The Night Owl Café returns to the Adventist Ministry Convention!

Three years ago we had a great time at the Night Owl Café, an evening conversational get-together of pastors and Best Practices readers to talk about creative ministry. We're reprising that again at the ministries convention next month at the NAD Adventist Ministries Convention. (Jan 15, 2012 - Jan 18, 2012, Innisbrook Resort & Golf Club, 36750 US Highway 19 N, Palm Harbor, FL 34684. To register, contact Charilolett.Johnson@nad.adventist.org)

Night Owl Café times:
Sunday, January 15- 9:00 p.m. - 11:00 p.m.
Monday, January 16-7:30 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.
Tuesday, January 17-7:30 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.

See you there!
Loren

Ministry

The Pedilavium Problem
by Loren Seibold, editor, Best Practices for Adventist Ministry

In my churches the Lord's Supper is reserved for the last month of each quarter. As I've been conducting it this month, I noticed again the number of people who choose to not participate in the foot-washing service. Even in a church that I'd describe as fairly traditional, there were more people in the sanctuary than in the rooms set aside for the service - and after the foot-washing, it was clear just looking at the pews that quite a few had used the "break" to slip away from church.

So I did an informal survey. "Why didn't you go to the foot-washing service today?"

- "I didn't know this was communion day, so I wasn't prepared for it."
- "I can't get down to the floor to do it."
- "It just disrupts everything for me to get up and walk to another place, and I lose the mood of the Lord's Supper."
- "I'd have to take off my hose."
- "I've got some really gross toenails, and it embarrasses me."
- "I just don't like it. Very uncomfortable for me. Have to talk with and touch someone I don't know that well."
- "We're visitors here. We don't know anyone."
- "I hate looking for a partner."
What to do with the foot-washing service? One of my church leaders said, "We need to push people to do it." (Not easy to do. In my way of thinking, it's a very personal thing.) Someone in the foot-washing room said, "Maybe people don't understand what it means." (If they don't, it's not for lack of explanations.) Someone asked, "If a person doesn't do foot-washing, are they allowed to take the Lord's Supper?" (I couldn't find an official answer, but I've never stopped anyone.) As for finding a partner, I'm not inclined to blame unfriendliness: those in the men's foot-washing service, at least, tried to make sure everyone was served.

The foot-washing service is explained in our Fundamental Beliefs as a "renewed cleansing," "willingness to serve one another," and "unifying our hearts in love" - all areas where every Christian and congregation could use help. The Church Manual explains the preparation for and importance of the ordinance, but it doesn't talk about what we should do when people don't participate in it.

Is there waning interest in the foot-washing service? How important is it to your church? What have you done to address it? Discuss this on our Facebook page.

Christmas Resources

Greatest Gift Slide Courtesy of SermonView
The Greatest Gift is a graphics package available as a courtesy download from SermonView. This image set comes complete with the primary image plus pre-built composition slides for easy customization. You'll receive both a PowerPoint file and jpg files for easy use with any worship software.

Let it Be From PDVD1
It's hard to imagine how God actually became a flesh and blood human being. This graphics package entitled Let it Be portrays the incarnation in the form of a sonogram. The complete package contains a short movie, a slide package and a scriptural reading. The graphics package was first featured on Pastor's DVD Volume One but is out of print. If you don't have a copy of PDVD1 I will send you the complete package via email. Just contact me at dave@acn.info.

--Dave Gemmell

Reading for Pastors

Still telling people that Christmas is in December because the papacy piggybacked on to pagan winter solstice celebrations? That was the Cromwellian explanation, but it may not be wholly true, according to some scholars.

Have you experienced a bad pastoral search committee process? You're not alone. Here are some great suggestions for search committees that should be required reading for every search committee member. Send this to the church that's interviewing you!

Are we way too pessimistic? Is the world really that bad? Bradley Wright doesn't think so. Great piece to contemplate with your outreach committee as you think about how you approach evangelism. Quote: "You'll find that contrary to popular opinion, life is improving in many ways (though certainly not all), and this improvement is nothing short of remarkable."

I love this emphasis on "externally focused ministry":

- Check out this fantastic blogsite: The Externally Focused Network
- 25 simple ways to be missional in your neighborhood
- 25 more simple ways to be missional in your neighborhood
- A great story of total generosity, no hooks, and a response way, way beyond what was expected.

Alvin Plantinga is still sticking up for God, in spite of being one of the world's most recognized philosophers. Quote: "Mr. Plantinga readily admits that he has no proof that God exists. But he also thinks that doesn't matter. Belief in God, he argues, is what philosophers call a basic belief: It is no more in need of proof than the belief that the past exists, or that other people have minds, or that one plus one equals two."

Always proud of our government when I hear of our leaders working to protect basic religious freedoms.

From the "you didn't think of that when you did it?" department: Laser tattoo removal is big, and at least some of it has to do with people's faith.
To the Point

Quotations by American humorist Robert Benchley:

A boy can learn a lot from a dog: obedience, loyalty, and the importance of turning around three times before lying down.

An ardent supporter of the hometown team should go to a game prepared to take offense, no matter what happens.

Anyone can do any amount of work provided it isn't the work he is supposed to be doing at the moment.

As for me, except for an occasional heart attack, I feel as young as I ever did.

Defining and analyzing humor is a pastime of humorless people.

Drawing on my fine command of the English language, I said nothing.

Drinking makes such fools of people, and people are such fools to begin with, that it's compounding a felony.

I can't bring myself to say, 'Well, I guess I'll be toddling along.' It isn't that I can't toddle. It's just that I can't guess I'll toddle.

It took me fifteen years to discover that I had no talent for writing, but I couldn't give it up because by that time I was too famous.

The surest way to make a monkey of a man is to quote him.

There are two kinds of people in the world, those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't.

News, Ideas & Reminders

- Humor: The 86 year Bible-reading plan. Start now!
- Rich DuBose announces a new Facebook page for Adventist songwriters, poets and artists
- Another new Facebook page for pastors' spouses.
- Nonprofit Leadership Certification Program
  - Southeastern Conference: 1701 Robie Ave, Mt. Dora, Florida 32712,
    - Session I, June 3-7, 2012
    - Session II, September 23-27, 201
  - ACS Outreach Leadership Conference, Washington Conference Office
    - March 2-4, 2012
- Humor: Ever heard preaching like this - that dwells on the negative and won't celebrate the good news?
- Buzz: Preview Joshua Harris's new book Why Church Matters.
- 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
Upcoming NAD Events

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

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: ruthieje@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 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: 301-680-6429. For more information, email: chariolett.johnson@nad.adventist.org

Religious Liberty Week. Jan 15, 2012 - Jan 21, 2012, North American Division. 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: latha.bithini@nad.adventist.org

NAD Health Summit Orlando 2012. Jan 27, 2012 - Feb 5, 2012, Orlando Marriott Lake Mary, 1501 International Parkway, Lake Mary, FL 32746. "Equipping Health Leaders to Reach Out." For a list of seminars, click here. Phone: 407-252-6554 (after 5:30pm EST) For more information, email: yasminthen1@yahoo.com


The ACS Outreach Leadership Conference is sponsored by the Adventist Community Services - Washington, the North Pacific Union Conference and NAD Adventist Community Services. It will be held at the Washington Conference Office in Federal Way, Washington on March 2-4, 2012. Participants will hear challenging speakers and choose from 30 training seminars. For registration and more information: www.washingtonconference.org/ACS.

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Spam
Not spam
Forget previous vote
How December 25 Became Christmas

by Andrew McGowan

On December 25, Christians around the world will gather to celebrate Jesus’ birth. Joyful carols, special liturgies, brightly wrapped gifts, festive foods—these all characterize the feast today, at least in the northern hemisphere. But just how did the Christmas festival originate? How did December 25 come to be associated with Jesus’ birthday?

The Bible offers few clues: Celebrations of Jesus’ Nativity are not mentioned in the Gospels or Acts; the date is not given, not even the time of year. The biblical reference to shepherds tending their flocks at night when they hear the news of Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:8) might suggest the spring lambing season; in the cold month of December, on the other hand, sheep might well have been corralled. Yet most scholars would urge caution about extracting such a precise but incidental detail from a narrative whose focus is theological rather than calendrical.

The extrabiblical evidence from the first and second century is equally spare: There is no mention of birth celebrations in the writings of early Christian writers such as Irenaeus (c. 130–200) or Tertullian (c. 160–225). Origen of Alexandria (c. 165–264) goes so far as to mock Roman celebrations of birth anniversaries, dismissing them as “pagan” practices—a strong indication that Jesus’ birth was not marked with similar festivities at that place and time. As far as we can tell, Christmas was not celebrated at all at this point.

This stands in sharp contrast to the very early traditions surrounding Jesus’ last days. Each of the Four Gospels provides detailed information about the time of Jesus’ death. According to John, Jesus is crucified just as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed. This would have occurred on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Nisan, just before the Jewish holiday began at sundown (considered the beginning of the 15th day because in the Hebrew calendar, days begin at sundown). In Matthew, Mark and Luke, however, the Last Supper is held after sundown, on the beginning of the 15th. Jesus is crucified the next morning—still, the 15th.

Easter, a much earlier development than Christmas, was simply the gradual Christian reinterpretation of Passover in terms of Jesus’ Passion. Its observance could even be implied in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:7–8: “Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the festival...”); it was certainly a distinctively Christian feast by the mid-second century C.E., when the apocryphal text known as the Epistle to the Apostles has Jesus instruct his disciples to “make commemoration of [his] death, that is, the Passover.”
Jesus’ ministry, miracles, Passion and Resurrection were often of most interest to first- and early-second-century C.E. Christian writers. But over time, Jesus’ origins would become of increasing concern. We can begin to see this shift already in the New Testament. The earliest writings—Paul and Mark—make no mention of Jesus’ birth. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide well-known but quite different accounts of the event—although neither specifies a date. In the second century C.E., further details of Jesus’ birth and childhood are related in apocryphal writings such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Proto-Gospel of James. These texts provide everything from the names of Jesus’ grandparents to the details of his education—but not the date of his birth.

Finally, in about 200 C.E., a Christian teacher in Egypt makes reference to the date Jesus was born. According to Clement of Alexandria, several different days had been proposed by various Christian groups. Surprising as it may seem, Clement doesn’t mention December 25 at all. Clement writes: “There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20 in our calendar]...And treating of His Passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the 16th year of Tiberius, on the 25th of Phamenoth [March 21]; and others on the 25th of Pharmuthi [April 21] and others say that on the 19th of Pharmuthi [April 15] the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21].”

Clearly there was great uncertainty, but also a considerable amount of interest, in dating Jesus’ birth in the late second century. By the fourth century, however, we find references to two dates that were widely recognized—and now also celebrated—as Jesus’ birthday: December 25 in the western Roman Empire and January 6 in the East (especially in Egypt and Asia Minor). The modern Armenian church continues to celebrate Christmas on January 6; for most Christians, however, December 25 would prevail, while January 6 eventually came to be known as the Feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem. The period between became the holiday season later known as the 12 days of Christmas.

The earliest mention of December 25 as Jesus’ birthday comes from a mid-fourth-century Roman almanac that lists the death dates of various Christian bishops and martyrs. The first date listed, December 25, is marked: natus Christus in Betleem Judeae: “Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea.” In about 400 C.E., Augustine of Hippo mentions a local dissident Christian group, the Donatists, who apparently kept Christmas festivals on December 25, but refused to celebrate the Epiphany on January 6, regarding it as an innovation. Since the Donatist group only emerged during the persecution under Diocletian in 312 C.E. and then remained stubbornly attached to the practices of that moment in time, they seem to represent an older North African Christian tradition.

In the East, January 6 was at first not associated with the magi alone, but with the Christmas story as a whole.
So, almost 300 years after Jesus was born, we finally find people observing his birth in midwinter. But how had they settled on the dates December 25 and January 6?

There are two theories today: one extremely popular, the other less often heard outside scholarly circles (though far more ancient).4

The most loudly touted theory about the origins of the Christmas date(s) is that it was borrowed from pagan celebrations. The Romans had their mid-winter Saturnalia festival in late December; barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe kept holidays at similar times. To top it off, in 274 C.E., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the birth of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun), on December 25. Christmas, the argument goes, is really a spin-off from these pagan solar festivals. According to this theory, early Christians deliberately chose these dates to encourage the spread of Christmas and Christianity throughout the Roman world: If Christmas looked like a pagan holiday, more pagans would be open to both the holiday and the God whose birth it celebrated.

Despite its popularity today, this theory of Christmas’s origins has its problems. It is not found in any ancient Christian writings, for one thing. Christian authors of the time do note a connection between the solstice and Jesus’ birth: The church father Ambrose (c. 339–397), for example, described Christ as the true sun, who outshone the fallen gods of the old order. But early Christian writers never hint at any recent calendrical engineering; they clearly don’t think the date was chosen by the church. Rather they see the coincidence as a providential sign, as natural proof that God had selected Jesus over the false pagan gods.

It’s not until the 12th century that we find the first suggestion that Jesus’ birth celebration was deliberately set at the time of pagan feasts. A marginal note on a manuscript of the writings of the Syriac biblical commentator Dionysius bar-Salibi states that in ancient times the Christmas holiday was actually shifted from January 6 to December 25 so that it fell on the same date as the pagan Sol Invictus holiday.5 In the 18th and 19th centuries, Bible scholars spurred on by the new study of comparative religions latched on to this idea.6 They claimed that because the early Christians didn’t know when Jesus was born, they simply assimilated the pagan solstice festival for their own purposes, claiming it as the time of the Messiah’s birth and celebrating it accordingly.
More recent studies have shown that many of the holiday’s modern trappings do reflect pagan customs borrowed much later, as Christianity expanded into northern and western Europe. The Christmas tree, for example, has been linked with late medieval druidic practices. This has only encouraged modern audiences to assume that the date, too, must be pagan.

There are problems with this popular theory, however, as many scholars recognize. Most significantly, the first mention of a date for Christmas (c. 200) and the earliest celebrations that we know about (c. 250–300) come in a period when Christians were not borrowing heavily from pagan traditions of such an obvious character.

Granted, Christian belief and practice were not formed in isolation. Many early elements of Christian worship—including eucharistic meals, meals honoring martyrs and much early Christian funerary art—would have been quite comprehensible to pagan observers. Yet, in the first few centuries C.E., the persecuted Christian minority was greatly concerned with distancing itself from the larger, public pagan religious observances, such as sacrifices, games and holidays. This was still true as late as the violent persecutions of the Christians conducted by the Roman emperor Diocletian between 303 and 312 C.E.

This would change only after Constantine converted to Christianity. From the mid-fourth century on, we do find Christians deliberately adapting and Christianizing pagan festivals. A famous proponent of this practice was Pope Gregory the Great, who, in a letter written in 601 C.E. to a Christian missionary in Britain, recommended that local pagan temples not be destroyed but be converted into churches, and that pagan festivals be celebrated as feasts of Christian martyrs. At this late point, Christmas may well have acquired some pagan trappings. But we don’t have evidence of Christians adopting pagan festivals in the third century, at which point dates for Christmas were established. Thus, it seems unlikely that the date was simply selected to correspond with pagan solar festivals.

The December 25 feast seems to have existed before 312—before Constantine and his conversion, at least. As we have seen, the Donatist Christians in North Africa seem to have known it from before that time. Furthermore, in the mid- to late fourth century, church leaders in the eastern Empire concerned themselves not with introducing a celebration of Jesus’ birthday, but with the addition of the December date to their traditional celebration on January 6.  

There is another way to account for the origins of Christmas on December 25: Strange as it may seem, the key to dating Jesus’ birth may lie in the dating of Jesus’ death at Passover. This view was first suggested to the modern world by French scholar Louis Duchesne in the early 20th century and fully developed by American Thomas Talley in more recent years.  But they were certainly not the first to note a connection between the traditional date of Jesus’ death and his birth.

Around 200 C.E. Tertullian of Carthage reported the calculation that the 14th of Nisan (the day of the crucifixion according to the Gospel of John) in the year Jesus died was equivalent to March 25 in the Roman (solar) calendar. March 25 is, of course, nine months before December 25; it was later recognized as the Feast of the Annunciation—the commemoration of Jesus’
conception. Thus, Jesus was believed to have been conceived and crucified on the same day of the year. Exactly nine months later, Jesus was born, on December 25.

This idea appears in an anonymous Christian treatise titled *On Solstices and Equinoxes*, which appears to come from fourth-century North Africa. The treatise states: “Therefore our Lord was conceived on the eighth of the kalends of April in the month of March [March 25], which is the day of the passion of the Lord and of his conception. For on that day he was conceived on the same he suffered.” Based on this, the treatise dates Jesus’ birth to the winter solstice.

Augustine, too, was familiar with this association. In On the Trinity (c. 399–419) he writes: “For he [Jesus] is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th.”

In the East, too, the dates of Jesus’ conception and death were linked. But instead of working from the 14th of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar, the easterners used the 14th of the first spring month (Artemisios) in their local Greek calendar—April 6 to us. April 6 is, of course, exactly nine months before January 6—the eastern date for Christmas. In the East too, we have evidence that April was associated with Jesus’ conception and crucifixion. Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis writes that on April 6, “The lamb was shut up in the spotless womb of the holy virgin, he who took away and takes away in perpetual sacrifice the sins of the world.” Even today, the Armenian Church celebrates the Annunciation in early April (on the 7th, not the 6th) and Christmas on January 6.

Thus, we have Christians in two parts of the world calculating Jesus’ birth on the basis that his death and conception took place on the same day (March 25 or April 6) and coming up with two close but different results (December 25 and January 6).

Connecting Jesus’ conception and death in this way will certainly seem odd to modern readers, but it reflects ancient and medieval understandings of the whole of salvation being bound up together. One of the most poignant expressions of this belief is found in Christian art. In numerous paintings of the angel’s Annunciation to Mary—the moment of Jesus’ conception—the baby Jesus is shown gliding down from heaven on or with a small cross (see photo of detail from Master Bertram’s Annunciation scene); a visual reminder that the conception brings the promise of salvation through Jesus’ death.

The notion that creation and redemption should occur at the same time of year is also reflected in ancient Jewish tradition, recorded in the Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud preserves a dispute between two early-second-century C.E. rabbis who share this view, but disagree on the date: Rabbi Eliezer states: “In Nisan the world was created; in Nisan the Patriarchs were born; on Passover Isaac was born...and in Nisan they [our ancestors] will be redeemed in time to come.” (The other rabbi, Joshua, dates these same events to the following month, Tishri.) Thus, the dates of Christmas and Epiphany may well have resulted from Christian theological reflection on
such chronologies: Jesus would have been conceived on the same date he died, and born nine months later.\(^\text{15}\)

In the end we are left with a question: How did December 25 become Christmas? We cannot be entirely sure. Elements of the festival that developed from the fourth century until modern times may well derive from pagan traditions. Yet the actual date might really derive more from Judaism—from Jesus’ death at Passover, and from the rabbinic notion that great things might be expected, again and again, at the same time of the year—than from paganism. Then again, in this notion of cycles and the return of God’s redemption, we may perhaps also be touching upon something that the pagan Romans who celebrated \textit{Sol Invictus}, and many other peoples since, would have understood and claimed for their own too.\(^\text{16}\)

Notes
1. Origen, \textit{Homily on Leviticus} 8.
3. The \textit{Philocalian Calendar}.
6. Prominent among these was Paul Ernst Jablonski; on the history of scholarship see especially Roll, “The Origins of Christmas,” pp. 277–283.
7. For example, Gregory of Nazianzen, Oratio 38; John Chrysostom, \textit{In Diem Natalem}.
9. Tertullian, \textit{Adversus Iudaeos} 8.
10. There are other relevant texts for this element of argument, including Hippolytus and the (pseudo-Cypriamic) \textit{De pascha computus}; see Talley, \textit{Origins}, pp. 86, 90–91.
11. \textit{De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri iesu christi et iohannis baptistae}.
a. See Jonathan Klawans, “Was Jesus’ Last Supper a Seder?” BR 17:05.
c. For more on dating the year of Jesus’ birth, see Leonara Neville, “Fixing the Millennium,” AO 03:01.
d. The ancients were familiar with the 9-month gestation period based on the observance of women’s menstrual cycles, pregnancies and miscarriages.
e. In the West (and eventually everywhere), the Easter celebration was later shifted from the actual day to the following Sunday. The insistence of the eastern Christians in keeping Easter on the actual 14th day caused a major debate within the church, with the easterners sometimes referred to as the Quartodecimans, or “Fourteeners.”

Andrew McGowan

Warden and President of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, Australia, Andrew McGowan’s work on early Christianity includes God in Early Christian Thought (Brill, 2009) and Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals (Oxford, 1999).
Why We're So Pessimistic: Read An Excerpt from Upside

Read the first chapter of the new book "Upside: Surprising Good News About The State Of The World."

By Bradley Wright, August 01, 2011

This month in the Patheos Book Club, we're featuring the book Upside: Surprising Good News About the State of Our World, by Bradley Wright. An excerpt of Chapter One follows.

Chapter 1

Pessimism About Our Nation and World

The trouble with this country is that there are too many people going about saying "the trouble with this country is..."
-Sinclair Lewis

If its individual citizens, to a man, are to be believed, [America] always is depressed, and always is stagnated, and always is at an alarming crisis, and never was otherwise.
-Charles Dickens

In an airport bookshop recently, I paused at the current affairs section and looked down the shelves.... All [the books] argued to a greater or lesser extent that a) the world is a terrible place and b) it's getting worse.... I didn't see a single optimistic book.
-Matt Ridley, science writer

The majority of Americans think that most things in our country and around the world are on a downward spiral, but is such pessimism justified? Is the world really facing impending doom? This book examines data on wide-ranging topics all in service of answering whether things are actually getting better or worse. Think of it as a guided field trip through things that matter. As you read it, you'll find that contrary to popular opinion, life is improving in many ways (though certainly not all), and this improvement is nothing short of remarkable. But before we get into the actual state of the world, let's first look at what we think about the state of the world.

Last Thanksgiving I took my nine-year-old son, Floyd,1 to visit family in the Midwest. Since we were there on a Sunday, we went to a service at the local mega-church, which we had attended and enjoyed before. (They have dry-ice fog and rock guitar during worship—big pluses for both of us.) That Sunday, in the midst of his sermon, the pastor started describing the condition of the world. He began with a story from the local newspaper of an unwanted baby being thrown away in a trash can. He followed this with a story of a mass shooting of soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas. From there he went on to worldwide famine and starvation before finishing with child sex-trafficking. With each malady that he described, he would hang his head and softly cry, "What has this world become?" After about a minute of this litany of suffering, I actually put my hand...
over Floyd's ears and just smiled at him while he gave me one of his frequent, "Dad, what in the world are you doing?" looks. I'm happy to talk with him about a lot of things, but child sex-trafficking and abandoned babies were not on the docket for that day.

I tell you this story not to criticize the pastor for being unduly negative. I realize that he was just trying to help the audience appreciate the need for the truths he was teaching. But his message illustrates what we routinely hear from so many different sources: that life is bad and getting worse. We know where we're going, and we'll arrive there in a hand basket.

Now, this story is just that-a story-and we can find anecdotal evidence to support just about any position, no matter how farfetched. So let's consider some systematically collected data to see how widespread our pessimism really is.

The Common Perception of Life Getting Worse

A 2009 nationwide poll asked Americans the following question: "I'd like you to compare the way things are going in the United States to the way they were going five years ago. Generally, would you say things are going better today, worse today, or about the same today as they were going five years ago?" Do you want to guess how many of the respondents thought things are getting worse? A full 83%! Only 5% thought that things were better. That's right: For every one American who thinks that things are getting better, sixteen think they are getting worse.

Another survey question makes the same point. Since 1971, surveys have asked Americans, "Do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction, or do you feel things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?" Now, I like to draw pictures of data, so I have summarized the results of these surveys in Figure 1.1. When this question was asked in 2010, 66% of respondents viewed the country as on the wrong track; only 34% thought we were headed in the right direction. This pessimism is rather typical, for as you can see in Figure 1.1, over most of the last forty years, a majority of Americans have viewed our country as on the wrong track in most years. In only nine years did more respondents say America was headed in the right direction. Overall, about two Americans think that we're on the wrong track for every one who thinks we're going in the right direction. Just a thought, but if we've been on the wrong track for forty years, shouldn't we have arrived in a really bad place already?

Americans aren't just down about our nation as a whole; we're concerned with just about every aspect of it. A 1996 survey asked respondents if they thought the United States was declining or improving in each of fourteen different areas spanning public life, including moral standards, the criminal justice system, public safety, family life, national leaders, Americans' honesty, Americans' work ethic, the health care system, education, our standard of living, the economy, and racial issues. With each one of these issues, about one-quarter to one-half of Americans thought the nation was "holding steady." Among the respondents who perceived any type of change, however, it was overwhelmingly negative. For every respondent who thought that moral and ethical standards were improving, almost twelve thought they were in decline. For every respondent who thought that the criminal justice system was improving, eight thought it was in decline. The ratio was 1:4 for standard of living and 1:3 for racial tensions.

Even when things are objectively getting better, we still think they are getting worse. A 2003 study by the children's advocacy group Child Trends illustrates our propensity for unwarranted pessimism. Child Trends wanted to gauge the accuracy of Americans' perceptions of children's well-being. They found that Americans think young people are far worse off than they really are. For example, three-quarters of the Americans surveyed thought the number of children on welfare had increased or remained steady in the previous decade,
but in reality it had declined. Ninety percent thought that crime rates among teens had gone up or stayed the same, but those too had decreased. In fact, at the time of the survey, they were at a twenty-five-year low! Likewise, Americans are overly pessimistic about young people's poverty, lack of health insurance, and teenage birth rate. The authors concluded, "Most Americans think that things are getting worse for children and youth, even when notable improvements have occurred." Of course the United States has children living in difficult circumstances, but it isn't as prevalent as we seem to think.

While the United States is the best in the world at some things (e.g., basketball, putting people in prison, and In-N-Out hamburgers), pessimism isn't one of them. In 2010, the Pew Global Attitudes Project surveyed respondents in twenty-two different countries, asking them, "Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in our country today?" As plotted in Figure 1.2, the United States is just middle-of-the-pack. In all but one of the nations queried, about half or more of citizens are dissatisfied with the way things are going in their countries, and in most countries two-thirds or more of citizens are dissatisfied. The most dissatisfied country was Lebanon. (National motto: "We don't want to be here either.") The most satisfied, far and away, was China. (National motto: "All 1.3 billion of us are doing quite well. Thank you for asking.") Only 9% of the Chinese were dissatisfied with their country's direction.

The Optimism Gap

At this point, you might be thinking that most humans (except the Chinese) are just pessimistic by nature, but this is not the case. We're actually quite optimistic about our own lives. This personal optimism sets up a paradox in that we think our own lives are going well, but we're convinced that almost everyone else is doing poorly. Basically, we are exceptions to the rule when it comes to life getting worse. Writer David Whitman labels this phenomenon the "optimism gap," and with it we tend to think that the grass is browner, not greener, in other people's yards. Psychologist Fathali Moghaddam characterizes this optimism gap as our thinking that the sky is falling, just not on us.

This optimism gap is demonstrated in a variety of studies. Survey researchers sometimes collect data using what they call the "ladder of life." This type of question asks respondents to rate some aspect of life on a 0-to-10 scale, with 0 representing the worst possible and 10 the best possible. Starting in 1959, the Gallup poll, and later the Pew Foundation, has used this tool to have Americans rate their own life situations as well as the United States as a whole. If the optimism gap did not exist, we would expect these two questions to yield similar results, but that is not the case. As shown in Figure 1.3, in 1959, Americans rated both their personal lives and the nation's condition at the same, relatively high level (6.6 and 6.7 out of 10, respectively). From then on, however, the scores started to diverge, and over the past forty-five years, Americans have consistently rated their own lives better than the nation as a whole. This difference exists both when times are bad, as with the low rating in the early 1970s, and when times are good, as in the mid-1990s. Most recently, in 2008, the average rating for one's own life was 6.8 while for the country it was 5.8. I suppose that I manifest this optimism gap myself. If I had to rate my own life, I would give it an 8, but I'd only give the nation as a whole a 7.

The optimism gap was also found in an intriguing historical study. In the 1980s, journalism professor Nicholas Lemann found an archive of photographs taken in the 1940s. He tracked down many of the people in those photographs and interviewed them. Almost to a person they reported that their lives had gotten better since the photographs were taken forty years prior, but the great majority of them thought that American life, as a whole, had gone downhill during that same period.

The optimism gap also shows itself with specific issues. Since the early 1970s, the General Social Survey has asked Americans if their financial situation over recent years is getting better, worse, or staying about the
same. Similarly, various national surveys have asked the same question about the national economy. Figure 1.4 plots the percentage of Americans who think that their own finances are getting better versus those who think the same about the economy. In every year but one, between 30% and 45% of respondents reported improvement in their own financial situation. In contrast, in most years, only 5% to 25% said the same about the national economy.

The crime rate also reveals an optimism gap. A 2007 Gallup poll asked respondents about the severity of crime nationwide compared to their local community. Over half, 57%, viewed crime nationwide as an "extremely" or "very" serious problem, but only 15% said the same about crime in their own community. So not only is the grass browner on the other side of the fence, but a lot of bullets are flying around there too.

Similar optimism gaps have been found with the environment, education, governmental officials, moral standards, poverty, hunger, homelessness, and health care. This led Humphrey Taylor, chairman of the Lou Harris & Associates survey organization, to summarize people's views on life as follows: "It is as though there are two different countries, the one people know personally, which they are happy with, and the one they see on television and read about in the newspapers, which they think is in bad shape."

Once you start paying attention to it, you'll be surprised at how often you witness this optimism gap in everyday life. For example, earlier this year I was asked to record my first book, Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . And Other Lies You've Been Told, as an audio book. I spent several days at a recording studio and got to know the two young guys who owned it. At one point one of them asked me about my next book. When I told him that it examines whether the world is getting better or worse, he laughed and responded, "What could possibly be getting better?" He said this despite the fact that though only in his late twenties, he owns a successful business, drives a Mercedes, is happily married with a child on the way, and seems to be doing pretty well all around. How can he think the world is spiraling downward when his own life is going so well? The optimism gap.

Why does the optimism gap exist? Americans generally have positive views toward their own lives. We value self-esteem, and we display higher levels of it than citizens of other countries, such as China and Japan, who are raised to be more humble and self-effacing. Also, we might give less attention to local problems that affect us personally because they might be too frightening, whereas catching up on bad news someplace else in the world can take on a more recreational form.

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This book closes the optimism gap by providing a more accurate-and in many cases more positive-view of what's going on in the world. It occurs to me, however, that another way to close this gap would be to write a book convincing you that your life is worse than you realize. Chapter 1: "Your family: They don't like you either." Chapter 2: "The nice stuff you own: Somebody is going to take it." But I think I'll stick with my original plan.

The Past and Future

Survey questions routinely ask Americans how they perceive the past and the future, and one thing is clear: both are better than the present-at least when we evaluate our nation. A 2009 study asked Americans how things are going in the United States now compared to five years ago, and only 5% of Americans said things now are better. Eighty-three percent said worse, and 10% said about the same. When asked to give their impressions of recent decades, Americans have an unfavorable opinion about their current decade. Fifty-seven percent of respondents in another 2009 study had a favorable opinion of the 1990s, 56% did of
the 1980s, 40% the 1970s, and 34% the 1960s. When asked about the year 2000, only 27% had a positive impression of it.

Likewise, Americans tend to be relatively optimistic about the future, though perceptions of the future vary from year to year. In a 2008 poll, 39% of Americans said that the United States would be better off in five years, compared to 34% who said it would be worse. Just one year later, in 2009, 61% said it would be better, versus 19% who said it would be worse. A 2010 Gallup poll asked Americans about different aspects of American life and whether these aspects would be better, worse, or about the same in twenty years. Respondents were most optimistic about the future regarding national security, Americans' hard work, race relations, health, and health care. They had mixed feelings about future standards of living and the functioning of democracy, and they reported pessimism about only one issue: the state of moral values.

Our good feelings about the future come with a hitch: The future never arrives. Surveys have asked questions about the present and the future for several decades now, allowing us to compare Americans' expectations for a specific year in the future versus their feelings about it once it arrives—but the future never seems to live up to its advanced billing. For example, a 1997 survey asked Americans to rate their current quality of life on a ladder scale of 1 to 10, and they averaged a rating of 7. The same survey asked what they expected for five years from then, and they rated their projected quality of life as 8.2. However, when the year 2002 actually rolled around five years later, another survey asked the same questions, and it found that Americans rated the quality of their current lives at just 6.9, but, again, respondents were optimistic about five years into the future, rating it at 8.3. As phrased by a Pew report, the "future ain't what it used to be."

Failed Prophecies of Doom

While rank-and-file Americans are modestly optimistic about the future, journalists, academics, and other experts seem to be more negative overall. In fact, forecasting doom is a viable career strategy, complete with strong book sales, frequent media appearances, and the occasional Nobel Prize. In this section I review a couple of the better-known prophecies of doom. It's kind of fun to see experts be so wrong, an intellectual schadenfreude—rejoicing in others' misfortune. Perhaps more important, realizing the errors of previous, widely accepted prophecies of doom should make us a little more skeptical about current ones, many of which could well turn out to be equally preposterous.

Perhaps the best known historical gloom-and-doomer was Thomas Malthus, an influential British scholar and Anglican clergyman born in 1766. Malthus predicted that the human population would continue to grow until it exceeded the availability of natural resources needed to keep humans alive, thus resulting in a "Malthusian" crisis of famine, poverty, and vice. According to Malthus, humanity could look forward to a continual cycle of population growth followed by social collapse. This prediction did not come about for two reasons: the human population hasn't grown as fast as Malthus expected, and agricultural productivity has increased even faster-making today's world the best fed in human history (as we'll discover in chapter 5).

In recent years, however, the King of Doom has been Paul Ehrlich. Ehrlich is a biologist at Stanford University who originally trained in the study of butterflies, but he transitioned to human ecology. Though most popular in the 1970s and 1980s, his work is still influential. Ehrlich has taken an updated Malthusian approach, linking sustainability to three factors: population size, affluence, and technology. He identifies larger, more affluent, and more technically advanced societies as using more natural resources than other societies, and since societies worldwide are moving toward affluence and growth, he views the world as headed toward scarcity. Based on this perspective, Ehrlich made the following predictions in the 1970s and 1980s, which I'll present along with what really happened.
Hunger:

- **Ehrlich**: "The battle to feed humanity is over. In the 1970s the world will undergo famines. Hundreds of millions of people will starve to death."
- **What happened**: The percentage of people starving worldwide has dropped from 38% in 1970 to 18% in 2001.

India:

- "India couldn't possibly feed two hundred million more people by 1980," or "be self-sufficient in food by 1971."
- India has grown to over one billion people, and their average caloric intake is 50% higher than in the 1950s.

Commodities:

- "Before 1985, mankind will enter a genuine age of scarcity in which many things besides energy will be in short supply. . . . Such diverse commodities as food, fresh water, copper, and paper will become increasingly difficult to obtain and thus much more expensive."
- Most commodities are cheaper and more widely available now than ever.

Life expectancy:

- "The U.S. life expectancy will drop to forty-two years by 1980, due to cancer epidemics."
- American life expectancy has steadily risen in past decades, and now it's at about seventy-eight years.

Air pollution:

- "Smog disasters in 1973 might kill 200,000 people in New York and Los Angeles."
- The air in Los Angeles, New York, and most American cities is substantially cleaner now than in the 1970s.

And my personal favorite:

- "I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000."
- I have it on good authority that England is still there.

How wrong was Ehrlich with these predictions? As my seventeen-year-old son, Gus, would say, Ehrlich was "epic-ally" wrong. Yet many people believed Ehrlich back then and many still do. Over the summer, I was asked by a publisher to review a forthcoming textbook for introductory sociology. It had a chapter on the environment, and its primary source was Paul Ehrlich and his Malthusian vision, written as if it were still the early 1970s.

As an aside, one can only hope that Ehrlich himself experienced an optimism gap, feeling better about his own life than the world as a whole. Can you imagine otherwise? "Hey, Paul, want to eat out tonight?" "No, thanks, the restaurants are probably out of food and there might be food riots." "Okay. How about a drive?" "No, we'll probably choke to death on smog while caught in traffic jams." "Hmm, how about a trip to England?"

Paul Ehrlich wasn't the first, nor will he be the last, expert to get these things terribly wrong. In 1980, a
lengthy governmental report entitled "The Global 2000 Report to the President" presented the predictions of leading experts of the day about what will happen in the future, and things weren't looking so good. They summarized their predictions as follows:

If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, more polluted, less stable ecologically, and more vulnerable to disruption than the world we live in now. Serious stresses involving population, resources, and environment are clearly visible ahead. Despite greater material output, the world's people will be poorer in many ways than they are today. . . . Barring revolutionary advances in technology, life for most people on earth will be more precarious in 2000 than it is now.

As we will see throughout this book, few of these expectations have come to pass.

Malthus, Ehrlich, and Global 2000 are far from the only doomsayers. A 1994 *Atlantic Monthly* article predicted "scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease that would destroy the fabric of our planet." A bestselling book of that time warned that "perhaps hundreds of millions of people would soon die in unstoppable pandemics of mutant diseases, such as Ebola." A well-known futurist has predicted that the United States is headed for food riots and Central Park will be engulfed by shantytowns.

**The High Cost of Unwarranted Pessimism**

If this were just an academic exercise, then our perceptions of the world might not really matter, but it's more than that. In various ways, our negatively skewed understanding of the world causes real problems.

The prevailing view that most everything is getting worse makes it difficult to prioritize, since we don't know what is *actually* getting worse. If everything is a problem, then, in a sense, nothing is. David Whitman put it: "False alarms drive out true ones." Our fear of plane accidents might blind us to the reality that driving to the airport is actually more dangerous than flying. Similarly, the steady stream of fear messages about the environment can lead us to incorrectly prioritizing environmental problems. This incorrect prioritization literally can be a life-and-death matter. For example, in the 1990s, AIDS activists sought to raise concern about the disease, so they emphasized heterosexuals' potential risk of contracting it, even though it struck mostly gay men. As a result of this distortion of risk, government agencies shifted their focus to AIDS prevention among straight people—at the cost of giving it to the more needy gays. In California, from 1989 to 1992, only 9% of AIDS prevention funds targeted gay men despite the fact that they constituted 85% of all AIDS cases. This incorrect prioritization probably cost lives.

Viewing the world as getting worse also casts doubt on the efficacy of proposed programs and policies to make things better. If everything is getting worse, then the solutions imposed in the past didn't work, so why should we have faith in today's solutions? In general, fear messages are a good short-term strategy for getting people to act, but they are less effective over the long term because they disillusion and discourage. In fact, consistently pessimistic messages about the world can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Hearing that a problem has steadily gotten worse, despite our past efforts to alleviate it, might be enough to make us want to stop trying. Many advocacy groups use pessimistic, fearful messages to raise awareness for their cause, which ironically can actually reduce their effectiveness, as people stop believing they can change the situation. A spokesperson for Greenpeace acknowledged this when he lamented that the constant pessimism put out by environmental groups actually weakens their credibility as the public hears it year after year.

Viewing the world as getting worse also bears personal costs. A Mayo Clinic report found that a pessimistic view of life can harm many areas of health and well-being. In particular, constant negative thinking can result in a shorter life-span, increased depression and distress, less resistance to the common cold, worse
psychological and physical well-being, increased risk of cardiovascular disease, and diminished coping skills during times of stress. Other studies have linked a negative outlook on life to mild cognitive impairment as well as Alzheimer's disease. This doesn't mean that we're all one Greenpeace report away from falling over dead, but rather that the barrage of negative news about the world cannot be good for us.

To be clear, my concerns are with unwarranted pessimism, not all pessimism. Pessimism, if accurate, can serve us well, and ignoring real problems has its own costs. Accurate perceptions of the world, both in the ways that it's getting better and worse, is the ideal.

The Plan of This Book

The goal of this book is not to comprehensively review every single issue facing Americans (that might take two books), but rather to focus on a limited set of issues that I believe are important to most people. Obviously, I judge what is important from my own particular social location. Hopefully most of the topics I cover will strike readers as significant, but some may not. Not only do I examine health, income, wars, and the environment-widely agreed-upon "big" issues-I also explore various less-agreed-upon issues. For example, some people define premarital sex as a social problem, while others think it's not a big deal. My own take on this issue, as well as others', is informed by my Christian faith, so if you do not share my values, as-gasp-some people don't, you might find some issues less compelling than I do.

There are, of course, many, many issues from which to choose, each with copious amounts of available data. Writing this book was like trying to fill a coffee mug from a fire hydrant—there is almost too much information. In fact, my biggest frustration in writing was figuring out how to prune major topics down to several pages of information. I had to drop a lot of elaboration and nuance about each topic in order to highlight its core findings and still leave room to explore other topics. Consider, for example, the annual Health Report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It contains over five hundred pages of detailed information about health trends in the United States. The index alone is eleven pages! In it you can learn about rates of triplets, dental visits, lower back pain, whooping cough, organ transplants, and hundreds of other health-related issues. Every one of these health issues is of importance, but I couldn't possibly cover all of them. When it comes to health, I examine only several of what I deem to be the most important issues, including longevity, major diseases, hunger, and substance abuse.

Evaluating the problems facing society at any given time is inherently subjective. It's natural for people to arbitrarily judge the current situation of an issue as either good or bad. For example, as of 2007, 24% of Americans smoke cigarettes. Is this number acceptable, too high, or too low? There is often no objective definition of problems; rather, they are open to subjective judgment, and two people can look at the same data and come to very different conclusions. One could say the cup is half full, and the other might say, "Hey, that's not my drink."

This book shies away from evaluating current levels of any given issue, and instead focuses on change over time. Is a particular issue getting worse, better, or staying about the same? Advantageously, this approach is reasonably objective, and all parties on a given issue should be able to agree on how it is changing (assuming suitable data). For example, fewer Americans smoke today than in 1965, when 42% smoked; this is true whether you're a tobacco company executive or an anti-smoking activist.

Nonetheless, even trends over time are also subject to subjective evaluation. Just because something is getting better doesn't necessarily mean that it's getting better fast enough to suit people. We can see substantial progress and still want much more. As former president Bill Clinton once said, "The crime rate is down, the welfare rolls are down, the food stamp rolls are down, the teen pregnancy rate is down . . . And yet,
we all know that all those things that are going down are still too high." Such ethical judgments are part of living in society, but I don't emphasize them. Instead, I focus on describing how things are changing, and others can debate whether these changes are enough.

The main focus of this book is tracking changes over time, but with some issues I also describe differences between groups-especially when people's experiences with an issue vary widely. With the United States, I highlight differences based on gender, race and ethnicity, class, age, and other social fault lines. With the world, I compare countries or regions to underscore international differences.

Going into this book I didn't have strong preconceptions about whether the world is getting better or worse; I treated this book as a chance to learn about it myself. My goal here is accuracy, and I tried to go wherever the data took me. Ultimately, I conclude that many things in the world are indeed getting better, but I did not set out to write a "positive" book. Indeed, this book catalogues issues that are getting better as well as some that are getting worse. Writer Robert Samuelson underscores the importance of this approach when he writes:

We'd be better off with a more balanced view of our present condition. We need a clearer understanding of our strengths and shortcomings, because we are ill served by either excessive optimism or excessive pessimism. The first regularly leads us into romantic schemes that are doomed to fail, while the second may condemn us to hopelessness and continued paralysis.

The meat of this book is statistical description. Surveys, census data, and other sources provide rich and accurate descriptions of the population as a whole. However, sometimes we lose the power of individual actions and local situations when we rely solely on statistical data. To counter this, and to provide a richer understanding of changes in the world, I also include stories that highlight unique, altruistic contributions made by people trying to improve the world. One of the conclusions of this book is that the world is improving so much because so many people are working to make it a better place. To help us appreciate the impact of this altruism, I tell some of their stories.
25 Simple Ways To Be Missional In Your Neighborhood

Posted August 23rd, 2011

[ This is a guest post from Josh Reeves. ]

I have found that it is often helpful to have practical ideas to start engaging the people around me. Most of the things on this list are normal, everyday things that many people are already doing. The hope is that we would do these things with Gospel intentionality. This means we do them:

- In the normal rhythms of life pursuing to meet and engage new people

- Prayerfully watching and listening to the Holy Spirit to discern where God is working.

- Looking to boldly, humbly, and contextually proclaim the Gospel in word and deed.

Below is a list of my top 25. The full list of 100 is available to download here. Not all of these are for everyone, but hopefully there will be several ideas on the list that God uses to help you engage your neighbors. Would love to hear stories of how you have lived some of these out or other ways you have engaged your neighbors.

1. Stay outside in the front yard longer while watering the yard

2. Walk your dog regularly around the same time in your neighborhood
3. Sit on the front porch and letting kids play in the front yard

4. Pass out baked goods (fresh bread, cookies, brownies, etc.)

5. Invite neighbors over for dinner

6. Attend and participate in HOA functions

7. Attend the parties invited to by neighbors

8. Do a food drive or coat drive in winter and get neighbors involved

9. Have a game night (yard games outside, or board games inside)

10. Art swap night – bring out what you’re tired of and trade with neighbors

11. Grow a garden and give out extra produce to neighbors

12. Have an Easter egg hunt on your block and invite neighbors use their front yards

13. Start a weekly open meal night in your home

14. Do a summer BBQ every Friday night and invite others to contribute

15. Create a block/street email and phone contact list for safety

16. Host a sports game watching party

17. Host a coffee and dessert night

18. Organize and host a ladies artistic creation night

19. Organize a tasting tour on your street (everyone sets up food and table on front porch)

20. Host a movie night and discussion afterwards

21. Start a walking/running group in the neighborhood

22. Start hosting a play date weekly for other stay at home parents

23. Organize a carpool for your neighborhood to help save gas

24. Volunteer to coach a local little league sports team

25. Have a front yard ice cream party in the summer
Do you have some other ideas or ways that you or your Missional Community have engaged your neighborhood? Let us know below in the Comments section!

**Missional Tip:** Pick one of these ideas and act on it this week. Let us know in the Comments Section how it went!

*******************************************************************************

*Josh Reeves is the Lead Planting Pastor with Redeemer Church in Round Rock, Texas. One way you can thank Josh for his helpful articles is to support Redeemer by going [here](#).*

*Follow Josh on Twitter: @joshreeves*
Megachurch surpasses its donation goals; fills local food pantry

Posted: Dec 05, 2011 2:50 PM EST
Updated: Dec 05, 2011 2:50 PM EST
By Sonia Moghe - email
Submitted by Mandi Milligan - email

ROSWELL, GA (CBS ATLANTA) - North Point Community Church's pastor had a challenge for church members at the end of October.

"I said, "You know what, we're such a big church, I just think half a million dollars -- we can do that so easily," said Senior Pastor Andy Stanley. "I challenge you to give a million dollars."

He also challenged members to donate 25 tons of food, and 8,000 hours of time volunteering.

Now, just over a month later, the church has raised $2 million, donated 41 tons of food and about 15,000 hours of volunteer time.

North Fulton Community Charities has gotten so much donated food from the church that it doesn't have room to store it all right now.

"Every time we get donations, it's wonderful. But when it comes in such quantity that North Point Community Church has done, it's amazing," said Barbara Duffy, Executive Director. "It's only been a couple of months when we had no food on the shelf and we were begging. And for North Point Community Church to have created 33,000 pounds of food in one weekend is amazing."

Duffy said food pantries across the Metro Atlanta area do need food donations year round.

To learn more about the "Be Rich" campaign, click here.

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Philosopher Sticks Up for God
By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

There are no atheists in foxholes, the old saying goes. Back in the 1950s, when the philosopher Alvin Plantinga was getting his start, there were scarcely more religious believers in academic philosophy departments.

Growing up among Dutch Calvinist immigrants in the Midwest, Mr. Plantinga was used to intense theological debate. But when he arrived at Harvard as an undergraduate, he was startled to find equal intensity marshaled in favor of the argument that God didn’t exist, when classmates and teachers found the question worth arguing about.

Had he not transferred to Calvin College, the Christian Reformed liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Mich., where his father taught psychology, Mr. Plantinga wrote in a 1993 essay, he doubted that he “would have remained a Christian at all; certainly Christianity or theism would not have been the focal point of my adult intellectual life.”

But he did return, and the larger world of philosophy has been quite different as a result. From Calvin, and later from the University of Notre Dame, Mr. Plantinga has led a movement of unapologetically Christian philosophers who, if they haven’t succeeded in persuading their still overwhelmingly unbelieving colleagues, have at least made theism philosophically respectable.

“There are vastly more Christian philosophers and vastly more visible or assertive Christian philosophy now than when I left graduate school,” Mr. Plantinga said in a recent telephone interview from his home in Grand Rapids, adding, with characteristic modesty, “I have no idea how it happened.”

Mr. Plantinga retired from full-time teaching last year, with more than a dozen books and a past presidency of the American Philosophical Association to his name. But he’s hardly resting on those laurels. Having made philosophy safe for theism, he’s now turning to a harder task: making theism safe for science.

For too long, Mr. Plantinga contends in a new book, theists have been on the defensive, merely rebutting the charge that their beliefs are irrational. It’s time for believers in the old-fashioned creator God of the Bible to go on the offensive, he argues, and he has some sports metaphors at the ready. (Not for nothing did he spend two decades at Notre Dame.)
In “Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism,” published last week by Oxford University Press, he unleashes a blitz of densely reasoned argument against “the touchdown twins of current academic atheism,” the zoologist Richard Dawkins and the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, spiced up with some trash talk of his own.

Mr. Dawkins? “Dancing on the lunatic fringe,” Mr. Plantinga declares. Mr. Dennett? A reverse fundamentalist who proceeds by “inane ridicule and burlesque” rather than by careful philosophical argument.

On the telephone Mr. Plantinga was milder in tone but no less direct. “It seems to me that many naturalists, people who are super-atheists, try to co-opt science and say it supports naturalism,” he said. “I think it’s a complete mistake and ought to be pointed out.”

The so-called New Atheists may claim the mantle of reason, not to mention a much wider audience, thanks to best sellers like Mr. Dawkins’s fire-breathing polemic, “The God Delusion.” But while Mr. Plantinga may favor the highly abstruse style of analytic philosophy, to him the truth of the matter is crystal clear.

Theism, with its vision of an orderly universe superintended by a God who created rational-minded creatures in his own image, “is vastly more hospitable to science than naturalism,” with its random process of natural selection, he writes. “Indeed, it is theism, not naturalism, that deserves to be called ‘the scientific worldview.’ ”

Mr. Plantinga readily admits that he has no proof that God exists. But he also thinks that doesn’t matter. Belief in God, he argues, is what philosophers call a basic belief: It is no more in need of proof than the belief that the past exists, or that other people have minds, or that one plus one equals two.

“You really can’t sensibly claim theistic belief is irrational without showing it isn’t true,” Mr. Plantinga said. And that, he argues, is simply beyond what science can do.

Mr. Plantinga says he accepts the scientific theory of evolution, as all Christians should. Mr. Dennett and his fellow atheists, he argues, are the ones who are misreading Darwin. Their belief that evolution rules out the existence of God — including a God who purposely created human beings through a process of guided evolution — is not a scientific claim, he writes, but “a metaphysical or theological addition.”

These are fighting words to scientific atheists, but Mr. Plantinga’s game of turnabout doesn’t stop there. He argues that atheism and even agnosticism themselves are irrational.

“I think there is such a thing as a sensus divinitatis, and in some people it doesn’t work properly,” he said, referring to the innate sense of the divine that Calvin believed all human beings possess.
“So if you think of rationality as normal cognitive function, yes, there is something irrational about that kind of stance.”

Longtime readers of Mr. Plantinga, who was raised as a Presbyterian and who embraced the Calvinism of the Christian Reformed Church as a young man, are used to such invocations of theological concepts. And even philosophers who reject his theism say his arguments for the basic rationality of belief, laid out in books like “Warranted Christian Belief” and “God and Other Minds,” constitute an important contribution that every student of epistemology would be expected to know.

But Mr. Plantinga’s steadfast defense of the biochemist and intelligent-design advocate Michael Behe, the subject of a long chapter in the new book, is apparently another matter.

“I think deep down inside he really isn’t a friend of science,” Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science at Florida State University, said of Mr. Plantinga. “I’m not objecting to him wanting to defend theism. But I think he gets his victory at the level of gelding or significantly altering modern science in unacceptable ways.”

Mr. Dennett was even harsher, calling Mr. Plantinga “Exhibit A of how religious beliefs can damage or hinder or disable a philosopher,” not to mention a poor student of biology. Evolution is a random, unguided process, he said, and Mr. Plantinga’s effort to leave room for divine intervention is simply wishful thinking.

“It’s just become more and more transparent that he’s an apologist more than a serious, straight-ahead philosopher,” Mr. Dennett said.

When Mr. Plantinga and Mr. Dennett (who said he has not read Mr. Plantinga’s new book) faced off over these questions before a standing-room-only crowd at a 2009 meeting of the American Philosophical Association, the event prompted ardent online debate over who had landed better punches, or simply been more condescending. (A transcript of the proceedings was published last year as “Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?”)

Mr. Plantinga, who recalled the event as “polite but not cordial,” allowed that he didn’t think much of Mr. Dennett’s line of reasoning. “He didn’t want to argue,” Mr. Plantinga said. “It was more like he wanted to make assertions and tell stories.”

Mr. Plantinga and Mr. Dennett do agree about one thing: Religion and science can’t just call a truce and retreat back into what the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould called “non-overlapping magisteria,” with science laying claim to the empirical world, while leaving questions of ultimate meaning to religion. Religion, like science, makes claims about the truth, Mr. Plantinga insists, and theists need to stick up for the reasonableness of those claims, especially if they are philosophers.
“To call a philosopher irrational, those are fighting words,” he said. “Being rational is a philosopher's aim. It’s taken pretty seriously.”
WASHINGTON — Seeking to bolster relations with Muslim countries angry about Western characterizations of Islam, the Obama administration has gathered representatives from more than two dozen governments this week in an effort to address religious intolerance around the world.

To critics, the three-day conference in Washington smacks of appeasement toward hardline Islamist governments with often dismal anti-discrimination records of their own. U.S. officials say they’re simply promoting education and understanding, while also rejecting any demands from Arab states and other countries that want restrictions on free speech.

“We know that some people distort various religious doctrines to justify intolerance, foment violence or create strife that serves their narrow political purposes,” said Suzan Johnson Cook, U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom. She said offensive speech ought to be denounced, but that “religion must never be used as an excuse to stifle freedom of expression.”

The dialogue comes after years of complaints from Muslim governments about perceived offenses against their faith. As examples they cite irreverent European cartoons of the prophet Muhammad and a small Florida church group’s burning of the Quran, and have advocated international rules to protect religious symbols and beliefs from mockery.

But the United States and European countries have sought to block what would essentially amount to an international ban on blasphemy that would be incompatible with free speech laws in the West.

American officials believe a compromise struck in March at the U.N. Human Rights Council broke the impasse. The divisive notion of interdicting “religious defamation” was dropped as countries agreed to work together to battle intolerance and the incitement of violence against people for their religious beliefs. And at an interfaith conference in July in Turkey, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton joined others in promoting the effort as a way to safeguard religious freedom without compromising free speech.

The improved atmosphere, the U.S. hopes, will allow officials also to examine bans on blasphemy and
apostasy in the Muslim world. The assassinations earlier this year of two prominent critics of Pakistan’s blasphemy law — Punjab governor Salman Taseer and national minority minister Shahbaz Bhatti — have focused attention on laws in the Islamic world used regularly to persecute Christians or silence minority dissent.

Nine European countries, three from Latin America and nine in the Organization of the Islamic Conference are among those that sent officials to the conference. The United Nations also is participating.

Still, conservative critics of the Obama administration said the administration was kowtowing to Muslim countries.

“Why is it that the U.S. Constitution must come second when representatives from Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan demand we must curb our religious liberties and free speech?” asked Andrea Lafferty, president of the Traditional Values Coalition. “Why is our government bending to Taliban values here on the home front?”

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Rethinking the ink: Laser tattoo removal gains popularity

By Emily Wax, Published: December 11

She arrives quietly, coming in from the rain after work. She lies down on her stomach atop a sleek, white reclining chair. She lifts her shirt and tugs down her jeans slightly. It’s enough to unveil a large pink flower tattoo with fat, webby green leaves, which she’s here to have lasered off her lower back. She wants to become a mother someday, and she doesn’t want her children to see this. The process could take up to 10 sessions, she says. She pauses. Then she starts crying.

“I was only 18. It was a homemade tattoo done at a party,” says Lizeth Pleitez, 30, who quickly dries her eyes. Her voice is shaking. “I wasn’t thinking about what it meant, you know? Little did I know it meant something else — like people calling it a ‘tramp stamp.’ I’m a Pentecostal, and the body is a temple. And I felt really ashamed.”

If tattoos are the marks of an era — declarations of love, of loss, of triumph, of youthful exuberance or youthful foolishness — then tattoo removals are about regret, confessions that those landmarks are in the past. They’re about the realization that whatever you believed in with such force that you wanted it eternally branded on your skin is now foreign to you.

According to the Pew Research Center, more than 40 percent of Americans between the ages of 26 and 40 have at least one tattoo. Getting a tattoo, once the province of sailors rather than suburbanites, is so mainstream that tats are inked at the mall and seen on everyone from Middle American mothers to H Street hipsters to Hollywood starlets.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a parallel trend is emerging: tattoo removal, with dozens of businesses and training schools opening across the country. Some are headed by entrepreneurs such as Ryan Lambert, who has a Harvard degree and launched a tattoo-removal training school at New Looks Laser College in Houston. He also manufactures tattoo-removal lasers.

In Washington, Ken Saler, a 61-year-old, semi-retired real estate maverick has reinvented himself. His Advanced Laser Tattoo Removal office sits above a Baskin-Robbins ice cream store on Connecticut Avenue NW and has a steady stream of customers, all trying to dial back their everlasting tributes.

“We have a client who has ‘Steve’ tattooed on her chest. But now she’s marrying Dennis,” says Saler, whose
bright white office features framed Grateful Dead posters and a print of Norman Rockwell’s “The Tattooist,” in which a heavily tatted-up sailor is having his sixth romantic conquest’s name scratched off his arm, and a seventh inked on, with an evil-looking needle.

**Star-bellied Sneetches**

Tattooing was once considered audacious, powerful and rebellious, precisely because of its permanence.

But for a generation that has come of age during an unprecedented revolution in medical technology, tattoo removal by a super-powered laser seems like a facelift for young people, a chance to start over, erase, rewind. Like deleting a bad photo from a digital camera or defriending a Facebook friend.

“It was such an underserved market,” says Christian Slavin, 54, who has an MBA from Harvard and owns Zapatat in Arlington County, which opened in September. “The difference between the regret rate and the removal rate is huge.”

While older lasers burned off the skin, Slavin’s new model interacts only with the ink and “makes it shake and makes it break,” he says. But it still hurts — it feels like hot rubber bands snapping against your skin, most removers say — and often is more painful than getting a tattoo.

“When it’s all said and done, I’m just not that guy anymore,” says Corey Newman, 29, who is getting married in May and wanted to get three tattoos removed: his left arm’s panther, his right shoulder blade’s bull, and two small Chinese characters on his right leg. He is spending $2,500 to take off tattoos that cost $600 to put on. (Which might explain why tattoo removers tend to be better dressed and better paid than tattoo artists.)

“I am starting a new life now,” he says. “There’s a big difference between being 19 and 29.”

Part of what made tattooing cool was its outlaw vibe: the Harley biker, the heavy-metal drummer, the ex-con. Part of what makes tattooing uncool is its ubiquity. Newman recently went to Rehoboth Beach, Del., for the weekend, and “every Tom, Dick and Harry had a tattoo, and it looked ridiculous. I started the removal sessions right after that.”

It’s a little like Dr. Seuss’s “**The Sneetches.**” In the children’s classic, Sylvester McMonkey McBean sells the Sneetches a star machine for $3. Once there are too many star-bellied Sneetches, he tells them about his “star-off” machine, which costs $10.

**A fresh start**

During a recent week, Saler’s appointment book included distraught mothers dragging their daughters in; ex-gang members with street tats who don’t want to be killed; professional women who are applying for office jobs; and African immigrants who want to get their tribal markings removed. Saler, who has a long face and tiny eyes under curly, graying hair, typically works in an oversize Cosby sweater and jeans.

“I have a lab coat,” he says. “But the sweater makes people feel more comfortable. They already arrive with a lot of anxiety and expectations.”

This being Washington, his office draws aspiring CIA and FBI agents, along with other law enforcement operatives. If they go undercover, they can’t risk being identified by their tattoos.

As it happens, Saler is the product of a fresh start. When the real estate market crashed, he was looking for a
growth industry and heard about tattoo removal. He took a two-week course to become a certified laser specialist at Rocky Mountain Laser College in Colorado, and he invested in a Quanta Q-Plus laser, which has a $90,000 price tag. The laser is on wheels and looks a little like a photocopy machine with a probe attached.

(He’s no stranger to entrepreneurial inspiration: He also claims that, in 1974, he became the first person to operate a hot dog stand in Washington.)

Saler’s bright office is on the second floor of a walk-up that houses several mental health therapists, “a back-up plan not lost on me, if people need therapy before or after,” he says with a chuckle. His Facebook page advertises “Tramp Stamp Tuesdays” and $50 ring-finger tattoo removals after a breakup.

**Emotional pain, physical pain**

On a rainy Tuesday, Dave Adams, 36, a musician and massage therapist, goes to Saler to have three neck tattoos removed. They are religious symbols, and there’s one on each side of his neck: a Star of David, a Hindu yantra and an upside-down cross.

“Tattoos were viewed as forever. But now I like the idea that I can treat the skin like an artist can treat a canvas,” he says, adding that he loves and respects tattoo work and expects to get more. “But I just got these too quickly. I feel like they are jumping off my neck.”

Then the burly, tattoo-faced Wayne Stokes, 34, arrives. He’s on his sixth session of a removal that might take up to 25.

He has tattoos on his face, neck, hands and chest. Both eyes are encircled by a black leopardlike Maori-inspired design, which is based on the tattoo sported by boxer Mike Tyson. The tops of his hands spell out S-U-F-F-E-R-I-N-G when he holds them side by side. The left side of his neck says “Life,” the back of his neck says “Is,” and the right side says “Pain.”

He started getting tattoos when he was 16. He says he grew up in rough neighborhoods in Baltimore, suffered abuse at the hands of his father and was threatened outside his home, too: by drugs, by peers on the streets.

“Subconsciously I was creating an image to keep people at bay and away from me. I wanted to look tough,” he says. “People ask me every day, ‘Why did you do it? Why did you put yourself through that pain of tattooing your entire face?’ I’ve realized I don’t have to keep that trauma on my body.”

He’s gone through a lot of therapy. He works as a cook, but when the tattoos are off, he wants to mentor abused kids.

Now that the painful decision to get rid of the tattoos is over, the physical pain begins. He prays in the bathroom for strength. He gets into the chair and squeezes a ball as the laser hits his skin, turning parts of it red and then frosted white as the ink crystallizes into smaller particles that will be removed by his body’s immune system over the next few weeks. The laser emits a green light, and the room smells a little bit like burned hair.

Saler uses a hose — known as the “Zimmer Cryo cooler” — to blow air onto the skin and deaden the sensation. “Each time, I get [part of] it removed, it’s like I can exhale,” Stokes says. “Sometimes I do dread coming in. But it’s the end result.

“I want to look in the mirror and see myself again.”
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP) -- Congregations across America call pastors to their churches in a variety of ways. As church polity varies, so do the approaches of calling a pastor. A bishop or other authority appoints some pastors. Sometimes an elder board decides who will be considered as the next pastor. Many times, however, the responsibility for recommending a pastor to a congregation falls upon a pastor search committee.

The search committee is typically comprised of lay leaders voted on by the congregation or nominated by some group in the church. Occasionally, the membership may include a current pastoral staff member.

It is this latter approach, the utilization of a pastor search committee, which I would like to address in this article.

I have heard from a number of pastors who have been contacted by pastor search committees. What I have heard from these pastors recently is consistent with that which I have heard for the past few years. The concerns and desires are very consistent from pastor to pastor.

So I am admittedly presenting a one-sided view, that of the pastor who has been contacted by a search committee. I am certain that members of pastor search committees could offer their unique perspectives as well.

THE PLEAS AND REQUESTS

When a pastor is contacted by a search committee, his life is often disrupted. Even if he has no sense of call to change churches, the very fact that a search committee contacted him at least causes him to pause. In some cases the contact is very disruptive to his life and ministry.

For that reason, pastors have shared with me a number of requests (and sometimes pleas) that they would respectfully ask search committees to consider:

-- Understand the potential disruption caused by your contact of a pastor. Most pastors at least pause and pray when they hear from another church. They often include their spouses in the early discussion. They may wonder if the contact is indicative that God may be leading them to another place of ministry. If a search committee contacts a pastor, at least be aware of the disruption that could take place. Perhaps it's not best to send 200 inquiry letters to 200 different pastors to see if anything sticks.

-- Have a clear plan for the process of calling a pastor. Let the contacted pastor know that plan on the front end so he won't be left wondering what the next steps are.
-- Prepare any questions before you contact the pastor. I have heard from many pastors who meet in person with the search committee, as well as those who first communicate via phone or Skype. They are often frustrated at the randomness of questions asked, and how different members of the search committee don't know what the other members will ask.

-- Do your homework thoroughly before showing up in the pastor's present church. Many congregations recognize a search committee immediately when they attend a worship service. These church members soon become worried, frustrated or angry at either the pastor or the inquiring church. The presence of a search committee can be highly disruptive. Many pastors do not even know that a committee is visiting his church. He, too, is caught off guard.

-- Communicate regularly and clearly with the prospective pastor. As long as the process is open, stay in touch with the pastor. Many times the greatest frustration is the lack of communication. One pastor recently told me that he resolved not to talk further with a church because he had not heard from them in such a long time. He assumed that they had moved in another direction. The search committee was shocked when they heard that information from the pastor several months later.

-- If the search committee decides to move in another direction, let the pastor know immediately. A courtesy call, even an email, will always be appreciated even if the committee concludes that the pastor is not a fit for the church. Many pastors have told me that they thought they were still under consideration, only to discover sometimes later that the church had called another pastor.

AN IMPERFECT PROCESS

There is no perfect way to call a pastor to a church. Regardless of church polity, mistakes and miscommunication will take place. But these suggestions by pastors who have been contacted by search committees could prove very helpful.

At the very least, they could help minimize frustration and disruption in the lives of pastors and the churches they serve.

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Thom S. Rainer is president of LifeWay Christian Resources. This column first appeared at ThomRainer.com.

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