

Century Marks

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First parishioner: Aides and friends of President Obama have been quietly visiting churches in Washington, D.C., to help the first family find a spiritual home. Some congregations in D.C. have actively courted the Obamas. Joshua DuBois, who directs the White House Office for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said that the Obamas are looking for a church whose beliefs match theirs and one that has a youth ministry suitable for their daughters and is active in helping the needy. Security logistics are also a factor. When word leaked out that the first family was visiting the 19th Street Baptist Church on inaugural weekend, so many strangers showed up that longtime members were turned away (*Boston Globe*, March 22).

Aiming higher: After Barack Obama graduated from Harvard Law School at the age of 26, the University of Chicago Law School created a faculty fellowship tailored for Obama and then invited him to apply for it. When Obama came to campus for his interview, he spent a few minutes chatting with the dean's secretary. The secretary, so impressed by Obama's grace and personal charm, said later, "He's going to be governor of Illinois someday" (*Chicago Tribune Magazine*, March 22).

Madoff's destiny: An online forum asked what justice would look like for Bernard Madoff, the financier convicted and incarcerated for swindling investors out of billions of dollars. Among the replies: he should go to jail, his family should forfeit all their assets except what is needed for a modest living, he should cooperate with government officials to help them keep similar schemes from occurring again, he should apologize to his victims and the nation, he should listen to the stories of those he fleeced, and he should reconcile with God. One correspondent said that "folks like Bernard Madoff make me wish I believed in hell." Another writer said Madoff is destined for the eighth circle in Dante's *Inferno*, the circle reserved for thieves, where they are continually eaten and torn apart by snakes and other reptiles (religion blog of the *Dallas Morning News*, March 17).

Upsides of the downturn: Demands on the social services of nonprofit organizations are up during this recession, and donations are down. The good news is that volunteerism is thriving. AmeriCorps's online system for volunteers had a 208 percent increase in February over the same month in 2008. But nonprofit groups may have to cut back on the number of volunteers if they can't meet their budgets (*Time*, March 30). Another apparent consequence of the recession is the increase in the number of church weddings—churches being a relatively cheap venue (*Christian Science Monitor*, March 16).

No welcome mat: A peace conference in Johannesburg, intended to highlight the way sports can promote peace (the soccer World Cup will be held in South Africa in 2010), was canceled after the government refused a visa for the Tibetan exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, and two Nobel Peace Prize winners threatened to boycott the event. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former South African president F. W. de Klerk had said they would have to reconsider their decision to attend the conference if the Dalai Lama, a fellow Nobel Prize winner, was not granted a visa for the meeting (ENI)

Holy war? A public debate has emerged in Israel over the army's treatment of Palestinian civilians during the conflict in Gaza. Especially disturbing to religious people are allegations that some rabbis encouraged the soldiers to view the military action in Gaza as a religious war. One soldier said the rabbis' message was clear: "We are the Jewish people, we came to this land by a miracle, God brought us back to this land and now we need to fight to expel the non-Jews who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land. . . . The whole sense many soldiers had in this operation was of a religious war." The military's chief rabbi has especially come

under fire. He reportedly promoted this slogan for war: “He who is merciful to the cruel will end up being cruel to the merciful” (*New York Times*, March 22).

Reality of TV: By the time filmmaker Gerard Thomas Straub was 35, he had been the producer of *General Hospital*, the most popular soap opera on TV at the time. Despite the fact that he was very successful, he felt unfulfilled. One day a vice president at NBC called him into his office to tell him his problem was that he thought he was an artist. “We don’t want art,” the VP said. “We want filler to keep the commercials from bumping into each other” (Straub’s *Thoughts of a Blind Beggar: Reflections from a Journey to God*, Orbis).

Spiritual weapons: In Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, a pastor and a member of his congregation were cited for shooting an arrow during a church service. At a designated time, the church member stood in the front row and shot an arrow at a foam target. A worshiper who objected to the stunt was asked to leave. The municipality said it is illegal to fire a missile indoors. The pastor said the action was meant to illustrate the spiritual weapons given to Christians, such as “the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit and the belt of truth” (*Sheboygan Press*, March 20).

Anonymous Christians: As an older woman entered a country church, the usher asked her where she’d like to sit. When she indicated that she wanted to sit in the front row, the usher said she shouldn’t sit there, because they were having a boring guest preacher that morning. The woman, bristling at that response, asked, “Do you know who I am?” When the usher said no, she said, “I am the preacher’s mother!” The usher asked her if she knew who he was, to which she replied no. “Good,” the usher said (William J. Carl III, *The Lord’s Prayer Today*, Westminster John Knox).

Evolution of creationists? The Creation Museum in Kentucky unveiled an exhibit in March that affirms Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. “Darwin was right about natural selection, right about different species forming and species changing,” said a spokesperson for the museum, which supports creationism. But the exhibit says Darwin was wrong in thinking that natural selection is “a mechanism to change one kind of animal into a totally different kind.” The executive director of the National Center for Science said he was not surprised at the museum’s statement. He said officials at the Creation Museum “have long recognized that natural selection works. They just don’t think that it can do anything important” (RNS).

Evolution of Darwin: Historians at Cambridge University have unearthed financial record books kept by Charles Darwin. The records show that he spent money to

have his shoes shined but not much on books. It is also known that he preferred shooting, riding and collecting beetles over attending lectures. A friend made a coat of arms for the future naturalist that featured Darwin's predilection for drinking and smoking (*Telegraph*, March 23).