

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue



Kids and the Internet© Angel Boligan, El Universal, Mexico City

Candle power: It's been 20 years since the Berlin Wall came down, an event caused partly by the protest movement spawned in East German churches. St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, where prayers were held every Monday, was the center of the movement. A month before the wall came down 70,000 people showed up at St. Nicholas for Monday prayers. They paraded through the streets in peaceful protest, carrying candles and chanting, "We are the people." A pastor from East Berlin says that no outside force could have liberated East Germany. "What happened was self-liberation," he says (*Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn).

Uncomfortable pews: Gregory A. Boyd, author and pastor in St. Paul, Minnesota, says that the clearer he is with his congregation about the cost of discipleship, the smaller his congregation gets. His church board tells him that he should go on the road giving seminars on church shrinkage rather than on church growth. Boyd says the church needs leaders who will preach a vision of the kingdom of God that looks like “Jesus’ self-sacrificial love.” Says Boyd: “We need visionary leaders and teachers who will challenge the status quo and make people uncomfortable in the pews, who will help them wake up to the many ways that our lives have been co-opted by the culture” (*Word & World*, Fall).

Speaking of pews: It matters where you sit at the Lighthouse Church of All Nations in Alsip, Illinois. At each of the three Sunday services the pastor, Dan Willis, draws the number of a seat from a bag. The occupant of that seat gets a cash prize of \$250 or \$500. Willis admits it’s a gimmick to get more people to church. Since this drawing began, weekly attendance has surged from 1,600 to 2,500. The pastor encourages the winners to use the money to pay down debt rather than splurge on new purchases. He keeps a shredder near the pulpit, and he implores people to give up their credit cards and reduce consumer spending (*Chicago Tribune*, November 2).

Trickle out: One trend missed in many accounts of the Vatican’s invitation to conservative Episcopalians and Anglicans, says author Diana Butler Bass, is that Rome has suffered a steady fallout to Protestant and Anglican churches. Bass notes the flow of cradle Catholics to churches that are more accepting of divorce and birth control and more inclusive of women and gays. She cites a 2008 Pew study that says one in ten adult Americans is an ex-Catholic and a 2005 Catholic News Service report that describes the switching as a “constant trickle.” In her study of successful mainline churches (*Christianity for the Rest of Us*), Bass found that “sometimes as many as a fifth of the members would have once been Catholic.” She added: “In every case, the former Catholics praised the intellectual and spiritual openness of the mainline church as the major reason for switching” ([Beliefnet](#), October 22).

The day the laughter stopped: Writer Sara Maitland, who was married to an Anglican priest, says that “in the early seventies the best of the adherents of Anglo-Catholicism were all so funny, so witty and so quick, self-mocking, heavily ironic, and we all loved talking.” By the end of the 1980s, she charges, Anglo-Catholicism was “increasingly bitter, misogynistic and right-wing; we stopped laughing, and a religion where you cannot laugh at yourself is a joyless, destructive thing” (*A Book of Silence*, Counterpoint).

Missing persons: Much of the antiterrorism intelligence work is outsourced by the CIA to countries like Pakistan, which have fewer legal restraints than the U.S. A Seton Hall University study found that two thirds of the Guantánamo prisoners were either arrested in Pakistan or by Pakistani authorities. Some analysts suspect that many detainees are shipped to places like Uzbekistan, which has a reputation for allowing torture, or simply end up as “missing persons.” The Pakistani Human Rights Commission estimates that there are at least 600 such missing persons in Pakistan (*Harper’s Magazine*, November).

Virtuality: Autopsies violate Orthodox Jewish practice and that of some other religious groups. Yet autopsies are mandated by law in the case of certain kinds of death. Some municipalities, like New York City, have learned to work with Jews and other religious groups, offering to use minimally invasive techniques or to conduct virtual autopsies, which rely on CT scans and MRI tests. Virtual autopsies cost about five times less than traditional ones (*Tablet*, October 23).

Worship of the sky gods: Writer Scott Russell Sanders points out that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all began in the desert. They were created by people who lived in the open, and their god is a sky god who would be eclipsed by a canopy of trees. “In every civilization influenced by these faiths,” claims Sanders, “trees have been cut down not merely to secure wood for cooking and building or to clear ground for agriculture or to open vistas around settlements where predators might lurk, but to reveal the heavens.” Not only have we paid an environmental price for deforestation, but the temptation for people of these faiths is to deny “that we emerge from and wholly depend on nature” (*Orion*, November/December).

Test question: “In the name of patriotism and / the flag, how much of our beloved / land are you willing to desecrate? / List in the following spaces / the mountains, rivers, towns, farms / you could most readily do without” (from “Questionnaire” in *Leavings: Poems*, by Wendell Berry).

Signs of the times: After 9/11 the cheerleaders at high school football games in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, started writing religious messages like “Commit to the Lord” on their banners. But that tradition ended when a parent warned the school that the practice could violate the First Amendment. Now fans in the stands have taken up the religious cause, holding up signs with Bible verses and messages at games. The woman who issued the warning, a graduate student at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University, said she was trying to protect the school from litigation (*New York*

Times, October 27).

Wedding on wheels: If you don't have time to go to church to be married, you can hire Darrell Best of Shelbyville, Illinois. He'll come to you with his wedding chapel on wheels. Converted from an old fire engine, the chapel has several pews, plexiglass windows that look like stained glass and a sound system disguised as a pipe organ. The fee is a mere \$200 plus \$2 per mile roundtrip. You needn't worry about getting to the church on time (ABCNews.com).