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Richard Vara
Houston Chronicle
"AMAZING grace, how sweet the sound . . . ."

The 26 white-clad prisoners of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice love to sing. Even barred windows and concrete walls don't hamper the enthusiasm of these boisterous choristers, felons whose crimes range from writing hot checks to committing homicide.

That saved a wretch like me . . . .

They are inmates of the Jester II Prison Unit in Sugar Land. They begin their day this way every morning, gathering together at 5:30 a.m. with Bible readings, prayers and hymns. They eat together and live in the same cellblock.

This is the vanguard of a pilot Christian program to spiritually transform prisoners and keep them from returning to prison. Experts say it's too early to evaluate, but that the project employs creative thinking that could be successful.

Called InnerChange, the program is a project of the Reston, Va., based Prison Fellowship founded by Watergate figure Charles Colson. Prison Fellowship, the Texas prison system and Houston churches are cooperating, hoping to lower the 48 percent recidivism rate of inmates.

I once was lost, but now am found

Inmates in the program study Scripture. This afternoon one reads a personal devotion from the New Testament letter of James, earning applause from his fellow inmates. Bible study and a community-building session follow, part of an ongoing program of spiritual discipline. Inmates listen attentively. They must participate in personal and social improvement classes. "Responsibility" and "accountability" are added to their vocabularies. They probe their hearts for the reasons they live behind steel bars and razor-lined fences.

Was blind, but now I see . . .

They will eventually leave the Jester II unit to work in the community. Every day prisoners will leave the unit to build homes for the poor, paint graffiti-marked walls or prepare food baskets. Some will come face to face with their victims to say they are sorry, to ask for forgiveness. At night, they will return to their cellblock.

The 26 volunteer prisoners are in the first class of InnerChange, an intense two-year Christian program. It fortifies prisoners with spiritual resources and community and family support for a permanent transition to free society, said Ray Roberts, InnerChange director.

The program will expand to 200 inmates by the end of 1998.

"When they sign on to our program, they are agreeing to participate in a Christ-centered, Bible-based program," said Roberts, a former warden in the Mississippi and Kansas state prison systems. Non-Christian inmates, such as Muslims, can participate but they must agree to attend the Christian classes. They are not pressured to convert, according to officials.

"Unless you want a change in life, there is no sense to come (into the
program)," said Walter Kasper, 43, serving two six-year sentences for robbery and theft.

Kasper faced desperation two years ago. "I could not sleep at night," Kasper said. "I was dreaming of crack cocaine all night long. I didn't know if I was going to kill myself or what I was going to do, but I knew I didn't want to go on like this."

He began to pray and asked God to help him. "When I gave my will over to God as I understood him, things got better for me," Kasper said.

InnerChange came at an opportune time. Kasper is gaining the skills he needs to change.

"I don't think like I used to think, I don't see things the way I used to see them," he said. "This is the last time I will be in prison."

Roberts is among four Prison Fellowship employees working directly with inmates. The prison ministry is investing $1.5 million over two years, establishing InnerChange as a national model for reducing prison recidivism. In addition to salaries, it is paying for program equipment and materials.

The program is modeled on a 20-year-old Christian program in Brazil and Ecuador. According to Prison Fellowship officials, the recidivism rate of its graduates is less than 5 percent.

InnerChange is only in its second month at the minimum security, pre-release prison unit. Inmates must complete a year-long curriculum of personal and social development in addition to Bible and spiritual studies, Roberts said.

After the half-hour morning devotional, inmates farm out on the unit as their work detail. But inmates without a GED or high school diploma must attend classes. "We would like to see every inmate leave here with a 12th-grade education," Roberts said.

The inmates reassemble after lunch for two hours of Christian character and social skills development. Volunteers teach classes on parenting, marriage, anger management and other social behavioral skills. Prisoners learn to look at themselves and find their self-worth and value.

"It is those basic foundational skills that every human being needs to properly adjust to the community setting and lead a productive, successful life," Roberts said.

Parents, wives and children will be invited to participate in some of the seminars.

"Ministering to the families is important to this program," said chaplain Jerry E. Bryan, who serves Jester II. A state prisoner can improve his education to the point of obtaining a college degree, Bryan said. He can learn a trade and get medical and dental problems resolved. But if he returns to a dysfunctional family, then he is likely to return to prison.

The afternoon classes are followed by a 45-minute session that ties together the morning devotional and the social skills classes. For example, a Bible reading on obedience is linked to unit work duties and family life.

From 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., the inmates gather for spirituality classes such as learning to pray, how to read the Bible, spiritual reflection and other spiritual disciplines. On some nights they meet in small groups to discuss personal concerns.

"We had an affirmation session and inmates related two things they admired in each other," Roberts said. "A lot of guys have never been told about the good
things about themselves."

One inmate was told he had a nice smile and that made a difference in him, Roberts said.

After six months, a volunteer mentor from the outside world will be assigned to each inmate. The mentor will help the inmate for 18 months, which will include the inmate's release from prison. "The mentor will help them make the adjustment back to the community and the family," Roberts said, noting mentors will offer encouragement and advice.

After the first year, InnerChange inmates begin their community service and may look for jobs away from the prison unit. Service projects may include home-building for Houston Habitat for Humanity or cleaning parks. The emphasis is on service to society, a repayment for the damage they have done, Roberts said. In this phase, victims will be free to meet the inmates who have hurt them. "It will provide an opportunity for victim-offender reconciliation," Roberts said.

Offenders will be asked to provide restitution to victims, if possible.

The mentor will continue with the inmate for six months after his release. Inmates will be guided to participating churches that can provide counseling, housing, support groups and other assistance.

The longterm personal mentoring, the post-release care and family involvement are things that prison chaplains cannot do on a regular basis, Bryan said.

Prison Fellowship has contracted with Lamar University in Beaumont to continue tracking and document whether InnerChange is lowering recidivism.

Carol Vance, former TDCJ board chairman, said he visited the Brazilian program and was impressed by prisoners' positive attitudes and behavioral changes. Many Texas prisoners have a hopeless, despairing attitude and believe they cannot change anything, he said.

"It is not for everyone," said Vance, former Harris County district attorney.
"There are a lot of inmates who would not want to be in such an intensive program as this one is."

"When we reduce recidivism, we reduce victimization," said warden Frederick E. Becker, who oversees Jester II.

Part of a prison system's responsibility to society is to reduce the likelihood of repeat offenders, Becker said.

James Turpin of the Maryland-based American Correctional Association said InnerChange reflects many popular components of pre-release programs such as life skills training, education and restitution.

The key to success in such programs is community support and employment. "For life skills to work and function in society, you have to have a job," Turpin said.

Kenneth Adams of Sam Houston University's Criminal Justice Center in Huntsville said the program reflects society's concern about simply incarcerating felons. The cost of incarcerating an inmate in Texas is $15,000 a year, he said.

"People expect prisons to make a difference in ways other than keeping people off the street," Adams said. "It is important for society to recognize inmates who want to make a change and facilitate that."

It is too soon for results, Roberts said. But he is seeing attitude changes.
InnerChange left the inmates little free time and they initially complained. That has changed. Roberts has seen some of the prisoners weep and ask for forgiveness for bad behavior toward fellow prisoners. One inmate had not received a family visit in more than six years. But he communicated with his family and they visited him a few weeks ago.

"They can see he is starting to change his life," Roberts said.

Roberts said that in his 22-year correctional career, he has seen only two factors change prisoners. One is age. As a inmate gets older, he is less likely to commit crimes. The second factor is spiritual transformation. He has seen even hardened violent criminals change their behavior after spiritual conversion.

Conversions are not necessarily deceptive acts, said chaplain Bryan.

"The No. 1 complaint we get from (the free world) is that this is jailhouse religion and therefore is meaningless," he said. "The truth is that we all turn to God at times of desperation. These men are in a time of desperation like few of us have known."

The program is not selecting just model inmates, Bryan said. "We did not pick the cream of the crop," he said. Chaplains, who interview the prisoners, also select inmates who are not necessarily diligent in attending weekly services, but who want to change.

InnerChange relies on God's power to transform lives, Bryan said.

Joseph Williams, 29, serving 15 years for drug delivery, is a Muslim but has gained valuable insight from InnerChange. "I get up at 5 a.m. Then I am singing, praying and reading the Bible with my brothers. If we could apply that to everyday living in the free world, then we would all come out a lot better."

Williams is convinced he was called by God to participate in the program. "Now it is my turn to walk the way He wants me to walk," he said. "I want to do something positive for the world."

"I believe more in myself and more in God," said Leroy Thornton, 32, serving 15 years for insurance fraud. "These last two months I have felt really good about myself. Words can't express how I feel."

Blind but now I see . . .
Houston's normally fun-loving, boisterous Greek community will soon be silent and sad.

"Father Lou" is leaving.

The Rev. Louis J. Christopulos, 43, dean of Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral since 1987, will leave Houston in July to pastor St. Catherine's Greek Orthodox Church in Denver, a parish of 250 families. The Denver diocese has 47 parishes in 14 states from Montana to Texas.

He'll leave behind a thriving 1,000-family parish that is working on a multimillion-dollar development plan. He'll also leave a void in the leadership of the city's interfaith and Greek Orthodox communities.

For Christopulos, leaving Annunciation is bittersweet. The bitter part will be leaving behind one of the major parishes in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America. The sweet part will be finding more time for his wife, Marsha, and children, Nicole, 16; Christopher, 13; and Jonathan, 7.

"I view Annunciation as the mother church of Orthodoxy in Houston," said Christopulos, a native of Cheyenne, Wyo. "This parish has a good reputation in the archdiocese."

The 80-year-old church, at 3511 Yoakum Blvd., is regarded as progressive and as a trend-setter, he said.

Annunciation took the lead in establishing the Orthodox parish of St. John the Theologian in Webster. Four years ago, Christopulos - who was providing part-time spiritual leadership to a score of Clear Lake Orthodox families - contacted the Rev. Gabriel Barrow, a Houston Independent School District administrator and asked him to take spiritual leadership of the fledgling congregation. Barrow serves as the church's pastor and works with the school district.

In Orthodox tradition, establishing new churches is usually reserved for diocesan officials. But Annunciation nurtured and encouraged St. John's, Barrow said, with "Father Lou" acting as the parish's surrogate godfather.

St. John's now has 75 families and its own church building. It has recorded 50 converts to Orthodoxy, Barrow said. "Father Lou was head of the cathedral, but he was willing to go out of his way to help a small church whenever we needed anything," Barrow said.

Christopulos said St. John and St. Basil the Great Greek Orthodox Church in west Houston are the results of growth in the Greek community. Unlike Greek communities in New York, Chicago and Boston, the Houston Greek community is not concentrated in a few neighborhoods or pockets.

Annunciation Cathedral parishioners come from as far away as Sealy. But a majority of parishioners live in Houston's west and southwest areas. That was one reason members considered moving Annunciation to the suburbs four years ago. But they voted to stay in Montrose, where the church has been since 1951.

Houston is not likely to see a repeat of the massive waves of Greek immigrants of the turn of the century and after World War II, Christopulos said. But the
Orthodox community will be bolstered by immigrants from Eastern Europe and by continuing conversions to Orthodoxy, he believes.

Eastern Orthodoxy traces its roots to apostolic times. In 1054, the Eastern branches of Christianity split from the Western churches. The Western churches recognized the authority of the pope, while the Eastern churches became autonomous. Most Eastern Orthodox churches are organized along national lines, such as the Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox.

As Houston's largest Orthodox church, Annunciation will likely be the first stop for many immigrants and for anyone curious about Orthodoxy, Christopoulos said. "It will be a beacon for the Orthodox faith in Houston," he said.

Mike Shebay, president of the church's board of trustees, said Christopoulos helped the parish confront many difficult problems by maintaining objectivity and showing compassion.

"His biggest contribution was the sense of compassion he instilled throughout the community," Shebay said.

"He is one of the most compassionate priests I have ever met in my life," Barrow said.

Christopoulos' reputation extends beyond the cathedral. In Houston's interfaith community, he has been regarded as a leader in ecumenical affairs.

He has been involved in many events and activities of the Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, said executive director David Leslie.

"He lives out his faith in the community," Leslie said. "He does not separate faith and culture."

Christopoulos said his parents, two sisters and brother - one of only 150 Greek families in Cheyenne - were deeply involved in that city's Saints Constantine and Helen Church.

While his younger brother, the Rev. Daniel Christopoulos, had expressed an interest in the priesthood since childhood, "I never thought about it until I graduated from college," Louis Christopoulos said.

He graduated from the University of Wyoming in 1976 with a degree in parks and recreation. One of the reasons he began to consider the priesthood was that Campus Crusade for Christ, an evangelical Protestant group, questioned him about his faith.

"They challenged me personally to look into my own faith," Christopoulos said.

He entered Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston in 1977 "not so much to become a priest as to learn more about my faith and see where that would lead me," he said.

It led to ordination in 1980. He served in a Brooklyn parish for two years, then went to a small Amarillo church for three years.

In 1985, the Rev. Nick Triantafilou, then dean of Annunciation, invited Christopoulos to become his assistant. Christopoulos found himself leading Annunciation after Triantafilou left the parish in 1987. It was a daunting challenge for a 33-year-old priest.

Christopoulos is confident that Annunciation will continue to grow and remain one of the nation's foremost Greek Orthodox churches. Architects and church officials are working on extensive plans for a new church complex.

It is a development Father Lou will continue to monitor from Denver. -END-
Published December 13, 1997

The homeless. The hungry. The hopeless. They trudge to Impact Houston Church of Christ, in the shadows of downtown, for help and healing.

In 1986, John T. Reilly found Impact Church while living in a men’s shelter and working in labor pools. Reilly was drifting through life, pulled down occasionally by drugs and alcohol. Today, he is a school psychologist pursuing a doctorate in educational psychology at Baylor University in Waco.

Reilly, 34, accepted a Sunday worship invitation that included a meal at Impact Church. Over the next year, he filled not only his stomach but also his spirit. He found encouragement, hope and fellowship. He attended weekly worship and Bible classes. He listened intently to the preaching. He discovered direction and purpose in his life.

In 1987, members collected funds to send Reilly to Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. Three years later he graduated magna cum laude.

"What made the biggest impression on me was their willingness to spend so much time (with me), and not just a few minutes," Reilly said of the way church members influenced him. "They seemed sincerely interested in reading the Bible and studying the Bible."

While Impact Church is transforming the lives of the needy, it is also uniting and revitalizing the estimated 150 Houston-area Churches of Christ. The churches, characterized by local church autonomy, have a national history which makes many view them as a denomination, a label they avoid. In both the Southwest and nationally, they now face a critical point in their history with some congregations eager to experiment and others fearful change will dilute the strength of their beliefs and message.

Some churches are also exploring:

Renewal through regional workshops every two years. Houston-area churches recently sponsored a spiritual renewal weekend that attracted thousands to workshops on ministry, outreach and evangelism. The event will be scheduled biennially.

Reaching out to the needy and ethnic minorities. This national movement, in which Impact Church is a leader, surfaced in the last decade.

Experimenting with worship styles that include contemporary hymns, hand-clapping and other exuberant, expressive formats influenced by Pentecostalism. That movement is sparking controversy among the churches. Most still reject any music in worship – other than a cappella singing – as sinful.

Some Churches of Christ regard this onslaught of change as unbiblical. Other leaders argue the church must change or die.

Impact Church is simply the New Testament in action, said Ron Sellers, a founder of Impact. The church needs to be where the needs are, he said. "We just wanted a church that really and truly would be for all the people that Jesus died for, no matter their color, class or situation," Sellers said.

Located at 1704 Weber, Impact is a massive, concrete-walled warehouse complete with tractor-trailer garage doors and enough room to accommodate a Dallas
Cowboys practice. It houses a small laundry used by the homeless, general worship facilities, kitchens, showers and a community dining area.

Nearby is a new, two-story food and clothing distribution center that serves 80 families twice weekly. A former mailing company building a stone's throw from the church is now a pre-school learning center. The learning center is also the home of the church's 200-member Hispanic congregation.

The 400-member church was established by Sellers and fellow ministers Charlie Middlebrook and Doug Williams. (Churches of Christ ministers do not use clergy titles.)

"So many of the (Churches of Christ) were moving to the suburbs that there was a greater and greater vacuum in the inner city," Sellers said. "We have gone around the world to save a soul, but we often have not gone into the cities."

Part of the reason is the rural roots of the Churches of Christ. "In Texas, in these little towns, you will see a Church of Christ for sure," Sellers said. "But in bigger cities, we have been pretty weak and have not related well."

Some churches are not aware of how much need exists among poor people and in the inner city, he said. Because of their independent structure, congregations may forget human needs beyond their neighborhoods.

Contact with the poor revitalizes Christians' spirit, he said. "There is an army of Christian people who love and care about others. When they get together, they are an encouragement to each other," Sellers said.

Churches such as Impact help unite the Church of Christ locally and nationally, Sellers said. Forty area congregations support Impact with donations and volunteers. Twenty-one congregations take turns supplying the weekly Sunday meal after worship.

Impact Church has become a destination for youth and volunteer teams from across Texas and other states such as Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina. This coming summer, Abilene Christian University is sending students who will do mission work and earn credit for an urban ministries course.

"Churches working together add all kinds of pluses," Sellers said.

Impact Church shows other Churches of Christ and other denominations how to reach out. For Sellers, outreach is a necessity. "We'd better go in that direction or we are in trouble," Sellers said. "If the church is going to grow and more importantly be a leader in the community and really help people, that is where it needs to be."

While community involvement and outreach to the poor are well accepted in other denominations, it is a recent movement in the Churches of Christ, said Jack Reese, dean of the College of Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University. "There has been a great emphasis on service in most cities that I know in the last 10 years," Reese said.

Impact Church is recognized as a model program at a denominational national urban ministries conference held in various cities annually. "Houston, Memphis and Dallas are centers of the movement toward Impact Church type of work," said Lynn Mitchell, University of Houston resident scholar in religion.

As with other Protestant denominations, Churches of Christ are losing members and facing decline unless leaders can find ways to attract youths, young families and ethnic groups, Mitchell said.

"The old mainline Churches of Christ have basically gotten the message that they are dying so they are trying to infuse congregations with newer ideas on evangelism and worship," he said.
Younger ministers are leading the church to outreach and service as one way to reach baby boomers and Generation Xers, he said. Nationally, local churches are in the forefront of new evangelism and outreach programs, Mitchell said. That means Churches of Christ are well positioned structurally if leaders can convince members to reach out.

Spiritual renewal workshops are unifying the churches and strengthening the call to outreach. In Houston, more than 3,000 Church of Christ members from more than 50 churches participated in a three-day workshop recently at the Sheraton Astrodome Hotel. The workshop, the first in recent memory in Houston, was so successful that several churches have chosen to hold the event biennially, said Bill Yasko of Westbury Church of Christ.

The 1999 event could attract up to 5,000 church members, Yasko said.

As for Impact Church, it is conducting a $1.8 million fund-raising campaign to renovate and buy more property. About half of the goal has been raised.

Sellers said most mission works like Impact Church want to become independent and self-sufficient. But Impact wants to become more dependent on help from other Churches of Christ.

"We are looking to be more involved in the hurting needs of people," Sellers said.

"If we do that, we will need more people and more funds," he said. "It is like deciding never to stop having children."

Impact Church can be contacted at 713-864-5667.
FIRST, there is forgetfulness. Car keys. Names. Birthdays. It mutates into confusion. House keys for unremembered houses often come next. Names for unrecognized persons. Finally, there is a black hole of disorientation that erases memories of spouses and children, grandchildren and lifelong friends.

Dementia - the mental impairment that can result in memory loss - is one of many afflictions that stalk the elderly and rob them and their families of independence. But local churches are joining the battle to keep their oldest members physically and spiritually fit.

St. Luke's United Methodist Church, 3471 Westheimer, recently opened the Seniors Place, an adult day-care center that helps elderly people who have Alzheimer's disease, stroke-related disabilities or chronic health problems.

Moody Memorial United Methodist Church in Galveston plans to open a $1.3 million, 13,000-square-foot adult day-care center. It will include recreational and occupational therapists to serve up to 53 people.

The Foundation for Interfaith Research and Ministry (FIRM) has trained 400 volunteers from 15 congregations. They provide in-home care for Alzheimer’s patients.

Estimates are that 20,000 to 40,000 people in Harris and surrounding counties may suffer from dementia-related illnesses, said the Rev. Ron Sunderland, vice president of FIRM.

According to the statistics, as many as one in 70 area families cares for a person with dementia or related problems. So a 400-member congregation may have as many as six families in such a situation, Sunderland said.

He points out that dementia of various degrees affects one in every four persons 65 or older. It affects one of every two persons 85 years and older. Moreover, many older people must deal with other debilitating afflictions such as Parkinson's disease and strokes.

"The real impact is going to be in 10 or 12 years," said Frank Balch, the Institute of Religion's senior adult ministry specialist. That's when the first wave of baby boomers will reach 65. The current generation of elderly is living longer, a trend likely to continue, Balch said. "The fastest-growing age group is 85 and over."

Churches are slow to acknowledge the aging explosion. Adult day-care centers are not as popular as children's day-care centers in churches nationally or locally, Balch said, but the omnipresence of churches and their supply of volunteers make them a natural place for elderly day care.

"Churches have not only a legitimate but also compelling role to play as the population ages," Balch said.

St. Luke's Seniors Place is considered Houston's first church-sponsored adult day care, said Melinda Vanzant, its director. The program serves eight to 10 senior adults. Average daily participation is three.

Daily activities include current events discussion, reminiscing, arts and crafts, parlor games and sing-alongs. There are stretch and exercise sessions,
musical programs and a hot lunch.

The focus is on socialization. It stimulates the brain and helps impede memory loss, Vanzant said. All the center's activities have a mental and physical goal. Parlor games like ring toss help eye-hand coordination. St. Luke's also has a day school for children, allowing the elderly to see and interact with the young.

A registered nurse monitors participants daily.

"The good thing about a church doing this is that you can get a ton of volunteers," Vanzant said. Volunteers help keep costs low. Participants pay $50 a day and are encouraged to attend at least twice a week.

The elderly, especially those with dementia, with no access to structured activities are often left to watch TV or sleep all day at home, Balch said. "Activities cut down on the tendency, especially for Alzheimer's patients, to wander at night," he said.

The center can also help the elderly who are in relatively good health.

The Seniors Place has been "extremely beneficial" for 94-year-old Mrs. Herbert T. "Elsie" Hayes, said her daughter, Mrs. Thomas B. Layton. Although her mother lives in a high-rise apartment and has around-the-clock nursing care, Layton encouraged her to attend. At first, her mother resisted. But one day at the Seniors Place changed her mind.

The exercise sessions have strengthened her mother's ability to walk, lessening her reliance on a wheelchair. "She is walking better than she has ever walked in two years," Layton said.

Her mother, a college music graduate, especially enjoys the music programs, and she has brought home Christmas ornaments and picture frames she has made in crafts classes.

For Dorothy Simons, Seniors Place gives her a chance to rest from providing daily care for her 98-year-old father-in-law, George Simons Sr.

"He loves it. He gets up ready to go," she said. "It is nice for him to get to go socialize with people in his age bracket."

It also gives her an opportunity to engage in other activities.

"All primary caregivers need to have opportunities for their elderly family members to have a good time," said Simons, a homemaker.

Giving respite for caregivers is the mission of the FIRM program, Sunderland said. Volunteers are recruited and trained to go into homes of primarily Alzheimer's patients to give caregivers a few hours or a day of rest.

For every family that can take advantage of a program like Seniors Place, Sunderland estimates, there are a 100 families who cannot afford to pay. "It's that family we are trying to help," he said.

The volunteers spell caregivers for a few hours or a day. That can mean the difference between care at home and a nursing home, Balch said. Most caregivers are women, either daughters or daughters-in-law, he said, and many are convinced that no one can care for their loved one like they can. That can lead to burnout.

"The longer you can maintain a person in their home with a minimum amount of assistance, the longer you can forestall a very expensive institutionalization," Balch said.
DALLAS - Southern Baptist Convention delegates Wednesday overwhelmingly approved a resolution calling for a boycott of the Walt Disney Co., provoking impassioned debate before and after the show-of-hands vote.

The controversial resolution received more than 80 percent support from the 6,000 delegates in attendance on the second day of the three-day annual meeting at the Dallas Convention Center. The meeting has a registration of more than 12,000 delegates, known as messengers.

The resolution does not mention boycott but calls on the 15.7-million member denomination to "refrain from patronizing the Disney Co. and any of its related entities" because the company is "increasingly promoting immoral ideologies such as homosexuality, infidelity and adultery, which are biblically reprehensible and abhorrent to God and His plan for the world that He loves."

Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God and other religious groups have been upset with the Disney Co. for permitting "Gay Days" at its popular theme parks and providing company benefits to partners of gay employees. The resolution is the result of a proposal introduced at the convention's 1996 meeting in New Orleans. Richard Land, president of the denomination's Christian Life Commission, attempted to negotiate the moral concerns for a year with the Disney Co., but he said company officials were uncooperative.

The Disney Co. issued a statement stating: "We are proud that the Disney brand creates more family entertainment of every kind than anyone else in the world. We plan to continue our leadership role and in fact we will increase production of family entertainment." The statement was unsigned.

The Burbank, Calif.-based entertainment conglomerate includes the ABC-TV and Radio Networks, Walt Disney Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, Disney World in Orlando, Fla., Disneyland in Anaheim, Calif., and other holdings. It also includes publishing companies, magazines, newspapers and retail stores.

The resolution also asked Baptists to "refrain from patronizing any company that promotes immoral ideologies and practices, realizing that the Disney Co. is not the only such provider."

"This is not an attempt to bring the Disney Co. down, but to bring Southern Baptists up to the moral standard of God," the resolution stated.

The Disney Co. has downplayed the boycott and generally ignored the convention.

Prior to the vote, the Rev. Rick Markham of Georgia attacked the resolution. He said if messengers approved the resolution, they had a moral duty to stop watching ABC-TV, ESPN and other Disney-owned channels.

"If we are not willing to do that, we are no more than 20th-century Pharisees who strain at gnats and swallow camels," Markham said in a Scriptural allusion. "In typical Baptist fashion, we have reacted to an extreme by positioning ourselves at another extreme."

Lisa Kinney, a delegate from Largo, Fla., received a standing ovation for her support of the resolution. Kinney told delegates that she spent her childhood at Disney World and had purchased many of its products. But she was boycotting
the company.

"Will the Southern Baptist boycott change the Disney Company?" Kinney asked. "I don't know, but it will change us. It will affirm to us and the world that we love Jesus more than we love our entertainment."

The Rev. Martin Knox said the resolution would hurt efforts to minister to homosexuals. "There are better ways to communicate the grace and truth of Jesus Christ to homosexuals in America than boycotting companies," Knox said.

But John Sullivan, chairman of the convention's resolutions committee, countered that the convention needed to take a stand against immorality. "There is a legitimate time when you have to say enough is enough," Sullivan said.

After the debate, the Rev. Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla., said he would not support the boycott. Henry, a former convention president, stood at a microphone attempting to speak to delegates but was never called during 25 minutes of debate.

Henry said the boycott would have no impact on the Disney Co. He said he was not going to give up his hour-long Sunday morning program that is broadcast by the ABC affiliate in Orlando. "The best way to bring Disney to its knees is for us to get on our knees," Henry said.

He said the boycott would bring moral agony to conscientious Southern Baptists who are employed by the Disney Co.

The Rev. Wiley Drake, a pastor in Buena Vista, Calif., and the originator of the resolution, angrily countered Henry's comments at an informal press conference, saying the boycott would hurt the Disney Co. Drake said not all Baptists would support the boycott but the majority would.

In other actions, Charles Omar Hart of Houston called for a boycott of the McDonald's restaurant chain because it signed a seven-year contract with the Disney Co. to distribute Disney toys. No immediate decision was made on the resolution.
Published September 6, 1997

What you can do, I cannot do. What I can do, you cannot do. But working together, we can do something beautiful for God. - Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa's boundless spirit of loving faith and service to the "poorest of the poor" radiated throughout the grim, desperate streets of Calcutta, across continents and to Houston.

The 87-year-old nun's death Friday of cardiac arrest stunned Houston's religious community. But her saddened supporters remained firmly confident that her spirit of giving and service to society's outcast and forgotten will transcend her life.

"We lost something and we gained something," said the Rev. Stephen Reynolds, pastor of Christ the King Catholic Church and spiritual director of the Lay Missionaries of Charity. "We have lost the best known example of selflessness and loving service to the poor. But Mother Teresa's death gives us a new saint in heaven."

The lay organization, composed of fewer than 20 members, supports the work of aiding the poor started in Calcutta, India, in 1948 by Mother Teresa. Lay members further the work of Missionary of Charity nuns and brothers through prayer and direct service to the poor, Reynolds said.

"We try to live our lives in solidarity with the poor," Reynolds said.

Serving the poor was not an option to Mother Teresa. It was the cornerstone of her life. Nuns and brothers who become members of her order must vow to give "wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor."

Mother Teresa became perhaps the world's best known woman religious leader through her tireless efforts for the poor of Calcutta. She was recognized for her work, winning the Nobel Peace Prize and other accolades.

"She has been a universal symbol to people of all faiths and colors," said the Rev. Fred Haman, director of congregational relations for Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston. "She was rich in her way of being with the poor."

"She has been a living example of what it means to simply serve," said Haman, a Lutheran minister.

Mother Teresa, born Agnes Bojaxhiu in Yugoslavia, set out to become a missionary to India when she joined the Loreto sisters in 1928. But as a nun, her work was primarily educating middle-class Indian girls in a Calcutta high school. The nun said that in September 1946, she experienced a call from Christ. "I want you to serve me among the poorest of the poor," she said.

That led her and an increasing number of supporters to the streets of Calcutta.

The Rev. Michael Miller, president of the University of St. Thomas, met the nun in Rome.

"One day on the way to work, I was going in the office door and there she was coming out, just by herself," Miller said. "Even seeing her, you couldn't help but be impressed by her diminutive stature. She had the most beautiful face;
that is the one thing I remember, the beauty of her face."

"She had the sense of such serenity and strength," he said. "There was a beauty in her that was remarkable."

Mother Teresa was not confrontational in her work for the poor, Miller said. She was not condemning of those who did not share her work.

"She seemed in many aspects of her life so very. embracing," Miller said.

"There was something remarkably tranquil about her even though she was obviously a woman of enormous strength, determination, a woman with a will of iron," he said.

Tracy Plunkett, a supporter of Mother Teresa's work, met her when the nun arrived at Houston's Intercontinental Airport in 1976. Mother Teresa stayed at the airport briefly and met privately with Plunkett and other supporters.

Plunkett, like others, was saddened by the news of her death but buoyed by the nun's saintly life. "We called her a saint here and we know she did so much good in this world," she said.

"She elevated a person's thoughts to God and to serving him through others," Plunkett said.

The sadness at Mother Teresa's death was blunted by the well-reported decline in her health. She had survived other heart problems and illnesses.

"It is not the kind of sadness you feel for a young person who was cut down in her youth," Miller said. "She did what God wanted her to do and had 87 years to do it and she did it magnificently."

-END-
A flame dances atop a thick, white candle as chants of "Shalom" reverberate through the sanctuary of Congregation Beth Israel.

Rabbi Steven M. Gross leads the chant. He faces 12 men and women seeking God's welcome, God's strength, God's healing. "Offerings of the Heart," the synagogue's healing service, has begun. -TEXT- A flame dances atop a thick, white candle as chants of "Shalom" reverberate through the sanctuary of Congregation Beth Israel.

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After the rabbi welcomes them, group members launch into an upbeat contemporary hymn guided by Gross' guitar strumming. Then the group prays in unison: "Let the healing power within me, your gift to me, bring me the strength to recover, so that I and all who love me may rejoice."

Since 1991, Jewish healing services have blossomed nationwide. Rabbis attribute the popularity to an increase in spiritual seeking throughout Judaism and American religion. The healing services offer spiritual consolation to people who are physically sick, emotionally distraught or grief-stricken. In Houston, Beth Israel offers a healing service. Congregation Emanu El will begin one in January.

The monthly Beth Israel Sunday morning service brings out regulars like Dr. Harvey Gordon, Fran Gimpel, Hilda Cobian and Bobbi Alford. Alford, nursing a broken elbow, is a breast cancer survivor. Gordon can no longer perform surgery because of back problems. The service also draws newcomers: Dr. Louis Pink, a dentist, and his daughter, Laurie Selzer. Gladys Pink, Pink's wife of 44 years and Laurie's mother, died a month ago. The father and daughter are seeking closure in the healing service.

"I open myself to God, and it is wonderful," said Gimpel, a purchasing expediter. "It's a different avenue to God you don't obtain in a Friday night service."

The group recites several traditional and modern prayers and sings together during the hourlong service. The heart of the service is a group sharing that follows a brief study or discussion of sacred texts, Gross said. He selects a symbol such as a shofar (a ram's horn) or the Torah that illustrates the point of the study and discussion.

He passes it around the group allowing each person to decide whether to share or reflect silently.

"We don't turn it into a therapy session," Gross said. "We don't sit and process everyone's thoughts. There are a lot of tears at this point."

The service concludes with prayers. "Then at the very end, we bless each other," Gross said. Participants say the service helps them heal. Several like Cobian and Gordon have not missed one since the services began in December 1996.

"Most of the people who are attracted to a healing service are the walking-wounded," said Gordon, a member of the Commission for Religious Living
of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. "Healing is this sudden understanding that we don't get out of this world cured, but we can get out of this world healed."

The healing service offers spiritual sustenance to weary souls in a religious community. It helps participants deal with pain and loss.

Jewish healing services do not seek "miracle" or instant cures for afflictions, Gordon said. "The main thing is a spiritual healing, healing of the soul rather than the body," he said. "It is the idea that God has not abandoned one even if one is ill or even incurably ill."

"We don't do these services so that people will be cured and throw away their crutches," said Rabbi Nancy Flam of Massachusetts, one of the originators of the healing services. "One always hopes for people to get better physically, but the truth for all of us is that we will get sick and die. These services are to strengthen the spirit and the bonds of community, to provide hopefully an environment where God can be felt."

Flam and four other women began the services in response to Jewish interest in the healing services in Christian churches and Hindu and Buddhist temples. "People weren't finding adequate sources of spiritual strength in the Jewish tradition," she said.

Judaism has always connected prayer and healing, she said. "Bikkur cholim" (visiting the sick) is one of the important mitzvahs (good deeds) in Judaism. The traditional sabbath service includes the "Mi Sheberakh," a prayer for healing.

Flam and Rabbis Rachel Cowan and Susan Freeman, along with writer Nessa Rapaport and Ellen Hermanson, founded the Center for Jewish Healing in 1991 in New York City. They also began building on a healing service first composed by Rabbi Yoel Kahn of San Francisco in 1988.

The service uses contemplative openings such as chants to bring the sense of the sacred to the participant, Flam said. "It is important to invite God's presence, and that is one way to do it," she said.

The services use music extensively, from 18th-century melodies known as "niggunim," to contemporary works such as the compositions of Debbie Friedman. Friedman's soft pop hymns have become standard at most services. Some services include prayers for the dead.

But many rabbis are still experimenting with healing services. Some are devising their own.

Rabbi Roy Walter of Emanu El has studied eight services and intends to formulate his own. "People want to walk out feeling as though the (liturgy) words are contemporary and touch their lives," he said.

Gross said the services currently are an alternative form of worship. "They are services that are more intimate, that allow people to bring their pain to the fore," he said.

The healing service is so new among Jews that many don't know they exist. Some Jews associate it with Christian services seen on television. Many are still simply leery.

"There is a timidity," Gordon said. "We live in a society that frowns on getting up and saying, 'I am weak, I am not perfect, I am in need.' " But Gordon finds that most participants "find peace, they find a home and they come back again and again and again."

Flam sees "a real deep yearning" for spirituality among Jews. "This is one
place where that can happen," she said.

Gross said he would like to see a healing service for children who may be ill or suffering the loss of a parent or grandparent. He is also working on a healing service prayer book where illustrations and words can combine to bring a sense of peace for participants.

Although relatively new, the healing services are rapidly becoming part of services offered by synagogues.

To Walter, a healing service is one way Jews can remind themselves that God is always present in our lives. "For emotional and psychological reasons, we feel the need for God's help when we are sick or ill," he said. "But we sometimes forget that when we are strong, we still need God's help."

Singer and composer Debbie Friedman will be in concert at 8 p.m. Dec. 20 at Congregation Emanu E1, 1500 Sunset Blvd. For ticket information, call 713-529-5771.

The National Center for Jewish Healing in New York City can be reached at 212-632-4705. Congregation Beth Israel holds its healing service at 10 a.m. on the third Sunday of the month. Call 713-771-6221.
WITH a knowing smile, 17-year old Kay Babineaux assessed three years of "boyless" high school.

"I am actually glad there are no boys," said Babineaux, an Incarnate Word Academy senior. "I don't have to worry about putting on makeup or fixing my hair."

"I am trying to get a college scholarship so I can keep my focus on academics without any distractions from guys," said the African-American teen whose academic resume includes honor society, student council, volleyball and science club. She wants to attend Southern Methodist University or the University of Texas at Austin or the University of Houston and study business.

It is not as if Babineaux has no social life. "I go to movies, talk on the phone, go to dances and parties and since my sister is in college, I sometimes go to parties with her," she said. And there is always a small army of boys ringing the downtown campus at 609 Crawford when classes end at 3 p.m.

Babineaux's school life is exactly what advocates of girls' schools have argued for decades: girls perform better academically when boys are not present.

Armed with supportive if not conclusive research, proponents of girls' schools are crusading for single-gender public schools throughout the nation despite formidable legal questions.

New York City public school system has established the Young Women's Leadership Academy in East Harlem. The school, in its second year, has seen its enrollment grow from 55 to 170 primarily Hispanic and African-American girls in grades 7-9. If it survives legal challenges, it will eventually enroll from 350 to 400 girls through the 12th grade.

Three California school districts just opened boys and girls academies at middle schools. Two more districts and a county plan to follow suit later this year. The districts are drawing from a $5 million state fund allocated for single-gender schools.

Some school districts are experimenting with single gender classes, separating boys and girls for science and math classes.

"It is going to happen," predicts Sy Fliegel, senior fellow at the Center of Educational Innovation at the Manhattan Institute in New York City. "You're going to have girls schools all over the country."

There are no girls academic public schools in the Houston Independent School District and no plans to start any, said Terry Abbott, district press secretary.

Houston has three girls schools, all private and affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. St. Agnes Academy has 731 girls in grades 9-12 while Duchesne Academy enrols 605 girls from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. St. Agnes' class of '97 consisting of 161 girls received $2.2 million in scholarships. In 1997, Duchesne graduated 41 girls who earned $900,000 in scholarships and grants.
Incarnate Word Academy, celebrating its 125th anniversary, has 255 girls enrolled in grades 9-12. The class of '97 had 55 graduates who were awarded $1 million in grants and scholarships.

Angelica Fernando, 15, an Incarnate Word sophomore, admits she was hesitant when her parents brought up the girls' school. She wanted boys around. "But after I thought about it, I decided it would be good for my education because I would be focusing more on my studies." Fernando wants to be a physical therapist.

Fernando said she has developed more self-confidence at the school, something she is not sure she would have acquired in a larger coed setting.

Marie Babineaux, Kay's mother, said she thought only of Incarnate Word when the time came to send Kay and her older sister, Kim, to high school. She had attended Incarnate Word for three years before a family move took her out of the school.

"Not only did it prepare me with an education but it prepared me for life," Marie Babineaux said. "The religious values and the whole school surroundings, they prepare girls well for life, for college."

"This is a wonderful urban campus that prepares girls for the world in a way that I don't think other places can," said Mary L. Welch, the school's principal.

"Coed is not an evil," Welch said. "It is just that the research has shown, in particular with Catholic girls schools, that girls do better in (single sex) environment."

Studies of girls' Catholic schools find that graduates are more likely to attend undergraduate and graduate schools, she said.

Welch points to studies by the American Association of University Women that find that 81 percent of girls and 84 percent of boys in elementary school say they like math. But in high school only 61 percent of girls say they like math compared to 72 percent of boys. A U.S. Department of Education study found that 4 percent of both boys and girls are in advanced math classes in the eighth grade. By the 12th grade, 3 percent of boys are in advanced math classes compared to 1 percent of girls.

"There is still a stigma in our society in regards to girls and 'smarts'," Welch said. "If a girl is too smart, no one is going to ask her out."

As a result, girls often defer to boys in the classroom. They hang back in class participation or are less likely to answer questions.

Moreover, boys tend to dominate classes. "If boys want to answer a question, they not only raise their hands, they will start making noises," said Anne Perrin, an Incarnate Word English teacher who has taught in public schools. "They want the teacher's attention. They bang, stomp, scream."

"Too many times, the girls don't have a chance," said Mary Jo Langston, a St. Agnes French teacher who taught in public schools for 16 years. "The boys blurt out the answer."

"Even the smartest girls, the boys would bug them for weeks if they got a wrong answer or made a wrong response," Langston said. "The girls are intimidated."

That doesn't happen in an all-girls classroom. "They are open, and they know they can be open," Langston said. "They can say what they want to say, and they don't have to watch their words."
The most important benefit of a girls-only class is that girls ask follow-up questions and are willing to admit they don't understand a topic, Langston said.

An all-girls environment promotes leadership and participation, Welch said. "When the girls come here, they have to be the leaders."

"They have to lead in the clubs and the student council. Whatever needs to be done, it has to be done by girls.

"In a sense this is giving them a nurturing environment in which they gather strength so they can go out and know who they are," Welch said. "It's a tough world out there, and it is still, by and large, a man's world."

Not everyone is behind the concept of all-girls schools, however, especially publicly funded schools. The New York girls' school is at the epicenter of a high-profile clash between the U.S. Department of Education and the city's public school system. The federal agency is asking Chancellor Rudy Crew to open the school to boys or open a boys' school or close the girls' school.

Crew has balked at the options and is threatening to go to court for a definitive ruling.

"What we object to and what we believe the law prohibits is a public school that denies admission based solely on gender," said Norman Siegel, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU and the National Organization of Women's New York chapter lodged complaints against the school system. NOW leaders are angry with the implication that girls cannot learn in the same room and in the same way as boys.

"As a country we have rejected segregation in favor of integration whether it is in a restaurant, on a bus or in a school," Siegel said.

Instead of sex-segregated classes, school systems should improve teaching techniques for coed education, he said.

"There might be some, even many 12-year-old boys in a classroom that create problems for girls to learn," Siegel said. "But you can't make the argument that all 12-year-old boys will have that effect on all 12-year-old girls."

"Taking girls out of the classroom reinforces boys' perception that the classroom is their world, their 'clubhouse' with a 'no girls allowed' sign posted out front," said Anne Conners, president of the NOW-New York City chapter. "Proponents of the school have argued that it is a form of affirmative action for the girls. We reject this argument: affirmative action has always been about inclusion, not about segregation."

Fliegel, a proponent of the girls school, said Title 9, the federal education law banning gender discrimination, does not address junior or senior high schools. The only U.S. Supreme Court ruling dealing with single-gender schools at the K-12 level was in 1976 in which the court justices let stand an appellate court decision that single-gender high schools were not a violation of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause.

Fliegel argues that even at the collegiate level federal officials are not demanding that women be integrated on men's teams but are asking for women's sports such as women's softball teams. "Title 9 was set up to help young women, not to be used against them," Fliegel said. Moreover, no boy has come forward to say he has been harmed by a girls-only school, he added.

Siegel admits the controversy has divided the influential New York feminist camp and other traditional ACLU allies. "We have lost some people in that sense that some people think race is different than gender," he said. But if the girls' school is ruled as constitutionally permissible, then Siegel
expects boys' schools to follow. After that he expects single-sex ethnic schools such as African-American boys' school and Italian-American girls.

"If the all-girls school wins in New York, you are opening the door to further polarization and divisiveness based on immutable traits, which is contrary to what we have been trying to do for the last 30 years," Siegel said.

The American Association of University Women is not advocating single-gender schools, but is not opposed to experimenting, said Janice Weinman, executive director. "We feel there is nothing conclusive about the pros of single-sex education," Weinman said. "What we are supporting is further experimentation and further research. Ideally, what we would hope for would be equal treatment within a public setting."

Many girls-school alumni say they don't need proof that all-girls school gave them an edge educationally and personally.

"When I hit puberty, I became awkward," said Juliette La Chapelle, Incarnate Word class of '83 and now an assistant U.S. Attorney. "I became uncomfortable, I became more withdrawn. This is a time when the hormones are tap dancing on your brains.

"Boys and girls were looking at each other differently," she said. The playmate phase is gone.

The absence of boys in the classrooms reduced the stress and distractions, she said. The school uniforms defused fashion contests between girls.

For La Chapelle, the most important benefit was that Incarnate Word was geared for girls. "The focus was on educating young girls, not young people but young girls," she said. Girls have to play all the roles in the school from leaders to clowns, she noted.

The teachers helped her through her awkward first year. She became student council president and was class valedictorian. She went on to graduate from the University of Notre Dame and Harvard Law School.

La Chapelle said the girls-school experience helped her at Notre Dame, which was more than 30 percent female when she attended. "At a Latin class I was the only girl in a class of 15," she said. "I felt very different not to mention being black on a campus that was only 4 or 5 percent black."

But she drew on the store of self-confidence she acquired at Incarnate Word and felt little anxiety.

Dr. Gina Oggero Rizzo, Incarnate Word class of '78 and an obstetrician-gynecologist, credits the school with developing her leadership skills. "I was a leader type anyway, but it allowed me to show my stuff in a smaller environment," she said.

"We had a great camaraderie among the girls," she said. Rizzo was also class valedictorian and graduated from Texas A&M and the University of Texas Medical School in Houston.

Advocates say women's traditions blossom at an all-girls' school.

Like her mother before her (Rosalie Mandola Oggero, class of '55) and her sister after her (Angela Oggero, class of '80), Rizzo was a St. Thomas High School cheerleader. St. Thomas is an all-boys high school. Incarnate Word, like St. Agnes and Duchesne, cooperates with St. Thomas and Strake Jesuit College Preparatory, both boys schools, in mutually hosting dances and other social events.

La Chapelle followed her sister, Margaret, to Incarnate Word then to Notre
Carmen Aguilar, class of '84 and Incarnate Word admissions director, is one of five sisters to have graduated from the academy. Anna, class of '79; Sylvia, class of '81; Margarita, class of '84; and Julie, class of '88; all graduated from the University of St. Thomas and are educators, Aguilar said.

"It is a sisterhood," Aguilar said. "Incarnate Word is like another family."
DARLENE DeLuca's death Nov. 2 was not unexpected. She had been in a coma since mid-March. The world of Larry DeLuca, her husband of 45 years, was filled with anguish but also with help in dealing with his grief.

In the months preceding his wife's death, DeLuca, 73, was prepared for the inevitable by Tony and Charlotte Maluski, fellow parishioners at St. John Vianney Roman Catholic Church and founders of Samaritan Ministry. The ministry, which has 104 volunteers, reaches out with consolation and assistance to families facing the trauma of death.

The Maluskis established the ministry, now in 28 Roman Catholic parishes in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, after the death of their 21-year-old son in 1985.

It is part of the religious community's growing response to bereaved families forced to plan funerals at a grief-stricken time.

St. John Vianney's church office, 625 Nottingham Oaks Drive in west Houston, automatically informs Samaritan Ministry of a parishioner's death or of sick members needing volunteer assistance. Team members call the families, and 90 percent of those called want help.

Charlotte and Tony Maluski responded to Larry DeLuca's plight shortly after his 75-year-old wife, suffering from Parkinson's disease, went into a coma. They read Scripture and prayed together, sharing death's sting. They prepared DeLuca and his three adult daughters for the inevitable end.

"They counseled and relaxed me," said DeLuca, who is retired. The Maluskis brought comparative lists of funeral costs at area funeral homes, preparing DeLuca for the details of planning a funeral. The information included a map showing nearby funeral homes and cemeteries. It prompted DeLuca to purchase a cemetery plot.

"I had not planned or thought about a funeral," DeLuca said. "It was the first death in my immediate family. I had no idea about funeral costs." Since he had no insurance on his wife, the Maluskis' information was "a great help financially," DeLuca said.

Samaritan Ministry volunteers brought meals to DeLuca and arranged a dinner for the family and guests in the parish hall after the funeral. They helped plan the funeral service, including Scripture readings and music.

If he had needed them, volunteers would have picked up family members arriving at airports, arranged for baby-sitting or secured his home while the family was at the wake or funeral.

"Without their help, their consoling, their thoughts, it would have been tough on me to go through," DeLuca said. The ministry offers personal and group bereavement help afterward.

For the Maluskis, it is a ministry born from the agony of losing their son, Robert, in an auto accident. "When he was killed, we had a tremendous amount of help," Charlotte Maluski said.

A close friend stayed with her from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m for three days, answering the phone, preparing meals and consoling her. A niece and a parish friend also
stayed with the Maluskis and their remaining four sons and daughter during the dark days. They were like the original Samaritan, Charlotte Maluski said, referring to the New Testament's story of a Samaritan who provided help and kindness to a robbery victim.

"You can't think straight; you can't put two and two together," she said. Then came the grim task of funeral planning. "It is the last thing you can ever do for the person that you love. You want it to be so right and so perfect, but your mind doesn't work worth a flip."

"There was so much to do," said Tony Maluski, a semi-retired engineer. "I never felt so overwhelmed in all my life. Even with all the help, it was a tremendously difficult job."

He spent half a day purchasing a cemetery plot. He knew nothing of funeral arrangements and costs. He didn't know if his son had any insurance.

"Often priests, the pastors and the funeral directors shift forward as fast as possible, and they don't give the bereaved any space to gather thoughts," Maluski said.

In the next few months, the Maluskis began a ministry to help those who found themselves undergoing the same wrenching experience. They began to lecture on funeral planning and costs. But no one wanted to listen. Charlotte Maluski spoke to a women's club at St. John Vianney. Some women walked out.

Tony Maluski now has well-attended parish funeral lectures, but "10 years ago I would have had two people (attend)," he said.

Today, more people are willing to talk openly about death. Assisted suicide, AIDS and the high cost of funerals have broken down taboos surrounding death, Charlotte Maluski said.

It is the new openness that is allowing the Institute of Religion to present a second seminar on funeral planning and the church from 9 a.m. to noon Feb. 11, said Frank Balch, a senior ministry expert at the institute. The first seminar in September drew 110 participants, the maximum allowed at the Texas Medical Center institute.

The second seminar will be held in the sanctuary of St. Luke's United Methodist Church, 3471 Westheimer. The free seminar targets clergy and ministers to senior adults, but lay leaders and interested persons can attend. Registration is requested by calling (713) 797-0600.

The seminar will present speakers on organ donation and the willing of bodies to medical schools. The schools pay for a cremation service for a donor.

The seminar will also feature Ken Lambert of Funeral Shoppers, who provides low-cost funeral information for a fee, and Frank Schulte of Eagle Casket Outlets Inc., 13329 Veterans Memorial Drive, who sells to the public.

Most churches provide spiritual and emotional assistance to bereaved families but stop short of funeral planning.

"They are not comfortable at helping families in terms of costs," Balch said. "They don't have that information."

Balch wants churches, synagogues and other religious institutions to promote planning for funerals and discussion of end-of-life issues, especially among the elderly. Parents need to discuss it with their children. Issues to be settled include organ donations, cremation vs. burial or funeral arrangements.

Most families want a dignified funeral they can afford, Charlotte Maluski
said. Even in cases of lingering terminal illness, families often will not prepare for funerals. Purchasing a casket or a cemetery plot is a discomforting admission that death is inevitable.

"It is an extremely personal thing," Maluski said. But waiting until after death leaves family and friends in grief and less able to deal with the details and costs.

Three months after Darlene DeLuca's death, Larry DeLuca feels satisfied that he made the best decisions possible for his wife in her last months and in death.

And those decisions were made with the help of some good Samaritans.

For information on Samaritan Ministry, call (713) 589-8729.
THE Holy Spirit speaks in Spanish in thousands of Hispanic Pentecostal churches in Texas and nationwide.

As millions of Christians worldwide celebrate Easter Sunday, the Pentecostal movement is reviving. It is sweeping through Third World countries, American ethnic communities and Houston's barrios. The movement annually grows by an estimated 20 million people worldwide, with vigorous growth especially in Latin America. Since 1986, Latin American Protestants have increased from 18.6 million to 59.4 million. An estimated two-thirds of that increase is Pentecostal.

But in Houston's barrios, Pentecostalism faces new challenges as it grows.

In the Bible, Pentecost marked the Holy Spirit's advent on Christ's frightened followers after he ascended to heaven. The New Testament Book of Acts describes the sudden appearance of tongues of fire over each person. The followers "were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues."

Pentecostals believe the Holy Spirit touches individuals with a personal divine experience that sparks praying in unknown tongues, joyous dancing and exuberant worship. They also believe in divine healing and miraculous cures.

"All our churches are growing," said the Rev. Jose Salazar who oversees 23 Hispanic Assemblies of God churches in the Houston area. He pastors Primera Iglesia Asemblea de Dios (First Spanish Assembly of God), 3402 Runnels, the oldest denominational church in Houston. Primera, in east Houston, was the city's only Hispanic Pentecostal church when founded in 1926.

"Some of our churches are growing because of bilingual services," Salazar said. "Some of them are growing because of immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru. Our families are bringing in other families."

James Plata, president of the San Antonio-based Latin American Bible Institute - an Assemblies of God Bible college, points to signs of vigor. "Five years ago, there were no Hispanic churches in Arkansas. Now there are five." Louisiana had no Hispanic churches two years ago but has two congregations today, he said.

The Rev. Isaac Canales, professor at Fuller Seminary in California and an Assemblies of God pastor, estimates half of Los Angeles' 2,500 Hispanic Protestant churches are Pentecostal.

Spanish-speaking Pentecostal immigrants arrive in the United States "with a lot of fire and fervor," he said. That keeps Pentecostalism fresh and vigorous in barrios.

Houston is a center of growth. The Rev. Hernan Silguero, 49, began his Houston Pentecostal ministry with 19 people in a northside Houston storefront in 1971. Now his United Hispanic Pentecostal Church at 6518 Fulton has more than 1,000 worshipers on Sundays. His goal is to expand his church's capacity from 700 to 1,500 by year's end.

His church owns half a city block for parking and a Bible college now training 40 ministerial students.
Silguero founded a now-15-year-old national organization of 43 Hispanic Pentecostal churches that includes eight Houston congregations. United Hispanic Pentecostal Churches, as the organization is named, exist in California, Arizona, Maryland and North Carolina. The organization also has 40 churches in Mexico and five congregations in Canada.

Silguero estimates his American flock at 5,000 members.

"We don't have a secret or anything," Silguero said. "It has to be the Lord."


"Pentecostalism is still a movement among the poor, the working class, the lower class," said Villafane, an Assembly of God minister. Pentecostals open storefront churches in the barrios or take over sanctuaries left behind by relocating Anglo congregations.

Poor Hispanics, especially immigrants, benefit from the numerous social services Pentecostal barrio churches provide. The barrio churches replace the community that was left behind in Mexico, El Salvador, Puerto Rico and other home countries, Villafane said.

The movement's biblical fundamentalism gives certainty to anxious immigrants who find their family and moral values at odds with American culture, Villafane said. Strict moral codes, such as bans on drinking, drug use and other "sinful" behaviors, guide family conduct.

The heart of the Pentecostal movement is a "personal experience" of the Holy Spirit. Carlos Reyes, a Primera Iglesia member, remembers the day 16 years ago when he responded to an altar call. Reyes merely wanted a blessing for an upcoming vacation trip but it became much more.

"It is something hard to explain," Reyes said. "I felt chills in my body, and I wanted to worship God. You feel something way down, and it stays with you."

"It is an inner peace, the joy that one feels in the presence of the Lord," Salazar said.

Houston may have been the birthplace of Hispanic Pentecostalism, according to Oral Roberts University historian Eddie Hyatt. Contemporary Pentecostalism began in 1901 with the Rev. Charles Parnham and his Topeka, Kan., Bible college. Parnham and his students received the "baptism of the Spirit" characterized by praying in tongues.

In 1905, Parnham came to Houston, where one of his students was African-American minister W.J. Seymour. Seymour launched modern Pentecostalism the following year with a historic campaign in Los Angeles that became known as the "Azusa Street Revival." The revival attracted national and international attention and helped spread Pentecostalism worldwide.

Hyatt said several Mexican-Americans attended Parnham's Houston meetings, but their names were not recorded.

Pentecostalism's success has changed Protestant churches, a phenomenon Villafane calls the "Pentecostalization of churches." Many churches now use upbeat music and expressive worship styles.

The Rev. Manuel Rodriguez of Central Park United Methodist Church introduced Pentecostalism to his 65-member congregation. "In the Methodist Church, you may feel the Holy Spirit, but you don't let it go," Rodriguez said. "You hold it back. If we feel the Holy Spirit is among the congregation at a certain
time, we turn it loose.

"We believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and we worship God in a way that he should be worshiped," Rodriguez said. When he arrived as pastor nine years ago, 30 of the 35-member congregation left because of his Pentecostalism.

But all is not rosy for Pentecostalism in the barrio.

A critical problem is the loss of younger English-speaking Hispanics to Anglo churches. "That's where we have our problem," said Plata, the Bible college president. "It's a phenomenon I don't understand."

Plata and other leaders encourage bilingual services to keep the English-speakers.

Fervor and evangelical aggressiveness also wane in the more assimilated and educated second and third generations, Canales said. "It is part of the desire to be mainstream," he said. The spiritual gifts, such as praying in tongues, are less evident and behavioral codes are less rigorous.

The enthusiasm is still there even if it is low-key, Canales said.

Despite the rapid growth, Plata estimates only 2 percent of the estimated 30 million Hispanics in the United States are Pentecostal.

Primera has seen good and bad times. There were fewer than 100 members when Salazar arrived at the church in 1957. Membership had grown to more than 400 earlier, but is now 200.

For seven years, Salazar has struggled to finish a 600-seat sanctuary that is about 60 percent complete.

Salazar attributes the decline to a worldly and materialistic mind-set in the 1980s. "The people are prosperous. They have cars. They have money and can go places here and there," he said. "They forgot about the church."

But he hopes for a resurgence. "Things are starting to change," he said. "We are seeing a hunger for the supernatural, a hunger for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit."