

Century Marks

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All are welcome? Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Carlsbad, California, recently voted to admit a registered sex offender into its membership. Pilgrim, which prides itself on its inclusiveness, was initially torn apart by the man's request to join the church as part of his effort to integrate with society. Parents of children and victims of abuse were the most concerned about welcoming him into the church. The sex offender, who acknowledges his wrongdoing going back to the 1980s and 1990s, has agreed to be escorted at all times at church. One member who had been molested as a child argued in support of inclusion. "To have said no to this request, for me, would have been like giving the person who abused me in my childhood power over how I could act and how I could live out my beliefs," she said (ABC News, May 7).

Cornucopia: Filling up the 25-gallon tank of an SUV with pure ethanol requires over 450 pounds of corn—enough to feed a person for a year. The increasingly popular use of ethanol as a substitute for petroleum is already increasing the cost of food, which is likely to adversely affect poor people around the world. This spring, corn futures rose to their highest levels in 10 years. Corn prices are also affecting the cost of other foods, since farmers are growing more corn and less wheat, soybeans, rice and sugar beets in order to take advantage of the increased price for corn. In Mexico, the cost of tortilla flour doubled in late 2006. Mexico gets 80 percent of its

corn imports from the U.S., where corn prices had gone from \$2.80 to \$4.20 a bushel in recent months. Several studies have concluded that the caloric consumption of the world's poorest people drops by half of 1 percent for every 1 percent increase in the price of major food staples (*Foreign Affairs*, May/June).

Can you believe this? In 1998 a rainbow appeared above the cabin of a devout Tibetan, a Buddhist lama. As he lay on his bed, chanting a Tibetan mantra, he died, even though he hadn't been sick. Shortly afterward, his students noticed that the monk's skin began to turn soft and pinkish. They were advised by another lama to cover his body and continue to pray. As the days progressed the dead monk's body shrank, and by the end of a week all that remained were a few hairs on a pillow. This phenomenon, known in Tibetan Buddhism as a rainbow body, has been subsequently studied by an associate director of the secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. David Steindl-Rast, an American Benedictine monk, concludes: "If we can establish as an anthropological fact that what is described in the resurrection of Jesus has not only happened to others but is happening today, it would put our view of human potential in a completely different light" (*Discover*, June).

Meet me at the ballpark: American families are increasingly giving priority to family time over involvement in church, according to a study conducted by *Leadership*. Midweek church activities are especially upstaged by attendance at sports, music and other extracurricular activities. Some families are also reacting to the fact that church activities tend to split up family members according to age and gender rather than bring them together. "The one common denominator for families is sports," says Jerry Drace of Humboldt, Tennessee. "We have many fathers and mothers skipping church on Sunday to watch their child participate in his/her favorite team sport. When this happens, the god of sports replaces the God of Scripture" (Baptist Press).

Spiritually questing: The Spirituality in Higher Education project at the University of California at Los Angeles has discovered that undergraduates are more spiritual than is widely assumed. They are seeking help for their spiritual quests from their colleges and universities but aren't getting it. In response, the UCLA project is attempting to help students with spiritual questions without engaging in religious indoctrination. At Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh teams of faculty members and student affairs administrators lead weekly discussions with freshmen in dormitories on the "big questions," such as: "What is my role in the community?"

What is my authentic self and how do I honor that self?" The UCLA data reveal that faculty are afraid of letting class discussions drift toward spiritual issues. They need to learn, the report says, that spirituality is "a legitimate subject of conversation" (Insidehighered.com, May 8).

Holy hilarity: The Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita, Kansas, celebrates a Holy Humor Sunday each year the week after Easter. The theological rationale for this, according to one pastor, is that "God played the best practical joke of all on death, on Satan, in raising Jesus." This year "The Great Grape Juice Controversy" skit was performed, in which a taste test was conducted to find the best grape juice for communion. The panelists in the skit were embarrassed to learn they had chosen "Real-Value Artificial Grape Drink from Wal-Mart" (*Mennonite Weekly Review*, April 23).

Lutherans baring all: As many as 200 students decided to celebrate graduation at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, by skinny dipping in a murky campus pond. A security officer tried to shoo the students out of the pond but they wouldn't cooperate, the Concordia security chief said. Moorhead police were called after students pushed the officer's golf cart into the pond. Police estimated that when they arrived on the scene, about 50 to 75 students were in various states of undress and fleeing, but no one was naked. Arnold said 10 people were identified because they left their clothes and wallets behind (AP).