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 Chariolett.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.

Location:
Stirling Hall, Terrace Salon G-H

See you there!

Loren

Ministry

Connecting with Seekers During the Christmas Season
by Rajkumar Dixit

You may notice a higher attendance during this season. That’s because, according to church researchers, people are more willing to attend a religious service around Christmas and Easter.

My family and I have been visiting local community church Christmas programs and services. Most of these churches have advertised heavily by radio, newspaper, and large banners in front of the church. As we visit, I’ve been making some observations on connecting with visitors. Here are a few things I have learned:

Who is answering the phone? After receiving an email confirmation to print tickets for the special Christmas program, I encountered a technical glitch. I called the church office requesting help. After several attempts, I left a detailed message. About three days later, 48 hours after the Christmas program, the church secretary returned my call. Make sure visitors can reach the church prior to your special services. You can redirect the church phone number to a volunteer’s phone or include a specific email address on the church answering machine for special requests.
Visitors are looking for a personal connection. If your weekend service looks anything like mine, you are putting out last minute fires, reviewing your homily, or feeling super stressed with ministry leaders who are not prepared. Yet it's important to carve out 20 minutes before the service to walk around the sanctuary welcoming and meeting visitors.

My family and I arrived to another church's Christmas program about thirty minutes prior to the start of the service. The orchestra was still rehearsing, and there were only 20 people sitting in the sanctuary when we arrived. Through the whole evening, not one person approached us to say hello. (Don't rely on your church greeters to take the lead in ministering to visitors. Ask trusted members in your congregation who relate well with the unchurched to connect with visitors.)

I have found from past experience that most visitors come to church on time, or early. They are usually sitting in the pews, feeling insecure, or waiting for a friend who may have invited them. Introduce yourself as the pastor, sit down for a few minutes and talk to them at eye level instead of standing over them.

Plan your "Jesus language." Last week at another community Christmas service the pastor referred to Jesus as Christ, God, Savior, Messiah, Son of God, Jesus. Remember, most unchurched people don't know all of the names of God. It can be very confusing to hear all of these references to a holy deity. When you are preparing your sermon or homily, select one good name for Jesus, and stick with it.

Ask your visitors to return. Most churches do a good job welcoming a visitor. However, it is important to make the "ask." I would urge you to go one step further: personally invite the visitor to come back again. Give them a specific time period to return. By expecting them to return, they will know their presence was valued.

Discuss this article on our Facebook page

Rajkumar Dixit, D.Min is a pastor at New Hope Adventist Church in Maryland and author of Branded Faith: Contextualizing the Gospel in a Post-Christian World. You can follow him at Twitter.com/kumardixit

Response

The Pedilavium Problem: Readers Respond

From the Best Practices Facebook page

Tami Zelms Cinquemani
I love the original intention of the foot washing service, but I wonder if we are missing an opportunity of meaningful relevance by not considering being more creative in implementing this intention. When Christ washed His disciples’ feet it was an act of humility and service. We periodically orchestrate a Sabbath of community service where, rather than attending worship services in the morning, we offer our attenders a variety of service opportunities in the community. They sign up for things like singing at the hospital or nursing home, volunteering at a local fundraising marathon, helping out at a local animal shelter, cleaning and organizing a community center, etc. This is a true experience of humility and service in our day and culture.

John T McLarty
In my church, we hold communion on Friday nights (never on Sabbath morning). There is a meal served at tables, worship in music, the briefest of sermons, footwashing and the Lord's Supper. The footwashing happens in the same room where the meal is served. Everyone - including children - is invited to participate, and most do. Our attendance for communion is about 70 percent of the Sabbath morning attendance, and we usually have non-Adventist visitors.

Rhonda Riles
When I ask why it can’t be done after the elements are shared, I'm told because then no one would stay to participate. Hmm.... so how special and meaningful is it then?

Monte Sahlin
As the median age goes up in Adventist congregations, I think we must simply be prepared for fewer and fewer people to participate. Older people are less able to get down on their knees. They also are more likely to have a variety of health problems that make baring one's feet and ankles something they do not want to do. One of my earliest memories of Communion Sabbath is the pastor making it plain that no one should feel less because they sat in the sanctuary and waited while others participate in the foot washing. We need to hold onto and make use of that tradition. Foot washing was not intended by Christ as a symbol of division and we dishonor Him to the extent that we make it so.

Kermit Netteburg
We have a Family Room, so that parents can help children learn the meaning of the service. It’s not unusual to see a father wash the feet of the mother - and the children. The room is filled. The separate rooms for men and women have far fewer people.

Media
Thought Provoking Communion Video

As you close your year out with a communion service you may wish to use this thought provoking video entitled Another Communion from Adventist Mission. This five minute video may allow your congregation to reframe the footwashing metaphor in a whole new context. A word of warning: the images are quite graphic. You can download the video or if you trust your internet connection play it right from Adventist Missions video on demand channel.

Media

PDVD20 is Now Shipping

Pastor's DVD volume 20 Keeping it Real will soon be delivered to pastors of the North American Division. Here's what Dave Gemmell has to say about it:

"The Keeping it Real PDVD20, is designed especially for ministerial spouses. We were delighted to partner with our NAD Ministerial Spouses Association director Donna Jackson in producing this DVD. Ministerial spouses have a unique influence in the North American Division and we wanted to let them know just how vital they are to leadership so we designed this DVD especially for them. Here you'll find stories and interviews intended to provide connection, affirmation and empowerment for our ministerial spouses.

Take this DVD home and watch it with your spouse and be prepared to get inspired! Listen to Cynthia Mercer tell her remarkable story of how through her persistent prayer, God transformed her husband from an addict to a pastor. Find out what factors are most important for keeping pastoral children active in church through Martin Weber's doctoral research. Journey with Christina Anderson as she shares how God was able to lead her porn addicted pastoral husband to freedom.

If you simply can't wait until the DVD arrives you can watch all of the content on the Ministerial Spouses Association video on demand channel:

The Pastor's DVD is produced by NAD Ministerial and is distributed to every pastor in the NAD through the local conference ministerial department. For more information feel free to contact Dave Gemmell, dave@.acn.info, 301-680-6699.

Apps

Gracelink Digital Felts

Remember when you used to sit in church, or at school, and the teacher pulled out a storyboard and felts to illustrate a story? The Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists offers a free storytelling app: electronic felts based on the kindergarten Bible study guide quartelys. The app titled Gracelink is available for the iPad in the iTunes app store.

The GraceLink app has a default library of "felts" that can be used to tell stories from Scripture. Depending on use and demand, the plan is to release weekly graphic packs that relate to that week's study and corresponding animation.

"Crayons" are provided so children (and the rest of us) can draw their own story, or add "color" to complement the story you tell with the "felts." The app also has an e-mail feature so teachers can e-mail the finished storyboard to kids after the story, or kids can e-mail family or friends after they've created their story masterpieces.

Reading for Pastors

Scholar translates an ancient text about the wise men - and gets some new insights about how they were seen in the early Christian church.

Christmas gets a higher profile this year in Israel, thanks to thousands of Christian immigrants.

All Tim Tebow, all the time:
Student athletes suspended for “tebowing”

What people leaders are saying: Quote: “Football has long been a secular religion in America. But Tim Tebow, the Denver Broncos’ overgrown cherub of a quarterback, has been blurring the line that separates it from actual religion.”

Does God care who wins the game? Quote: “Do you think one day we will be held accountable for every dime we spent on sports, and every minute we spent watching sports? If you are not aware, there are some terrible things going on in the world - oppression, starvation, slavery-the sorts of things we as Christians are supposed to be standing up against. How many times have you heard that nearly half the world’s population lives on less than $2 a day? That’s $730 a year ($732 on Leap Year). Or to put it into perspective, about $500 less than I spent on season tickets this season.”

Popular tebowing: imitation or mockery?

Do you have secular Asian students in your boarding academy? It’s been a nice cash source, but criticism about proselytizing was inevitable.

Why do we want religious symbols in the public square anyway? Leesburg, VA has let this go to a ridiculous extreme.

To the Point

A lovely thing about Christmas is that it’s compulsory, like a thunderstorm, and we all go through it together.

- Garrison Keillor

Bloody Christmas, here again,
Let us raise a loving cup,
Peace on earth, goodwill to men,
And make them do the washing up.

- Wendy Cope

Christmas is a time when kids tell Santa what they want and adults pay for it. Deficits are when adults tell the government what they want - and their kids pay for it.

- Richard Lamm

Christmas makes me happy no matter what time of year it comes around.

- Bryan White

Christmas to a child is the first terrible proof that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive.

- Stephen Fry

I once bought my kids a set of batteries for Christmas with a note on it saying, toys not included.

- Bernard Manning

Mail your packages early so the post office can lose them in time for Christmas.

- Johnny Carson

Next to a circus there ain’t nothing that packs up and tears out faster than the Christmas spirit.

- Kin Hubbard

Our children await Christmas presents like politicians getting in election returns: there’s the Uncle Fred precinct and the Aunt Ruth district still to come in.

- Marcelene Cox

There’s nothing sadder in this world than to awake Christmas morning and not be a child.

- Erma Bombeck

To perceive Christmas through its wrappings becomes more difficult with every year.

- E.B. White

When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?

- Gilbert K. Chesterton

News, Ideas & Reminders

Humor: Abraham Lincoln quote?

Humor: Deer crossing

All-Night Prayer Dial-in Teleconference, January 5: Praying for the NAD Prayer Summit (January 12-15), the Adventist Ministries Convention (January 15-18), and for our children. Join whatever time you wish between 10 p.m. Thursday night,
January 5, until 5 a.m. Friday morning, January 6. At the time you wish to join, just call 712-432-0031, and at the prompt, enter the access code: 435650 plus the # sign. Invite your church and prayer group members to join. Download the flier/bulletin insert.

"God’s Christmas Cards" is a series of seven Christmas programs presented by Dan Jackson. On the Hope Channel (also DIRECTV ch. 368) or live online each evening at 7:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. EST from December 17-23. Also airing multiple times December 24 and 25. Check www.hopetv.org for listings:

- 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
  - REACH North American Resources Guide
  - Adventist Meetings Speaker Registry
  - World Life Expectancy website
  - The ONE project, Seattle
  - Archive of Best Practices newsletters
  - NAD Calendar of Special Days
  - Facebook page for Adventist songwriters, poets and artists
  - Facebook page for pastors’ spouses

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.

**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 advisors 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 Mariott 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.

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

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Ancient text brings the Three Wise Men to life

AN ancient document found in the Vatican archives casts new light on the story of the Nativity and the Three Wise Men who came to offer gifts to the infant Jesus, according to researchers.

The Revelation of the Magi, reputedly a first-hand account of their journey to pay tribute to the son of God, only now has been translated from ancient Syriac.
In Israel, a higher profile for Christmas - KPTV - FOX 12
http://www.kptv.com/story/16367231/in-israel-a-higher-profile-for-chri...
Social worker Tamar Schwartz directs Mesila, an aid organization for foreigners funded partially by the Tel Aviv municipality. The church is a key meeting place for the foreign community, she said.

Each year the organization throws a Christmas-Hanukkah party to help bridge between the migrants' foreign backgrounds and the Jewish culture their children absorb.

"They learn only about Hanukkah in school, and then they get home to parents who don't speak Hebrew and they hear that Christmas is the most important holiday," she said. "A child like this grows with a split identity."

The top Roman Catholic clergyman in the Holy Land even warned of the migrants drifting away from their faith by living in a Hebrew-speaking Jewish society.

"We must redouble our pastoral efforts to provide religious services and to ensure their integration into the local church," Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal said Wednesday in his annual pre-Christmas address.

Gift shop owner Daniel Seah said that when he first arrived in Tel Aviv from Singapore 15 years ago he brought his own Christmas tree because he wondered whether he could find one in Israel. A week before Christmas he produced an annual Christmas show on the fourth floor of the Central Bus Station, with singing, dancing and a gift basket lottery.

"In the mind of the people who come to Israel, it's the birthplace of Christianity and they really thought Christmas would be a big deal everywhere," he said. "They were disappointed. They expect it to be a little more exuberant."

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High schoolers banned for Tebowing

By Christopher Hunt
Special to ESPNNewYork.com

No running in the halls -- and no Tebowing either.

That's what one Long Island administration said Wednesday when it suspended a group of high school athletes for replicating Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow's popular pose in the hallway at school.

Jordan Fulcoly, Wayne Drexel and brothers Tyler and Connor Carroll of Riverhead High School were all handed a one-day suspension Wednesday, after three days of taking a knee with their foreheads resting on their fists, the same way Tebow does in the end zone and on the sidelines. The news was first reported by Yahoo! Prep Rally earlier Thursday.

Riverhead superintendent Nancy Carney said that two of the students' suspensions were later rescinded, citing that administrators found that those students were not given the same warnings that the other two were.

Tebow has made headlines for the move, a display of his devotion to his Christian faith. The students were not suspended for bringing religion into the school, but instead for clogging the hallway.

Carney said that she supported the administration's efforts to maintain a safe environment and was surprised that the incident has received this much attention. Since the news broke, Carney said she has been receiving hate mail from people charging that the suspension is due to religious prejudice.

"It's very unsettling," she told ESPNNewYork.com on Thursday. "It's a shame that people out there are so ready to judge when they weren't there to see what happened."

Reports said that the students had been Tebowing all week, starting Monday. It was meant to be a joke, only paying homage to one of pro football's newest stars. But other students started joining in and administrators claimed it had become a disturbance. District officials reportedly told the students that the celebration was making it unsafe for students walking the hall in between classes.

The incident saw about 40 students engaging in the popular Tebowing. Only the four students, all athletes, were suspended. Caroll told Prep Rally that the administration told them "that our Tebowing was blocking the halls and could potentially cause a riot, because they were growing in number and if the wrong kid gets pushed a brawl could ensue."

Carney said students have three minutes to reach their next class.
"It's just high school kids being kids and administrators doing what they do on a daily basis -- keeping kids safe," Carney said, "and with today's world and cell phones and people taking pictures and video, it can be taken out of context."

Tyler and Connor Carroll are on the football team along with Drexel.

Christopher Hunt is a regular contributor to ESPNNewYork.com.
What Are Pastors and Rabbis Saying About Tim Tebow?

Tim Tebow heads to the locker room before losing to the New England Patriots last Sunday.

Football has long been a secular religion in America. But Tim Tebow, the Denver Broncos’ overgrown cherub of a quarterback, has been blurring the line that separates it from actual religion. To the faithful, the evangelical signal-caller’s improbable run of on-field success testifies not just to his competitive spirit, but to the Holy Spirit. Tebow’s religious zeal—he makes pro-life ads with his mom, sings “Our God is an awesome God” during pregame warmups, and, of course, he Tebows—made him a bona fide cross-over star in the ecclesiastical realm even before his recent string of deus ex machina victories.

Hard-headed Hitchens types have had the latest laugh, as Tebow failed to conjure any fourth-quarter marvels in a 41-23 loss to a superior team—and a superior quarterback. But even if Tom Brady had better numbers on the field, I’m willing to bet that Tim Tebow got more mentions at church on Sunday—and even in temple on Saturday: A little Googling suggests that “Tim Tebow sermons” have become popular with some rabbis as well as plenty of pastors. And reading those sermons themselves, one begins to suspect that the setback against the Patriots will not make Tebow less popular in the pews. Rather, this loss is just the latest bit of adversity he will nobly overcome.

Consider Pastor Randy Smith’s words delivered last year at the Grace Tabernacle Church in Allenwood, N.J.: “We carry our crosses every time we bear reproach for the name of Christ. And if we seek to live as lights in a world of darkness (as we should), you can only imagine a conflict will arise. We do not have to look for trouble. There will always be hostility when godliness invades ungodliness. Just ask Tim Tebow and his mother!”

To Smith, the Tebow backlash illustrates the cross that Christians have to bear simply for being Jesus’ followers. Tebow, of course, seems to bear it quite happily. It’s his apparently serene acceptance of both praise and criticism that delights people like Pastor Jim Phillips, who recently gave a Tebow-themed sermon at a Denver church—while wearing a Tebow jersey.

Phillips’ flock seems to share his unorthodox taste in church attire. “There’s 30 to 40 jerseys every week, from infants to grandparents who are all wearing Tebow,” the pastor told The Daily. “Tebow has given us the opportunity to elevate the conversation about Jesus because he’s so forward about his faith.”

That forwardness is the quality most often referenced in sermons about Tebow. It’s also provided comic fodder: This past weekend, a Saturday Night Live sketch joked that even Jesus thinks Tebow should be a little less conspicuous about his Christianity. But a pastor at a liberal Denver church took his very discomfort with Tebow’s aggressive stance as the basis for a lesson about not being “of the world.” He compared the hometown hero to John the Baptist, noting, “Both attract huge numbers of folks from the countryside to participate in their spectacle. Both of them, it seems, are too often mistaken for being the Messiah. And both...
of them seem to do nothing except point to Jesus.”

“As with John the Baptizer,” the pastor continued, “not everyone is down with Tebow’s public displays of affection for his Savior. But then, I’m not sure people have really ever been down with public displays of faith. I know I’m not. … I mean, I guess in theory we’re all supposed to be all about taking the Good News to the world. But if you’re like me, you probably prefer St. Francis to Tim Tebow. You know, that whole, ‘preach the Gospel at all times, and use words only if necessary’ thing?” Ultimately, though, this pastor found value in the discomfort prompted by the Broncos quarterback: “Maybe Tebow’s on to something after all,” he concludes. “Amen.”

Tebow has not only united liberal and conservative Christians, but, even more surprisingly, some Jews as well: The man behind the Tebowing blog, it turns out, is 24-year-old Jared Kleinstein. “In Denver, people see football as religion; Tebow unites people of all faiths,” he told the Jewish magazine Jweekly.com.

A startling exception to the good will came from a Connecticut rabbi named Joshua Hammerman, who wrote an anti-Tebow screed in the magazine The Jewish Week that has since been taken down from its website. Excerpts have been preserved, however:

Absolutely confident that God is on his side, (Tebow) comes across as a humbler version of the biblical Joseph, who, in this week’s Torah portion, audaciously lays claim to being the Chosen One, and then goes out and proves it. Tebow’s sanctimonious God-talk has led even pious peers like Kurt Warner to suggest that he cool it. Joseph could have used the same coaching.

If Tebow wins the Super Bowl, against all odds, it will buoy his faithful, and emboldened faithful can do insane things, like burning mosques, bashing gays and indiscriminately banishing immigrants. While America has become more inclusive since Jerry Falwell’s first political forays, a Tebow triumph could set those efforts back considerably.

Both the rabbi and the magazine later apologized for the column, calling it “more inciting than insightful.” So far, Hammerman’s rant has been the outlier: Not just Jews but Muslims have evinced admiration for Tebow—at least in Colorado, where Tebow’s team plays. The board chair of the Colorado Muslim Society told Glenn Beck’s website The Blaze, “I know I’m a Muslim and he’s a Christian, but I admire somebody who thanks God for everything that he gave him.”

Further viewing: In case you missed it, the SNL sketch about Tebow that aired last Saturday is below. Enjoy.
Does God Care About Football?

Chad Gibbs

I don’t want to write this. Not today. Not when the Auburn Tigers, my Auburn Tigers, are only hours away from playing the most important football game in the history of space and time. I would have rather have written this in May, when the stresses of being a rabid college football fan are more manageable. No, today I have worrying to do, and I’d rather not have to sit down and question whether stressing over spectator sports is something a Christian should be doing.

It’s been an interesting fall to live in Auburn, and by interesting of course I mean totally awesome. You see, my wife and I are Auburn graduates, and if you haven’t heard, our football team is pretty good. So good, in fact, that tonight they are playing the Oregon Ducks for the BCS National Championship. What’s made the fall more interesting, and now by interesting I mean slightly awkward, is that in August my first book came out, entitled God and Football: Faith and Fanaticism in the SEC. In the book, I traveled to the 12 schools of the Southeastern Conference, searching for a healthier perspective on sports.

I spent the fall speaking to churches, campus ministries, civic groups and quarterback clubs about correctly prioritizing your love of God over your love for football. And coming off last season, and the lessons I learned from writing my book, I figured I actually would have a healthier perspective on sports.

But like I said, our football team is ridiculously good this year, and I may have gotten a little caught up in the excitement.

So here’s the question: Is it OK for Christians to care about sports? Can you even answer a question like that? I searched BibleGateway.com and Scripture appears to remain silent on the
subject of football, although Leviticus has some harsh words about pigskin. But I guess just because the Bible doesn’t mention something doesn’t mean we’re clear to partake in it (e.g. pornography, dog-fighting, Bieber Fever).

This is the problem I ran into repeatedly while writing my book. I don’t believe there is a one-size-fits-all answer to questions like this. It may just be one of those things you have to figure out through prayer and personal conviction, but let me ask it another way.

Do you think one day we will be held accountable for every dime we spent on sports, and every minute we spent watching sports? If you are not aware, there are some terrible things going on in the world—oppression, starvation, slavery—the sorts of things we as Christians are supposed to be standing up against. How many times have you heard that nearly half the world’s population lives on less than $2 a day? That’s $730 a year ($732 on Leap Year). Or to put it into perspective, about $500 less than I spent on season tickets this season.

Will I get a pass on this at Judgment Day? Will Jesus say, “You spent more money on football tickets than 3 billion of my children lived on in one year, but I understand, those games sure were exciting, well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Of course you can get as legalistic with this as you want. I spent just as much on the cable and Internet bill as I did on football tickets. Is it OK for a Christian to have cable when children are starving in Africa? Is it OK to belong to a gym when that money could serve a higher purpose? “But my body is a temple,” you protest. Maybe, but jogging and pushups are free, and your body isn’t that great.

Perhaps it’s a question of comfort. If you have disposable income to spend on sporting events, maybe your life has become too comfortable. I think that might be the thinking behind books like Francis Chan’s Crazy Love and David Platt’s Radical, but I’ve avoided reading them both because that is not a message I particularly want to hear. I mean, when Jesus told that guy to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, that was a one-time suggestion to a single individual, right? Is the ability to spend what amounts to a year’s wages for half the world on our hobbies something we should be thankful for, or something we shouldn’t be doing?

Like I said, I didn’t really want to write this article. Not today. But the questions are out there, and worth thinking about. And I’d certainly appreciate your thoughts on the subject. As for me, I’m going to try and forget about all this stuff so I can enjoy the game in peace. At least until tomorrow.

War Eagle!

Chad Gibbs is a rabid Auburn fan and author of God and Football: Faith and Fanaticism in the SEC (Zondervan, 2010). He and his wife live in Auburn, Alabama with their dogs Harper and Bob Vance. He also writes regularly at ChadGibbs.com.
By Daniel Golden

Dec. 21 (Bloomberg) -- Haiying Wu's family in Shandong Province wasn't religious. After a born-again Texan teaching English in China advised her that Christian schools in the U.S. are safe and academically strong, she enrolled at Ben Lippen High School in Columbia, South Carolina.

Ben Lippen required her to attend church and chapel, take Bible class, and join a Bible study group. At first, she didn't understand "why you need to believe in something you can't view or touch," she said. Gradually, it began to make sense. When the house parents in her dorm showed the 2004 film, "The Passion of the Christ," she wept. Shortly before her 2009 graduation, she was baptized.

Her parents were taken aback. "In China, I don't think there's any chance I would have become a Christian," said Wu, 21, a junior at Tulane University in New Orleans. "It takes a lot to convert someone. Because Ben Lippen is such a strong religious environment, it makes you feel you have to learn about Christianity, and how come everybody around you believes."

As evangelical schools capitalize on the desire of affluent Chinese families for the prestige of an American education, many Chinese students are learning first-hand how the Bible Belt got its name.

While proselytizing is banned in China, Protestant -- and, to a lesser extent, Catholic -- high schools are doing their missionary work on this side of the Pacific Ocean. Through placement agents and religious networking, they're recruiting growing numbers of students from China, most of them atheists, and encouraging them to convert, in the hope that some of them will spread the faith back home.

Little Preparation

Plunged with little preparation into an intense religious environment, Chinese students often struggle to fit in. Some shed their skepticism and become Christians, delighting school officials and dismaying their families in China.

Eighty of Ben Lippen's 108 international students come from China, up from hardly any five years ago, said Emery Nickerson, director of the boarding program. A "large minority" commit to Christianity, he said.

"I'm pleased that so many of these kids come to Christ while they're here," said Ben Lippen School Headmaster Mickey Bowdon. "I'm not sure the Chinese government would be."

China's Ministry of Education and State Administration for Religious Affairs declined to respond to written questions.

"The government is in a real quandary," said Daniel Bays, director of the Asia Studies Program at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, who researches Christianity in China. "They can't forbid people from sending their kids overseas. They may worry about these kids coming back, but they can't do much about it. These kids are just added to the crop of suspects that they already have to deal with."

Proselytizing Students

Teachers, classmates and host parents with whom Chinese students stay are sometimes overly fervent in proselytizing them, said former Ben Lippen Headmaster David Edgren.

"What we have are wonderful, sensitive, caring, committed Christian people who want so much for this particular Chinese student to come to know the Lord Jesus Christ the way they do," said Edgren, who now recruits Chinese students for Ben Lippen and other evangelical schools. "There is sometimes a tendency for the Christian student/host family/teacher to press for and receive what appears to be a commitment."

Non-believing Chinese parents choose Christian schools for their moral values, college placement records, and lower tuition than secular private schools, Edgren said. Because the U.S. is regarded in China as a Christian nation, many parents see Christian schools as part of mainstream American culture, said Susannah Clarke, who taught in China for three years and helps with a Bible study group at Ben Lippen.

Confucius Institutes

Religious schools are the latest entrant in the race by American educational institutions to tap the lucrative China market. About 57,000 Chinese undergraduates, most paying full tuition, attended U.S. colleges in 2010-2011, six times as many as in 2005-06. A Chinese government affiliate has contributed millions of dollars to establish Confucius Institutes for Chinese language and culture on 75 American campuses.
Limited to one year of attendance at U.S. public secondary schools under federal law, Chinese students are flocking to private high schools, where they diversify student bodies and offset declines in domestic enrollment caused by the economic downturn.

The number of Chinese students at U.S. private high schools soared to 6,725 in 2010-11 from 65 in 2005-06, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which doesn’t keep separate statistics for religious schools.

Beijing Recruiting Fair

Religious schools boost Chinese enrollment by sending staff members to China and using agents such as New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc., China’s largest education firm by market capitalization.

Known for preparing Chinese students for the SATs and other exams, New Oriental also connects them with U.S. high schools. Eight Protestant U.S. schools, including Ben Lippen, and two Catholic schools were represented at a New Oriental recruiting fair in Beijing in October.

One New Oriental business partner uses a religious appeal to open doors at Christian schools that aren’t used to taking foreigners. Eduboston placed 119 Chinese students this year at 15 New England schools, including one Protestant and 12 Catholic institutions, said President Kason Park.

When school administrators balk because they don’t have international advisers or English-as-a-second-language programs, Park tells them about a pastor in China who was jailed for handing out Bibles.

“Some people sacrifice so much to spread the gospel,” said Park, a Presbyterian. “Now we have people at our doorstep, offering money. I always tell the schools, ‘God has a bigger plan than we see.’”

‘Religion Permeates’

New Oriental’s pipeline to religious schools worries Annalee Nissenholtz, a St. Louis-based counselor for international students and a consultant to the company.

“Relying on recruiters who do not emphasize their schools’ religious focus, Chinese parents perceive these schools as ‘safe’ and ‘family-oriented’ places where their children will get a typical American experience,” she said in an e-mail. “They have no idea how religion permeates the day to day environment. I would no more place a Chinese student in an evangelical Christian school than in an orthodox Jewish school.”

‘Foreign Concept’

The schools’ religious emphasis, including teachers praying in class, has surprised some Chinese students, said Laura Chevalier, destinations program coordinator for the Association of Christian Schools International in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

“A Christian school is such a foreign concept coming out of China,” Chevalier said. “Even if they’ve been prepped a lot, until they get in that environment, they might not have any context to understand.”

Ben Lippen’s application asks Chinese students what their understanding is of the Christian faith, who is Jesus Christ, and what it means to live in a Christian community. They also must agree to attend religious services, Bible study and Bible class.

“They know, without a shadow of a doubt, they are coming to a Christian environment,” Bowdon said. “They must be OK with that.”

Placement agents sometimes fill out the forms for applicants, Nickerson said.

“Before students get here, there is always the question, ‘Do the parents understand?’ he said. “They aren’t sending kids here to learn about who Jesus Christ is. We do our best to publicize our mission.”

Influx of Non-Christians

Some religious schools have adapted their missions to fit the influx of non-Christians.

Students from South Korea, which has a higher percentage of Christians than China, previously dominated international enrollment at Ben Lippen and other religious schools.

As the Chinese replaced the Koreans, Ben Lippen’s trustees wrestled with the question of whether to require boarding students to be Christians, said Kelly Pengelly, former director of the boarding program. In October 2010, they decided that a majority didn’t have to be Christian, she said.

Whitinsville Christian School in Massachusetts, which requires applicants to submit recommendations from pastors, waived the rule earlier this year for Chinese students, said Roann Karns, international student coordinator.

Administrators at Whitinsville, which has seven Chinese students, “embraced the idea of being able to expose them to Christianity,” she said.

Reconciling the Mission

While its mission statement says its purpose is “to serve as partners with Christian parents,” Southside Christian School in Simpsonville, South Carolina, recruited six Chinese students from non-Christian families last year and is increasing Chinese enrollment to 12 next month, said Stephen Reel, superintendent.

The school reconciles recruiting Chinese students with its mission by housing them with Christian families, he said. Several have “made some level of statement of faith,” he said.
Wheaton Academy, an evangelical school in West Chicago, Illinois, started an introductory Bible class last year for non-Christian international students, said Chief Operating Officer Jon Keith. Of its 37 international students, 22 come from China, he said.

Wheaton also plans to supply hundreds of international students a year, of whom between half and two-thirds would come from China, to 22 Christian schools nationwide, Keith said. Participating schools will pay Wheaton for membership in the network plus a modest per-student placement fee,” Keith said.

St. Mary’s Preparatory, a Catholic boys’ school in Orchard Lake, Michigan, where 50 of 65 international students come from China, plans a “scaled-down” introductory catechism class for non-Catholics next year, said James Glowacki, headmaster.

‘Blank Slates’

Chinese students pay $41,750 a year for tuition and room and board, $15,000 more than boarders from the U.S., reflecting expenses such as advertising, international admissions staff, and English as a second language, he said.

While some trustees were leery of bringing so many non-Catholics to St. Mary’s, they couldn’t pass up the chance to evangelize. One trustee said, according to Glowacki, “We have blank slates coming that we have an opportunity to write upon.”

Communists Expelled Missionaries

Converting the Chinese isn’t easy in their native country, even as Christianity is growing there. Between 80 million and 125 million Chinese -- out of a population of 1.33 billion -- are Christians, including about 12 million Catholics, said David Aikman, a former Time Magazine foreign correspondent and author of the book, “Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China And Changing the Global Balance of Power.”

Most Protestants worship at illegal “house” churches, which are sometimes tolerated by the regime, rather than the government-controlled Three Self Church, Aikman said.

Communists took control of China in 1949 and expelled foreign missionaries. Forbidden from evangelizing, American Christians who teach English or work in social service agencies in China spread the word discreetly.

“We made a pledge to local officials that we would not do overt faith-based teaching in our classrooms, and we honored that,” said Nathan Musgrave, assistant pastor at Heartland Evangelical Free Church in Central City, Nebraska, who taught English from 2004 to 2008 to young adults in China, primarily farm and factory workers. “There was a lot of informal contact outside the classroom. Students would visit our homes, and issues of faith would come up naturally. We would share openly at that time, but not unless the student broached the subject.”

‘Prays With Teammates’

When Randy Liang wanted to study in the U.S., his parents’ friends at a Christian group that provides medical and small business services in Shanxi Province recommended Ben Lippen. He enrolled in January, 2010, as a sophomore, largely unfamiliar with the Scriptures and the English language.

He “really hated” the school at first, he said. “I thought they were trying to force me to be Christian. I couldn’t understand what they’re talking about. I thought, ‘This is boring.’”

Liang adjusted as his English improved and he joined teams in four sports: football, wrestling, cross-country and track. After watching a creationist video in Bible class, he developed doubts about evolution. Now a senior, he prays with teammates before games, he said. He lives in a teammate’s home, and prays with the family for success on exams.

Still, Liang plans to postpone any religious commitment and concentrate on schoolwork until he’s had more experience, he said. While those around him encourage him to become Christian, “I control my own brain,” he said.

Bible Study

In a Ben Lippen classroom on a Sunday evening in early December, the discussion and the Bibles are in Mandarin. With Christmas approaching, a volunteer from the Chinese Christian Church of Columbia is teaching the nativity story to 20 Chinese teenage boys fulfilling their Bible Study requirement.

Some students send text messages, or doze. Asked what Christmas means, one responds, in a joking allusion to a similarly-pronounced Chinese-language character, “Egg.”

“They’re bored,” said the leader, Thomas Su, 35. “They come from an atheist background. They don’t think it’s the truth. They think, ‘Why do I waste my time?’ They were mocking me.”

“A lot of them are anti-Christian. They know we’d like them to become Christian,” said Susannah Clarke, who was instructing a girls’ group across the hall. “It’s been drummed into them: there’s no God, the government is great. They know if they go back as a Christian, their parents will not be happy.”

Cultural Gap

Bridging the linguistic, religious and cultural gap between Chinese and American students is a challenge at Ben Lippen. Named for a Scottish phrase meaning “mountain of trust,” it stands on the hilltop campus of Columbia International University, overlooking the Broad River.

Ben Lippen has 392 students in grades 9-12. Day students, who must have at least one parent active in an evangelical church, make up almost three-fourths of the enrollment. Few of the 80 Chinese students come from Christian families, Nickerson said.

Twenty Chinese students stay with local evangelical families, such as Rick and Jennifer Byers. The school is paying them $3,200 a month this year to host
four Chinese students.

“We don’t do this for the money,” said Jennifer Byers. “We do this because we want to win these kids to Jesus Christ. If that’s what eternity is all about, that’s the most important thing we can do.”

‘No Touch’ Policy

The Chinese pay about $30,000 a year for tuition and room and board, plus $930 to $2,270 for English as a second language. Tuition for day students is about $11,000.

The school has a strict behavioral code. Any student who “professes to be homosexual/bisexual” or “supports or otherwise promotes such practices” may be expelled, the school handbook states. “To avoid temptation, we enforce a ‘no touch’ policy between the sexes at all times,” the handbook states.

For students who voluntarily confess and repent involvement in “sexual immorality, or use of alcohol or illegal drugs, the opportunity for reconciliation is available,” with lesser consequences such as suspension or drug testing, it says.

Chinese students often arrive at Ben Lippen with less English than their entrance exam scores predicted.

“There’s a lot of dishonesty or padding,” Nickerson said. Even if they are qualified to be high school juniors in China, they may spend a year or two as freshmen taking English-as-a-second-language courses until they become fluent enough to handle a regular load, Nickerson said. While taking Bible class in English, they worship at the Chinese church and participate in evening Bible study in Mandarin.

‘English Only’

Boarders must speak English in common areas of their dormitories. “Thank you for speaking English only’ reads a sign in one house, where 11 of 14 residents come from China. Rule-breakers may lose their computers for a few hours, said Houseparent Marty Gilpatrick.

Like other Ben Lippen courses, English-as-a-second-language instruction is steeped in Scriptures. Randy Headley, a former Ben Lippen history teacher, diverged from this approach last year when he taught ESL to newcomers from China.

While he used one Christian text, Johann Sebastian Bach’s church cantatas, he “tried to not push religion too hard,” and emphasized vocabulary such as the names of countries and vegetables, he said.

The Chinese “need a rest somewhere in the institution,” Headley said. “I gave them a rest. They appreciated it. Some Americans didn’t. Perhaps many ESL teachers thought it was their one chance to save people.”

Intellectual Diversity

Chinese students enhance diversity of evangelical schools not only ethnically but also intellectually. When Ben Lippen teacher Tom Pengelly asked his comparative-government class whether God is sovereign over national leaders, a Chinese student responded, “No. If the Lord was sovereign, why would He allow Hitler, Mao, and George W. Bush.”

Conservative Southerners in the class were scandalized by the pairing of Bush with two tyrants, Pengelly said. “One football player said, ‘You can’t say that!’”

Founded in 1940, Ben Lippen in its early decades housed and educated children of American missionaries. As missionaries began taking their children abroad, the school sought foreign students to replace them.

“Originally, we brought children of missionaries here,” Headmaster Bowdon said. “Now we’re preparing future missionaries. They’ll go back to their own country, with the claims of Christ and a transformed heart.”

Recruiting in China

David Edgren, who had taught English at a Chinese university, became headmaster in 1992. Three years later, he went to China and brought back 15 students.

“That was a very incredible thing from our school’s standpoint,” he said. “From that point on, I recruited in Korea and would go back and forth to China.”

One of those students, Henry Guo, drowned in a lake during a party celebrating the end of the 1995-96 school year. In the woods, near the Chinese students’ dormitories, a plaque memorializes him.

Guo converted at school, said Southside Christian’s Reel, then a Ben Lippen administrator.

“We had the assurance in our hearts that he had given his life to Christ and would have eternal salvation as a result,” he said. “That was the silver lining.”

Commission Payments

Ben Lippen’s Chinese population was dwindling by the time Edgren left in 2000 to become headmaster at Nebraska Christian School in Central City, Nebraska, where he also initiated Asian recruiting. By 2006, “there were zero Chinese students” at Ben Lippen, said then-Headmaster Brian Modarelli. Eager to fill beds, Modarelli turned to Edgren.

The 69-year-old Edgren now represents nine schools, six of them Christian. For each Chinese student he places, Ben Lippen pays him 15 percent of the $30,000 first-year tuition and room and board, 10 percent of the next year’s payment, and 5 percent for the third and fourth years, Nickerson said. Depending on the school, his first-year commissions range from zero to 15 percent, and he splits the fees with agencies in China that find the students, Edgren said.
Multi-year payments motivate agents to encourage Chinese students to stay at Ben Lippen, Nickerson said.  

"At some point, the student is going to be angry with us," he said. "If they just run to the agent and leave, the student hasn’t learned, and we lose financially."

High School Tour

New Oriental, based in Beijing, supplies some of the students whom Edgren places, he said. Edgren began working with New Oriental in 2010, and took two company officials to visit 15 U.S. high schools, most of them Christian.

He and several evangelical school administrators, including Southside’s Reel, had lunch with New Oriental executives at a premier Beijing restaurant before a 2010 recruiting fair sponsored by the company, Edgren said.

New Oriental doesn’t have a religious agenda, and funnels students to Protestant and Catholic schools because of market demand and relationships with agents such as Park and Edgren, they said. New Oriental recently started a separate department for U.S. secondary schools, Park said.

"New Oriental does not promote religion of any denomination," President Louis Hsieh said in an e-mail. "It is the families’ decision if they want their kids to attend a Christian or non-Christian high school or college."

Meeting Yao Ming

At the New Oriental fair this past October, high school representatives interviewed students and gave presentations. Northland Christian School in Houston provided students with a package of gifts, including a key chain, notepad and pen.

Kevin Roberts, chairman of Northland’s board, impressed students by telling them that he had met Yao Ming, the retired Chinese star of the National Basketball Association’s Houston Rockets, in the team’s locker room and been given one of Yao’s high-top shoes as a memento.

"Obviously, when you put a slide up there of Yao Ming, that’s a good recruiting tool," said Headmaster Daniel Woods.

Guan Yuntian, a 15-year-old from Beijing, was interviewed by three schools, including Northland.

"Religious school is fine for me," she said. "The school will be better disciplined than other schools," and the tuition lower. "It’s not bad to have a religion as it may help me to be stronger."

Zhang Shaoxuan, the father of another girl at the fair, would gladly send her to a Christian school, he said.

"Both religious school and private schools are fine, the public schools are what you don’t want to be in," he said. "Because there will be all kinds of odd students there."

Saving Face

His experience with Chinese culture has taught Edgren that many Chinese students at Christian schools convert to please administrators or save face, he said.

Of Ben Lippen’s 80 Chinese students, “if there are more than three, four, five believers as I would understand a commitment to Jesus Christ, I’d be surprised,” he said. "From a practical standpoint, we don’t know until the kid goes back to China. Many of them will not tell their parents."

Chang Su was unusually blunt. A Shenzhen native, whose father is a computer engineer and whose mother teaches kindergarten, she "didn’t want anything to do with a Christian school," she said.

She opted for Ben Lippen after missing the application deadline for secular private schools. Meeting Edgren, she informed him that she was not Christian, she said.

She was "so antagonistic," said Edgren. He thanked her for her honesty and told her she would have to go to church.

Late for Church

Entering Ben Lippen as a junior in 2008, Su clashed with dormitory parents over the requirement to turn in her computer and cell phone at night. When she was late for church one Sunday, they and the other girls left without her; she took a taxi. Accusing her of lying and disrespect, school officials sent her to a Christian counselor, she said.

"It was a really hard time," she said. "I didn’t feel loved at all. I cried a lot."

Her teachers stood by her. "I could feel the love from them," she said. "There was no reason for them to love me. They were willing to forgive me."

The more she read the Bible, the more truth she discovered there. After praying for a month, she felt the Holy Spirit one night in March 2009.

"Before, what I believed, what Chinese people believe, is that people are innately good," she said. "I realized that I was sinful. I was lying, not loving. Those are as bad as killing someone. There’s no difference between me and a murderer."

She was baptized in April, 2009. Now a sophomore at Davidson College in North Carolina, Su proselytized vacationers this past summer on Myrtle Beach. She tells her parents and grandparents about Jesus. "They haven’t converted yet, but they’re open to it," she said.

She hopes to become a neurosurgeon and return to China. "God wants me to go back to China," she said. "Someday if Jesus calls me, I will be a missionary..."
Chinese Atheists Lured to Find Jesus at U.S. Christian Schools - Busine...

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stillmad are you ok with your religion behaving like the authoritarian communist chinese government? Your argument seems to rest on saying "well they were brainwashing them first so why can't we?"

Are you still mad at your parents about Santa?

Are you referring to their new-found Christianity or the atheism of their Chinese education system?

Unbelievable that we're talking about kids coming out of Mainland China, where they really aren't allowed to explore different worldviews in their education system, it's the the American Christians who are "brainwashing"... you guys obviously don't know squat about what evangelicals think or how they typically operate.

There is a very specific reason why this is wrong. This program brainwashes the students. At a normal university/school you are introduced to ideas. The students are not told to adopt any position. They are not required to be in a society of people that only accept this one subjective position. This type of behavior is not the proper way someone should adopt a position. This is child abuse.
In Leesburg, holiday displays bring controversy and change

By Caitlin Gibson, Published: December 16

Baby Jesus is keeping strange company.

For the better part of 50 years, a creche and a Christmas tree were the only holiday displays on the Loudoun County Courthouse grounds.

Then came the mannequin Luke Skywalker and signs celebrating the winter solstice. This month, a skeleton Santa Claus was mounted on a cross, intended by its creator to portray society’s obsession with consumerism. A pine stands adorned with tinsel — and atheist testimonials. (“I can be moral without religion,” one declares.)

Members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster are scheduled to put up their contribution this weekend. It’s a banner portraying a Nativity-style scene, but Jesus is nowhere to be found. Instead, the Virgin Mary cradles a stalk-eyed noodle-and-meatball creature, and the manger is surrounded by pirates, a solemn gnome and barnyard animals. The message proclaims: “Touched by an Angelhair.”

With the new displays, a new tradition was born: a charged seasonal debate.

This year, the dispute struck a particularly raw chord. The skeleton Santa was ripped down — twice — by offended locals. Kenneth D. Reid, Loudoun County supervisor-elect for the Leesburg District, sent a news release opposing “outrageous anti-religious displays.” In a letter to a local newspaper, one resident called the displays a “mean-spirited attack by the faithless on the faithful.”

Atheists spoke up, too. They said that if Jesus has a right to be there, so does the skeleton Santa. The place for a Nativity scene, they said, is outside a church, not a county courthouse.

Despite a flurry of tongue-in-cheek news reports about the controversy, most in Loudoun don’t find it a laughing matter. Some say the issue is about freedom of speech or the separation of church and state; others say it is about the importance of preserving a cherished small-town tradition.

‘It is embarrassing’

Stanley Caulkins, who moved to Leesburg in 1937, remembers the first time the Nativity scene was put up at the corner of the courthouse lawn.
Caulkins, who has owned Caulkins Jewelers in downtown Leesburg for more than a half-century, sees the creche as a valued symbol, something that should not be messed with. He went before the County Board of Supervisors two years ago to argue that it should stay. Last week, he said that he still does not understand why the issue engenders such controversy.

“The creche is not religious,” Caulkins said, his voice trembling. “It is a belief symbol. You have to believe in something.” His eyes were glazed with tears.

But he expressed little patience for those who profess a belief in flying pasta monsters or in the artistic value of a skeleton Santa Claus. “It is embarrassing to me, and it should be to everyone,” Caulkins said.

His point of view, shared by others, suggests that in matters of faith and tradition, facts carry less weight than feelings.

For decades, the creche took its place without fanfare. Then, in 2009, a courthouse grounds committee, concerned about a growing number of requests to use the public space, decided that Loudoun should ban all unattended displays on the property.

The public outcry was fierce and emotional. Wearing Santa hats and religious pins, residents poured into the county boardroom and pleaded with county leaders to respect the freedoms of speech and religion. The board ultimately decided to allow as many as 10 holiday displays on a first-come, first-served basis. Applicants got in line.

Baby Jesus generally appears in several displays. But others presented far different ideas about a holiday greeting.

Reid (R), a former Leesburg Town Council member, said he has been dismayed by some choices. “Just the way Christians have rallied against anti-Semitism and support Israel, I, as a Jew, will return the favor and help lead the fight to stop this mockery of Christmas and Christian beliefs,” he wrote in a statement.

Reid moved to Leesburg a decade ago because he wanted his children to grow up in a place with a quaint, small-town feel. He still thinks the town is welcoming and friendly, although he has seen some changes that concern him. Loudoun, which in recent years has been among the fastest-growing counties in the nation, is no longer the quiet farm community it once was.

Matthew Courtney — a “Pastafarian,” or member of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster — said that allowing diversity in the holiday displays is welcoming. He said he was excited to contribute a holiday message that represents his belief but acknowledged that the message might not be well received.

“I understand that it’s out of the blue for some of these residents — that there are atheists in the community, or Pastafarians in the community,” Courtney said. “A lot of them are uncomfortable with that. At some level, I can understand that. But it doesn’t bother me. . . . It does show the diversity of the community, and I think that’s a good thing, not a bad thing.”

Rick Wingrove, Virginia state director of American Atheists and a longtime Loudoun resident, put up the atheist-themed tree and banner on the courthouse lawn to make a point: There should be tolerance for conflicting and secular viewpoints. But if he had his way, religious symbols would be barred from public property altogether.

At home, Wingrove said, his family celebrates a traditional holiday, complete with a decorated tree. “This has
never been about destroying Christmas,” he said. “It’s always been about the separation of church and state.”

Seeking compromise

The question remains: Will the “War on Christmas” end this year?

Loudoun Board of Supervisors Chairman Scott K. York (R-At Large) has indicated that the policy probably will be reconsidered after a new, all-Republican board takes office in January. Reid said he thinks that the supervisors will be able to find a compromise and salvage the town’s tradition.

Reid also said he thought that the local leaders could do more to help “bridge the divide” between the two sides of the debate and to ease the community’s growing pains.

“We still have that small-town feel,” he said, “but we’re no longer a small town.”

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