

Tar wars: Minister on the roof

by [Brett Younger](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

In the spring of 1987, I was the pastor of Central Baptist Church in an Indiana town of 3,000 with three Baptist churches—at least two more than needed. Years ago people broke with the pastor of First Baptist and started Central Church; shortly after that, the people now at Eastview Baptist left because they were angry with the pastor of Central—my predecessor. I am quite proud to have no church splits on my résumé and only one quick exit.

Central bought its current building from the Methodists, the wealthiest Christians in town, when the Methodists decided to move a half-mile to the suburbs. The sanctuary they left behind was prettier than that in most Baptist churches, but the education building must have been constructed by Alph and Ralph, the Monroe brothers. It had a mostly flat roof, which in Indiana shows remarkable shortsightedness.

Each winter the snow would pile up on the roof, freeze, crack and melt. From five different directions it moved through the roof into the fellowship hall and two of the three children's classrooms. Each year on some Saturday in April, a group of men would climb up on this 40- by 20-foot section of the roof to lay tar.

I was a seminary student commuting to Louisville each Tuesday through Friday. I spent every Saturday at the church frantically writing the Sunday morning sermon, and on a really good Saturday, I'd get a leg up on the Sunday-night sermon as well

I didn't know about the annual tarrin' party until I got to church early one Saturday and heard Danny Hickman yell, "We've been waiting for you!" Danny, a firefighter, Loy Doenges, a furniture factory worker, and Tony Martin, a horseshoer, were waving for me to climb up on the roof.

I had work to do in my office, but I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of thinking I was scared of heights or hard work or some such foolishness. So I climbed up for a quick perusal of their work, thinking I'd offer a few heartfelt words of appreciation and make a speedy exit to my study.

But when I got to the top of the ladder they had a three-bristle brush waiting for me. I thought about begging off, but I knew I would never hear the end of it—and that I'd rather be tarred and feathered than put up with the teasing. I had no choice but to roll up my sleeves and lay tar.

What became my annual trip to La Brea Tar Pits doesn't sound like a big deal, but this is one of the clearest memories I have almost 20 years later. Three things about this experience made it memorable and miserable.

One is that tarring is dismal work. You heat the tar with a torch before you dip into it and smear it onto the fiberglass that covers the cracks. The tar is hot, gooey and sticky. As anyone who's read *Uncle Remus* would guess, at least as much tar sticks to your hands as makes it into the cracks. Somehow the tar gets in your hair and takes your hair with it when it goes. Tar hands, tar hair, tar heels. All this atop a building, with nothing to keep you from falling to a horrible death.

Worse than the first problem was the second. Whenever anyone showed up to help, walked by on the street or drove through the drive-thru at the bank next door, they would inevitably shout something clever like:

"I never saw a preacher working on Saturday!"

"How does it feel to do some real work?"

"What in tarnation do you think you're doing, actually earning your pay?"

While members of my loving congregation offered these attempts at humor I was thinking, "I have to get off this roof and get to work on the sermon or I'll be here all night long. How will my people survive if Sunday morning comes and I don't have the inspiring thoughts they've come to expect?"

But the third problem is worse than the second. After this experience I haven't been able to shake the fear that the people were right—that in some ways church work is a way for me to avoid rolling up my sleeves and doing real work. Maybe that's true for other ministers. Maybe it's true for churchpeople. We Christians are tempted to believe that our job is to describe the work that needs to be done, share this knowledge with one another and then keep our sleeves buttoned.

Before the next pastor came to Central Baptist, the congregation put a new roof on the education building. Maybe it was the pastor's good fortune that he never had to

pick tar out of his fingernails. Or maybe he, and all of us, could use the reminder to stop talking about God and get to work building Christ's church.