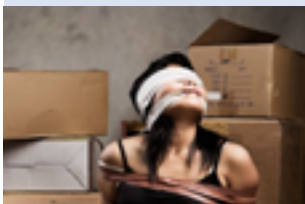


Rainbow Network to Serve its Forty Millionth Meal

The network has been serving impoverished Nicaraguan children since 1995



SPECIAL REPORT: HUMAN TRAFFICKING



There are more slaves in the world today than in the entire 350 years of the European slave trade. Page 7

Commentary & Opinion
RN-R columnists share their thoughts on issues pertinent to Christianity today, Page 2 and 3

Obama's Stand on Religious Freedoms
Obama has a record for maintaining that no one in the world should be persecuted for their religion. Page 4

Sikhs Stand Against Bullying - Seek to Educate



The story of one Sikh who endured a lifetime of persecution and is now trying to bring more understanding of his religion to the US. Page 5

Interfaith Building to be Erected in Berlin
A group comprised of Christians, Jews and Muslims are seeking funds to build an Interfaith facility for prayer and worship. Page 6

Christian Healthcare Alternative
Some Christians are turning to Christian healthcare coops instead of traditional insurance. Page 8

Green Burials
Some people are starting to look at "green burials" as a way to save the ecology and money at the same time. Page 9

Jewish Artist Marc Chagall Paints Potrayals of the Crucifixion of Christ



Jesus was a Jew. Chagall sees the crucifixion of Christ against a background of Jewish struggle and suffering throughout the ages and paints scenes that interpret that persecution

Springfield, Missouri –
(Publisher's Note ... I have known Keith Jaspers since a time before he began Rainbow Network. He is a remarkable man who has done more with his life than can be reported in one newspaper story. His life and his unique approach to missions outside the U.S. are good reasons for placing this story on the front page and above the fold in this Real News-Review. What he is doing deserves international attention. Rainbow Network is truly a Christian humanitarian effort that puts people before doctrine and religious exercises. Read and enjoy this presentation. Then, I urge you to do what Acts Ministry has done. We "adopted" a teenage Nicaraguan girl to assist her in acquiring a high school diploma. Then my wife and I personally chose to become a monthly supporter to assist a young girl in her elementary school expenses. Please, become involved. Connect with Rainbow Network.)

Since its founding in 1995, the faith-based organization has provided nutritious meals to children through a network of 130 to 230 feeding centers located throughout rural Nicaragua. In April of 2014, The Rainbow Network will serve its forty millionth meal during their Second Annual 'GO &

SEE' Trip. While they have educated thousands of children, built hundreds of houses, given thousands of micro-enterprise loans to start small businesses, and provided healthcare to the neediest in rural Nicaragua, The Rainbow Network is about to mark a milestone that is the culmination of almost two decades of work – the serving of their forty millionth meal. The organization will celebrate this landmark occasion in the last week of April 2014, during The Rainbow Network's Second Annual GO & SEE Trip. The trip allows donors and interested individuals to visit rural Nicaragua and witness the charity's good work firsthand.

That is what's so special about The Rainbow Network – their life-saving work has not been funded by celebrities or bulk donations. Instead, the organization's work assisting impoverished Nicaraguan communities has been a collective grassroots effort by thousands of donors across the country. Two of these donors, Bill and Pam Carpenter of Lee's Summit, Missouri, recently



For nearly twenty years The Rainbow Network has been helping the poor and destitute of Nicaragua by building homes, like the one pictures above and providing nutritious meals, as well as educational opportunities for underprivileged children. Photo courtesy of The Rainbow Network.

returned from their first trip to see the work of The Rainbow Network in rural Nicaragua. "We recently visited Nicaragua with The Rainbow Network and saw first-hand the impact of their work in the remote villages they serve! Lives are being impacted, children are going to school with many going on

to high school, communities have access to doctors, community bank micro-loan programs are creating opportunities to earn money, houses are being built and nutrition centers have helped to cut the malnutrition rate in the villages served," they said. The organization's Founder, Keith Jaspers, gives an example of the impact The Rainbow Network has had on one of many children.

"Dory Luz was 4-years-old when her mother brought her to us. She still had not walked, weighed less than 20 lbs, could not talk, complicated with

pneumonia and severe diarrhea. This was all the result of severe malnutrition....3rd stage malnutrition! Her life was saved the day she began taking the antibiotics and fortified nutrition provided to her by The Rainbow Network. Today, Dory Luz is a happy, normal and healthy 11-year-old, attending a Rainbow Network grade school. But it took years in our feeding centers and constant medical attention to finally bring her to this point!" he explains. Continuing, "One in three Nicaraguan children have some degree of chronic mal-

Continued on back page

The pope and the president: What to look for in the Obama-Francis summit



Pope Francis and President Barack Obama will meet on March 27.

By DAVID GIBSON
(RNS) The news that President Obama will meet with Pope Francis on March 27 brightened a snowy Tuesday morning for Catholics who see a broad overlap between the president's agenda and the pontiff's repeated denunciations of income inequality and "trickle down" economics, and his support for the poor and migrants.

Other Catholics, especially conservatives already unsettled by Francis' new approach, hoped that the pope would use the encounter at the Vatican to wag a finger at Obama over the president's support for abortion rights and gay marriage.

So what will the two leaders talk about? What issues will they avoid? With Francis, anything is possible, but here are some initial ideas on how the summit could play out:

Poverty and the wealth gap
Roman Catholics call it social justice. American politicians call it a campaign slogan. Whichever tagline you prefer, poverty has become a favorite new buzzword inside the Beltway, in part thanks to Francis' popularity and his repeated desire to have "a poor church for the poor." Expect Obama to highlight his common ground with Francis in this area. He's already done that twice: telling an interviewer in October that he was "hugely impressed" with the pope's "incredible empathy to the least of these," and quoting Francis last month in a speech on income inequality. In announcing the visit, White House press secretary Jay Carney said Obama "looks forward to discussing with Pope Francis their shared commitment to

fighting poverty and growing inequality."

A truce in the culture war?
Pope Francis will certainly bring up the church's opposition to abortion, a distinct contrast with Obama's strong support for abortion rights. And the pope will likely mention the U.S. bishops' long-running fight with the administration over the contraception insurance mandate. Yet social conservatives are always hoping for a tongue-lashing, and popes always disappoint them by not taking presidents to the Vatican woodshed. When U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met his Vatican counterpart, Cardinal-designate Pietro Parolin, earlier this month, Parolin touched on the birth control issue but did not make it a focus of See PRES/POPE on page 5

Evolutionist vs Creationist debate sparks interest

Ham and Nye to square off on the universe

By KIMBERLY WINSTON
(RNS) Bill Nye may be "The Science Guy," but Ken Ham is the "Answers in Genesis" man, and a debate between the two over the origins of life has non-believers and Christians wringing their hands. Nye, host of a beloved television science series, and Ham, president of a creationist apologetics ministry, will meet at the Creation Museum, where Ham is also the president, on Feb. 4. In what some wags are calling "the Ham-on-Nye debate," they will weigh this question: "Is creation a viable model of origins?" In truth, both sides answered that question long ago — Nye with Charles Darwin's work on the origin of species and Ham with the first book of the Bible. Yet many observers — both religious and nonreligious — say the debate is a very bad idea. "Scientists should not debate creationists. Period," wrote Dan Arel on the Richard Dawkins Foundation's website. "There is

nothing to debate." Arel, a secular advocate, is echoing the position of Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist and outspoken atheist who has long refused to debate creationists. "Winning is not what the creationists realistically aspire to," Dawkins said in 2006. "For them, it is sufficient that the debate happens at all. They need the publicity. We don't. To the gullible public which is their natural constituency, it is enough that their man is seen sharing a platform with a real scientist." In a twist that might surprise Ham and Nye, some Christians find themselves agreeing with Dawkins. "It is this huge stereotype that all Christians reject science and an event like this reinforces that stereotype," said Deborah Haarsma, president of the BioLogos Foundation, an organization whose motto is "science and faith in harmony." "It looks like science versus Christianity and it ignores the people who have accepted

Continued on page 10

COMING SOON

GROWING OUT OF AUTISM

With Jim Sharp

Monday - Saturday

7:30 am - 8:30 am / 11 am - noon

2 pm - 3 pm / 5:30 pm - 6:30 PM

9 PM - 10 pm

Jim is the parent of an autistic child and this program will discuss, not only how to survive as a family, but how to "grow" as a person and family because of the challenges of autism. A range of information from family outings and financial issues to the latest research and alternative therapies that are being used to enrich the lives of those touched by autism. Filled with humor, and true life situations, this is a must-see program for anyone who has an autistic family member or friend.

ACTS TELEVISION NETWORK SHOWS

Acts Ministry, Inc announces the launch of a new Christian TV network. Acts Television Network (ATN) is available now on the Internet. ATN will bring you some unique programming, including: Christian talk, teaching, Branson entertainment, & locally produced shows not found anywhere else. Scan the code to see some clips. www.actsmediagroup.com/tv

BRANSON NOW

Thursdays 7:00 PM

Third generation Bald-knobber, Brandon Mabe, emcee and vocalist will host a program featuring some of your favorite alking about how Branson has become the live show capitol of the world

Our Heroes

Tuesdays 7:00 PM

Veteran's share their stories, we highlight veteran's events and tackle issues of importance to veterans. Host, Sarah Hord works extensively with Military groups.

Commentary

Faith and Culture: 30 million live in slavery today

There is a silent epidemic affecting millions of people around the world -- including those in the United States of America -- SLAVERY!

It is silent because victims can not speak out without fear of beatings or worse. Additionally, few people in the USA know, or care, enough to say something.

It is an epidemic because it impacts, not only the human beings that are bought, sold or otherwise forced to work for others, but those who consume the goods and services produced by those slaves.

January was Human Trafficking Awareness Month. There are a couple of articles in this issue of the Real - Review dealing with this issue. And it is an issue that needs to be dealt with by you and me.

Slavery may have officially ended in the United States in 1865, but according to recent

reports it is very much alive and well, with an estimated 60,000 slaves in the USA today.

From 1525 to 1866 best estimates indicate that 12.5 million slaves were exported, mostly from Africa, with almost 2 million dying in transit. That means that three times as many slaves exist in the world today as did in the entire 350 year period of the European slave trade.

From 2008 to 2012 the National Human Trafficking Resources Center Hotline received 72,543 contacts about probable human trafficking in the US. This resulted in the investigation of a possible 9,298 cases. From 2008 to 2012 the contact volume increased 4 fold. The US Department of Justice estimates that 300,000 children are in danger of sex trafficking in the US alone. The average age for introduction to prostitution is 13-14 years old.



Steve Highlander
Managing Editor RN-R,

However, infants and younger children can be used for child pornography photographs.

According to statistics, 83% of confirmed sex trafficking victims in the US were US citizens, as compared to 95% of forced labor cases being foreign workers.

The DOJ Center for Missing and Exploited children estimate that a pimp can earn \$150,000 to \$200,000 per year from each sex slave and typically have 4 to 6 slaves each.

The National Runaway Hotline reveals that 1/3 of teen runaways will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of

leaving home.

While these statistics are shocking, they probably don't reflect the true extent of the problem.

What can be done about human trafficking? In the past few years the problem is getting more attention. Awareness and education is probably one of the most critical keys to actually doing something about it, hence this article and the other articles in the RN-R.

Many social justice and faith-based groups are starting to take the problem of human trafficking seriously. The federal government is taking steps to prosecute traffickers and NGOs are investing a lot of resources into solutions for integrating victims back into society. These include crisis counseling, transitional housing, educational resources, job training, and other life-skill opportunities to help victims

develop as much normalcy in their lives as possible.

The question remains: "What can you and I do to make a difference?"

You can research the issue and become personally aware. I went to www.slaveryfootprint.org and took their survey. I discovered that my consumer trends probably employed 52 slaves who worked to produce goods I use in my daily life. You can offer to speak to community organizations or churches and/or connect with a national or international organization actively fighting human trafficking. The key is to do SOMETHING!

Dr. Steve Highlander is a pastor and author. He holds a doctorate in Pastoral Theology and is a Certified Christian Counselor. He can be contacted through his website at www.c3ministries.com.

Upstairs Over a Vacant Lot: The tale of the tape

The organization that publishes this newspaper is more like an organism. It is people working together to reach a specific goal. The organism is Acts Ministry, a true non-profit organization incorporated in the State of Missouri in August of 1993. In the span of twenty years, these dedicated folk have been instrumental in extending love to multiple millions of God's children scattered all over the globe.

Acts Ministry, Inc. has empowered men and women to go to the foreign mission fields, hold revivals, pastor local churches, witness the love of Jesus in county jails and prisons, feed and clothe the hungry and the victims of poverty, grant relief to the homeless, and perform numerous other services to reach and rescue those not

effectively served by government.

Most of those empowered by Acts Ministry are without a definite denominational connection or backing. It is worthy of note that there are probably more independent ministers, churches, and ministries in America that those specifically connected to a denomination. I confess I do not have verifiable statistics about this, but it seems to be true when I survey communities, Internet information, and religious radio/television programming. We can be certain, independent ministers exist in abundance and Acts Ministry is providing assistance to enable them to be more effective.

The Acts Media Group is a department of Acts Ministry, Inc. and is the Real

News-Review newspaper, Acts Internet Radio, and Acts Television network. Together, these three operations are reaching into the secular marketplace with the message of Jesus Christ. Hundreds of thousands of lives are touched every month; and not just in America, but around the world. Check www.actsmediagroup.com.

Do you need prayer? You can go online and at www.actsministry.org, click on the prayer room, and the path to prayer is clear. Your request has the potential of being brought to the attention of many thousands of Christians.

Acts Ministry offers educational opportunities, consulting, book publishing (Acts Press), and referral services for workers in the



Dr. Paul C. Collins
Publisher RN-R

church world.

I am not writing this column to be a commercial for Acts Ministry, Inc. The real purpose is to tell the reader "little is much when God is in it"

When I was much, much younger, boxing was one of the highlights of weekly television viewing in our home. My dad purchased a television what seen was "snow" (You older folks reading this know exactly what I mean by "snow".) Through "the

snow" there was a barely discernible picture of the announcers (usually two were ringside) to "call" the fight. One would give us the "blow by blow" and the other would provide the extra commentary. It was expected that one or both would refer to "The Tale of The Tape." This meant they would repeat the measurements of each fighter's reach and his weight.

When Acts Ministry is measured, I want the "tale of the tape" to say we are equipped to go the distance for Jesus.

Dr. Paul Collins is the founder of Acts Ministry and publisher of the Real News - Review. He is Presiding Bishop of Acts Church International and currently serves as senior pastor of Acts Church in Springfield, MO.

Seasons of Reflections: Please, God! Or, please God. . .

Is it your daily desire to please God or is your desire for God to please you? Have you ever thought about what pleases God and your role in his pleasure? Scripture tells God's children to "find out what pleases the Lord." God was pleased to have all his fullness to dwell in Jesus Christ and to reconcile all things to himself through his blood shed on the cross. He was also pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. In accordance with God's pleasure and will, in love he predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ!

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on

earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."¹ "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."² "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."³



LeAnn Kennedy

When we believe, God is pleased for "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."⁵ God is pleased with Jesus. God is pleased with our faith—and our obedience. God said, "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"⁶ "Listen" and "hear" (KJV) both come from the

Greek word "akoúō" meaning "to understand, hear with the ear of the mind; to hear effectually or so as to perform or grant what is spoken, to obey."⁷

Since Jesus is our Master, let us recall what Jesus told people to "do" during his Sermon on the Mount:

"Let your light shine before men; be reconciled to your brother before offering gifts to God; love your enemies as well as your neighbor; pray for those who persecute you; be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect; do your "acts of righteousness" in se-

cret; pray in seclusion; fast in "secret;" store up treasures in heaven; seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness; ask, seek and knock; focus on the log in your own eye, before helping to remove the speck from your brother's eye; do to others what you would have them do to you; and watch out for false prophets in sheep's clothing."⁸

And then in John chapter 13, Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

All men will know you are my disciples if you love one

another."⁹

Footnotes: ¹Ephesians 5:8-10,17; ²Colossians 1:19-20; ³1 Corinthians 1:21-24; ⁴Ephesians 1:5-6; ⁵Hebrews 11:6; ⁶Matthew 17:5; ⁷Spiros Zodhiates, ed., The Complete Word Study New Testament, #191 (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1991), 883; ⁸see Matthew chapters 5-7; ⁹John 13:34-35

LeAnn is a Junior High mathematics teacher and ardent Bible student. This article is excerpted from her book Seasons of Reflections, published by Acts Press.

Christian Writer's Corner

The importance of editing

A manuscript is the completion of a dream and hundreds of hours of effort. It might be an entertaining story, a testimony, or a life record. But, as magnificent as your work might seem, the next step, editing, will make it even better.

It can be difficult to properly self-edit your own work, writers tend to get so used to seeing and reading through their pages that they can often miss the simplest of mistakes. Sometimes putting the work away for a while can help you view it differently, but the time loss can be a problem of its own. Of course with current programs you can check your spelling as well as the other basics, such as capitalization and punctuation. Still, content and continuity can easily be overlooked.

Reading your work out loud can be helpful, however this usually works best for written articles and short stories. Reading a hundred and fifty pages out loud, though, can obviously be taxing and time consuming. This isn't your only option, nor do you have to do all of the heavy lifting on your own.

If you're an avid reader, you



Kim Rowley

might have noticed that on the author's page at the beginning of many books, the writer thanks editors as well as trusted readers. The modern book is edited not only for the basics but also for content, continuity, story development, dialogue, entertainment value and more. The work is done by a team of people who, like you, want the book to be the best product it can be.

The editor's first step is to read through the manuscript with a professional eye... checking the basics and helping to organize your work into a professional looking story. The editor will correct obvious mistakes and create notes on certain sections bringing them to the writer's attention and suggesting changes. He or she will work closely with the author as the two take the draft

through its first revision.

Another important resource during the editing process is your readers, fresh eyes who are ready to give your manuscript a thorough reading and provide you with notes on its strengths and weaknesses. They can be friends or other editors who try to see the book as a whole product and not just a collection of words. Always remember, though, that you, the author, are ultimately responsible for any changes and proofing.

So when you type those last words, find someone to help edit your work. Find a semi-professional or professional to re-check your content and help you set up your team. Together you'll find most of those pesky typos that are hiding inside your text just laughing at you. You'll find those places that do not quite work, help finish the manuscript and direct you to the next phase... design and layout.

Kim Rowley is an editor for Acts Press, and past owner of a printing and publishing company. (If you would like to explore writing a Christian book, us through Acts Press, a division of Acts Ministry, Inc. at 417-886-0223 or email actsministry@sbcglobal.net.)

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Stress-free living: *Harrowing times*

Hardships are harrowing times. The harrow is a soil cultivating tool set with spikes, spring teeth or disks. It is used primarily for pulverizing, mixing and smoothing the dirt before planting. The harrow tears at the clods, the tractor lurches and strains with the effort, the farmer pushes forward despite constant resistance. Hard-baked soil is set against a cultivator's effort to create fruitful new life.

The farmer forces break-up of depleted, hardened soil that stunts growth in order to enrich the old with fertilizer, creating rich rooting ground for new growth. Delicate seeds find a receptive environment for their thrust up toward the sun and downward toward moisture. Unlike those seeds that die in the compacted footpaths, cultivated ground provides more oxygen, prevents mold growth and nurtures healthy sprouts more resistant to root rot. Most viruses, bacteria, parasites and fungi die in the presence of oxygen.



Judith Bonner
RN-R Columnist

The original meaning of harrow was to pillage. In one sense, the harrow is pillage or destruction, and many people in the depths of hardship perceive only the damage, the torn earth of harsh reality, if you will. They seek escape, but whole-brain thinking stops under stress. Problems are not solved. Addictions, even harmless ones like workaholism, bring temporary comfort, but long-term destruction.

Two stress-relief techniques can move us beyond stress management into productive growth. First, deep breathing will cut short our half-hour of AD-HD-like, adrenalin-driven behavior. Work with a

learning partner to master this challenge. Hold each other to a routine schedule of accountability. If you have a history of New Year's Resolution failure, take heart. This will work if you work it.

The cycle of life is never ended, yet we resist hardships like death itself. We create barriers rather than prepare for richer new growth. We get stuck in useless or harmful addictions. Those compacted footpaths--our old shallow habits--bear no fruit. Those hard-baked clods of our comfort prevent new perceptions. We become self-absorbed and unproductive. We cannot give or receive new life.

The choice is ours. Will we deny progress because it is difficult?

Ms. Bonner is a member of the Missouri Synod Lutheran denomination, and lives in California. She is an author and conducts seminars on stress free living and she does workshops on the subject in prisons.

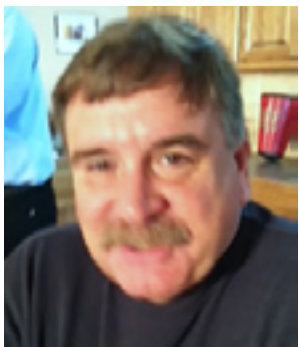
Autism Awareness

The value of Autism mentor partners for parents in need

How can I be a better parent? What "stuff" do I need to know and how do I do it? Does any of this ring through to you as a parent of an autistic child? Those glances, those shunning looks and those feelings of utter aloneness seem to never go away. Let's look at one of these aspects with "fresh eyes." Let's look at the concept of keeping current.

Parents with children affected by autism are usually poorly fed, lack sleep, and hunger for a moment of physical pleasure of any kind. Therefore, they live lives as deprived and persecuted people. So how can they possibly stay current? They barely have enough time to keep their autistic child in school, go to the doctor appoints, and meet the most basics of human needs? Answer is a mentor partner.

No you can't do it all. However, how many times have you heard this phrase "I wish I could help but I just can't handle this autism thing?" I had lovely and caring parents who I believe did a great job in raising my sister and me. They couldn't handle the child management respon-



Dr. Jim Wining
President Acts Ministry
sibilities of our autistic son for any length of time. Therefore, I isolated them from his successes and failures and essentially guarded both sides away from any affection of love. As I look back, I realize how short sighted my actions were and how harmful it was in not doing all I could to keep up the connection.

If your mom or dad, aunt or uncle or friend expresses an interest in helping but a lack of supervisory ability for your autistic child, then open a new door. Ask them to be an "Autism Mentor Partner." Their job is simple and most likely fits their Internet connectional lifestyle. Ask them to daily check the Internet for any new information about autism. Also, have them pick websites to follow that specialize in health or food or

medicines, etc. Ask them to also watch foreign websites which appear ahead of USA medical research.

You don't have to have weekly formal meetings. Your normal means of communication can be greatly enhanced by a loved one helping with information you did not have time to gather. Furthermore, you no longer feel all alone in the battle of Autism. They on the other hand, no longer feel useless and your connectional relationship most likely will help your autistic child! Everyone is a winner!

I fundamentally believe God put us on this earth to learn and thereby help one another. Given this fundamental principle we as parents of autistic children need to find a way to use our challenge in Autism to encourage others to help in any way they can. My God is all about character and not comfort.

Jim and his wife Pam are parent of an autistic child. He is an ordained bishop with Acts Church International. His radio show Autism Outreach can be heard Mondays at 8 am Central on Acts Ministry Radio www.actsmediagroup.com

America's Moral Compass

What will it take to win the war for America's soul?

What will it take to win the war for America's soul? What are we doing about the disgustingly low moral standards that prevail in our nation? The answer is nothing because too many silent! National morality is sliding downward rapidly because of what "they" say and do, and not what we say and do.

We have been commanded to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to every creature. All we have to do to disobey our Lord's commands is to do nothing. The result of that disobedience is the moral darkness that shadows our nation.

I am optimistic that God will do something wonderful in the next few decades in our nation, but this is by no means a certainty. Unless American Christians awaken and descend from the bleachers onto the playing field of America's moral debate, we are not going to turn this country around. We are, without doubt, in a time of great moral and spiritual crises. We are in a war. The question is "What have you done in the midst of this Great War?" Are you adequately informed about



Dee Wampler DJ
RN-R Columnist

pornography, its source, and the lives it destroys? Have you read the side of the abortion issue that tells the story of women who suffer for years after aborting a baby? Have you considered the pain felt by the child being killed in the womb?

As the debate rages about homosexuality, have you taken the time to defend heterosexuality and marriage according to the time-honored Judeo-Christian value system? Are you supporting the church and proven Christian leaders and encouraging others to follow your example? This can become a powerful move on behalf of the American family.

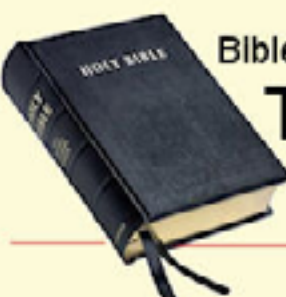
"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how Can its salti-

ness be restored? It is then good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. (Matthew 5:13 NRSV)

Dee Wampler is an Author, Defense Attorney, Former Prosecutor, and a Native of Springfield, MO. He believes America needs a moral compass and advocates an honest look at America's Christian History.

"Any idiot can find God alone in the sunset. It takes a certain maturity to find God in the person sitting next to you who not only voted for the wrong political party but has a baby who is crying while you're trying to listen to the sermon."

– Author Lillian Daniel, in an interview with RNS' Jonathan Merritt, on the importance of community in religious faith.



Bible Study Moment with Ed Croteau

The Evidence of Faith's Substance

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) is one of the most recognized names in the world, and is probably the most famous scientist who ever lived. What many people may not know about him was his pronouncement to the scientific community, after reviewing the scientific evidence from Hubble's Telescope, that the universe had a beginning, and therefore a Beginner, a "First Cause."

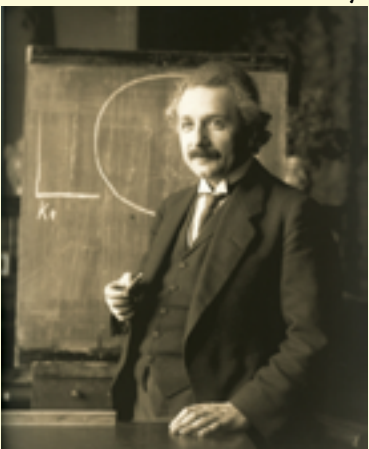
So who did Einstein identify as this "First Cause" who created everything in the beginning from nothing? In 1942, he met with three theologians at his home to discuss his views of who God is. Though he confessed that he was convinced God brought the universe into existence and was intelligent and creative, he denied that God was personal. The clergy had a valid challenge to Einstein's denial: How can a Being who is intelligent and creative not also be personal?

Einstein believed in a god who fit the description in Psalm 19, whose glory is revealed in a general sense, in the scientific evidence in the universe. But he did not believe this same god of creation could personally care for Him. and the clergy never pointed him to that the same god who promised to be personally with him fulfilled that promise by revealing His glory in a specific way. As John 1:14 says, by the Incarnation: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth".

Why does this creator god make Himself known to us personally? Charles Spurgeon provides the best answer which is what Einstein needed to hear and understand, but never did. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us in the world that He might thereby make our peace, reconciling God to man and man to God. The Son of God is become the Son of Man, even flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones; and the sons of men are made the sons of God... My sin is His sin, and His righteousness is my righteousness. He who knew no sin, for my sake was made sin, and I having no good thing, am made the righteousness of God in Him." (2Corinthians 5:21)

At the Cross, God passed judgment on Himself when Jesus willingly took upon Himself the sins we all commit, offering His perfect life as the sacrifice to pay for our immorality, a punishment we deserved. Through this sacrifice God reveals both His justice (crimes deserve punishment) and His deep love for us (Christ takes your punishment for you), offering each of us His free gift of reconciliation back to Him. He promises not only to forgive us through Christ but also to never leave us.

Ed Croteau is a resident of Lee's Summit and hosts a weekly study in Lee's Summit called "Faith: Substance and Evidence". He can be reached with your questions through the LS Tribune, and you can friend him on Facebook.



Albert Einstein circa 1921,
Photograph by F. Schmutzer



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USA Religion

COMMENTARY: Obama’s religious freedom record is strong

Overall, President Obama has remained consistent about his views on freedom of religion around the world.

By JUDD BIRDSALL

(RNS) Barack Obama’s critics allege that the president doesn’t practice what he preaches on international religious freedom policy. Last week they pounced on an apparent gap between presidential rhetoric and reality.

On Thursday (Jan. 16), the same day that Obama issued his annual Religious Freedom Day proclamation, Religion News Service published an article highlighting his administration’s failure to quickly nominate a new ambassador at large for religious freedom.

Suzan Johnson Cook resigned in October, and a successor has yet to be named. It took the administration well over a year to nominate Johnson Cook in the first place, and then a skeptical Senate took an additional year to confirm her. During her brief tenure Johnson Cook never escaped criticism that she was unqualified for the job.

Even so, Obama used his proclamation to affirm, “America proudly stands with people of every nation who seek to think, believe, and practice their faiths as they choose.” He promised that his administration “will remain committed to promoting religious freedom.”

Critics aren’t so sure. The RNS article quotes Georgetown University’s Tom Farr as lamenting, “A continued vacancy will confirm the suspicion that already exists among foreign

governments, persecutors, victims and American diplomats that the issue is not a priority.”

So who’s right? Does the current administration stand for religious freedom globally or does the delay in appointing an ambassador cast doubt on that stand? My answer: Yes.

Both sides are right, at least partially.

Critics like Farr are right to press for an expeditious nomination. The ambassador is the face of American religious freedom diplomacy. Without an ambassador, that diplomacy loses face.

And yet Obama is right to trumpet his administration’s commitment to defending belief rights around the world. He needs a new, qualified ambassador to take that commitment forward, but the ambassador is far from being the government’s only instrument of religious freedom promotion.

The United States has thousands of diplomats serving in nearly 200 nations. Collaborating with faith communities on religious freedom and other issues of mutual concern is increasingly part and parcel of American statecraft.



President Barrack Obama has consistently maintained a policy that no one should be persecuted for their religious beliefs, no matter what religion they are. Photo courtesy the White House.

engagement is a priority for this administration: “I say to my fellow State Department employees, all of them, wherever you are, I want to reinforce a simple message: I want you to go out and engage religious leaders and faith-based communities in

American diplomats have new resources to carry out Kerry’s orders. The Foreign Service Institute, America’s training ground for diplomats, offers intensive courses on religion and foreign policy. The new U.S. Strategy on Religious Leader

commitment to promoting religious freedom. The slowness in appointing a new ambassador doesn’t negate that fact.

The three months since Johnson-Cook’s resignation is a blink of an eye in bureaucratic time. John Hanford, George W. Bush’s ambassador, began his duties 14 months after the start of the Bush presidency. Rarely did anyone question Bush’s commitment to religious freedom.

Obama hasn’t enjoyed the same reputation as a religious freedom fighter. It’s in his interest — and the interest of religious freedom worldwide — to appoint a new ambassador quickly.

The RNS article lists five of the IRF ambassador candidates currently under discussion in the Washington rumor mill. All have their strengths, and two have the added bonus of being seasoned diplomats. Previous State Department experience is a major asset for any would-be ambassador who, to be effective, must navigate the byzantine maze of executive branch bureaucracy.

Obama and critics of his religious freedom policy are both partially right. But what matters most are the rights of people who suffer around the world on account of their faith — and the strategic interest the United States has coming to their defense.

(Judd Birdsall is a former U.S. diplomat and a current doctoral candidate at

Cambridge University. From 2007 to 2011 he served at the U.S. State Department in the Office of International Religious Freedom and on Secretary Hillary Clinton’s policy planning staff. He was also founding chairman of the Forum on Religion & Global Affairs. Birdsall is an editorial fellow with The Review of Faith & International Affairs, a peer-reviewed journal.)

Evangelical campaign says everyone, even gays, reflect God’s image

By SARAH PULLIAM BAILEY

NEW YORK (RNS) A group of Christian leaders has set up a new campaign to emphasize that all people — gay, liberal, undocumented or otherwise — reflect the image of God.

Six Christian leaders, including Focus on the Family President Jim Daly, “Touched by an Angel” star Roma Downey and her producer husband Mark Burnett, have created a coalition called “Imago Dei,” Latin for “image of God,” to encourage people to treat each other with respect.

“If we had the image of God in mind for every human being, we could change the world,” said the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, who is leading the cause. “I want Christians to not be known for what we oppose but for what we propose.”

The campaign, also joined by Liberty Law School Dean Mat Staver and Life Today’s James Robison, is intended to include all human beings, but it offers specific examples.

“For the image of God exists in all human beings: black and white; rich and poor; straight and gay; conservative and liberal; victim and perpetrator; citizen and undocumented; believer and unbeliever,” the campaign states.

Rodriguez said it’s not intended to target a specific group or issue, even as the campaign has raised eyebrows for attracting the support of conservative leaders who have vocally opposed gay rights in recent years.

“We intentionally listed groups to capture the idea that there’s no exception to the rule. Our emphasis is not LGBT or political ideology or color of skin,” he said. “It’s not germane as to whether or not people can change sexuality or not. It’s not about condoning a lifestyle, political ideology, worldview.”

Rodriguez said he got the idea for the campaign when he was at a restaurant with his family in Sacramento, Calif., and saw girls as young as 12 and 13 who he believed were involved in sex trafficking.

“I looked at my wife and said, ‘That girl has the image of God,’” he said, before launching a sex trafficking ministry in his church and eventually in NHCLC.

The biblical emphasis of Imago Dei stems from Genesis, where God said he would make mankind in his own image. Evangelicals have signed similar kinds of statements in the past, but this campaign is more focused and simple, said Glenn Stanton of Focus on the Family.

“If someone says something out of line, someone

Continued on next page

“America proudly stands with people of every nation who seek to think, believe, and practice their faiths as they choose.”

~ President Barrack Obabma

In an August 2013 speech, Secretary John Kerry made it clear that religious

our day-to-day work”

Thanks to several Obama administration initiatives,

and Faith Community Engagement offers guidance on partnering with religious leaders to advance foreign policy objectives like religious freedom. The 2013 creation of the State Department’s Office of Faith-based Community Initiatives, which reports directly to Kerry, has helped to further elevate and integrate these issues.

And the president’s rhetoric has imbued religious liberty with strategic significance. Freedom to profess, practice and promote one’s faith is not some fluffy human right. It’s a necessity, not a “nice to have.” As Obama makes clear in his 2014 proclamation, religious freedom is a “critical foundation of our Nation’s liberty” and, for the entire world, “a key to a stable, prosperous, and peaceful future.”

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Pope and President

Continued from front *page*
the 90-minute discussions, which were praised by the Vatican as “positive” and “constructive.”

Whatever Francis says to the president, some already suspect that Obama will find a way to spin the talks away from abortion. As blogger Rocco Palmo tweeted when news of the meeting broke just ahead of the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion: “Rather curious that White House announces Francis-Obama meeting hours before March for Life events begin, no?”

Finding “common ground”

Obama is a Protestant who has often cited the late Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin as an inspiration — a “common ground” model for an engaged and active community-based life that forges alliances where possible and uses dialogue to deal with the tensions of contrasting views.

Francis seems to take that approach as well, and he also appears to echo Bernardin’s “consistent ethic of life” ideas, which see issues such as abortion and euthanasia not as stand-alone markers of Catholic identity but as integral parts of the church’s wider, womb-to-tomb approach to life that encompasses the poor and immigrants.

A good example of Francis’ “global” view was his speech this month to diplomats accredited to the Holy See. The pontiff cited a host of urgent issues, including immigration, the environment, poverty and hunger. Francis mentioned abortion (though not gay marriage), but he did so in the context of many other topics.

Peace in the Middle East

Kerry’s talks with Parolin this month focused on peace in the Middle East, and Francis is also likely to spend a lot of time with the president discussing ways to halt the brutal civil war in Syria. Francis has made that a priority, and he will be meeting with Obama two months before Francis makes his own pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The Vatican and Washington were at odds a year ago when Obama was threatening a military strike against the Syrian regime and Francis rallied international protests against armed intervention. The military threats — or the papal prayer vigil — led Damascus to agree to give up its chemical arms, and now the pontiff and the president are on the same page in pushing for a peace

Everyone Reflects God’s Image

Continued from previous page

else can say, ‘Hey remember this, how you signed it?’” Stanton said. “Each one of us are image bearers in the sense that each one of us bear the image of God that others don’t.”

Rodriguez and Daly were included in a movement of religious leaders that created the Manhattan Declaration, a 2009 manifesto that emphasized protecting religious liberty and resisting abortion and gay marriage. The document included a section on the idea that humans bear the image of God.

“We shouldn’t forget that the doctrine of Imago Dei necessarily leads to other commitments, especially as it relates to life, marriage and religious freedom,” said Eric Teetsel, director of the Manhattan Declaration. “Christians have been emphasizing the Imago Dei for a long time. It’s often fallen on deaf ears. If this movement causes people to hear it for the first time, that’s a

settlement.

An invitation — and an RSVP?

Obama is sure to issue an invitation to Francis to visit the U.S., and specifically the White House. While Francis has been less inclined to be a globe-trotter in the mold of his predecessor, John Paul II (or even Benedict XVI), there’s a good chance Francis could visit the U.S. for the September 2015 World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia.

Before he resigned last year, Benedict said he would like to come for that event, and Francis could certainly work in a visit to the nation’s capital nearby and maybe to New York; Cardinal Timothy Dolan and the city’s new mayor, Bill de Blasio, are already lobbying for a Big Apple papal visit.

Controversy non grata

One topic the two men surely won’t discuss will be the State Department’s decision to move the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See to new quarters inside the compound of the American Embassy to Italy.

News of the move late last year infuriated a number of Republicans, but the move was made for security reasons, and it actually upgraded the quality of the Vatican embassy while saving \$1.4 million annually and putting the ambassador’s office a bit closer to the Vatican. Given Francis’ disregard for protocol, and his focus on spending money on the poor instead of on pomp, Obama could pledge to give the savings to charity and he’d have an instant fan.

Pope and change?

The pontiff could even give the president some political advice. “I would have made a good pope,” Richard Nixon is rumored to have mused. The tale is probably apocryphal, but it underscores how much presidents can get bogged down by the kinds of checks and balances pontiffs don’t have to face.

Yet as Obama confronts Republican resistance on Capitol Hill, Francis is also facing strong headwinds from church conservatives and from the infamously sclerotic papal bureaucracy, the Roman Curia. He’s had to use the power of his message — and his considerable popularity — as much as his authority to try to turn around the Vatican. “Obama would be wise to talk politics with Francis,” Notre Dame’s Candida Moss wrote in Politico. “He might be able to pick up a few pointers.”

wonderful thing.”

Rodriguez declined to disclose how much money is involved in the campaign, saying they are creating financial support, eventually aiming to hire Danielle Jones, who currently leads NHCLC’s initiative on sex trafficking. He said Imago Dei plans to create wristbands and launch public service announcements next fall.

How can you tell when a political ideology has become the equivalent of a religion?
~ Andrew Sullivan

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Sikhs stand up to bullying as they try to build understanding

SILVER SPRING, Md. (RNS) Throughout elementary, middle and high school, Prabhdeep Suri has been the only Sikh in his class, and it’s been obvious.

Like all Sikh boys, he wore a patka, a head covering for his uncut hair that’s worn out of respect for his gurus. To his classmates, the patka was a license to stare, taunt, isolate, punch and kick him. It was a target to knock off his head. It was the reason they called him “Osama bin Laden” and “terrorist.”

“He came home crying three days out of five,” his mother, Harpreet Suri remembered. “They were taking his patka off almost every day.”

Bullying is a hot topic in the U.S. today, and affects children and teenagers who for any number of reasons appear or act differently. But unlike others who can hide their religion at school — by wearing a baseball cap instead of a yarmulke, or never mentioning that their family celebrates Ramadan — Sikhs literally wear their religion on their sleeves.

The kara, a steel bracelet, symbolizes strength, and unity with God. Sikhs believe God created the universe and all religions, and made men and women equal. More apparent is the patka, which covers a Sikh boy’s head from the day his hair is long enough to tie into a topknot, and is traded for a turban at his coming-of-age ceremony, around age 12.

Prabhdeep, now 17, credits his parents and his religious community at a gurdwara (or temple) here for giving him the strength to survive the torment with his pride and religious identity intact. His parents sought to instill that pride with the help of religious school teachers at the gurdwara and counselors at a Sikh summer camp.

But they dealt with the verbal and physical assaults at school mostly on their own, holding countless meetings with often-disinterested principals. They enrolled Prabhdeep in a private school in the vain hope of a serious response. Once, at a school assembly, they wrapped their son’s hair in his patka as they explained the sanctity of the ritual.

“I was very resistant,” Pradhdeep said, recalling the public patka tying. But he said he understands the importance of demystifying Sikhism for non-Sikhs. “We stand up for ourselves,” he said, “by telling others about our religion.”

Increasingly, in recent years, Sikhs have banded together to call attention to the plight faced by their school-age children, so that families such as the Suris do not have to fend for themselves.

The Maryland-based Kaur Foundation, for example, has distributed sleek, upbeat anti-bullying videos and lesson plans to the teachers of 1.3 million American elementary and secondary school students since 2008. The video, “Cultural Safari,” explains Sikh culture, including a patka-tying demonstration and a lively musical number, but also makes the case for tolerance of anyone from an unfamiliar background.

“You don’t have to have Sikhs in the school to realize this is a valuable curriculum,” said Nina Lamba, the Kaur Foundation’s director of strategic partnerships and the owner of a technology company in northeastern Maryland.

But children are not the only victims of ignorance among the 500,000 Americans who practice Sikhism, the world’s



Prabhdeep Suri speaks about his experiences with bullying in a classroom at the Sikh gurdwara, Guru Nanak Foundation of America in Silver Spring, Md. on Jan. 19, 2014. RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks

fifth-largest religion. Incidents against Sikhs in recent years include:

- Four days after 9/11, an Arizona man bragged that he would take vengeance by killing Iranians, Middle Eastern people, and Arabs, and then pulled up to a gas station and shot and killed its turban-wearing Sikh owner.

- A gunman looking to kill Muslims killed six and wounded three at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in August 2012, as they prepared for Sunday services.

- A suspect shouting anti-Muslim slurs attacked a Sikh doctor and Columbia University professor in Manhattan in September, breaking his jaw.

Because of their turbans — of all American men who wear turbans, the vast majority are Sikhs — many mistake Sikhs for Muslims, who sometimes wear turbans, though not commonly in the U.S. Sikhs — properly pronounced “siks,” but more commonly “seeks” — are also mistaken for Hindus, because Hinduism dominates India, where Sikhism was founded and most of the world’s 25 million Sikhs live.

In response to the violence, said Amardeep Singh, co-

founder of the largest Sikh civil rights group in the U.S., Sikhs have come together to explain who they are, not by contrasting themselves to Muslims, but by speaking up about their own beliefs and practices.

“One of the core tenets of Sikh tradition is to have respect for all religious traditions,” said Singh, whose Sikh Coalition was founded on the night of 9/11, after a man seeking vengeance attacked a Sikh family in Queens, N.Y.

“How can we throw Muslims under the bus,” he said, “when there are writings of Muslims in our own holy books?”

Singh and other American Sikh leaders have worked, especially since 9/11, to press the case of Sikh religious freedom before courts, federal agencies and Congress.


They successfully lobbied the Transportation Security Administration in 2007 to allow passengers to pass through airport security without removing their turbans. They helped convince the FBI in June to collect data on hate crimes committed against Sikhs. Before a congressional subcommittee this week, they testified against the “presumptive ban on Sikh articles of faith” in the U.S. military.

“It was 9/11 that put the issue out there for the Sikhs that, as Martin Luther King showed us, no one is going to fight your fight for civil rights,” said Mirin Phool, the Kaur Foundation’s founder and president. “You have to do it for yourself.”

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World Religion

Interfaith prayer building may rise from Berlin ruins

Christians, Jews and Moslems to have a building dedicated to prayer -- combining a church, synagogue and mosque

By MELANIE SEVCENKO
BERLIN (RNS) At a church near Berlin's bustling Alexanderplatz, an evangelical pastor, a rabbi and an imam have conducted interfaith services on special occasions for the past two years. Now they plan to build a multifaith prayer building.

Billed as a landmark Jewish-Muslim-Christian prayer space, the building will combine a church, a synagogue and a mosque under one roof, next to one of Berlin's busiest streets. Its organizers hope to make the German capital a meeting ground of world cultures and international relationships.

"Berlin is a multi-faceted city," said Kandir Sanci, the imam of the House of Prayer and Learning, the association behind the project. "You find many people of all kinds of religions. I feel that the city is very engaged to support the various religions and make them feel at home."

In a few months, the House of Prayer and Learning will launch a crowd-sourcing campaign with a goal of raising an estimated 30 million euro, about \$40 million.

Anna Poeschel, spokeswoman for the Evangelical Church Association of St. Peter's-St. Mary's, one of the project's partners, said the campaign is scheduled to start in May.

Architectural plans are already in place. Architect Wilfried Kuehn was awarded the prize in a design competition two years ago.

"The main focus for us

was each of the religions have their own space and are not fused into one," he said.

Kuehn's winning design includes no church towers or minarets. There are three separate religious spaces joined by one central hall, which the architect suggests could function as the democratic heart of a community.

"We didn't want to load any symbolism on the building," said Kuehn. "From the outside it's very pure and simple, almost archaic looking."

Birgit Meyer, professor of religious studies at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, said what is most compelling about the project is the neutral secular space in the middle, which she sees as a basis for the mutual acceptance.

"Obviously, this is a modern, programmatic vision about religion in the 21st century," said Meyer. "Clearly, not all religious groups in the spectrum of Christianity, Judaism and Islam in Berlin would endorse this view, and wish to be part of the project."

The Rev. Gregor Hohberg, minister at the Evangelical Church Association of St. Peter's-St. Mary's, initiated the project along with the Jewish Community of Berlin, the Abraham Geiger College of Potsdam, and the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue.

The location of the new prayer building is planned for Petriplatz on the ruins of the 13th-century St. Peter's Church — property that is owned by the Evangelical



The architectural drawing of the new multi-faith prayer building planned for Berlin, Germany. A group comprised of Christians. Muslim and Jews are seeking funding for the project. Photo compliments of Architect Wilfried Kuehn

Church Association of St. Peter's-St. Mary's.

During World War II, St. Peter's Church was damaged beyond repair and eventually demolished by the East German government. For decades Petriplatz lay as a desolate parking lot, until 2007 when archeological excavations revealed the submerged remains of Coelln, the sister town of Old Berlin and one of five cities united in 1709 by Frederick I of Prussia to serve as a capital city.

Today Petriplatz is little more than a stretch of fenced-in shrubs, but Hohberg said the group has been given a unique opportunity

to breathe new life into the city's medieval origins.

Some have criticized the site of the new prayer space. During the war, St. Peter's Church hosted one of the most radical Nazi pastors in Berlin.

While serving as an army chaplain, Walter Hoff led hundreds of Eastern European Jews to their deaths. Critics say the House of Prayer and Learning is not doing enough to remember the site's significant role in the Holocaust.

"How can there be a dialogue of honesty amongst these three religions when

the one religion who is hosting isn't being honest about its own past?" asked Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College and a scholar of Christian and Jewish relations in Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The site's connection to Hoff needs to be clearly identified in the new prayer space, as well as in its promotional literature and educational programming, Heschel said.

Poeschel, the church spokeswoman, said an exhibition at the House of Prayer and Learning will address

religious coexistence in Berlin — as well as the site's historical connection to the Third Reich.

Kuehn too recognizes the importance of addressing the past, but he's grateful the organizers are addressing the future, too.

"They're actually asking how we can address the non-religious people, the secular world," said Kuehn. "How can we address the people who do not go to church, do not pray, do not go to synagogue — but maybe are interested in the question of faith and community."

Indonesian president reveals he believes in witchcraft in new memoir

By VISHAL ARORA

(RNS) Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono may be the first Indonesian president to acknowledge publicly he believes in witchcraft. In a recently published memoir, he describes a "horror movie" style encounter with black magic at his residence.

"Suddenly, my wife screamed," writes Yudhoyono in the 900-page book, "Selalu Ada Pilihan" (There is Always a Choice). "There was this thick dark cloud hovering beneath the ceiling, trying to enter my bedroom. I then asked everybody to pray to seek Allah's help. I closed the door to my room but left others wide open. The revolving clouds eventually headed out of my house."

Witchcraft is prohibited in Islam. However, the practice is widespread in Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population. A 2012 survey by the Pew Forum showed that 69 percent of Indonesian Muslims believe witchcraft is real.

"Many people in Indonesia, including its top leaders, turn to soothsayers to consult about their careers, fortunes and marriages," said Endy Bayuni, senior editor at The Jakarta Post.

However, a president sharing this information publicly is unprecedented, Bayuni added. Yudhoyono's second — and last — presidential term is ending this year.

Yudhoyono lives in his private residence, not at the 19th-century presidential palace in Jakarta, which is considered haunted, Bayuni said. Only two presidents, Sukarno from 1945-1965 and Abdurrahman Wahid from 1999-2001, made the palace their residence.

In September 2010, Yudhoyono skipped a meeting of the U.S. and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations held on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in New York, partly because of "rumors of rampant witchcraft in the palace," according to a



Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, president of The Republic of Indonesia Photo Government of Indonesia

WikiLeaks cable. Yudhoyono believes in witchcraft, but perhaps only as a menace. His government last year proposed amendments to the 1918 Criminal Code, adding a clause that states using black magic to cause "someone's illness, death, mental or physical suffering" is an offense with a punishment of up to five years in jail or 300 million rupiah (\$25,000) in fines.

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SPECIAL: Human trafficking and slavery

Evangelicals work to end human trafficking

Nightlight International seeks to provide alternatives for people caught in the sex trade

BANGKOK (RNS) A small delicate silver cross hangs around Mint's neck, a charm she reaches for nervously from time to time as she speaks.

Mint is her nickname, an Anglicized version of the long Thai name she was given and would rather not make public. As a former prostitute, the 24-year-old is concerned about bringing shame to her family, though she says everyone in her village in the northeastern province of Issan — a poor agricultural region along the border with Cambodia and Laos — would assume, or simply know, she had to be doing sex work to send money back home.

Everyone in Bangkok knows how it works. Many of the countless massage parlors, go-go bars, and karaoke joints peppered throughout the city are frequently thinly veiled fronts for prostitution. Heavily made-up girls hang around in the periphery of joints catering to Western tourists. Most of the Asian customers, including Thai men, head to brothels and bars

vatively, that it generates 7 percent of the country's gross domestic product. An ILO report from the late 1990s says sex workers sent home \$300 million a year to rural areas, "more than any government development project."

Not all sex work is done willingly, and some would argue that prostitution is by its very nature exploitative, as well as a driving factor for human trafficking — the sale, transport and profit from human beings who are forced to work for others, often referred to as the modern equivalent of slavery.

Thailand is struggling to curb trafficking amid international pressure and dozens of American groups, many of them evangelical, have entered the country in recent years to fight the issue, with the blessing of U.S. foreign policy.

Yet Mint resists the conflation of sex work with trafficking. She now has a steady job with NightLight International, the anti-trafficking organization that got her off the streets.

"I wasn't tricked into this



No, it is not a pretty picture, but it is reality for hundreds of thousands of women around the world who are victims of human trafficking. Would you help this woman or thousands more like her. You can make a difference. Stock photo

International is emblazoned on its website: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2).

And the oppressed, as far

Dieselberg founded NightLight in 2005 after almost a decade of missionary work in Thailand with her husband, a pastor who had been assigned to an evangelical church in Bangkok. What Dieselberg enjoys do-

them.

Mint came by way of a friend of Dieselberg's. A fellow evangelical found her working a corner many nights and referred her to NightLight. Some women arrive there after one-on-one conversations on the streets; other organizations, including the police, fight sex trafficking by storming brothels in search of underage sex workers.

NightLight employs 50 women, paying them around \$250 a month to make crafts and jewelry. The salaries are above Thailand's minimum wage, and the organization provides medical insurance and a savings plan, as well as a small child care center.

Most of the women at NightLight's four-story building, just blocks from Bangkok's infamous Nana Plaza sex district, are younger than 30, and come from Thailand, Burma and Laos.

Mint comes here to work on a part-time basis assembling jewelry. She has found

a community here, a sense of belonging she didn't have before.

"Now I can do good work that will not hurt my body," she says. "I don't have to fight all the time."

This goal of individual human dignity is what drives so many U.S. evangelicals to fight sex trafficking, said Brie Loskota, managing director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California.

"It is a moving idea, for just about anyone, but particularly in the evangelical world," she explains. "The fact that they come together in a way that is non-shaming for the victims, is a remarkable testament for how evangelicals are being smart in this movement."

Combating sex trafficking

More than a decade ago, the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act established a set of legal tools to combat trafficking nationwide and around the world.

To help Thailand, the U.S. government awarded almost \$12 million in funding to nongovernmental organizations in East Asia that run anti-trafficking programs in 2010; about one-sixth of that went to faith-based organizations.

"We work closely with many of them, and they give us tips on who the trafficking victims are and where they might be," said Saowanee Khomepatr, director of Thailand's Bureau of Anti-trafficking in Women and Children, part of the Ministry of Social Development.

But this summer, the latest U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report found the Thai government was not fully complying with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

Continued on the back page

"I wasn't tricked into this — not into prostitution, nor into a Christian life, I entered sex work by choice, but that doesn't mean it was an easy choice."

~ "Mint" a young woman who got out of the Thai sex trade and became a Christian

elsewhere, away from the sex tourism districts.

Sex work is such big business in Thailand that the International Labor Organization estimates, conser-

— not into prostitution, nor into a Christian life," Mint says. "I entered sex work by choice, but that doesn't mean it was an easy choice."

Evangelicals step in
The motto for NightLight

as Nightlight founder Annie Dieselberg is concerned, are women exploited by the sex industry, along with children, or at high risk for such exploitation, she says.

ing most, she says, is rescuing women. She roams the streets at night, searching for those who may need a way out of prostitution — the "survivors," as she calls

Human Trafficking: Moving past shock, disgust and apathy

Just because human trafficking isn't always obvious doesn't mean you are not touched by it or can do nothing about it

By JOSHUA STATEHAM

In recent years a lot of attention has been focused on the issue of human trafficking both in the church and outside of it. This is not because it has only recently become an issue, but rather because it has only recently become trendy to acknowledge that it is an issue. While I am sure God is pleased that His people are once again taking up the battle cry against human slavery as they have in centuries past, many Christians struggle with what to do with the revelation and information presented to them. Many Christians find themselves in shock, disbelief or disgust when they realize just how horrific and widespread human trafficking is, but eventually these emotions become paralyzing and simply lead to apathy. However apathy is far worse than ignorance, so we must overcome these debilitating emotions and move into action. Phil Gazely, a researcher in this field, came up with a handy acronym to help people take action- D.R.E.A.M. It stands for Direct services, Research, Education and awareness, Advocacy and Media.

Direct services would include becoming a case worker, a restoration home employee or volunteer, a prosecuting attorney, a federal ICE agent and other official and legal positions

or careers. While direct services don't have to be a career choice, in America, human trafficking is a federal crime and therefore the federal government is involved in nearly every aspect. Working with victims outside of the law is just that and will most likely end with you yourself being prosecuted. However, if you feel called to minister to these victims outside of the U.S., there are many, many countries that have no legal restrictions. I have worked with teams and ministries in India and Nepal for example that can actually identify victims, start a relationship with them and get them out of that situation (if they so choose) and place them in a restoration home where they are loved, treated and taught life skills. Within the U.S., direct services for the lay person can involve prevention strategies such as reaching out and educat-

ing homeless, at risk youth and immigrant populations. While direct services sound exciting and very rewarding, this is one of the toughest jobs on the planet and carries a high risk of depression, disillusionment and burnout. Proceed with extreme caution and prayer.

Research can be done anywhere, but is particularly available in the U.S. in partnership with state and federal governments. The "Community Needs Assessment" can be a very useful tool for the government to get a better understanding of how your particular neighborhood is affected. The more boots on the ground and the more data collection, the better authorities can respond. If your area has a local anti-trafficking coalition or organization, get in touch with them and see if they are currently involved in this research and how you can help. Plugging in with

established efforts avoids project redundancy and having to re-invent the wheel.

Education and awareness is a very popular category. Most people who hear about human trafficking have a desire to pass the information along to someone else. In Christian circles this often means giving a presentation or hosting forums and documentary viewings. Education involves reaching out

to potential victims and teaching them how to avoid situations that could lead to them being trafficked. Speaking at middle and high schools, youth groups, immigrant communities and homeless shelters in your area can make a big difference. Of course this requires you to first educate yourself and that will require much more than just an internet search engine. Look for schools and seminars in your region or

contact an anti-trafficking group to see if they have courses or information packets that you can benefit from.

Advocacy involves being actively involved in campaigning and lobbying for changes in legislation that aids in the prosecuting of traffickers, increases sentencing, exposes government corruption, improves law enforcement policies and provides better pro-

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Religion and Life

Christian Health Care: Assurance instead of insurance? For some Christians, sharing medical bills is a godly alternative

By BOB SMIETANA (RNS) Every time he goes to the doctor's office, Daniel Eddinger takes a leap of faith.

Eddinger, a 28-year-old father of two from Lexington, N.C., doesn't have health insurance.

But he's not worried about the cost of getting sick.

Instead of insurance, he says, he relies on God — and the help of other believers — to pay his medical bills.

Eddinger is one of a small but growing number of American Christians who have joined so-called health sharing ministries — faith-based alternatives to insurance.

Health share ministry leaders expect their programs to grow despite the rollout of the federal Affordable Care Act, which in some cases is less expensive.

Every month Eddinger deposits about \$400 — known as a share — into an account set up through Medi-Share, a Florida-based nonprofit that has about 70,000 members nationwide.

If Eddinger's family has medical bills — like those for the birth of his youngest son last year — other members deposit their monthly share into Eddinger's account.

Otherwise Eddinger's \$400 goes to another family that has medical bills.

"I like that the money goes to other families, and

not the pockets of the insurance company," he said. "You can be confident that your money has been spent wisely."

The last few years have been good for health-sharing ministries. Medi-Share, for example, had 35,000 members in 2009. Today that number has doubled. Samaritan Ministries International, based in Peoria, Ill., went from 13,470 households in January 2009 to 30,068 households in January 2014.

Tony Meggs, CEO and president of Medi-Share, expects the numbers to continue to grow because of the concept's faith appeal.

Health-sharing ministry members sign a statement of beliefs, along with a code of conduct that bans smoking, extramarital sex and excessive drinking. They also pray for other families in the group, along with sending money. Health-sharing plans don't cover abortion or contraception.

It's an idea, he says, that's based on the Bible, especially the New Testament book of Acts.

"The early church came together and they took care of their own," Meggs said.

Health-sharing ministries offer a community — not just a health plan. James Lansberry, executive vice president of Samaritan Ministries International, keeps mementos

from group members on his desk to make that point.

Last year his infant son spent 11 days in intensive care, due to complications at birth. Along with paying about \$200,000 in medical bills, group members sent greetings and prayer cards to Lansberry and his family.

For some members, joining a health-sharing ministry was cheaper than buying insurance. But the new health insurance exchanges, and tax credits, have made some insurance plans more affordable for families.

According to an online health insurance cost calculator from the Kaiser Family Foundation, a silver level health care plan for a family of four earning the median family income would cost \$8,290 a year, which works out to about \$690 a month.

The Kaiser calculator estimates that same family could get up to \$4,728 a year in tax credits for their health premiums. That would cut the cost of the plan to about \$3,562 a year, or \$296 a month, or about \$104 a month less than the Eddingers pay.

Still, health-sharing ministry leaders believe their programs will continue to grow. Health-sharing ministries are exempt from the ACA — so they aren't involved in legal battles over the contraceptive mandate. That allows members to follow



Many Christian families are exploring an alternative to traditional insurance in the form of faith-based cost-sharing programs. There are several popular programs in place nationally with tens of thousands of members and significant growth. Stock photo

their faith without being in conflict with the government, said Lansberry.

"We are thankful for this island of freedom," he said.

Health-sharing plans aren't for everyone.

Members have to sign a fairly conservative statement of faith and code of conduct. They have to be

active church members.

And they have to be comfortable with risk.

There's no guarantee that their medical bills will get paid. The system is based on trust, rather than a contract.

When his son was hurt playing football, the Rev. Tom Zobrist said, Samaritan members paid more

than \$10,000 in medical bills.

"When you trust God's people, they keep their word," he said.

Zobrist also likes that Samaritan members don't always pay full price for health care.

He doesn't show an insurance card when he

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Green burials reflect a shift to care for the body and soul

Many people are opting for less elaborate (and costly) funerals without embalming and fancy caskets

By LAUREN MARKOE

(RNS) Growing up in small-town Georgia, John B. Johnson had family friends who ran the funeral home down the street, so the particulars of a typical American funeral — the embalming, the heavy casket and remarks about how great the deceased’s hair looked — were all familiar to him.

When the time came, he assumed, his funeral would look much the same.

But Johnson, now 44, envisions a different sort of send-off for himself: a “green burial” that draws both upon his faith and his commitment to the environment. For Johnson and others like him, a green burial is a way to care for the Earth and answer to the part of his soul that recoils at the pomp of the average American funeral, and takes seriously the biblical reminder: “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

“It’s the notion that Jesus was so humble,” said Johnson, an Episcopalian who

led by a gas-guzzling hearse. There are no solid statistics on how many Americans choose green burial. But an indication of its rising popularity comes from a 2007 AARP study, which found that nearly one in five Americans age 50 and older who have planned for a funeral have considered a green one.

The stereotype of these people, said Joe Sehee, who founded the nonprofit Green Burial Council, is of a “Prius-driving member of the eco-chic” — a person who is well-educated, environmentally conscious, liberal and not too keen on organized religion.

But the stereotype, said Sehee — a former Jesuit lay minister — ignores a whole group of people who seek green burial in great part because of their religious or spiritual convictions. Sehee, whose group sets standards for green burials, has worked with Catholic priests, rabbis and others who see it as an alternative to the funeral industry and



Plain pine caskets are gaining more popularity as an eco-friendly alternative to fancy wood or metal coffins. Additionally, ecology conscious people are are opting for not being embalmed or at least using natural embalming fluids rather than the harsh chemicals typically used for traditional embalming.

deemer Cemetery, green burial “is a way for families to talk about resurrection.”

After fielding numerous requests from Catholics

ness said.

As in all Catholic cemeteries, all bodies interred in green graves at Most Holy Redeemer receive traditional Catholic rites.

But there is no embalming — or the embalming is with Earth-friendly chemicals only — and the caskets are made of untreated wood or other natural materials. For grave markers, the deceased’s name is sandblasted into a cobblestone. Deer and wild turkey roam the meadow, which is named for Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American Catholic saint.

The price of green burial is often lower than typical burials, sometimes by hundreds or thousands of dollars, McGuinness said, because there is no embalming and the casket — if there is one — is simple. Green burial also forgoes the concrete burial vaults into

which caskets are placed.

The Green Burial Council has certified nearly 400 providers in 46 states. Some of them have religious orientations. And even some that are not certified consider themselves already green because their faiths have for millennia taken an ecologically friendly approach to death. Muslims and Jewish traditions, for example, eschew embalming and require quick burials. A kosher casket is a plain wood box made without metal hardware. Muslim tradition specifies a simple shroud and does not require a casket.

But Sehee said religious funeral professionals often fall short of embracing their green religious traditions. He knows of Jewish cemeteries that require burial vaults and he has heard an imam lament that a funeral

director serving his Muslim community pushes metal caskets.

“And there are Catholic cemeteries that won’t accept a body in a shroud, even though Jesus was buried in a shroud,” Sehee said.

Gilbert Becker was buried a flannel shirt and overalls, the clothes he used to wear hunting, camping and fishing with his family. After he died last September, his Christian family placed his body in a casket carved from a fallen tree by his son and interred it in the woods at Green Acres Cemetery near Columbia, Mo. It just made sense, said his wife, Suzanne Becker.

“Gilbert and I always felt most close to God when we were out in the mountains or in the woods,” she said.

What “better place to camp out,” she said, “until the good Lord brings us up.”

“The price of green burial is often lower than typical burials, sometimes by hundreds or thousands of dollars, because there is no embalming and the casket — if there is one — is simple. Green burial also forgoes the concrete burial vaults into which caskets are placed.”
Maureen McGuinness, Family Services Manager

lives in Washington, D.C. “I am a follower and I want to follow that example. I want my death as humble as I think Jesus lived.”

Johnson wants to skip the embalming fluid, which often contains methanol, ethanol and formaldehyde — a suspected carcinogen. He wants a plain pine box. And he would just as soon skip the grand procession,

a return to their religious traditions.

Green burial, Sehee said, recognizes that “there’s death, but there’s rebirth associated with it. And we don’t see any connection between death and life in traditional death care.”

Or, in the words of Maureen McGuinness, family service manager of upstate New York’s Most Holy Re-

looking for a green burial, the Diocese of Albany set aside a wildflower-filled meadow at Most Holy Redeemer — one of its 16 cemeteries — and blessed it as a green resting place in September 2012. So far, 35 people have purchased grave sites, and about half of those have been used.

“When grandma dies and you come to this place, it’s all filled with life,” McGuin-

Human Trafficking *continued from page 7*

tection for victims. Many anti-trafficking groups have good relationships with their local and state officials as most politicians recognize that this is a very popular movement and one with few downsides to get behind. As such, rallying troops, getting petitions signed and influencing legislation is much easier as, unlike abortion, this is a moral issue that nearly everyone agrees on.

The last area you can get involved in is media and the arts. Many documentaries have been made and are currently being made covering the issue from a wide variety of angles,

but if this is your area of expertise, there are many creative ways to exert influence in this sphere. Music, commercials, advertising, billboards, skits and dramas, prayer booklets or calendars etc. all can be very effective tools in both bringing the issue to the forefront and keeping pressure on policy makers and law enforcement to act.

Now, most of these actions points are focused on you helping to give others tools, but there is another reality that hits much closer to home. The truth is that you in some ways also contribute to human trafficking. Trafficking is globally

nearly a 50/50 split between sex trafficking and labor trafficking. Much pornography involves trafficked victims and many of the goods Americans purchase have involved labor trafficking somewhere along their production line. So there are steps you can take to help ensure you’re not part of the problem on the demand side of the equation. You can take a quick quiz at slaveryfootprint.org to see approximately how many slaves work for you and you can regularly check free2work.org to see which companies are taking steps to ensure their production lines do not involve slavery.

Making the connection between pornography and sex trafficking can also help people realize that viewing this content is not a harmless or private sin- it is in fact destroying other people’s lives.

So while human trafficking is a tragedy and a product of sin and while sin will not be completely overcome until Christ returns, He has called us to be His hands and feet in this world until He does. So let us cast of paralyzation and move toward actualization- not for the sake of our fellow man, but for Him who is worthy of every man.

Poll: Younger Christians less supportive of the death penalty

By JONATHAN MERRITT

(RNS) One day after the state of Ohio executed a man for murder (Jan. 16), a new poll shows younger Christians are not as supportive of the death penalty as older members of their faith.

When asked if they agreed that “the government should have the option to execute the worst criminals,” 42 percent of

self-identified Christian boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, said “yes.” Only 32 percent of self-identified Christian millennials, born between 1980 and 2000, said the same thing.

The poll conducted by Barna Group this past summer and released to Religion News Service Friday, surveyed 1,000 American adults and has a mar-

gin of error of plus or minus 2.6 percentage points.

It showed an even sharper difference in support for the death penalty among “practicing Christians,” which Barna defined as those who say faith is very important to their lives and have attended church at least once in the last month. Nearly half of practicing Christian boomers support the government’s right to execute

the worst criminals, while only 23 percent of practicing Christian millennials do.

Other polling organizations such as Gallup, show similar generational trends among Americans in general.

Heather Beaudoin, national organizer for Equal Justice USA, a national organization working to

Continued on page 10

Cremation is popular, but is it really green?

By LAUREN MARKOE

(RNS) Cremation is forbidden in traditional Islam and Judaism but accepted by most other religions. It is also the fastest-growing way Americans choose to deal with their bodies after death.

But does it hurt the environment?

The Cremation Association of North America predicts that 44 percent of American deaths will result in cremation by 2015. Many Americans, religious or otherwise, are under the impression that cremation is a prime environmental option — it takes up less land and avoids the danger of groundwater contamination seeping from embalming chemicals in the body.

But the cremation society does not promote it as a green option. Green burial advocates note the tremendous energy expended by crematoriums, the pollutants released into the atmosphere from the mercury and other metals found in tooth fillings and surgical implants, and the fact that cremated bodies are often embalmed beforehand.

As the Green Burial Council concludes: “Cremation uses far fewer resources than almost any other disposition option, but it certainly has an environmental impact.”

But cremation options billed as more environmentally-friendly are emerging: bio-cremation, for example. Also known as resomation or alkaline hydrolysis, bio-cremation dissolves the body in a process that involves pressure, an alkali solution, and heating at much lower temperatures than necessary in crematoria. Metals are separated from body tissues, and can be disposed of properly instead of burned.

It’s legal in only eight states — Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Oregon — and some have questioned how green it really is.

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Religion in Society

Jewish paintings of Jesus focus of exhibit

Marc Chagall is a Jew who has painted several interpretive portrayals of the crucifixion as a paradox to Jewish suffering

NEW YORK (RNS) At a moment when the world is flush with new books and ever-evolving interpretations of Jesus, one of the last century’s artistic masters is providing art lovers with a striking take on the first-century religious figure. The first U.S. exhibition exploring the “darker works” of Marc Chagall (1887-1985) shows a Jewish artist obsessed with Jesus. “Chagall: Love, War, and Exile,” at The Jewish Museum in New York showcases the work of the Russian-French artist during World War II as he tried to make sense of a world gone mad. Of particular interest are paintings depicting the crucified Jesus — depictions that are often read as metaphors not only for war but the particular expressions of Jewish suffering and persecution in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. These somber, often brooding, paintings were unusual for a Jewish artist who, before and after the war, was celebrated for his bold colors and acclaimed for his humanistic warmth, and sometimes criticized for his perceived sentimentality. The works on display through Feb. 2, signal an alarm and warning, as art historian Kenneth E. Silver wrote in an essay featured in the exhibit’s catalog. Chagall, Silver noted, “could demonstrate not only to Jews but also — perhaps primarily — to Gentiles that what was being done to modern Jews had a direct parallel in the fate of Jesus, cruelly misunderstood and executed for his outsider status.” He add-

ed: “Perhaps more than anything else, it was the image of Jesus Christ as a Man of Sorrows — a sufferer — that made him the exemplary Jew.” And yet, the paintings defy easy classification or labels. In some ways, they can appear to straddle different understandings and readings of the figure of Jesus, a Jew who came to be worshipped by Christians as the Messiah and a symbol of oppression to Jews because of the violence inflicted by his followers. In Chagall’s work, Jews may recognize Jesus because he wears the tallit, or prayer shawl, as a loin-cloth; Christians will recognize his haloed head. For some, the exhibit will have lasting echoes beyond its early February closing. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I, the event that laid the groundwork for World War II and changed life forever in Europe. It forced Chagall to leave the Soviet Union for France and then the United States. (He returned to France after World War II.) One painting among many captures the catastrophe of the times. As Susan Tamar-kin Goodman, the museum’s senior curator emerita, noted, “Christ in the Night” (1948), with its arresting and somber blue palate, is a work of “immeasurable pathos. By the time this work was completed, the fate of Europe’s Jews was well known and the crucified Jesus had become a symbol of the murdered millions.” In an interview, Goodman said that given what Chagall experienced “and what he



“White Crucifixion” a 1938 painting by Jewish artist Marc Chagall shows Jesus as a Jew, crucified against a background of anti-Jewish violence. Chagall’s artwork of the crucifixion of Christ has been taken as a metaphor for Jewish suffering throughout the ages - but especially during World War II.

absorbed, all of this enters into the work,” including the death of his beloved wife, Bella, in 1944. And in her conclusion to the exhibit’s catalog, Goodman said, “He offered a narrative art that met the psychological needs of the moment and gave pleasure and consolation as could no other artist.” Jesus became a lifelong obsession for Chagall, and not isolated to the tragic era of the 1930s and 1940s. Yet, the “back story” and history of the works should not overburden the essential mystery of Chagall’s artistry or his gift to the world — the poetry of expression. In short, it’s the art that counts.

Continued from front page

raising \$29 million in municipal bonds to construct a proposed replica of Noah’s Ark. Even if he loses the debate, critics say, Ham wins at the bank.

In fact, the debate, which will be held in the Creation Museum’s 900-seat Legacy Hall in Petersburg, Ky., sold out its \$25 tickets within minutes. The museum will stream the event live and for free.

But while some of the strongest voices against the debate have come from the non belief community, some nonbelievers are looking for a silver lining.

Maggie Ardiente, director of development and communications for the American Humanist Association, went to so far as to say she wishes the debate had been her idea.

“It is very simple,” she said. “I am looking at statistics (like the Pew Research Center’s poll) and they tell me people like Ken Ham and other creationists are being very effective and that is a serious problem. We can’t just ignore that. We have to challenge people like Ken Ham so I support the debate 100 percent.”

Debbie Goddard, director of outreach for the Center for Inquiry, another humanist organization that supports science education, is less certain. She said she was “originally on the fence” when she heard about the debate, concerned it would only attract the already convinced, but has reconsidered.

“If we don’t let their ideas see the light of day we can’t develop the tools to address them,” she said. “And we don’t just need the tools of facts and evidence, but also of understanding their views and compassion for them if we want to be effective at changing their minds.”

Central African Republic’s top clerics call for peacekeepers

By ELIZABETH BRYANT

PARIS (RNS) The Central African Republic’s top Muslim and Christian clerics called Thursday (Jan. 23) for a United Nations peacekeeping force to end their country’s brutal conflict.

Speaking at a press conference in Paris, the two said the conflict was not religiously motivated, but warned that only justice and reconciliation at the grass roots can bring longer-term peace.

“All the Seleka aren’t Muslims, and all the Muslims aren’t Seleka,” said Roman Catholic Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga of Bangui, referring to the rebel forces that overthrew CAR’s government in March, sparking a blood-bath that has displaced

roughly a million people and killed more than 1,000 in recent weeks alone.

He was joined by the country’s top Muslim cleric, Imam Kobine Layama.

Nzapalainga described their travels across CAR in recent months, trying to preach reconciliation. He cited examples of how CAR’s minority Muslims and majority Christians tried to protect one another.

“We discovered the Muslim community suffered as much as the Christian community,” Nzapalainga said.

The two clerics are using their European trip — they head to London next — to drum up support for a UN peacekeeping force in CAR to bolster French and African Union troops there. They also urged support for the country’s newly elected

interim president, Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of Bangui and a rare female head of state in Africa.

Earlier this week, the European Union agreed to dispatch 500 troops to CAR and pledged nearly \$500 million in humanitarian assistance. The United States has also announced an additional \$30 million in aid.

Even with the new support, the clerics said, their country is on the edge.

“We saw many orphaned children. We saw widows and old people who have been abandoned without assistance,” Layama said. “There have been enormous violations. These recent years have left our country in a serious situation and on the verge of famine.”

Younger Christians and the death penalty

Continued from page 9

reform the criminal justice system, said the Barna research confirms what she sees: a growing desire among younger Christians to abolish the death penalty.

“The question for them is no longer ‘Is it right or wrong?’” said Beaudoin. “They are seeing how it is actually functioning in our country — the race issues, the risk of executing the innocent, the fact that if you can afford an attorney you’ll probably not end up on death row — and they are changing their minds.”

Roxanne Stone, vice president for publishing at Barna, said capital punishment may increasingly be seen as a human rights or social justice issue.

“This parallels a growing trend in the pro-life conversation among Christians to include torture and the

death penalty as well as abortion,” Stone said. “For many younger Christians, the death penalty is not a political dividing point but a human rights issue.”

And what of that age-old question, “What would Jesus do?”

According to the Barna study, only 5 percent of Americans believe that Jesus would support government’s ability to execute the worst criminals. Two percent of Catholics, 8 percent of Protestants, and 10 percent of practicing Christians said their faith’s founder would offer his support.

“People use Jesus as their ideal and what they aspire to,” said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center in Washington. “But in practical day-to-day liv-

ing they know they will fall short and be less than ideal. They might think that the ideal is to turn the other cheek or not throw the first stone, but they do. They are more pragmatic.”

Comparatively lower support for the death penalty among young Christians stands in sharp contrast to the way conservative Christian leaders like Ralph Reed, Gary Bauer, and Jerry Falwell backed state executions in the 1990s.

“Certain things come to a moment and then become accepted all of a sudden very quickly,” Dieter says. “From apartheid to women’s rights, we’ve seen this throughout history. I think we’re coming to a moment on this issue now that will lead to the death penalty being outlawed in the United States and around the world.”

Christians face travel restrictions in Sudan

(RNS) For Christians living in predominantly Muslim Sudan, travel restrictions are making life more difficult each day, a Roman Catholic cardinal said.

Sudanese Cardinal Gabriel Zubeir Wako highlighted the challenges at a Catholic Bishops Conference in Juba, the Republic of South Sudan’s capital. His auxiliary bishop could not attend the Jan. 21-30 meeting because his passport was seized by security agents, along with those of eight priests.

“Christians in the two countries are facing difficulties,” Wako told the gathering. “We (bishops) must fo-

cus on serious matters and come up with strong messages.”

Catholics and other Christians survived serious persecution during the Sudanese civil war (1983-2005), between the Khartoum-based Islamic government and rebels in the mainly Christian south.

In 2011, the country split in two, with the south becoming the Republic of South Sudan. Since then the Christian minority in the north has faced growing violence, harassment and discrimination, including reports of priests being interrogated and having their

ed the science of evolution and have not let go of their faith.”

And that is a considerable number of people. A 2013 Pew Research Center poll found 60 percent of Americans believe “humans have evolved over time” while 33 percent reject that statement. Of those who believe in evolution, 24 percent say they also believe “a supreme being” used evolution to create life forms.

“A debate like this sets up a false choice” between science and religion for viewers, Haarsma said. “We don’t want them to have to choose.”

Other Christians are concerned that Nye, an inexperienced debater with a background in engineering, will not perform well against Ham, a skilled debater. Tyler Francke, a 25-year-old Christian who writes about the intersection of science and religion at the blog The God of Evolution, said he knows many “young Earth creationists,” as Ham and his supporters are called, and that the presentation of scientific evidence alone is not enough to persuade them.

“Young-Earth proponents like Ham have all kinds of tricks they play to make their view seem reasonable,” he said. “They claim they don’t ignore evidence they just look at it with a different lens. ... Bill Nye seems to be a very smart man, and I’m confident that he’ll come prepared. But if he shows up expecting a fair fight purely on the basis of what the available evidence most

reasonably indicates, I think he’s going to be sorely mistaken.”

Nye may be an inexperienced debater, but he has a background in entertainment. He has hosted six popular science television shows — including the irreverent and informative “Bill Nye the Science Guy” — and appeared on “Dancing with the Stars” — where he was the first contestant to get the hook in its 17th season.

“Bill Nye is not a professional scientist; he is an entertainer and a science communicator,” said Joshua Rosenau, policy director at the National Center for Science Education, an advocacy group that discourages scientists from debating creationists. “So I am optimistic this could turn out better than some others. But don’t try this at home, kids.”

Both men have described their reasons for engaging in the challenge. Nye, an agnostic, told The Huffington Post he hopes “to show people that this belief (creationism) is still among us and it finds its way onto school boards.”

Indeed, there have been four laws introduced at the state level that challenge evolution in public school science curricula just this year — two in Missouri, one in Virginia and one in Oklahoma, according to the National Center for Science Education. Currently, laws in Texas, Louisiana and Tennessee permit the teaching of “alternatives” to evolution.

As for Ham, he has said he extended the debate invitation to Nye out of concern that young people are too quick to dismiss creation in favor of evolution. But critics note another reason — the financial rewards of increased media attention. The Creation Museum is up against a deadline for

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5.3 billion people face harsh religious freedom restrictions

Religious persecution, affecting all religions, is on the rise around the world

By BRIAN PELLOT

LONDON (RNS) Global religious hostilities reached a six-year high in 2012 and affected more people than government curbs on religious freedom, according to the Pew Research Center's latest report on religious restrictions around the world.

The report, released Tuesday (Jan. 14) ahead of National Religious Freedom Day on Thursday, shows that 74 percent of the world's population experienced high levels of social hostility toward religion, up from 52 percent in 2011.

The sharp rise is due to hostilities in China, which for the first time in the survey's six-year history, scored a "high" level of religious strife. Home to more than 1.3 billion people, China experienced an increase in

Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, Indonesia, Afghanistan, the Maldives and Syria imposed the strictest government restrictions.

When social hostilities and government restrictions are combined, Pew estimates that 5.3 billion people or 76 percent of the world's population lived under high religious restrictions in 2012.

Government restrictions include political efforts to ban conversions, limit preaching, or privilege some religious group over others. Social hostilities include armed conflict, terrorism, sectarian violence, harassment, intimidation or abuse motivated by religious factors.

"The Pew report is a chilling reminder that religious freedom is losing ground in much of the world," said

intimidation of religious groups was reported in 16 of the region's 20 countries.

On the global scale, Mali, Libya, Mexico, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan experienced some of the greatest increase in hostilities. The social situation improved significantly in only seven countries, including Ethiopia, Cyprus and Cambodia.

"Some of these improvements are associated with peacemaking efforts to solve long-standing conflicts," Grim said.

In Cyprus, a country divided between the predominantly Muslim north and the predominantly Christian south, there were a number of efforts to bridge divides, he added. The number of countries in the world with "very high" social hostilities toward religion rose from 14 to 20 between 2011 and 2012, with Syria, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand and Burma joining the worst of the worst.

For the first time, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Morocco, Iraq and Kazakhstan joined 19 other countries with "very high" government restrictions.

Overall restrictions increased somewhat in 61 percent of countries between 2011 and 2012. Abuse targeting religious minorities was reported in 47 percent of countries, up from 38 percent in 2011. The report documents intensified violence in Buddhist-majority

Charles C. Haynes, director of the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum in Washington. "The rise in social hostilities toward religion in 2012 is a harbinger of much worse to come."

Among the world's most populous countries, Egypt, Indonesia, Russia, Pakistan and Burma had the worst overall restrictions in 2012, while Brazil, the Philippines, Japan, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo had the fewest.

On the regional level, social hostilities and government restrictions remained highest in the Middle East and North Africa. Libya, Tunisia, Syria and Lebanon saw the greatest rises in regional hostilities in 2012, and experienced violent attacks against religious minorities. Widespread government

“Without a renewed commitment to religious freedom, religious differences will deepen and the world will be torn by religious conflict.”
~ Charles C. Haynes

religion-related terrorism, mob violence and sectarian conflict in 2012.

The greatest levels of social hostilities toward religion were felt in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Somalia, Israel and Iraq, according to the report.

"One of the common things we see in that group of countries is sectarian conflict," said Brian J. Grim, senior researcher at Pew Research. "In Pakistan, even though minority religious groups like Christians face hostility, there's also inter-Muslim conflict between Sunnis, Shias and Ahmadi Muslims."

Global government restrictions on religion remained relatively unchanged between 2011 and 2012, with 64 percent of the world living under harsh legal and political conditions.

Christian Healthcare

Continued from page 8

goes to the doctor or hospital. Instead, he pays cash, which often leads to significant discounts.

Medi-Share also negotiates discounts for its members, said Meggs.

Health-sharing plans do put some limits on pre-existing conditions. Medi-Share also makes some members work with a health coach, to deal with issues such as obesity.

At least one health-sharing ministry has run into legal problems in the past.

Leaders of the Christian Brotherhood Newsletter were accused of misusing millions of dollars for personal gain in the late 1990s and were eventually sued by the state of Ohio.

That group, now known as Christian Healthcare Ministries, is now accredited by the Better Business Bureau's charity program and files a 990 tax return annually with the IRS.

Samaritan Ministries also files a 990 and makes its annual audit available to the public. Medi-Share, which is organized as a

church, does not file a 990 but makes its audit available to the public.

For the most part, the health sharing groups operate outside of government regulation. Nevertheless, in 2007, Medi-Share was banned from Nevada after regulators there claimed it was an unlicensed insurance plan. Kentucky also banned health-sharing groups but lifted the ban in 2013 after lawmakers passed a bill making such plans exempt from state insurance law.

Leaders of health ministries take great pains to distinguish themselves from insurance plans. They've also lobbied Congress and state legislatures to keep them exempt from regulation.

"Insurance is about actuarial tables. We are about sharing burdens," said Lansberry of Samaritan Ministries. "Insurance companies want to protect you from what might happen. We are going to share what already happened."

“If our love of God does not directly influence, and even change, how we engage in the issues of our time on this earth, I wonder what good religion is.”
~Richard Rohr



Ambassador Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe, U.S. Representative to the United Nations Human Rights Council, listening to discussion of Iran's Human Rights record at the Human Rights Council June 10, 2010. Photo courtesy United States Mission - Wikimedia Commons

Sri Lanka against Muslims and Christians and in Muslim-majority Egypt against Coptic Orthodox Christians.

Christians were harassed in 110 countries, Muslims in 109 and Jews in 71. Harassment against Hindus, Buddhists, folk religionists and members of other faith traditions also increased by country. Jews faced social harassment in more countries than they faced government harassment.

The opposite was true for Sikhs and Baha'is. Haynes sees a strong connection between governments denying their citizens religious freedom rights and the outbreak of sectarian violence.

"Without a renewed commitment to religious freedom, religious differences will deepen and the world will be torn by religious conflict," he said.

Governments used force against religious groups in nearly half of the world's countries. Violence or the threat of violence was used in 39 percent of countries to compel people to adhere to religious norms, including in Somalia, where the Islamic militant group al-Shabab continued to ban "un-Islamic" behavior.

Pew documents a rise in the number of countries in which women were harassed for religious dress, mobs turned violent over

religious issues and sectarian violence escalated.

In Burma, communal violence led to hundreds of deaths and the displacement of more than 100,000 Rohingya Muslims. Sectarian strife continues to claim lives in Syria and Iraq. Pew's latest report covers 198 countries.

Notably absent is North Korea, which Pew acknowledges "is among the most repressive in the world with respect to religion as well as other civil and political liberties." Due to the country's repressive and closed environment, Pew was unable to obtain sufficient data on North Korea for this study.

Things you may not have known about the Sikh religion from Punjab India

- After services, Sikhs partake in the langar, a communal meal, typically of Punjabi food, cooked and served by volunteers.

- The first Sikhs came to the U.S. about 100 years ago. They are most concentrated on the coasts, with a large Sikh population in

Queens, N.Y.

- Sikh is properly pronounced "sik" but you will likely not be corrected for saying "seek."

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Rainbow Network: helping impoverished children in Nicaragua

Continued from the front page nutrition. This has been cut to less than eight percent in areas served by The Rainbow Network. As of today, community volunteers operate one hundred and thirty two feeding centers in Rainbow Network villages. These centers are often the only regular source of nutrition for the children, pregnant and nursing mothers, and the at-risk elderly they serve. Coupled with our other key focus areas including education, economic development and housing, we look forward to celebrating many more milestones in the future.”In addition to its feeding centers, The Rainbow Network has helped thousands of families establish successful gardens, providing fresh produce for their family and often the entire community. The organization has also given more than 60,000 micro-enterprise loans to families throughout rural Nicaragua, allowing them to start small businesses and generate an income for themselves. “These programs have been very effective in helping the Nicaraguan communities we serve to end the long-standing cycle of hunger they have faced for generations,” said Jaspers. “It can also eliminate the need for a feeding center in that community all together. The Rainbow Network partners

with the Nicaraguan people to develop long-term sustainable solutions to poverty.” Those interested in learning more about the upcoming 2014 GO & SEE Trip should visit: www.GOAND-SEE.org.

About The Rainbow Network:

Since its founding in 1995, the mission of the Rainbow Network has been to share in the love of Jesus Christ by partnering with Nicaragua’s poorest people in healthcare, education, economic development, and housing. Rainbow Network has sought to accomplish its mission by being a model charity organization; incorporating best practices in rural economic development and providing hope through innovative, integrated and sustainable solutions that empower local communities and promote self-sufficiency. This holistic model, combined with the extraordinary dedication of the Nicaraguan people and the generosity of donors, has allowed Rainbow Network to maintain a full-time presence in seven regions of rural Nicaragua and expand from four original communities to a total of 105 to date.

The Rainbow Network is an interfaith missions organization founded by businessman and hotelier Keith

Jaspers. Since its founding, The Rainbow Network has served nearly forty-million meals, educated thousands of children, given more than 60,000 micro-enterprise loans, built nearly 800 houses and provided more than 650,000 medical consultations to the neediest in rural Nicaragua.

To learn more about The Rainbow Network, how you can help or to make a donation visit www.RainbowNetwork.org, call (417) 889-8088 or send mail to

The Rainbow Network, 3834 South Avenue, Springfield, MO 65807.

RIGHT: A little girl gets a nutritious meal she would not otherwise have access to if it were not for the generous donors who support the Rainbow Network and their feeding centers around Nicaragua.



Thailand is one of the worst offenders for the human trafficking

Continued from page 7

That means possible U.S. trade sanctions if the Thai government can't prove by the end of 2014 that more trafficking victims are being helped, or that more traffickers are ending up behind bars.

But not everyone agrees that sex trafficking is the highest priority. Some critics argue that in an effort to fight trafficking, the U.S. is clamping down on prostitution worldwide while overlooking other kinds of human trafficking.

“There are other places to focus on, like children, or people who are exploited in the factories who cannot leave, or the fishing boats,” said criminologist Sam Derbali, a Belgian researcher at Mahidol University in Bangkok. “There are thousands of fishing boats in Thailand, and nobody knows what happens there.”

According to the ILO, an estimated 75 percent of people trafficked around the world at any point in time do not end up as sex workers, but in fishing, farming, domestic work, or construction industries.

Alternative solutions

Rescuing sex workers, it turns out, is difficult and often unsuccessful. One alternative can be found in the northern city of Chiang Mai.

The Can Do bar, located on Chiang Mai's sex district strip, looks like an old punk rock joint: It isn't very clean, and the walls are covered with graffiti.

But workers here are paid at or above the Thai minimum wage, and receive training on a range of skills, from how to practice safe sex, to tips on how to manage difficult or violent situations that may arise.

Mai, a 28-year-old woman from Burma, is a sex worker affiliated with Can Do. Without makeup, and dressed in a simple black T-shirt and jeans, she looks nothing like the young women roaming Bangkok's sex tourism districts. Before landing here, she had worked as a maid, dishwasher, baker, farmer, and street food vendor. And, she claims, she is in sex work for the long haul.

“Each job has its good points

and its bad points, but when I came to do sex work, I realized this is a job that gives me enough income to really look after my family,” says Mai.

She insists no one forced her to do this: “My friends were the ones that told me about the money to be made in sex work.”

One of those friends, Mai says, was picked up in a police raid at a Chiang Mai brothel a couple of years ago. She has since gone right back into prostitution.

But while the Can Do bar tries to treat sex workers fairly and gives them part ownership of the business, NightLight's Dieselberg is convinced most women would rather quit prostitution if they are offered a decent-paying alternative.

“We usually have a waiting list of women wanting to come work at NightLight,” Dieselberg says. And that tells her women aren't so eager to sell their bodies on the streets.

According to NightLight, 160 Thai women and 45 women from other countries have come through the organization since its founding in 2005. There's no way to know if any of these women have gone back to prostitution.

“We could do much more but the financial and human re-

sources needed are so high and we are limited in how much we can help,” she says.

Mint, for one, is grateful for NightLight's help and has no desire to go back on the streets.

“There may be some women out there who say they feel fulfilled when they find a foreign boyfriend or a man who gives them money for sex,” says Mint. “But we don't really know their full story, like what they had to endure, what they've been through.”

For two years, she has been making jewelry and crafts at NightLight and during that time, she says, she has developed new skills that will keep her from having to earn a living as a prostitute.

Someday, when she has enough savings and business know-how, she plans on starting her own crafts store in Bangkok.

“Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.”
~ Edmund Burke

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