friedman

The trouble with America is that there are far too many wide-open spaces surrounded by teeth.

- Charles Luckman

I think that I shall never see / a billboard lovely as a tree. / Perhaps, unless the billboards fall, / I'll never see a tree at all.

- Ogden Nash

I have noticed that the people who are late are often so much jollier than the people who have to wait for them.

- E. V. Lucas

If there is anything the nonconformist hates worse than a conformist, it's another nonconformist who doesn't conform to the prevailing standard of nonconformity.

- Bill Vaughan

Traditions are group efforts to keep the unexpected from happening.

- Barbara Tober

Most people would rather be certain they're miserable than risk being happy.

- Robert Anthony

When a thing has been said and well, have no scruple. Take it and copy it.

- Anatole France

News, Ideas & Reminders

- A reminder: You're free to republish pieces from Best Practices in your own newsletter or blog, as long as you give attribution to Best Practices and the author of the piece.

- You'll find here an archive of all Best Practices newsletters going back to its beginning.

- A good resource for what's planned: the NAD Calendar of Special Days

- ADRA has resources available for World Aids Day.
• **2012 West Coast Worship Conference, February 2-4** - will feature Elizabeth Talbot, Ryan Bolger, Ray Beeson

• **Adventists InStep for Life (AISFL) webinar, Tuesday**. December 13, at 8-9 p.m. EST.

• **Previous resource links**:  
  - Andrews Study Bible  
  - The Hope of Survivors, ministry to victims of pastoral sexual abuse  
  - iFollow website  
  - NAD NewsPoints (formerly Friday Fax): by email, or on a web page.  
  - Back issues of REACH North America News  
  - Adventist Parenting e-newsletter  
  - The one Project  
  - Facts with Hope, evidence-based health messages for bulletins  
  - NAD Volunteer Screening Guidelines and Screening Form  
  - InMinistry fall classes in NAD  
  - The Andrews Study Bible is now digital  
  - Adventist Family Ministries  
  - Ron Cluzet's Prophecies Decoded  
  - REACH North American Resources Guide  
  - Adventist Meetings Speaker Registry  
  - World Life Expectancy website  
  - The ONE project, Seattle

Got a tool, resource, site, article, idea or seminar that you like a lot? Share it with us at BestPractices@ameritech.net.

**Upcoming NAD Events**

Do you have an event you’d like to invite NAD pastors to? Send details to BestPractices@Ameritech.net.

**Bible Sabbath.** Dec 3, 2011, Division Wide.  
Pastoral Evangelism and Leadership Conference. Dec 4, 2011 - Dec 6, 2011, Oakwood University Seventh-day Adventist Church, 5500 Adventist Boulevard, Huntsville, AL 35896. "Pentecost II: Walking in the Rain". Come for a confluence of powerful worship, incredible teaching, transformational experiences and ultimately, seeking a "soaking" in the "rain" of Holy Spirit. For more information, email: lindsay@adventsource.org

Lake Region Conference Evangelism Summit. Jan 7, 2012 - Jan 8, 2012, Detroit Metro Area. Revival and Reformation Bible Institute "The Harvest is Ready." Friday evening 6:30pm: Detroit Conant Gardens SDA Church, 18801 Joseph Campau Street, Detroit, MI 48234. Saturday afternoon 3:00pm: Detroit City Temple SDA Church, 8816 Grand River Avenue, Detroit, MI 48204. The Summit will energize, educate, equip and empower members in the ministry of Bible Work and Lifestyle Evangelism. Contact Pastor Leon Bryant at 313-715-2957. For more information, email: lbryant@lakeregionsda.org

NAD Day of Prayer. Jan 7, 2012, Division Wide via Hope Channel & Church Channel. Tune My Heart. Plan now for a special, life-changing day of prayer for your church. Options: * Begin on Friday evening, January 6, 2012. * Add the valuable discipline of some form of fasting. For the last 16 years Seventh-day Adventist churches across North America have joined hearts on the first Sabbath of each new year praying for our countries, our communities, our churches, and our own needy hearts. Join with your family across the Division at this crucial time in our history. For more information, email: ruthiej@earthlink.net

Worldwide Day for Prayer and Fasting. Jan 7, 2012, Worldwide. First Sabbath of each quarter has been designated as days of prayer and fasting for the world church. Families and individuals are encouraged to establish the first day of each month and one day a week as normal or partial fast days. Support information and helps are being developed by the Prayer and Fasting Subcommittee.

NAD Pre-Convention Prayer Summit. Jan 12, 2012 - Jan 15, 2012, Innisbrook Resort & Golf Club, 26750 U. S. Highway 19 North, Innisbrook, FL 34684. "Revolution on Our Knees". Featured Speakers: Dan Jackson, President, North American Division; José Rojas; Director, Volunteer Ministries, North American Division; Jonathon Henderson, Pastor, Northern California Conference; Jim Moon, Pastor, Rocky Mountain Conference; Pavel Goia, Pastor, Kentucky-Tennessee Conference. For more information, email: ruthiej@earthlink.net

NAD Adventist Ministries Convention. Jan 15, 2012 - Jan 18, 2012, Innisbrook Resort & Golf Club, 36750 US Highway 19 N, Palm Harbor, FL 34684. The NAD Adventist Ministries Convention (AMC) features keynote speakers, guest musicians, ministry advisories and a menu of training seminars for Seventh-day Adventist Ministry facilitators and leaders throughout North America. It is an opportunity for ministry professionals to re-think, re-evaluate, re-tool, and re-discover. Phone: 301-
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<td>Religious Liberty Week</td>
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<td>North American Division</td>
<td>Religious Liberty offering will be taken January 21, 2011. Resource materials are being mailed to each pastor and religious liberty leader. For more information, email: <a href="mailto:latha.bithini@nad.adventist.org">latha.bithini@nad.adventist.org</a></td>
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<td>NAD Health Summit Orlando 2012</td>
<td>Jan 27, 2012 - Feb 5, 2012</td>
<td>Orlando Mariott Lake Mary, FL 32746</td>
<td>&quot;Equipping Health Leaders to Reach Out.&quot; For a list of seminars, click here. Phone: 407-252-6554 (after 5:30pm EST) For more information, email: <a href="mailto:yasminthen1@yahoo.com">yasminthen1@yahoo.com</a></td>
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Mormons’ Ad Campaign May Play Out on the ’12 Campaign Trail

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

After Sunday worship in recent months, Mormon bishops around the country gathered their congregations for an unusual PowerPoint presentation to unveil the church’s latest strategy for overcoming what it calls its “perception problem.”

Top Mormon leaders had hired two big-name advertising agencies in 2009, Ogilvy & Mather and Hall & Partners, to find out what Americans think of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Using focus groups and surveys, they found that Americans who had any opinion at all used adjectives that were downright negative: “secretive,” “cultish,” “sexist,” “controlling,” “pushy,” “anti-gay.”

On seeing these results, some of those watching the presentation booed while others laughed, according to people at the meetings. But then they were told that the church was ready with a response: a multimillion-dollar television, billboard and Internet advertising campaign that uses the tagline, “I’m a Mormon.” The campaign, which began last year but was recently extended to 21 media markets, features the personal stories of members who defy stereotyping, including a Hawaiian longboard surfing champion, a fashion designer and single father in New York City and a Haitian-American woman who is mayor of a small Utah city.

“We’re not secretive,” Stephen B. Allen, managing director of the church’s missionary department, who is in charge of the campaign, said in an interview. “And we’re not scared of what people think of us. If you don’t recognize the problem, you can’t solve the problem. If nobody tells you you have spinach in your teeth, how would you know?”

Church leaders like Mr. Allen say that the timing and tenor of the campaign have nothing to do with the political campaigns of two Mormons running for president: Mitt Romney, the putative front-runner, and Jon M. Huntsman Jr., both former Republican governors. To avoid the perception that it was trying to influence politics, the church is intentionally not airing the campaign in states that have early primaries, going so far as to cancel their advertising in Las Vegas when Nevada moved up its primary, said Mr. Allen.

And yet, the church’s campaign could prove to be a pivotal factor in the race for the presidency. The Mormon image problem is a problem not only for the church, but also for Mr. Romney. For all
their success professionally and financially, Mormons still face a level of religious bigotry in the United States equal only to that faced by Muslims.

Mormons make up less than 2 percent of the American population; the church says it has six million members in this country out of 14 million worldwide. They believe in Jesus Christ, read the Bible and consider themselves Christian, but their theology differs significantly from traditional Christianity. They claim three additional books of scripture, including the Book of Mormon. They believe that the prophet Joseph Smith, who founded the church in 1830, restored Christianity to its true path.

Polls taken during the last presidential race showed that 4 in 10 Americans said they would not vote for a Mormon for president. While some more recent polls have shown a slight softening of attitudes, a Mormon candidate still has a huge hurdle to overcome. If the church’s upbeat advertising campaign succeeds in warming public perceptions of Mormons, then a campaign intended to sell the church could also help sell a president.

The highly negative poll numbers that surfaced in the first Romney campaign were deeply disturbing to the church’s top leadership, according to people involved with the church’s advertising campaign who spoke on condition of anonymity so as not to jeopardize their jobs. Church leaders were also taken aback by the vitriol directed at Mormons after the church contributed money and volunteers to pass Proposition 8, the California measure in 2008 that banned same-sex marriage.

“You would think,” said one person involved with the advertising campaign, “that the higher Romney’s profile, the better it is for the church. It’s actually the opposite.

“The people who are very savvy within the church and understand media,” this person said, “know that if Romney gets the nomination, ultimately for the church it’s a problem. Politicians are polarizing figures, they’re not unifying figures. What it does is completely eliminate the option of Mormonism among a whole swath of people who will never ever consider it. They’ll say, I know one Mormon — our president — and I hate that guy.”

In many ways, Mr. Romney and Mr. Huntsman embody the Mormon archetype: clean-cut, Republican American family men. The church’s campaign is designed to introduce a rainbow of Mormon faces who counter the stereotype. These Mormons are not only white, but also Asian, black and Hispanic, and from countries other than the United States. There are plenty of traditional two-parent families, but there are also single parents, working women and stay-at-home fathers, and even an interracial couple — all family arrangements rare among Mormons until recently.

The video featuring Erick Lund, an Army veteran, opens with him playfully spinning his cat on the slick wood floor of his home. It shows him reveling in his life with his wife and two children,
studying to be a dentist, and only gradually, when he takes off his shoe, does the video reveal that he was seriously injured in Iraq.

“My faith is so intertwined with my life,” he said in a phone interview. “But nobody wants religion shoved at them. I don’t. I don’t think anybody does. What I like about this campaign is it’s a really nice way to start a conversation.”

Brandon Burton, president and general manager of Bonneville Communications, an advertising agency owned by the church, said that the church’s previous, long-running media campaign promoted the church’s doctrine, providing a toll-free number to call for a free Bible or Book of Mormon. However, this new campaign introduces doctrine only if a viewer seeks out the Web site mormon.org.

“What we found was that in order for people to have a desire to understand doctrinally what the church stands for, it was necessary for us to overcome the stigmas that existed,” said Mr. Burton in an interview. The biggest stigma, said those involved in the campaign, is the belief that Mormons are not Christians.

After the presentations in their churches, members in good standing were asked by their bishops to go to the Web site and post their own personal profiles and testimonies. Screeners reviewed the text before it was made public to make sure that nothing in it contradicted church theology, said Mr. Allen of the missionary department.

Is the campaign working? In the past 12 months, the Web site has had more than one million people initiate online chats with Mormons, he said, but it is too early to tell whether this is bringing in more converts.

Mia B. Love, the daughter of Haitian immigrants and mayor of Saratoga Springs, Utah, said she had received a letter from a man she didn’t know saying that her video had helped convince the man’s wife to join the church.

“The church has always been incredibly involved in missionary work, and the ads are an extension of that,” said Ms. Love. “They wanted to get the word out that we’re not a cult, we’re not sitting in the mountains here with five wives. They wanted to let people know that we’re normal.”
A sister American denomination gets its moment in the sun. Why not us?

Recently I watched an interview with the polished and handsome Mitt Romney. He’ll quite possibly be the nominee for his party next year, and even if he isn’t, he’ll have left a big footprint on the American political landscape. I don’t like everything he stands for (if you can figure out what that is), but he’s clearly smart and pragmatic and, from what I can tell, at least as moral as some of the previous inhabitants of that office.

And he’s a Mormon.

Most of what I know about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints seems bizarre to me. A prophet of questionable reputation. Mysterious golden plates “translated” into the odd New World-centric Book of Mormon. Masonic-like secret ceremonies in Disneyland castles. Special underwear. Baptism for dead people whose names are mined from extensive genealogical archives. Marriage as a metaphor for the Godhead. An afterlife where Mormon men are elevated to deity by a God who, as I heard one Mormon say, wants to surround Himself with peers.

Yet the actual Mormons I know, or know about, aren’t bizarre. Let’s not judge them by the desert mobile home compounds filled with child brides (do you like it when people judge us by David Koresh?) and look instead at the ordinary Mormons you meet in business and see on television. Mormons have done well, at least in the United States—and that in spite of ongoing embarrassing publicity about the strange behaviors at their fringes. They have good marriages.
and families, help others, are generally honest business people and hard workers.

There's no direct link between our two faiths—Joseph Smith died the same year as The Great Disappointment—yet Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists have much in common beyond our long, adjective-clogged names and three-letter abbreviations. We come from the same religious impulse in American frontier faith.

Both denominations originated in the “burned over” district (so called because of the many religious movements arising there during the Second Great Awakening) of western and central New York state, among people who felt alienated from the educated Presbyterian and Episcopalian establishment of the East. (Hill Cumorah, Hiram Edson’s farm, and the Fox sisters’ home are within a 15 minute drive of one another). Both faiths are restorationist, meaning that we were willing set aside 1800 years of theological development in favor of reliance on the Bible and contemporary prophetic gifts, toward the goal of creating a new, true religion that God would recognize to the exclusion of all the others. Both groups adopted doctrines and lifestyles that segregated us from our communities, the Mormons going so far as to establish their own state in the American West. Both embraced healthful lifestyle innovations and conservative Christian behaviors. Both are determinedly evangelistic. Both are eschatological movements, though we Seventh-day Adventists have tended to be, ironically, more pessimistic and fearful than Mormons.

Ironic because while Seventh-day Adventists have talked a lot about being persecuted, instances of it have been rare. The Mormons suffered real persecution, mostly because of polygamy, until they were able to establish their Zion in Utah. Their history is more mysterious and tragic than ours: believers hounded from place to place, crossing the Rockies with handcarts, a new city carved out of the desert, factional rivalries ending in massacres and gunfights. As we Seventh-day Adventists have moved in the direction of Evangelical Christianity (much to the concern of some, who prefer we remain sectarian—the objection to Questions on Doctrine was that our scholars watered down distinctive pioneer doctrines in order to appease Evangelical leaders who wanted to label us a “cult”), Mormonism reveled in the strange doctrine of a married God who created people so they (men, at least) can ultimately become gods over their own planets. While we invested in denominational governance, professional clergy, multiple schools, colleges and health-care institutions, Mormons called all laymen priests, made the church lay led (in practice it tends to be plutocratic), established one big university, and built some of the most fanciful and attention-getting houses of worship in the world. While our evangelism is popularly known for Biblical monsters and predictions of doom, theirs is associated with smiling, clean-cut young men in white shirts.

In some respects Mormons have maintained their sectarianism better than we have: their scholars have been less willing to explain themselves to other Christians than ours have, and clustered as they had long been in a few Western states, hadn’t (until recently) needed to. Yet they’ve accommodated the surrounding culture when necessary, such as suspending polygamy and allowing blacks into their priesthood.

In spite of their oddness—or perhaps because of it—they’re better known than we are. All current studies show that whereas relatively few in our communities know who Seventh-day Adventists are, almost everyone knows who the Mormons are, especially now that two of them are running for President and legislative leaders like Orrin Hatch and Harry Reid are often in the news. Add to that well-known authors like Orson Scott Card, Stephanie Meyer (Twilight), Steven Covey, dozens of athletes, doctors, scientists and industrialists, a Book of Mormon play on broadway, and “Big Love” on television. And, they do nice image-building advertising.
Like us, they’ve been an insular community whose culture isn’t easily understood from the outside. And, like us, some of them question the veracity of their founding stories and documents, and resent the protective, conservative leadership of their church. This came home to me when listening to an episode of NPR’s “Being” in which Krista Tippett interviews Mormon scholar and journalist Joanna Brooks. Brooks speaks candidly of the insecurities and doubts that Mormons have about their distinctive identity. While they’re proud of their achievements, she says this is a “white-knuckle moment” for aware Mormons, who fear what people will say about them next—especially since some of it is true, such as that polygamy, though suspended, is still technically Mormon doctrine.

I’m struggling to know what to think about the so-called Mormon Moment. I have always thought it astonishingly arrogant that Martin and Barnhouse et al. defined the word “cult” and then threatened other groups with it. Having had the word used on me a few times, I see little advantage to pinning it on someone else. Mormon doctrine is weird, to be sure, but I know my own denomination’s feet of clay too well to feel good about stomping on another’s toes. And I have to admit that as far as influencing culture, Mormons have done wonderfully well at getting around the movement’s dodgy past and odd beliefs and succeeding on their own terms. Better than we have.

I’m a little jealous, actually. I wonder why there’s not been an Adventist Moment. We’ve had our small recognitions by the larger culture: a year or two around the time of Baby Fae (though it was mostly LLU and Dr. Bailey, not the church, that got the attention), Paul Harvey mentioning us occasionally, a few politicians and entertainers. We’re better known in the African-American community than elsewhere, and have more important people in government in Africa and the Caribbean than here, too. Here, we appear mostly concerned with keeping our denominational machinery running and our institutions alive. But as for interacting with American culture, for good or ill, we’ve been sidelined.

One reason may be that the judgment of our church appears to fall more heavily on our achievers than happens in the LDS church. I was always amazed that people as conservative as Mormons could put up with the Osmond family in spite of their being entertainers, with all the lifestyle compromises that implies. Adventists are interested in our few celebrities, but we’re suspicious of them, too. Actor Clifton Davis and Congressman Jerry Pettis were much criticized because they didn’t behave as Adventist as we should have, and most of us won’t even claim Little Richard. We tend to value personal piety over societal recognition, even if that means sacrificing achievement. It’s a rare celebrity—Dr. Ben Carson comes to mind—who can stay among us without being fired upon. Our heroes, like Eric Liddell in Chariots of Fire, are those who don’t do things for the sake of principle.

If we did have a Seventh-day Adventist candidate for president, what questions would arise? I can imagine our people asking, “Will he work on Sabbath?” “Will he close government offices on Sabbath?” “Will he let alcohol and pork be served at state dinners?” Outsiders might ask whether a person who believes that the world is on the verge of destruction over which is the right day to go to church, and that Roman Catholics are set to persecute him, can be trusted to make good judgements with the machinery of government.

Could we stand a Mormon president? We may find out. I do hope we’d behave better than we did back in 1960 when we got our first Roman Catholic president.
I find the theory that Ellen White copied from Smith too weak to be taken seriously.

Recommend this? | Recommended by 9 people [?]

You might be interested in:

- Barna Study vs. Ted Wilson: Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church
- Ricardo Graham Re-elected, But With Concerns Expressed | Spectrum Magazine
- Three Faces of the Cosmic Conflict Metanarrative: Astronomical Problems
- Slavery, Circumcision, and the Ordination of Women
- Adventist Philosophy: Promise or Peril?

Source URL (retrieved on 12/05/2011 - 11:09): http://spectrummagazine.org/node/3608

Links:
While thousands of bargain hunters hit the stores for Black Friday deals, several churches are choosing to start the Christmas season with "Bless Friday" by giving back to the community.

And these churches are hoping to get their message across to Americans. "People get our message that when we focus too much on buying things, we lose sight of the real reason for Christmas – remembering and honoring Christ," said Chuck Fox, founder of Bless Friday, in a statement. "We want to begin our Christmas celebration by serving others just as Jesus did."

Fox launched Bless Friday in 2010 after hearing a sermon on how Americans are losing sight of the real reason for Christmas.

The message of Bless Friday in a nutshell: It's a day for service not shopping.

"On the day after Thanksgiving, millions of people started their Christmas celebration at malls and other retail outlets," the website for Bless Friday states. "This can't be the way that God intends Christians to prepare for the celebration of the coming of the Savior of the World. And what begins poorly also ends poorly."

According to the National Retail Federation, up to 152 million people plan to shop Black Friday weekend, up from the 138 million people who planned to do so last year.

Fox stressed the need to start the Christmas celebration "in a more loving and appropriate manner." He is hoping to spread the word to get more churches involved and more service opportunities scheduled.

Beacon of Light Christian Center in South Houston is participating by offering food and clothing to those in need and hosting activities for the wider community.

"Our community is filled with people who financially overextend themselves at Christmas. We want to show them a more positive and more spiritual way to celebrate," Pastor Anthony Gasery said in a statement.

Congregants from Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church in Houston have been encouraged to volunteer at local ministries, fix up a hurricane-damaged home or simply share a meal with neighbors.

"BLESS is not a program," the church says. "Rather, it is a series of practices that we believe will help us live a complete and balanced life in Christ."

Other churches in the Houston and Galveston area joining the Bless Friday movement include St. Luke's United Methodist Church, St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, Moody Memorial First United Methodist Church, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Fair Haven UMC and Mission Milby.

Nathan Black
Christian Post Reporter
SAY MERRY CHRISTMAS - American Christian Life United (ACLU) choir - Vocal by Carrie Rinderer

Uploaded by saymerrychristmas on Oct 24, 2011
Download your FREE Sheet Music at www.saymerrychristmas.net and together we can make 'Say Merry Christmas' the biggest Christmas song of all time. MP3 downloads are available on iTunes and Amazon.

Top Comments

There is an irony in this video. What are we supposedly defending in "walking right by the door" etc. It certainly isn't Jesus or LOVE. Jesus doesn't shun and God's love needs no defense, is always welcoming, and is not self-righteous nor fearful. The music is lovely however!
jamie48027 22 hours ago 9

I say Merry Christmas to everyone, instead of walking by the store I would walk in and wish them a merry Christmas.
wdvrgo 16 hours ago 4

Video Responses

Wish Me A Merry Christmas - Snyder Davis by snyderdavissmith 1.379 views
Dollar Store Christmas by DollarStoreChristmas 2.134 views

All Comments (821)

Sign In or Sign Up now to post a comment!

@mebyrne Whether or not you're a "good Christian" will be determined by Christ and not by your fellow man. I have no right to pass judgement, just encouragement. If anyone demands you turn back on Jesus Christ for whatever reason, you have a decision to make. Either choice will have consequences. Many have been martyred for their belief in Christ. They counted the cost of betrayal far too expensive and were not willing to allow themselves to be controlled by anyone. I hope this helps!
KCross81050 1 hour ago
MERRY CHRISTMAS to all & Happy Birthday Jesus Lord of LORDS!

I try to live my life in a Christ-like manner. I learn of his example and try to treat others the way He did while He was on the Earth. If I were to avoid shops that didn't see Christ the way I do, how would Christ see that? He welcomed everyone - unbelievers, sinners etc. He LOVINGLY showed the way. To be like him visit the shops and say Merry Christmas. Share the light of Christ. Leave them feeling appreciated. They would remember that far longer than they would those who walked past.

I understand the point of the song; for example, I like a Christmas tree to be called just that instead of a "holiday" tree. However, I have friends of different faiths, so I send out cards with the greeting of "happy holidays" so I can include everyone's holidays, not just the Christmas holiday. I really don't think there is anything wrong with that. Stores are open to the public, not just the Christian public, so in their case, I believe they have to include everyone.

Great song!

I think the ONLY reason Jesus would walk right by that door is if he were not buying things for his loved ones at Christmas.

I think the ONLY reason Jesus would walk right by that door is if he were not buying things for his loved ones at Christmas.

@kcross81050, I respectfully disagree with you. There is righteous anger, and you know that well I suspect. We can be kind but not shop in those stores that don't respect our Christian holiday. Do you think Jesus bought product from the sellers at the temple???? No!

Is this a joke? I'm a pastor and I think this is a terrible song.
Church offering free VBS during Christmas break
(http://leadercall.com/religion/x1202027457/Church-offering-free-VBS-during-Christmas-break)

Agape Church hopes to fill need in community

By Charlotte Graham, countyreporter@laurelleadercall.com
Laurel Leader-Call (http://leadercall.com)

LAUREL — A church in downtown Laurel has a special holiday gift for parents and their children in K5 to 5th grade.

On Dec. 19-22, Agape Church will sponsor a free Christmas Vacation Bible School called “Mr. McGregor’s Gift Shop. The event will be held at the Four One Five City Centre, 415 Central Avenue in Historic Downtown Laurel, from 8:30 a.m. until noon.

“This is our First Annual Christmas Vacation Bible School,” said Dr. James Johnson-Hill, the church’s lead pastor. “Children in Jones County will start their Christmas break on December 17, however most parents still need to work through December 24.

“This leaves some families in a dilemma and Agape Church would like to serve the Jones County Community by helping through the Christmas VBS,” added Johnson-Hill. “It will provide a safe and healthy activity, reinforce the real meaning of Christmas, and meet a need in our community.”

Johnson-Hill said Agape, a new church in the area, tries to do life-giving projects in the community. He added that a church’s mission is much larger than Sunday morning worship services.

“During the holiday season different churches do food kitchens and other things that we try to support,” said the pastor. “We try not to duplicate the work of others, but work along with them. If they are feeding, we can help serve.”

The church’s decision to offer Christmas Vacation Bible came after church leaders sought out ways to give back to the community. Bible school was something no church was offering during the Christmas break.
“We are a small congregation with just about 100 adults on a Sunday, but that doesn’t exonerate us,” said Johnson-Hill. “There is a work for us to do in the community, too.”

Registration is underway for those interested in enrolling children in the Bible school. Also, passersby will notice that the exterior of Four One Five City Centre is beautifully decorated to take on the theme of the Bible School.

There are scenes of the Nativity, toy train, nutcracker, gingerbread house and a lighted street at Christmastime found in the glass windows of the building.

“It’s beautiful when its lit up at night,” said Johnson-Hill. “It will be up through Christmas until after New Year’s.

“We wanted to do something to get the kids excited about what the holiday is really all about,” he added.

“Mr. McGregor’s Gift Shop” will focus on lessons in forgiveness. Johnson-Hill said teachers will discuss the “gift of forgiveness” and its importance.

“There will be a lot of different subjects that deal with how to live your life as a person who learns to forgive,” said the pastor. “If we can learn to forgive, we will eliminate some early gray hairs.”

Johnson said the Bible school will use multi-media teaching to share the message of love and forgiveness. There will be daily arts and crafts classes, as well as a musical component for participants. A mini concert is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 22. Also, snacks will be provided each day.

“Chick-fil-a, one of our sponsors will give free food coupons to each student that completes the Bible school,” said Johnson-Hill. “The Chick-fil-a cows will also visit the kids during the Bible school.”

Johnson-Hill welcomes volunteers from other churches to join Agape in this special gift to the community. He advises that background checks will be made on all volunteers and parents can be assured that their children will be in a safe and wholesome environment.

“We believe we can handle about 125 children,” said Johnson-Hill. “If we exceed that number, we will try to serve as best we can.”

Interested individuals can register by calling 601-342-040 or visiting the website at www.THEAGAPECHURCH.TV and click “VBS Registration.”
Most churches plan Christmas worship, but some will skip it

Posted on November 29, 2011 by Peter Smith

The last time Christmas fell on a Sunday, in 2005, some of the nation's largest churches drew criticism for canceling services.

This year, about 9 percent plan to skip church on Sunday, but 91 percent do plan a worship service, according to a new LifeWay Research survey of pastors.

The assumption has been that many people will be attending church on Christmas Eve and then staying close to home on Sunday — a particularly challenging scenario for large churches relying on battalions of volunteers.

Most churches skipping Sunday worship do plan a Christmas Eve service, the survey said.

LifeWay, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, based its results on a survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors.

Said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research:

"Having church on Christmas Day when it falls on a Sunday seems as if it would be as much of a given as having Thanksgiving on a Thursday, but this has been an issue of discussion and contention in recent years. Also, just because an overwhelming majority of pastors think that way doesn't mean those in their congregations necessarily share their perspective."

He cited another recent LifeWay survey finding that while three-quarters of Americans saw Christmas as primarily a religious holiday, two-thirds also acknowledged much of what they enjoyed about Christmas had "nothing to do with the birth of Jesus Christ."

How about you and your church? Planning to worship in church on Christmas Day, or will the church stay dark after the last candle is blown out at the Christmas Eve service?

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Guess who's coming to church: Kentucky congregation's racial policy protested

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Once again, Israel is scapegoated (The Washington Post)

Top Ten China Adventures: Walking With Pandas (Away.com)

Christopher Hitchens: Unspoken Truths (Vanity Fair)

The Reiki Symbols (MyDailyMoment.com)

About Peter Smith

Peter Smith writes about faith and religion for The Courier-Journal. Get your local newspaper delivered daily or weekends to your door. Click here for subscription information and special deals.

View all posts by Peter Smith →
Most churches plan Christmas worship, but some will skip it | Faith & Works


This entry was posted in Uncategorized. Bookmark the permalink.

6 Responses to Most churches plan Christmas worship, but some will skip it

Kenny Jahng says:
November 29, 2011 at 5:24 pm

Our church is holding 6 different live services on Christmas Eve, but we are also assembling the first ever Christmas Virtual Choir where anyone can participate from afar. Instructions are here: http://www.liquidchurch.com/virtualchoir

We’re inviting everyone with a webcam and access to YouTube to participate!

(PETER: If you want to cover this as a story, let me know and I can fill you in on all the details)

Reply

Scott Reeder says:
November 29, 2011 at 5:29 pm

In an era when we wish each other seasons greetings, decorate holiday trees, and throw winter solstice parties, it is no surprise to me when secularized families opt out of attending church on Christmas Sunday. I mean for them it has never been much more than a season of shopping, followed by a time of giving and receiving gifts from each other. Many secular minded Americans are perfectly content to celebrate Christmas without any thought of Christ.

This year with Christmas Day falling on a Sunday – The Lord’s Day, churches and Christian families will have to “choose that day” whom they are going to serve. Either we will cater to the traditions of a secular Christmas morning and forego church, or make worship on that day primary and our traditions secondary. As for our church and as for me and my house, I suppose we will choose that day to do what we do when Easter falls on a Sunday. We will serve the Lord and celebrate Him at church.

Pastor Scott Reeder
Church of Christ
Borden, Indiana
http://www.bordencc.org

Reply

Steve Brown says:
November 30, 2011 at 8:58 am

Our church, Highland Baptist, will have two Christmas Eve services, one featuring familiar carols and the reading of Scripture, the other a version of the English “Lessons and Carols” service, with the reading of nine Scripture texts and music performed by our choir and congregation. We’ll also have a worship service on Sunday morning at 11AM.

Reply

Kevin Lee Neathery says:
November 30, 2011 at 1:25 pm

Our church, Minors Lane Baptist Church, is having our regular morning worship service but no Sunday School or evening service. This is our practice whenever this occurs. We will have the same service times the next Sunday, New Years Day. This will also be our last Christmas in our current location. We are moving due to airport relocation.

Reply

TimZ says:
November 30, 2011 at 1:47 pm

I remember back in 2005 when a C-J columnist excoriated Willow Creek (outside of Chicago) for “cancelling Christmas”. She failed to mention that the congregation had 11 services that week, just not on that Sunday. She also failed to mention that the senior minister and several members of the ministry team spent Christmas Sunday morning participating in the service at one of Chicago’s largest predominantly African American churches. Clearly this editorialist was only concerned with bashing a large evangelical congregation, not with raising a legitimate issue (and not even with telling the truth).

My congregation will have a Christmas Eve service, but no service Sunday morning.
Southeast Christian Church will have Christmas Eve services at various times at its different campuses. We'll have a Christmas service on Sunday at 10 a.m. I hope that you'll join us!
Weblog: Megachurches Cancel Christmas

Plus: Australian charity ordered to hire non-Christians, one Walgreen pharmacist caves on Plan B, anti-"fundie" KU prof alleges attack, and other stories from online sources around the world.

Compiled by Ted Olsen | posted 4/13/2006 12:00AM

Megachurches won't hold Sunday services December 25

While Christian groups are warring to make sure that business and government workers say "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays," one place you won't hear either greeting this December 25 is at many of the largest churches in the country.

That's because, the Lexington Herald-Leader and Chicago Tribune report, the churches won't be open that day. Now, in most years, that wouldn't be terribly surprising: Protestant church offices have closed Christmas day since the time of the Puritans (who closed churches that day both to distinguish themselves from Roman Catholics and in protest of the bacchanal that Christmas celebrations had become in the early 18th century).

But this year, Christmas falls on a Sunday, the day when most churches (excepting those of Sabbatarians and a few others) hold services. Not this year.

Willow Creek Community Church (near Chicago), Southland Christian Church (near Lexington, Ky.), Mars Hill Bible Church (near Grand Rapids, Michigan), North Point Community Church (in Alpharetta, Ga.), and Fellowship Church (near Dallas) are among the churches hanging up a "closed" sign after their many Christmas Eve services. The five churches have a combined weekly attendance of more than 64,500.

And, yes, it's a conspiracy. "Megachurch officials around the country consulted with each other before deciding to take the day off," reports the Chicagoist blog (not a Christian blog): "You reward people for coming to church by … not making them come to church?"

Let's try another Willow spokesperson.

"At first glance it does sound contrarian," Willow Creek senior pastor Gene Appel told the Tribune. "We don't see it as not having church on Christmas. We see it as decentralizing the church on Christmas —hundreds of thousands of experiences going on around Christmas trees. The best way to honor the birth of Jesus is for families to have a more personal experience on that day."

But if that holds true for Christmas, doesn't it hold true for every other Sunday? Why not decentralize the
church every week by telling families "to have a more personal experience on that day"?

Folks at Willow Creek and Southland aren’t upset, say the papers. But others sure are.

"What's going on here is a redefinition of Christmas as a time of family celebration rather than as a time of the community faithful celebrating the birth of the Savior," Fuller Theological Seminary theologian Robert K. Johnston told the Herald-Leader. "There is a risk that we will lose one more of our Christian rituals, one that's at the heart of our faith."

"It's a sign of how totally identified with the culture [evangelicals have] become," Calvin College historian James Bratt told the Tribune. "The church has subordinated to cultural icons, and family is one of them. ... The logic of that is you should celebrate the holiday in its true sanctuary, which is the home."

The churches say they're being evangelistically sensitive.

"Studies would say the best opportunity to invite people is Christmas Eve. It's, for whatever reason, the least threatening service of the year to attend ... so what we do is really point all of our energy in that direction," says Glen Schneiders, pastor of Crossroads Christian Church in Lexington, another church closed this Christmas. "We don't think we're compromising. We're actually reaching more people by doing that."

Parkinson told the Tribune that Willow Creek is taking the money it would have cost to conduct a Sunday service and is instead putting it into producing and distributing a Christmas DVD, "potentially touching thousands more people than the same message from the stage on Sunday morning."

But again, the suggestion that the message is all that church is about, or that you can duplicate church on a DVD, is going to send those same critics howling.

There are so many angles to this story—the nature of church, the consequences of equating "pro-family" ideology with Christianity, the challenges of Christmas services' attendance (largely attended by non-Christians), the changing nature of Christmas, the subordination of religion to "family" at a time when "pro-family" groups are arguing for more explicitly religious Christmas greetings ... .

But Weblog probably shouldn't go on at length. After all, Weblog's church isn't meeting Christmas morning, either. (Then again, our non-sabbatarian church never meets on Sundays, since we rent, rather than own, our church space.)

More articles

Christmas wars:

- Suit filed over denied Nativity scene request | A local man's free speech rights were violated when the cities of Atlantic Beach and Neptune Beach refused his request to erect a Nativity display in a public park, according to a federal lawsuit filed in Jacksonville this morning (The Jacksonville Times-Union, Fla.)

- True meaning of Xmas | Money Editor Anne Howland writes it's fine to put the 'X' in Christmas; what's not politically correct is the holiday's commercial craziness (Ottawa Sun)

- Happy, er, Merry, er — oh, just 'Have a nice day' | Receive 'Happy Holidays' or 'Merry Christmas' greetings with the spirit in which they are intended (Editorial, The Arizona Daily Star, Tucson)

- Oy to the world | There is a grave concern, on news shows and op-ed pages, that we are about to lose Christmas. Though no one outside the media is at all interested, I figure jumping in will make my editors think I’m smart (Joel Stein, Los Angeles Times)

- The defense of Christmas is in the shopping bag | There was a time when falling on your knees was the
suggested posture to "hear the angel voices." Now, apparently, it's the only way to hear the cash registers ring (Laura Billings, Pioneer Press, St. Paul, Minn.)

- Selling Jesus isn't reason for season | Compulsory Christmas greetings by checkout clerks are just the beginning (Diane Carman, The Denver Post)

- Xmas on the rocks | I don't hesitate to use the word "Christmas." Even in mixed company. But I do wonder about the self-described Christians who become highly agitated upon failing to detect the "Christmas" spirit during their shopping sprees (Dan Bernstein, The Press-Enterprise, Riverside, Ca.)

- Joy to the world—now start spending | What religious person would enter a float celebrating the birth of Christ in a parade alongside marching bands, flaming hula hoops and a giant balloon kangaroo named Jumping Jack Cash? (Mike Littwin, Rocky Mountain News, Denver)

- Season could use a bit more good will | Chalk up 2005 as the year Christmas got off to a rocky start in Roanoke (Shanna Flowers, The Roanoke Times, Va.)

**Church and state:**

- Church loses bid for faithful | A Melbourne charity has lost its legal bid to hire only Christian staff (Herald Sun, Melbourne, Australia)

- School ban on girl wearing cross 'discriminatory' | A mother accused her daughter's school of discriminating against Christians yesterday after the teenager was suspended for refusing to take off a crucifix necklace (The Telegraph, London)

- Program for ex-convicts loses US grant | Police-clergy group to hunt new funding (The Boston Globe)

- Alleged satanic church challenges Zambian ban | An evangelical church that was banned in Zambia last week for allegedly practising satanism, including human sacrifice, has decided to challenge that decision in court, an official said Tuesday (SAPA, South Africa)

**Politics:**

- Senate race may bring religion into voting booth | An anticipated electoral showdown next year between U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum and Pennsylvania Treasurer Bob Casey Jr. will produce lots of talk about faith (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review)

- 3 D.C. hopefuls back civil unions | Candidates Cropp, Orange oppose same-sex marriage (The Washington Post)

- Ubiquitous porn: Alive on the net | It's a warning label, not a platform! It's isolation. It's zoning. Would you allow locating adult bookstores next to churches? It seems that Concerned Women for America would demand doing so (John C. Dvorak, PC Magazine)

**Alito:**

- Focus on the Family takes shot at Salazar | Newspaper ads today center on nomination of Alito to high court (Rocky Mountain News, Denver)

- Ads portray nominee as protector of Christmas | Conservative groups are hoping to rally support for Supreme Court nominee Samuel A. Alito Jr. with ads depicting him as a supporter of public Christmas displays (The New York Times)
Conservatives air ads praising Alito | Conservatives began airing two ads this week aimed at rallying support for the Supreme Court nomination of Judge Samuel A. Alito Jr. during the holiday season (The Washington Times)

For foes of Roe v. Wade, Alito's fuzziness comforts | Most Alito backers are adopting the same line: Alito wouldn't necessarily vote the way they, the conservative activists, believe is the best way (Peter S. Canellos, The Boston Globe)

Dodging debate on Alito | Whatever Alito said in the past that proves conservatives are right in seeing him as a comrade in arms is supposed to be irrelevant to the Senate's debate over his confirmation (E. J. Dionne Jr., The Washington Post)

Winning the battle, losing the war? | The president is losing the intellectual war over constitutional interpretation (Bruce Fein, The Washington Times)

Pharmacist agrees to dispense morning-after pill:

Three pharmacists still out after 4th agrees to policy | Conscience question may stir legal action (Belleville News-Democrat, Ill.)

Pharmacists' firing spurs call for Walgreens boycott | Catholic diocese will back it with mailing, abortion foe says (Belleville News-Democrat, Ill.)

Blagojevich drug rule is questioned | Southern Illinois lawmakers question the merit of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's order that pharmacists cannot refuse to dispense the morning-after pill (Belleville News-Democrat, Ill.)

Local pharmacists see room for middle ground | Local pharmacists spoke out Wednesday about Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s rule after four Walgreens Co. pharmacists essentially lost their jobs when they refused to agree with store policy to dispense the morning-after pill (Belleville News-Democrat, Ill.)

Suspended workers mull legal action | Five metro-east Walgreens Co. pharmacists met with a lawyer Tuesday to see what their rights are if they choose not to dispense the morning-after pill (Belleville News-Democrat, Ill.)

Be the governor, not a lawmaker | Gov. Rod Blagojevich's ill-advised decision to tell pharmacies how to run their business has a lot of people in Illinois calling for Plan B. And we don't mean the morning-after pill (Editorial, Belleville News-Democrat, Ill.)

Life ethics:

Labs unsure whether to join stem cell bank | The Bush administration's plan for a bank of federally approved stem cells unveiled two months ago is being met with apathy, confusion and derision (Associated Press)

The silent bias | How the media quietly gives cloning advocates a pass (Wesley J. Smith, The Weekly Standard)

Umbilical accord | Senate Democrats resist a stem cell solution (Wesley J. Smith, The Weekly Standard)

Are sonograms dangerous? | Mr. Cruise, get your hands off that ultrasound machine! (Daniel Engber, Slate)
War and violence:

- Catholic leader criticizes IRA amnesty plan | A leader of Northern Ireland's moderate Catholics criticized government plans to offer amnesty to IRA fugitives, saying Monday they will allow fugitives guilty of killings and bombings to avoid taking responsibility for their crimes (Associated Press)

- Aid group pins hopes on Muslim pleas to captors | A Christian aid group said on Tuesday they prayed that appeals by Muslim leaders to kidnappers of four of their aide workers would put a strong moral burden on their Iraqi captors to release them soon (Reuters)

- Bush rules out ransom for captives in Iraq | "We, of course, don't pay ransom for any hostages," Bush said (Associated Press)

- The defining of torture in a new world war | The US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's defence of the practice of transferring prisoners around the world for interrogation relies a great deal on a definition of torture (BBC)

- Illegal trip protests Guantanamo prison | Baltimore activists will join others in march through Cuba to U.S. base (The Baltimore Sun)

- Dead end in Darfur? | Robert Zoellick's frustrating mission to end the genocide in Sudan (Jonathan Karl, The Weekly Standard)

KU professor alleges attack:

- Mirecki treated after roadside beating | Douglas County sheriff's deputies are investigating the reported beating of a Kansas University professor who's gained recent notoriety for his Internet tirades against Christian fundamentalists and Catholics (Lawrence Journal-World, Kan.)

- KU professor reports attack | At center of e-mail furor, Mireki tells police his car was forced off road before beating (The Kansas City Star, Mo.)

- Kan. professor attacked along rural road | A college professor whose planned course on creationism and intelligent design was canceled after he derided Christian conservatives said he was beaten by two men along a rural road early Monday (Associated Press)

Evolution and Intelligent Design:

- At forum on evolution, beliefs remain static | The conference drew 175 high school students from public and private schools throughout the Washington area, all selected by their schools for their scientific achievement -- if not for their personal beliefs in evolution (The Washington Post)

- The hubris of the humanities | The evolution debate is a symptom of something more serious: a profound illiteracy about science and math as a whole (Nicholas D. Kristof, The New York Times)

- Religion, science, both can evolve | Clearly, some of us can embrace both God and all, or almost all, of the theory of evolution. But, for everyone else, it's either Intelligent Design, or it's evolution. One thing is certain - the issue should not be debated in science textbooks and classrooms (Montie Rainey, The Jackson Sun, Tenn.)

- In the biology class | Intelligent Design is about faith, not science (Editorial, The Miami Herald)

Therapy: http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=34415
Help from above | In times of trouble, growing numbers of people take comfort in faith-based therapy (The Washington Post)

Having faith, demanding credentials | In most parts of the United States, anyone can claim to be a "pastoral counselor" or even a "licensed pastoral counselor," because the use of these terms is not legally protected (The Washington Post)

**Encouraging marriage:**

- Anti-marriage policies a social ill, says judge | The government was accused by a retired senior judge last night of downgrading marriage and doing too little to encourage couples to wed and to stay married (The Guardian, London)

- Save marriages and taxes | A major new study, "With This Ring ... A National Survey on Marriage in America," provides powerful evidence legislation pending in Congress reallocating $200 million to promote healthy marriages would be an excellent investment. (Michael McManus, The Washington Times)

**Homosexuality:**

- Methodist clergy blast gay exclusion | More than 100 clergy members from the Rocky Mountain region of the United Methodist Church have signed a statement protesting a national church ruling that effectively bars a gay man from membership (Rocky Mountain News, Denver)

- Boston College rejects proposed gay theme for dance | Boston College has asked a student group to adopt a "less gay" theme for an AIDS benefit dance, saying the proposed "A Night in Gay Paris" defies the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church (Associated Press)

- Benefactor's group to fight effort to ban gay marriage | Denver philanthropist Tim Gill has formed a political nonprofit group to get more involved in candidate races and fight constitutional amendments barring gay marriage, including one anticipated on the Colorado ballot next fall. (The Denver Post)

- Under pressure, Ford will cut its ads in gay publications | After a threatened boycott from a conservative religious organization, the Ford Motor Company has said it will cut back on advertising in gay-oriented publications (The New York Times)

- Also: 2 Ford brands stop ads in gay publications | Ford says its Jaguar, Land Rover brands will no longer advertise in gay publications (Associated Press)

- When role of Catholic priests becomes a bundle of clichés | Until we begin our discussions at a level much deeper and more theological than simply that of functionality (though I really don't think we're able to do so any longer), both sides will continue to aim wide of the mark (David Lewis Stokes Jr., The Providence Journal, R.I.)

- Coming out of the Catholic closet | Gay professors strive — some more overtly than others — for acceptance at Roman Catholic colleges (The Chronicle of Higher Education, sub. req'd.)

**Catholicism:**

- Don't make John Paul saint: dissident theologians | While the theologians acknowledged John Paul's papacy had "positive aspects," their seven-point appeal included criticism of his rigidly conservative stand on issues such as contraception, limitations on the role of women, and of scandals in the Church (Reuters)
Brazilian singer blasts Vatican in condom dispute | Brazilian singer Daniela Mercury, who was banned from performing in a Vatican Christmas concert, said on Monday she was outraged at a Vatican claim that she had threatened to promote condom use during the show (Reuters)

Pope given Schumacher's Ferrari steering wheel | Italian carmaker Ferrari gave Pope Benedict the steering wheel to one of their Formula One racing cars on Monday, honouring the man in the driving seat of the Roman Catholic Church (Reuters)

Business:

Tyson launches faith-friendly campaign | Tyson Foods Inc. of Springdale is offering free downloadable prayer booklets on its Web site, part of an overall strategy to appear faith friendly to its workers and customers (Arkansasbusiness.com)

Major leadership shortage in nonprofit world expected in next two decades | Nearly three-fourths of all nonprofit executives will reach retirement age over the next two decades, and charities will be hard pressed to replace them, according to a new survey (The Chronicle of Philanthropy)

Film and TV:

Mel Gibson plans TV miniseries on Holocaust | The project is being developed by the production company of Mel Gibson, whose The Passion of the Christ was assailed by critics as anti-Semitic (The New York Times)

Heavenly features | Moving into the mainstream, the Christian right tells Hollywood to have a little faith (Village Voice)

In world of 'Left Behind,' end is weird | Plot reflects conservative Christian interpretation of biblical Book of Revelation (Chicago Tribune)

Trapped in the closet: Robust rendering of a fantasy classic | Visiting the land of Narnia as a young heathen, I found Lewis's theology an only mildly obtrusive part of the landscape (J. Hoberman, The Village Voice)

Books:

Two reference works are year's best religion titles | The newly revised third edition of the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church and the companion Encyclopedia of Christianity rank as 2005's books of the year in religion (Associated Press)

A 'Good to Great' second act | Jim Collins's best seller is that rare business book that finds an audience beyond corporations. Now he's got a sequel for organizations not ruled by the bottom line (Newsweek)

Leaving the dark side | Anne Rice recently finished reading C.S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity" (The Washington Times)


Other stories of interest:

Civil rights leader to retire from ministry | The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, who worked with the late Rev.
Martin Luther King Jr. in the fight against segregation, said he will retire from the ministry but will not stop fighting racial injustice (Associated Press)

- Russian Archbishop calls Lord Krishna 'Satan' | Hindus are shocked and outraged to read the views of the Russian Orthodox Church on Lord Krishna, who is revered by over one billion Hindus worldwide as the Supreme Lord, said an ISCKON press statement (Hindustan Times, India)

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Due to a mathematical error, an earlier version of this weblog gave the wrong number for the combined weekly attendance for the five listed megachurches skipping Sunday morning Christmas services. We apologize for the error.

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November 4b | 4a | 3

October 31 | 27 | 24 |

October 19 | 12 | 11
By Susanna Kim

Nov 18, 2011 12:05pm

Bankrupt Crystal Cathedral Sold to Catholics for $57M

(Image credit: Jae C. Hong/AP Photo)
Bankrupt Crystal Cathedral Sold to Catholics for $57M - ABC News

The megachurch, founded by television evangelist Robert H. Schuller in 1955, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in October last year to restructure its staggering debt.

In 2008, the recession led to a decrease in church donations and ticket sales according to church officials.

The structure is entirely made of glass. Imagine the insurance premiums on an all glass building that sits in an earthquake zone. The roof was never expected to last as long as 70 years. It was damaged by strong winds and heavy rain. The windows broke like daggers. The church as a religious institution, ruing church bylaws and a desire to honor the donors who contributed to the church's construction.

I certainly don't need a 'middle man' to talk to God for me. These high paid clergy men/women are really something else. Charge me $1000 a week………what a gig.

There is nothing divine about the building. It is a man made structure with a cross in/on it.

"I will become a true center for our Catholic community in Orange County," said Father Michael McGivney, the new pastor of the property with its towering glass building for which the church was sued for payment, according to church officials. Hundreds of creditors could owe between $50 million and $100 million, according to documents filed in federal bankruptcy court, the Associated Press has reported.

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I believe people are finally waking up to this total scam. All anyone needs to do is go within and ask themselves how to work per week………what a gig.

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"I will become a true center for our Catholic community in Orange County," said Father Michael McGivney, the new pastor of the property with its towering glass building for which the church was sued for payment, according to church officials. Hundreds of creditors could owe between $50 million and $100 million, according to documents filed in federal bankruptcy court, the Associated Press has reported.

The structure is entirely made of glass. Imagine the insurance premiums on an all glass building that sits in an earthquake zone. The roof was never expected to last as long as 70 years. It was damaged by strong winds and heavy rain. The windows broke like daggers. The church as a religious institution, ruing church bylaws and a desire to honor the donors who contributed to the church's construction.

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Bankrupt Crystal Cathedral Sold to Catholics for $57M - ABC News

http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/business/2011/11/bankrupt-crystal-cathedral...
I worked at the place in the early 1980s. First, helping to build and install the second sound system for the sanctuary (crystal speaker clusters), then, operating it for the services (shows). I left after 3 months due to my identifying the place as a "ministry" dedicated to the cult of Schuller. I found he was in constant need of validation by the people around him. He was always soliciting your thoughts on how much good he was doing and how great a place "he" had built in the CC. It was very sad. This could help explain the meals for Arvella email. I'm glad I left. I was making great money, but I'm glad I left.

Be very careful whom you follow. It is easy to become enthralled by a grand personality. Dr. Schuller has one. There have been, and will always be grand personalities.

Clip (2:48 PM); "Grand personalities". Now who comes to mind?

House of glass? Great, now we won't have to worry about the priest being alone with the altar boys anymore.

Bring back Jim and Tammy Faye Baker!!!

Oh well just another example of nutjob religious folk falling to the lords axe... he chops with his mighty axe all thine hypocrites.

The Church must still have a pretty good income. I never could understand the need for huge, ornate, expensive churches. Jesus didn't need one.

Okay the Catholic Church does make their contributions, but how do you justify $57+ Million Dollars that could have been donated towards many causes throughout the world...children in need and hungry, elders who need heat and meals, those families affected by molestation, or set up some sort of scholarship fund for catholic kids who need financial aid for schooling that the state won't pick up! I mean the list goes on! There's just no explaining that insane amount of money on a place of worship considering God is with you where ever you are! Sin! Greed!

he without sin cass the first stone, i remember when the church was a humble church, and yes pastors are people too, they fall, make mistake. Money can change the best of all of us, we loss track of what we believe in and are charater that we stood for at one time. So, i'm sorry this church had to pay for it, in the long run, but I hope the schuller famliy can find there faith again, and start over from which they came from, like the old saying was "GOD DON'T MAKE NO JUNK"

Boy, what an avalanche of hatred! The Crystal Cathedral will continue to function as a pulpit from which to promulgate the Christian message, which does not include the spewing of such hateful diatribe. With the eloquency of his message and the beauty of his headquarters building, Rev. Schuller was able to do a lot of good for the faithful and for the poor in Orange County. Hopefully, the Catholic Church will be able to continue its Christian ministry in the same spirit. The Catholic Church is comparatively rich, yes -- but its clergy generally do not pursue riches for themselves. I don't believe Rev. Schuller's goal was to become rich, either. His living standard was a result of the generosity of his followers.

POSTED BY: LARRY JACKSON | DECEMBER 2, 2011, 5:32 PM 5:32 PM

Top
Bankrupt Crystal Cathedral Sold to Catholics for $57M - ABC News
Bankrupt Crystal Cathedral Sold to Catholics for $57M - ABC News
http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/business/2011/11/bankrupt-crystal-cathedral...
The finest church that Rolus Smith ever knew was the Lord's Chapel.

For more than 15 years, Smith was an elder of the 2,500-member Nashville congregation. Crowds packed the church on Granny White Pike, drawn by its contemporary music and charismatic practices such as speaking in tongues. The Rev. Billy Roy Moore's sermons made the Bible come alive.

Then it all fell apart.

Moore moved away after his son died in a car crash. People dropped out rather than shift to a new, 50,000-square-foot church seven miles away. When the Lord's Chapel finally closed down in 2003, there were 40 people left.

"It was the power of God that brought people to the church — and I don't know how we got away from that," Smith said. "That's a question I've asked myself a thousand times."

The past three decades have been boom times for big churches like the Lord's Chapel. In the 1970s, only a handful of churches drew more than 2,000 people on Sundays. Now they number in the thousands.

But the collapse of the Crystal Cathedral near Los Angeles, which is being sold to pay off more than $40 million in debt, has prompted fears that the megachurch bubble may be about to burst.

Most megachurches — which earn that label around the 2,000-attendance level — are led by baby boomer pastors who soon will hit retirement age and without suitable replacements in the pipeline. And some fear the big-box worship centers with lots of individual programs no longer appeal to younger generations.

Skye Jethani, a senior editor of Leadership, a prominent evangelical magazine for pastors, compared megachurches to the real estate market of a few years ago.

"If you asked people back in 2007 if the housing market was doing well, people would have said yes," he said.

Jethani said megachurches have become so big that their economics are unsustainable. They often have multimillion-dollar
mortgages and hundreds of staff members. That works while a church is growing.

But churches often shrink when a longtime minister leaves, Jethani said.

“If you are a church of 400 people and you lose 200 people, you can still keep going,” he said. “If you are a church of 10,000 and you go down to 5,000, you may not be able to survive.”

Researchers don't see a bubble

Researchers who study megachurches are skeptical that a bubble exists. Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary and co-author of Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches, said all churches are vulnerable when they switch pastors or when their demographics change.

Good megachurches will adapt, he said. Bad ones will struggle.

He said people have predicted the end of megachurches for years. But like the big-box retailers they often resemble, Thumma believes, megachurches are here to stay.

“It took decades for that big-box reality to become part and parcel of American suburban life,” he said. “It is not going to disappear overnight.”

Megachurches are often run by entrepreneurs who aren’t tied to traditional ways of doing church, Thumma said. That gives them an advantage over other congregations.

“They are willing to adapt to changes in American society — which is why they got big in the first place,” he said.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., which draws about 20,000 on weekends, said he’s not worried about megachurches disappearing. “The truth is that the next generation of churches is going to be even larger than my generation's churches,” he said. New technology — like high-quality, inexpensive videoconferencing — allows churches to meet in many locations at the same time. So a church can attract tens of thousands of people without building a huge facility. That means a church won’t be tied to a massive building, he said. “The next generation never fills the temples of the past,” Warren said.

Warren already appointed younger leaders to help run his church. But he said that the transitions between senior pastors can
make or break a church’s future.

“One of the strengths of large churches is that pastors stay a long time,” he said. “But sometimes the pastor stays too long.”

List of biggest churches is in flux

Two things are clear about megachurches: New ones pop up on a regular basis, and the list of biggest churches is always changing. Outreach Magazine has published a yearly list of the biggest churches in America since 2004.

Only eight of the top 25 in 2004 are still in the top 25 this year. Twenty years ago, six Nashville-area churches — The Fellowship at Two Rivers, First Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Park Avenue Baptist, Judson Baptist, Woodmont Baptist and Tusculum Hills Baptist — were among the top 10 in the Tennessee Baptist Convention, all with more than 2,000 members.

Today, only First Baptist in Hendersonville remains in the top 10. But Long Hollow Baptist Church, Brentwood Baptist, LifePoint Church in Smyrna and New Vision Baptist in Murfreesboro have joined the list, all with 3,000 members or more. There also has been a big-box-style trend of consolidation when it comes to churches.

While most churches are small — fewer than 100 attendees — most people go to big churches.

For example, only 4.37 percent of Southern Baptist churches draw more than 500 people on Sundays. But about 35 percent of Southern Baptists go to those churches, including 12.6 percent who go to churches that draw more than 2,000, said Thom Rainer, president of Nashville-based LifeWay Christian Resources.

Rainer, who studied church growth patterns for more than 15 years, said megachurches have a lifecycle like that of other churches: They grow at first, then stall out and decline, and then sometimes recover.

Decline sometimes happens because of a change in pastor or demographics, he said. But often church leaders become set in their ways and aren’t willing to adapt and change their programs.

A church’s growth stalls, then leaders deny they have problems, and then they long for the good old days, Rainer said.

“The past becomes the goal instead of the future.”

Messes left behind
Bigger churches mean bigger messes when a church fails. And the struggles of megachurches often make headlines.

That was the case in Nashville for Two Rivers Baptist Church and Bellevue Community Church, two local megachurches that struggled after public feuds with their former pastors.

Both churches moved on and are now reinventing themselves under new leaders with new names — The Fellowship at Two Rivers and Hope Park Church — and smaller congregations.

Local pastors are looking to those and other churches nationwide to see what they can avoid.

The Rev. Rick White, pastor at the People’s Church in Franklin, grew that congregation, formerly known as First Baptist Franklin, into a megachurch over the past 20 years.

Now in his 50s, White has begun making plans for his eventual retirement, looking for younger leaders to groom.

“You don’t want to spend your life building something and then see it blow up,” he said.

The Rev. Mike Glenn of Brentwood Baptist is mentoring a couple of younger ministers on his staff, who fill in when he can’t preach. He’s also working to clear the church’s debt so a new leader doesn’t inherit it.

“It’s really key for the lead pastor to get his ego out of the way,” Glenn said. “The worst thing in the world would be for me to drive by and for people to say, ‘That used to be a great church.’”

That kind of planning ahead may help churches avoid a crisis in the future, said Sheila Strobel Smith, a megachurch researcher from Minneapolis who studied pastoral change at megachurches for her doctoral dissertation.

She studied the top 50 largest Protestant churches for her dissertation. Only four had changed ministers since hitting the megachurch level, and one was the Crystal Cathedral.

It was defined by its Hour of Power television broadcast, hosted by the Rev. Robert Schuller. When the church began to shrink, Schuller was unwilling to change, she said. Now there’s a plan to sell the building to a local Catholic diocese.

“It was very clear in 2005 that they were really, really in trouble,” Smith said. "The
last six years have been awful."

She said there is no excuse for megachurches waiting until it's too late to plan for the future.

"Leaving this to chance is inexcusable," she said. "We owe it to the God-fearing people in the pews to not create a crisis or create a situation where they lose faith."

Contact Bob Smietana at 615-259-8228 or bsmietana@tennessean.com.

Related Links
Catholics prepare for new missal
Word of mouth grows church
Some of the biggest churches in Middle TN
This excerpt from Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson’s recent book *Rework* keeps reverberating in my mind today:

“When you stick with your current customers come hell or high water, you wind up cutting yourself off from new ones. Your product or service becomes so tailored to your current customers that it stops appealing to fresh blood. And that’s how your company starts to die.”

That’s consistent with one of the key attributes of churches in decline that we talked about a few months ago. When churches become inward focused and start making decisions about ministry to keep people rather than reach people, they have also started to die.
Jesus said it this way:

“If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it?

(Luke 15:4, NLT)

Why do you think some churches slip into the mode where they’re so focused on keeping people that they neglect trying to reach people who are outside the faith? Join the conversation by sharing your comment.

Related Articles:

- Rework

25 Responses to “Has Your Church Started to Die?”

1. Brandon February 20, 2011 at 3:29 pm #

People who aren’t here yet don’t speak up during meetings.

2. dave February 20, 2011 at 3:47 pm #

“When you stick with your current customers come hell or high water…” I think this simple yet true statement points to a stagnation and static environment that does not dynamically change with the ebb and flow of the organization’s intended audience. Continually assessing and re-assessing how the target audience is shifting and changing must help inform the organization’s strategy without losing the DNA or substance of that organization.

I also think the inverse could be also true. Any organization that does not also focus time and energy on the existing and future leadership will begin to die especially when the leadership begins to sense that it does not have a voice. The leadership within an organization, especially when it is raised up from the target audience, must help shape the future of the organization even if it means putting an end to programs that have existed since the organization’s inception. Some of this breakdown occurs when we value our position over our passion and our popularity over our obedience.

3. James McLaren (Jersey, Channel Islands) February 20, 2011 at 4:53 pm #

It’s a simple matter of resources. If you commit resource to something -evangelistic program, building maintenance, whatever – you have to ensure that the income keeps coming in to provide that resource.

There are two ways of doing this. One is to live by faith. Now living by faith can – and does – work, but there are not a few people out there who have tried it and come away badly burnt by the experience; in addition, the secular world will put on every bit of pressure it can to move people away from it.

Faced with that, most churches go the other way about it – they draw up a budget and a plan. Intrinsic to this is protecting the income stream – so the pastor cultivates the wealthy members to ensure they
stay onside.


4.

Sean Sabourin February 20, 2011 at 7:15 pm #

Tony,

Much appreciated the post. This is a subject many of my ministry friends and I have been talking about for the past few months. One word which came to mind while reading this was ‘balance.’ I wonder if too many churches and ministries are not balanced. It is easy to fall into the trap of being inward focus but if you don’t have people in your midst who are concerned about the lost then there won’t be a lot of outward focus taking place. Ministries need balance. I love what Ephesians 4:11 says, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.” I believe the local church needs team ministry rather than just one senior Pastor to meet the needs inwardly and outwardly.

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Tony February 21, 2011 at 7:35 am #

Sean, one of the exercises I do with churches is have them list every ministry program and event on their calendar as either a “reach” or a “keep” ministry. I don’t allow anything to go in the same column. That forces conversation about what the appropriate balance needs to look like. Generally, though, the vast majority of churches (that’s why so churches are in decline) program around keeping the people who already attend their church.

In the end, though, this is definitely an “and” solution. Healthy churches are about both outreach and discipleship.

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Tom Lyberg February 20, 2011 at 7:41 pm #

As a mainline pastor, I see this all the time. Its sad and funny, that Boomers would become the generation that does not want to change or give up its preferences or power for emerging generations. However, since they are reluctant to do that in other arenas, the church really is no different. So emerging generations leave to chart their own course and gather their own congregations.

The congregation that focuses and getting back the members who have left or only recruiting members like themselves, will end up like the Jerusalem Church of the First Century. First irrelevant and then gone.

Its the rare established congregation that can discern the need to change and open its eyes, heart, and traditions for the sake of others, even when they know the Great Commission and what it means. I have seen it happen a few times, been part of it, but with that shift and hope comes great pain and loss for what was.

Thanks for the great blogs and tweets.
A great quote from Rework. I think I will add that to my ever expanding reading list.

What I think is sad is how much more difficult it is for the older, smaller churches in this whole area of inward/outward focus. I am talking with pastors pretty regularly who feel their hands are tied because their key influencers like things the way they are.

It's a long hard road to shift that attitude and culture to one that embraces 'fresh blood' and change.

Two reasons I see right away that people don’t make this shift include intimidation and feelings of inadequacy or hopelessness.

One of the many benefits of Mark Oestreicher’s YMCP is that we talk about stuff like this. Adizes life cycles of organizations has great things to say about this.

It’s so much easier to deal with what you know then what you don’t know. Ministering to people you know is easy. Ministering to people you don’t know can be tricky and it might take more effort. So, stay comfortable, stay as long as there is money to pay you and leave so the next minister can hopefully turn the focus outward….

I think the main motivation to try and keep people FROM leaving all comes down to money. The fear is, ‘If we lose anymore people, we won’t have enough money to keep the doors open.’. That’s people-focused instead of God-focused. Gotta keep God first.

The problem I see is that many churches are convinced that their “keep” programs are actually “reach” programs. They think that the worship service is a reach program because the music is modern so the unchurched will like it, or the children’s program is a reach program because the kids have lots of fun and they might invite their friends. What they don’t seem to understand is that if people have to come to the church’s campus to experience the program then it is most likely a “keep” program.
I’ve got a serious problem with the proposition that new converts are more important than existing Christians. If the church only cares about new converts rather than lifetime faith, there’s a huge focus problem that I don’t want anything to do with. It’s like the church realizes that they have nothing to offer the “midlife” Christian.

And a lot of times they don’t.

Way too many churches find it easier to use rock music to attract teens, fear tactics to spur conversions, and evangelism training to bring in even more converts than they do to sit down with a Christian that has been following Christ for 30 years and has serious life issues that only God offers hope for and help him handle that. Most churches want NOTHING to do with that. Thus, they lose a lot of people.

The problem, period, is when it becomes one or the other, and small churches are left with few choices. Either we minister to people we know, or we throw them to the wolves and try to find a new bunch that doesn’t take so much work and money. Some choose one, some choose the other. Both are subject to criticism.

Old people need church, too.

Tony February 21, 2011 at 9:03 am #

I agree with you to the extent that it’s not an either/or proposition. However, the tendency for churches is to focus so much on keeping people happy who have already committed their lives to Christ, that they completely lose focus on the people who are outside the faith. We have to be willing to reach the one lost person.

Bernard Shuford February 22, 2011 at 8:14 am #

In my sincerely humble opinion, the reason this happens is that church people get jealous. They were important to the church when they were outside the faith, but once they convert, they no longer get much attention. That’s a genuine flaw in how we do things, and it’s also a genuine flaw that is due to their sinful nature. As Christians, they still want attention, perhaps unconsciously, so they clamor for it. It’s also a problem that “we” promise them that Jesus will fix all their problems, so they convert, and then they still have problems. So they clamor. At that point, the church is trapped, and the resources to respond to the clamor are limited. It’s a painful cycle to watch, but small churches – and I’m not talking about 250 members (those are large churches to WNC) – often have little choice. No full time staff, only one true “pastor”, deacons who were pressed into service rather than genuinely called of God, and church members that often have very little in common with each other. Willing to reach the lost, yes, I believe “we” are. Yet, worse than being unwilling, almost, we simply don’t know how. But we DO, sorta, know how to try to respond to those that are our friends, and, after all, what kind of “Christians” would we be if we didn’t even love our “brethren”?

Hope I don’t sound argumentative. I agree this is a huge problem. But I do think that sometimes your Grainger / NewSpring background puts you in an entirely different world than those of us who are truly delighted to see 75 people on a Sunday morning. Steven
Furtick admits that he has told people that Elevation is not the church for them. He’s got the “clout” to do that because there are literally thousands of others who take their place. My world is very different. Very freaking different. To just abandon the people who are the founding, enduring core of our church would be an extremely, extremely, non-Christian decision.

We (at my little church) are indeed very inwardly focused, and I don’t like that. BUT, I believe Luke 15:4 is just as much about trying to preserve a straying member of the current fold as it is about going out and finding someone that’s never been a member of the fold. After all, do we really think that sheep just appeared out there? No, it was once in the fold and was then lost. Hmmmm. Not the standard interpretation of the evangelical message, is it? :)

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12. Richard Hearing February 21, 2011 at 8:28 am #

We live in an age where choice is uppermost is in peoples mindset, choice of school, tesco Asda’s we can approach God, and hence Church in the same way we shop. A new Church has opened it’s Charismatic live music coffee shop to relax with those non Christian friends develop your ministry here so we go leave the Church in which perhaps we have had difficulty settling in have made a few friends and the semons have lost their edge.. so we go start again when will we see that following Jesus becoming a disciple being where God has asked us to being obeadent along side others who are just as human as you, As a Church we need to be outward looking, whilst discipling those within,encouraging those who God has annointed.This will mean that your fellowship will grow, souls are won for Christ and the Kingdom draws near.

13. Art February 21, 2011 at 9:32 am #

The problem is that we have abandoned the process that works, and that was trumpeted during most of the last decade: commit to the five purposes of the church. The church that has balance in those five areas (evangelism, discipleship, worship, fellowship and ministry) will engage everyone, new and old alike. Balance is the key. We must, as Ed Young, jr. puts it: Build believers and Serve seekers. If you don’t keep believers engaged, you won’t have anyone to serve (and fund ministry to) seekers.

It isn’t either/or, it is both/and.

14. Matt DeLaRosby February 21, 2011 at 1:18 pm #

Great thought. Something new and fresh always creates momentum. This can be applied to any ministry.

I’m talking about an infusion of newness not necessarily a reworking of something.

15. Don Edsall February 21, 2011 at 6:07 pm #

Where God guides God provides.
The church that I used to attend had the same problems. There were (and are) so inward focus that they forget the entire community of unreached people around them. I think that shift appeared when a small group in the church decided to take control and make the church experience about them and their needs even if the pastor was against it. The pastor also did not set the boundaries to stop that from happening. The church is now almost disintegrated. Personally I think the pastor plays a big role in what happens or not in the church.

This not only happens when you “stick with your current customers” but also when you stick with your current programs. Programs that worked yesterday won’t necessarily work tomorrow. But people often have a vested interest in what worked for them in the past and create systems to support these programs (interesting thought given your upcoming talk). An excellent example in the business world is Blockbuster. They were so focused on their in-store business because it was successful, and their systems were setup to support this model, that they missed new opportunities like Netflix and Redbox.

Churches can focus on programs that worked for a previous generation and miss out on reaching the next generation that requires new, innovative methods.

I am in total agreement with this article. I think that at times we ‘stick’ to the same ways of reaching potential members and not realize that the method that was effective ‘yesterday’ may not be as effective ‘today’. There are now so many ways to reach new members which churches can explore. For example, use of technology. Peace, love and God’s blessings!

This really is a great thought. Steven Furtick blogged about something similar and used the analogy of an aquarium. Churches tend to focus on taking care of all the needs of the fish in the aquarium rather than going out and fishing. Helpful for me anyways.

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2. Churches dying a slow death - February 21, 2011

[...] Read Tony’s thoughts here… […]

3. Learning from the mistakes of others « Alethinos - February 21, 2011

[...] also came across a couple interesting blog posts by Tony Morgan about churches in decline. I definitely think that this graph (attached below) is […]

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Has Your Church Started to Die? | TonyMorganLive.com

http://tonymorganlive.com/2011/02/20/church-has-started-to-die/
The question of a woman’s role in ministry is a pressing concern for today’s church. It is paramount first, because of our need for the gifts of all the members God has called to serve the Church. The concern, however, has extended beyond the Church itself. Increasingly, secular thinkers attack Christianity as against women and thus irrelevant to the modern world.

Increasingly, secular thinkers attack Christianity as against women and thus irrelevant to the modern world.

The Assemblies of God and other denominations birthed in the Holiness and Pentecostal revivals affirmed women in ministry long before the role of women became a secular or liberal agenda. Likewise, in the historic missionary expansion of the 19th century, two-thirds of all missionaries were women. The 19th-century women’s movement that fought for women’s right to vote originally grew from the same revival movement led by Charles Finney and others who advocated the abolition of slavery. By contrast, those who identified everything in the Bible’s culture with the Bible’s message were obligated both to accept slavery and reject women’s ministry.

For Bible-believing Christians, however, mere precedent from church history cannot settle a question; we must establish our case from Scripture. Because the current debate focuses especially around Paul’s teaching, we will examine his writings after we have briefly summarized other biblical teachings on the subject.

WOMEN’S MINISTRY IN THE REST OF THE BIBLE

Because Paul accepted both the Hebrew Bible and Jesus’ teachings as God’s Word, we must briefly survey women’s ministry in these sources. The ancient Near Eastern world, of which Israel was a part, was a man’s world. Because God spoke to Israel in a particular culture, however, does not suggest that the culture itself was holy. The culture included polygamy, divorce, slavery, and a variety of other practices we now recognize as unholy.

Despite the prominence of men in ancient Israelite society, God still sometimes called women as leaders. When Josiah needed to hear the word of the Lord, he sent Hilkiah the priest and others to a person who was undoubtedly one of the most prominent prophetic figures of his day: Huldah (2 Kings 22:12—20). Deborah was not only a prophetess, but a judge (Judges 4:4). She held the place of greatest authority in Israel in her day. She is also one of the few judges of whom the Bible reports no
failures (Judges 4, 5).

Although first-century Jewish women rarely, if ever, studied with teachers of the Law the way male disciples did, Jesus allowed women to join His ranks (Mark 15:40, 41; Luke 8:1–3)—something the culture could have regarded as scandalous. As if this were not scandalous enough, He allowed a woman who wished to hear His teaching "sit at his feet" (Luke 10:39)—taking a posture normally reserved for disciples. Other Jewish teachers did not allow women disciples; indeed, disciples were often teachers in training. To have sent women out on the preaching missions (e.g., Mark 6:7–13) might have proved too scandalous to be practical; nevertheless, the Gospels unanimously report that God chose women as the first witnesses of the Resurrection, even though first-century Jewish men often dismissed the testimony of women.

Joel explicitly emphasized that when God poured out His Spirit, women as well as men would prophesy (Joel 2:28, 29). Pentecost meant that all God’s people qualified for the gifts of His Spirit (Acts 2:17, 18), just as salvation meant that male or female would have the same relationship with God (Galatians 3:28). Subsequent outpourings of the Spirit have often led to the same effect.

PASSAGES WHERE PAUL AFFIRMED THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

Paul often affirmed the ministry of women despite the gender prejudices of his culture. With a few exceptions (some women philosophers), advanced education was a male domain. Because most people in Mediterranean antiquity were functionally illiterate, those who could read and speak well generally assumed teaching roles, and—with rare exceptions—these were men. In the first centuries of our era, most Jewish men—like Philo, Josephus, and many later rabbis—reflected the prejudice of much of the broader Greco-Roman culture.

Women’s roles varied from one region to another, but Paul’s writings clearly rank him among the more progressive, not the more chauvinistic, writers of his day. Many of Paul’s colaborers in the gospel were women. Paul commended the ministry of a woman who brought his letter to the Roman Christians (Romans 16:1, 2). Phoebe was a servant of the church at Cenchrea. "Servant" may refer to a deacon, a term that sometimes designated administrative responsibility in the Early Church. In his epistles, however, Paul most frequently applied the term to any minister of God’s Word, including himself (1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; 6:21). He also called Phoebe a "succoror" or "helper" of many (Romans 16:2); this term technically designated her as the church’s patron or sponsor, most likely the owner of the home in which the church at Cenchrea was meeting. This entitled her to a position of honor in the church.

Phoebe was not the only influential woman in the church. Whereas Paul greeted about twice as many men as women in Romans 16, he commended the ministries of about twice as many women as men in that list. (Some use the predominance of male ministers in the Bible against women in ministry, but that argument could work against men’s ministry in this passage.) These commendations may indicate his sensitivity to the opposition women undoubtedly faced for their ministry and are remarkable, given the prejudice against women’s ministry that existed in Paul’s culture.

If Paul followed ancient custom when he praised Priscilla, he may have mentioned her before her husband Aquila because of her higher status (Romans 16:3, 4). Elsewhere we learn that she and her husband taught Scripture to another minister, Apollos (Acts 18:26). Paul also listed two fellow apostles, Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7). Although Junia is clearly a feminine name, writers opposed to the possibility that Paul could have referred to a female apostle, suggest that Junia is a contraction for the masculine Junianus. This contraction, however, never occurs, and
more recently has been shown to be grammatically impossible for a Latin
name like Junia. This suggestion rests not on the text itself, but entirely
on the presupposition that a woman could not be an apostle.

Elsewhere Paul referred to the ministry of two women in Philippi, who,
like his many male fellow ministers, shared in his work for the gospel
there (Philippians 4:2,3). Because women typically achieved more
prominent religious roles in Macedonia than in most parts of the Roman
world, Paul’s women colleagues in this region may have moved more
quickly into prominent offices in the church (cf., Acts 16:14,15).

Although Paul ranked prophets second only to apostles (1 Corinthians
12:28), he acknowledged the ministry of prophetesses (1 Corinthians
11:5), following the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 15:20; Judges 4:4; 2 Kings
22:13,14) and early Christian practice (Acts 2:17,18; 21:9). Thus those
who complain that Paul did not specifically mention women pastors by
name miss the point. Paul rarely mentioned any men pastors by name,
either. He most often simply mentioned his traveling companions in
ministry, who were naturally men. Paul’s most commonly used titles for
these fellow laborers were "servant" and "fellow worker"—both of which
he also applied to women (Romans 16:1,3). Given the culture he
addressed, it was natural that fewer women could exercise the social
independence necessary to achieve positions of ministry. Where they did,
however, Paul commended them and included commendations to women
apostles and prophets, the offices of the highest authority in the church.

While passages such as these establish Paul among the more progressive
writers of his era, the primary controversy today rages around other
passages in which Paul seemed to oppose women in ministry. Before
turning there, we must examine one passage where Paul clearly
addressed a local cultural situation.

PAUL ON HEAD COVERING

Although Paul often advocated the mutuality of gender roles, he also
worked within the boundaries of his culture where necessary for the sake
of the gospel. We begin with his teaching on head coverings because,
although it is not directly related to women’s ministry, it will help us
understand his passages concerning women in ministry. Most Christians
today agree that women do not need to cover their heads in church, but
many do not recognize that Paul used the same kinds of arguments for
women covering their heads as for women refraining from congregational
speech. In both cases, Paul used some general principles but addressed a
specific cultural situation.

When Paul urged women in the Corinthian churches to cover their heads
(the only place where the Bible teaches about this), he followed a custom
prominent in many Eastern cultures of his day. Although women and
men alike covered their heads for various reasons, married women
specifically covered their heads to prevent men other than their husbands
from lusting after their hair. A married woman who went out with her
head uncovered was considered promiscuous and was to be divorced as
an adulteress. Because of what head coverings symbolized in that
culture, Paul asked the more liberated women to cover their heads so
they would not scandalize the others. Among his arguments for head
coverings is the fact God created Adam first; in the particular culture he
addressed, this argument would make sense as an argument for women
wearing head coverings.

PASSAGES WHERE PAUL MAY HAVE
RESTRICTED WOMEN’S MINISTRY

Because Paul, in some cases, advocated women’s ministry, we cannot
read his restrictions on women in ministry as universal prohibitions.
Rather, as in the case of head coverings in Corinth, Paul addressed a
specific cultural situation. This is not to say that Paul here or anywhere
else wrote Scripture that was not for all time. It is merely to say that he
did not write it for all circumstances and that we must take into account
the circumstances he addressed to understand how he would have applied his principles in very different situations. In practice, no one today applies all texts for all circumstances, no matter how loudly they may defend some texts as applying to all circumstances. For instance, most of us did not send offerings for the church in Jerusalem this Sunday (1 Corinthians 16:1—3). If our churches do not support widows, we can protest that most widows today have not washed the saints’ feet (1 Timothy 5:10). Likewise, few readers today would advocate our going to Troas to pick up Paul’s cloak; we recognize that Paul addressed these words specifically to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:13).

**LET WOMEN KEEP SILENT**

Two passages in Paul’s writings at first seem to contradict the progressive ones. Keep in mind that these are the only two passages in the Bible that could remotely be construed as contradicting Paul’s endorsement of women in ministry.

First, Paul instructed women to be silent and save their questions about the service for their husbands at home (1 Corinthians 14:34—36). Yet, Paul could not mean silence under all circumstances, because earlier in the same letter he acknowledged that women could pray and prophesy in church (1 Corinthians 11:5); and prophecy ranked even higher than teaching (12:28).

Knowing ancient Greek culture helps us understand the passage better. Not all explanations scholars have proposed have proved satisfying. Some hold that a later scribe accidentally inserted these lines into Paul’s writings, but the hard evidence for this interpretation seems slender. Some suggest that Paul here quoted a Corinthian position (1 Corinthians 14:34,35), which he then refuted (verse 36); unfortunately, verse 36 does not read naturally as a refutation. Others think that churches, like synagogues, were segregated by gender, somehow making women’s talk disruptive. This view falters on two counts: First, gender segregation in synagogues may have begun centuries after Paul; and, second, the Corinthian Christians met in homes, whose architecture would have rendered such segregation impossible. Some also suggest that Paul addressed women who were abusing the gifts of the Spirit or a problem with judging prophecies. But while the context addresses these issues, ancient writers commonly used digressions, and the theme of church order is sufficient to unite the context.

Another explanation seems more likely. Paul elsewhere affirmed women’s role in prayer and prophecy (11:5), so he cannot be prohibiting all kinds of speech here. (In fact, no church that allows women to sing actually takes this verse to mean complete silence anyway.) Since Paul only addressed a specific kind of speech, we should note that the only kind of speech he directly addressed in 14:34—36 was wives asking questions. In ancient Greek and Jewish lecture settings, advanced students or educated people frequently interrupted public speakers with reasonable questions. Yet the culture had deprived most women of education. Jewish women could listen in synagogues, but unlike boys, were not taught to recite the Law while growing up. Ancient culture also considered it rude for uneducated persons to slow down lectures with questions that betrayed their lack of training. So Paul provided a long-range solution: The husbands should take a personal interest in their wives’ learning and catch them up privately. Most ancient husbands doubted their wives’ intellectual potential, but Paul was among the most progressive of ancient writers on the subject. Far from repressing these women, by ancient standards Paul was liberating them.

This text cannot prohibit women’s announcing the word of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:4,5), and nothing in the context here suggests that Paul specifically prohibited women from Bible teaching. The only passage in the entire Bible that one could directly cite against women teaching the Bible is 1 Timothy 2:11—15.
IN QUIETNESS AND SUBMISSION

In 1 Timothy 2:11—15, Paul forbade women to teach or exercise authority over men. Most supporters of women in ministry think that the latter expression means "usurp authority," something Paul would not want men to do any more than women, but the matter is disputed. In any case, here Paul also forbade women to "teach," something he apparently allowed elsewhere (Romans 16; Philippians 4:2,3). Thus he presumably addressed the specific situation in this community. Because both Paul and his readers knew their situation and could take it for granted, the situation which elicited Paul's response was thus assumed in his intended meaning.

It is probably no coincidence that the one passage in the Bible prohibiting women teaching Scripture appears in the one set of letters where we explicitly know that false teachers were targeting and working through women. Paul's letters to Timothy in Ephesus provide a glimpse of the situation: false teachers (1 Timothy 1:6,7,19,20; 6:3—5; 2 Timothy 2:17) were misleading the women (2 Timothy 3:6,7). These women were probably (and especially) some widows who owned houses the false teachers could use for their meetings. (See 1 Timothy 5:13. One of the Greek terms here indicates spreading nonsense.) Women were the most susceptible to false teaching only because they had been granted the least education. This behavior was bound to bring reproach on the church from a hostile society that was already convinced Christians subverted the traditional roles of women and slaves. So Paul provided a short-range solution: "Do not teach" (under the present circumstances); and a long-range solution: "Let them learn" (1 Timothy 2:11).

Today we read, "learn in silence," and think the emphasis lies on "silence." That these women were to learn "quietly and submissively" may reflect their witness within society (these were characteristics normally expected of women). But ancient culture expected all beginning students (unlike advanced students) to learn silently; that was why women were not supposed to ask questions (as noted above). The same word for "silence" here is applied to all Christians in the context (2:2). Paul specifically addressed this matter to women for the same reason he addressed the admonition to stop disputing to the men (2:8): They were the groups involved in the Ephesian churches. Again it appears that Paul's long-range plan was to liberate, not subordinate, women's ministry. The issue is not gender but learning God's Word.

What particularly causes many scholars to question this otherwise logical case is Paul's following argument, where he based his case on the roles of Adam and Eve (1 Timothy 2:13,14). Paul's argument from the creation order, however, was one of the very arguments he earlier used to contend that women should wear head coverings (1 Corinthians 11:7—9). In other words, Paul sometimes cited Scripture to make an ad hoc case for particular circumstances that he would not apply to all circumstances. Although Paul often makes universal arguments from the Old Testament, he sometimes (as with head coverings) makes a local argument by analogy. His argument from Eve's deception is even more likely to fit this category. If Eve's deception prohibits all women from teaching, Paul would be claiming that all women, like Eve, are more easily deceived than all men. (One wonders, then, why he would allow women to teach other women, since they would deceive them all the more.) If, however, the deception does not apply to all women, neither does his prohibition of their teaching. Paul probably used Eve to illustrate the situation of the unlearned women he addressed in Ephesus; but he elsewhere used Eve for anyone who is deceived, not just women (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Because we do not believe Paul would have contradicted himself, his approval of women's ministry in God's Word elsewhere confirms that 1 Timothy 2:9—15 cannot prohibit women's ministry in all situations; rather, he addressed a particular situation.
Some have protested that women should not hold authority over men because men are the head of women. Aside from the many debates about the meaning of the Greek term "head" (for instance, some translate it "source" instead of "authority over"), Paul spoke only of the husband as head of his wife, not of the male gender as head of the female gender. Further, we Pentecostals and charismatics affirm that the minister's authority is inherent in the minister's calling and ministry of the Word, not the minister's person. In this case, gender should be irrelevant as a consideration for ministry—for us as it was for Paul.

**CONCLUSION**

Today we should affirm those whom God calls, whether male or female, and encourage them in faithfully learning God's Word. We need to affirm all potential laborers, both men and women, for the abundant harvest fields.

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**ENDNOTES**


3. Ibid.


5. To "sit before" a teacher's feet was to take the posture of a disciple (Acts 22:3; m. Ab. 1:4; ARN 6, 38 A; ARN 11, §28 B; b. Pes. 3b; p. Sanh. 10:1, §8). On women in Jesus' ministry, see especially B. Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, SNTSM 51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984).


7. Although inscriptions demonstrate that women filled a prominent role in some synagogues (see B. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* [Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982]), they also reveal that this practice was the exception rather than the norm.


10. Because Paul nowhere else appeals to commendations from the
apostles, "notable apostles" remains the most natural way to construe this phrase (see, e.g., A. Spencer, Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989], 102).


13. Jewish people were among the cultures that required married women to cover their hair (e.g., m. B.K. 8:6; ARN 3, 17A; Sifre Num. 11.2.2; 3 Macc 4:6). Elsewhere in the East, cf., e.g., R. MacMullen, "Women in Public in the Roman Empire," Historia 29 (1980): 209—10.

14. Sometimes men (Plut. R.Q. 14, Mor. 267A; Char. Chaer. 3.3.14) and women (Plut. R.Q. 26, Mor. 270D; Char. Chaer. 1.11.2; 8.1.7; ARN 1A) covered their heads for mourning. Similarly, both men (m. Sot. 9:15; Epict. Disc. 1.11.27) and women (ARN 9, §25B) covered their heads for shame. Roman women normally covered their heads for worship (e.g., Varro 5.29.130; Plut. R.Q. 10, Mor. 266C), in contrast to Greek women who uncovered their heads (SIG 3d ed., 3.999). But in contrast to the custom Paul addressed, none of these specific practices differentiates men from women.

15. Hair was the primary object of male desire (Apul. Metam. 2.8,9; Char. Chaer. 1.13.11; 1.14.1; ARN 14, §35B; Sifre Num. 11.2.1; p. Sanh. 6:4, §1). This is why many peoples required married women to cover their hair but allowed unmarried girls to go uncovered (e.g., Charillus 2 in Plut. Sayings of Spartans, Mor. 232C; Philo Spec. Leg. 3.56).


18. G. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699—705. Fee may be right that the entire Western tradition displaces this passage, but this might happen easily with a digression (common enough in ancient writing), and even in these texts the passage is moved, not missing.


21. One of the most progressive alternatives was Plut., Advice to Bride and Groom, 48, Mor. 145BC, who, nevertheless, ended up accusing women of folly if left to themselves (48, Mor. 145DE).

22. For more detailed documentation, see Keener, Women, 70—100; similarly, B. Witherington, III, Women in the Earliest Churches, SNTSM 59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988), 90—104.


24. For recent and noteworthy arguments in favor of "exercise authority,"
see the articles by Baldwin, Köstenberger, and Schreiner in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9—15* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).


27. First Timothy 2:15 may also qualify the preceding verses; see Keener, *Women*, 118—20.

28. Catherine Clark Kroeger and others believe it implies "source," Wayne Grudem and others that it implies "authority over." With Gordon Fee, I suspect that ancient literature allows both views but that Paul used an image relevant in his day (see further Keener, *Women*, 32—36, 168).
Christian baker faces boycott for refusal to make cake for lesbians
By Todd Starnes/Fox News & Commentary
Nov 15, 2011

NEW YORK (BP) -- Pro-gay activists have launched a boycott of an Iowa baker who declined to create a wedding cake for a lesbian couple based on her religious beliefs.

Victoria Childress, the owner of Victoria's Cake Cottage in Des Moines, has been accused of being anti-gay, homophobic and a bigot after she refused to make a cake for Trina Vodraska and Janelle Sievers.

Childress told Fox News & Commentary that she made five cakes for the couple to taste – unaware that they were lesbians.

"She introduced herself, and I said, 'Is this your sister?'' Childress said. "She said, 'No. This is my partner.'"

At that point Childress told the couple that she would not be willing to make their wedding cake.

"I was straightforward with them and explained that I'm a Christian and that I have very strong convictions," she said. "I chose to be honest about it. They said they appreciated it and left. That was all that was said."

But that wasn't the end of the story. Soon Childress began receiving hateful emails and then the local media called.

Vodraska told KCCI that she was offended by Childress.

"It was degrading," she told the television station. "It was like she chastised us for wanting to do business with her. I know Jesus loves me. I didn't need her to tell me that. I didn't go there for that. I just wanted to go there for a cake."

The pair also released a statement, calling the Christian cake baker a "bigot."

"Awareness of equality was our only goal in bringing this to light; it is not about cake or someone's right to refuse service to a customer," they wrote in a statement posted on KCCI's website.

The Iowa Civil Rights Act was amended in 2007 to include protections for sexual orientation. The couple told the television station they had not decided whether they would file a civil rights complaint against the baker.

A spokesperson for the Iowa Civil Rights Commission declined to confirm or deny whether they've launched an investigation. State law only allows exemptions from discrimination laws to a bona fide religious institution.

Childress said her decision had nothing to do with discrimination or the lesbian couple.

"It doesn't have anything to do with them -- it was about my convictions," she stressed. "They can get their cake
anywhere."

Childress said money is not the issue. "I'm being attacked because of my beliefs -- my convictions to their lifestyle," she said.

Childress said she stopped reading the hate mail.

"It's really hard to read things like that," she said. "I'm a pretty quiet, soft-spoken person. But when I stand up for my convictions against things, I'm very strong when it comes to that."

She said she's received a positive reaction from local business owners -- along with some cake orders.

"People are telling me they were proud of me for standing up for my beliefs because not many people do that these days," she said. "Business people are afraid to because they're afraid to lose money."

But there have been plenty of critics -- even among some of Childress' competitors.

"To have someone say, 'Well, I'm sorry because your lifestyle is different from mine, I'm not going to take care of you and help you. And I don't want your business,' it's wrong on so many levels," said Dana Schaub, a local baker told KCCI.

Childress said she was simply stating her belief.

"I was not rude," she said. "I was not condescending. It was matter-of-fact. I told them, 'I'm sorry, I just can't do that.'"

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Todd Starnes is the host of Fox News & Commentary, heard daily on Fox News Radio stations around the nation. He is the author of "They Popped My Hood and Found Gravy on the Dipstick" and the upcoming "Dispatches From Bitter America." This article first appeared at www.toddstarnes.com. Used by permission.

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Original copy of this story can be found at http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=36575
RONNELLE ADAMS came out to his mother twice, first about his homosexuality, then about his atheism.

“My mother is very devout,” said Mr. Adams, 30, a Washington resident who has published an atheist children’s book, “Aching and Praying,” but who in high school considered becoming a Baptist preacher. “She started telling me her issues with homosexuality, which were, of course, Biblical,” he said. “‘I just don’t care what the Bible says about that,’ I told her, and she asked why. ‘I don’t believe that stuff anymore.’ It got silent. She was distraught. She told me she was more bothered by that than the revelation I was gay.”

This was in 2000, and Mr. Adams did not meet another black atheist in Washington until 2009, when he found the Facebook group called Black Atheists, which immediately struck a chord. “I felt like, ‘100 black atheists? Wow!’ ” he said.

In the two years since, Black Atheists has grown to 879 members from that initial 100, YouTube confessionals have attracted thousands, blogs like “Godless and Black” have gained followings, and hundreds more have joined Facebook groups like Black Atheist Alliance (524 members) to share their struggles with “coming out” about their atheism.

Feeling isolated from religious friends and families and excluded from what it means to be African-American, people turn to these sites to seek out advice and understanding, with some of them even finding a date. And having benefited from the momentum online, organizations like African Americans for Humanism and Center for Inquiry-Harlem have well-attended meet-up groups, and others like Black Atheists of America and Black Nonbelievers have been founded.

African-Americans are remarkably religious even for a country known for its faithfulness, as the United States is. According to the Pew Forum 2008 United States Religious Landscape Survey, 88 percent of African-Americans believe in God with absolute certainty, compared with 71 percent of the total population, with more than half attending religious services at least once a week.

While some black clergy members lament the loss of parishioners to mega-churches like Rick Warren’s and prosperity-gospel purveyors like Joel Osteen, it is often taken for granted that African-Americans go to religious services. Islam and other religions are represented in the black
community, but with the assumption that African-Americans are religious comes the expectation that they are Christian.

“That’s the kicker, when they ask which church you go to,” said Linda Chavers, 29, a Harvard graduate student. The question comes up among young black professionals like her classmates as casually as chitchat about classes and dating. “At first,” she said, “they think it’s because I haven’t found one, and they’ll say, ‘Oh I know a few great churches,’ and I don’t know a nice way to say I’m not interested,” she said.

Even among those African-Americans who report no affiliation, more than two-thirds say religion plays a somewhat important role in their lives, according to Pew. And some nonbelieving African-Americans have been known to attend church out of tradition.

“I have some colleagues and friends who identify as culturally Christian in a way similar to ethnic Jews,” said Josef Sorett, a religion professor at Columbia University. “They may go to church because that’s the church their family attends, but they don’t necessarily subscribe to the beliefs of Christianity.”

Given the cultural pull toward religion, less than one-half of a percent of African-Americans identify themselves as atheists, compared with 1.6 percent of the total population, according to Pew. Black atheists, then, find they are a minority within a minority.

In 2008, John Branch made his first YouTube video, “Black Atheism.” With the camera tight on his face, Mr. Branch, now 27, asks, “What is an atheist? An atheist is simply someone who lacks a belief in God.” Half kidding, he goes on, “We’re not drinking blood. We’re not worshiping Satan.” The video has received more than 40,000 hits.

“I think it attracted so much attention because, in the black community, not believing in God is seen as a thing for white people,” said Mr. Branch, a marketing strategist in Raleigh, N.C. “I hate that term, ‘acting white,’ but it’s used.”

According to Pew, the vast majority of atheists and agnostics are white, including the authors Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens.

Seeking a public intellectual of their own, some black atheists have claimed the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, interpreting his arguments against teaching intelligent design in the classroom to be an endorsement of atheism. But Dr. deGrasse Tyson is loath to be associated with any part of the movement. When contacted last week by e-mail, he noted a Twitter exchange he had in August, in which he told a follower, “Am I an Atheist, you ask? Labels are mentally lazy ways by which people assert they know you without knowing you.”

Jamila Bey, a 35-year-old journalist, said, “To be black and atheist, in a lot of circles, is to not be
black.” She said the story the nation tells of African-Americans’ struggle for civil rights is a Christian one, so African-Americans who reject religion are seen as turning their backs on their history. This feels unfair to Ms. Bey, whose mother is Roman Catholic and whose father is Muslim, because people of different faiths, and some with none, were in the movement. The black church dominated, she said, because it was the one independent black institution allowed under Jim Crow laws, providing free spaces to African-Americans who otherwise faced arrest for congregating in public.

Recognizing the role of churches in the movement, Ms. Bey still takes issue when their work is retold as God’s. “These people were using the church, pulling from its resources, to attack a problem and literally change history. But the story that gets told is, ‘Jesus delivered us,’ ” Ms. Bey said. “Frankly, it was humans who did all the work.”

Garrett Daniels wrote on the Facebook group page of Black Atheists, “I CAME out that I’m an atheist to my family.” He added, “I’m not disowned and they apparently don’t love me any less.” A member responded: “Good for you. Seeking out religion just to fit in will drive you crazy.”

The Facebook discussion boards for these groups often become therapy sessions, and as administrator of the Black Atheist Alliance, Mark Hatcher finds himself a counselor. “My advice is usually let them know you understand their religion and what they believe, but you have to take a stand,” he said.

This strategy has worked for Mr. Hatcher, 30, a graduate student who started a secular student group at the historically black Howard University. For two of his Facebook friends, though, it has not worked, and they moved to Washington, not to sever ties with their families as much as to keep their sanity.

Now that Facebook groups have connected black atheists, meet-ups have started in cities like Atlanta, Houston and New York.

On a gray Saturday in October, 40 members of African Americans for Humanism, including Mr. Hatcher, Ms. Bey and Mr. Adams, met at a restaurant in Washington to celebrate the first anniversary of holding meet-ups. Speakers discussed plans to broaden services like tutoring and starting a speaking tour at historically black colleges.

“Someone’s sitting on the fence, saying, ‘I go to church, and all my friends and my family are there, how am I supposed to leave?’ ” Mr. Hatcher said on stage. “That’s where we, as African-American humanists, say, ‘Hey look, we have a community over here.’ ”

After the speeches, Mr. Hatcher looked at the attendees mingling, laughing, hugging one another. “I feel like I’m sitting at a family reunion,” he said.
Seated beside Mr. Hatcher was his girlfriend, Ellice Whittington, a 26-year-old chemical engineer he met through a black atheist Facebook group. He lived in Washington and she in Denver, so their relationship progressed slowly, she said, over long e-mails. But Mr. Hatcher said he fell immediately. “We bonded over music. She loved Prince.”

As for being nonreligious in the black community, Ms. Whittington said, “It definitely makes your field of candidates a whole lot smaller.”

She added, “It scared some men to hear me say I don’t believe in God the way you do. I’ve heard people say, ‘How can you love somebody if you don’t believe in God?’ ”

ON his blog “Words of Wrath,” Wrath James White is an outspoken critic of Christianity and of African-Americans’ “zealous embracement of the God of our kidnapper, murders, slave masters and oppressors.”

Though his atheism is a well-worn subject of debate with his wife and his mother (a minister), Mr. White, a 41-year-old Austin-based writer, avoids discussing it with the rest of his family. Though he won’t attend Christmas services this year, and hasn’t in years, he said, his family assumes he’s just “not that interested in religion.” To say explicitly he is an atheist, he said, “would break my grandmother’s heart.”

The pressure he feels to quiet his atheism is at the heart of a provocative statement he makes on his blog: “In most African-American communities, it is more acceptable to be a criminal who goes to church on Sunday, while selling drugs to kids all week, than to be an atheist who ... contributes to society and supports his family.”

Over the phone, Mr. White said he does feel respected for his education and success, but because he cannot talk freely about his atheism, it ultimately excludes him. When he lived in Los Angeles, he watched gang members in their colors enter the church where they were welcomed to shout “Amen” (they had sinned but had been redeemed) along with everyone else.

“They were free to tell their story,” Mr. White said, while his story about leaving religion he keeps to himself — and the Internet.