1st Place

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The San Diego Union-Tribune

2007 Finalist
Templeton Reporter
of the Year Award

FOR DISPLAY ONLY
OAK GLEN – They went through hell to get to their Zion.

The curving hills teased the caravan of handcarts with the promise of level ground, only to break the hearts of the would-be pioneers when they got to the bend and saw another climb awaited around the corner. It must have been 95 degrees in the sun, with a windchill factor of 90. Dust filled the air and caked the clothes.

Going downhill wasn't exactly heavenly, either. The young men and women strained against gravity to guide the loaded wooden carts down the twists and turns. For their reward, they got to unpack their belongings and carry them, and the carts, over a ravine filled with stinging nettles.

Their homes were only a two-hour drive away. So was the beach. And air conditioning. And bathtubs.

But for a few days last month, hundreds of teenagers and adults from northern San Diego County's Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – better known as Mormons – were pretty much stuck in the 1850s, suffering the hardships of the ancestors of their faith.

They were there to get a taste of what it was like to be part of the handcart trail, the historic migration of Mormons who pushed and pulled handcarts for hundreds of miles as they fled persecution from neighbors who did not care for this new religion.
The young people and the adults came from congregations in the Del Mar and Vista stakes (a stake is the church's name for a geographic region), to take part in two separate re-enactments on a spread of land known as Riley's Farm. There, in the southern hills of the San Bernardino Mountains near the town of Oak Glen, the Mormons dressed in suspenders and long skirts and lived out real-life stories going back 150 years: the death of a baby crushed under a wooden wheel, a single mother who pressed on with her children after her husband died of natural causes.

They came for many reasons: curiosity; to understand their history; to make new friends; and, for some, because their parents made them.

"This whole experience is so humbling," said Brianna van Kan, 15. "We're going to go home and take showers and be so appreciative."

It didn't matter that the actual Mormon pioneer trail is someplace else. Just by participating, they were fulfilling a yearning for pilgrimage that sustains the world's major religions.

Muslims go to Mecca. Catholics trek to Lourdes. Hindus travel to the banks of the river Ganges. Jews gather for prayer at the Western Wall. And Mormons have their pioneer trail — 1,300 miles from the plains of Illinois to the Great Salt Lake that marked one of the biggest religious migrations in U.S. history.

"For us, we feel so blessed that we had these amazing ancestors," said Shannon Rumsey, a 37-year-old Mormon who helped organize the re-enactment for the Vista Stake, which includes wards (or congregations) in Vista, Bonsall, Fallbrook, Rainbow and a corner of Oceanside.

Around her, a tent city was being erected for the night. The handcarts were being unloaded, and a couple of fiddlers were joined by other members of a string band playing old-time music. The pioneers are owed their gratitude, Rumsey added. "We are standing on their shoulders."

Tens of thousands of Mormons went West in the 19th century to find a new religious homeland, their Zion, for their fledgling, U.S.-born church. The exodus began in 1844 after an angry mob killed their founder, Joseph Smith, in Nauvoo, Ill. In July of 1847, the first wagons arrived in what is now Salt Lake City, which today is home to the church's world headquarters.
But wagon trains weren't the only means of transportation. Mormon families who could not afford horses and mules pushed their belongings themselves in two-wheeled handcarts roughly the size of a pickup bed. Between 1856 to 1860, almost 3,000 Mormons pushed and pulled their way to the Great Salt Lake, according to church history.

And while last month's handcart reenactments traveled only a fraction of the original distance, each mile of the pilgrimage brought blisters and bruises that were more than spiritual.

On the second day of its three-day trek, the Del Mar Stake's venture encountered the S-shaped hills and stinging nettles. On the trail were about 200 young people (mostly teenagers) and adults from Torrey Pines to Encinitas, along with 16 carts. Each cart was staffed by a "family," including an adult Ma and Pa (except for two with single mothers) and several teenage children, and loaded with clothing, water and other necessities.

On one cart, there was a small blue flag with the nickname "Dirty Dozen" written on it. "There are a dozen of us, and we're all dirty," explained Alyssa Calder, 17, who lifted her long skirt -- that's what girls wore in the 1800s -- to show off the line between dust and no dust.

"And we all smell," said Milian Leone, 12. She did not offer to elaborate.

There were some modern-day amenities -- like sunglasses and Nikes. Medicine also was upgraded (Preparation H works well for countering the sting of nettles). But the suffering was pretty real.

They also think they have an inkling now what their ancestors went through. "It's not like you're in a class learning history," said Kimberly Packard, who is 16 and wore her hair in braids. "You get to really feel how the people did."

Kimberly was a daughter in the family whose baby (actually, a doll) was killed in the wheel accident. "We had this whole funeral procession. It was really cool." She paused before explaining. "It was cool because it was a real person. It wasn't just a made-up thing."
Meg Roach, the single mother of the Dirty Dozen handcart, said that years after this death, the original family was consoled by news that the baby's grave had not been disturbed. "It's emotional stuff," said Roach, 42.

They did more than relive history. They learned about teamwork (it takes a village to move a handcart). They got to fire replicas of muskets and became acquainted with the fine art of throwing tomahawks. Their experiences had some unexpected outcomes. "I eat everything on my plate now," said Alex Ortega, 15. "There are no snacks and stuff. There's just three meals a day."

On the other hand, the catered grub was a lot better than the traditional trail mix of hardtack and jerky. They were served taco salad for lunch one day and hamburgers another day. Breakfast was oatmeal. Beans and franks also were on the menu.

Jim Nuckols, one of the Pas on the Del Mar Stake trip, brought envelopes with stories of Mormon pioneers. Among them: A boy who carried his little brother through the snow to safety, dying of exhaustion in the process.

"There are a bunch of stories like that, and they're really moving," said Nuckols, 50.

"You know," he added, "our kids today live a very comfortable life, and it's easy to forget the sacrifices others made on their behalf — on our behalf."

Chris Urbina gasped for breath as he collapsed on the grass in a sweaty heap, his right leg quivering from the exertion. The last hill of the day was a monster — and he and other boys went back time after time to help get the handcarts to camp.

Chris, a 17-year-old Mormon in the Vista Stake, rendered aid about a dozen times after getting his own family's cart over the hill. "I thought, 'I'm not going to go back,' but I looked up and saw the people and said, 'I've got to go back.'"

At the camp, participants got a barbecued chicken dinner, a hoedown and restrooms with running water. "This is heaven," one girl gushed as she washed up in a bathroom sink.

Riley's Farm, the backcountry land where they held these handcart treks, specializes in reliving history — from Revolutionary War field trips to staging Civil War battles. It also hosts several Mormon groups each year, although this was the first time both the Del Mar and Vista stakes held a handcart reenactment for their youth.
The Vista Stake was the larger of the two groups, with about 400 participants and 26 carts. They also were there for four days, a day longer than the Del Mar Stake, and were organized with color-coded bandannas and water bottles stamped with logos fashioned after the "Survivor" TV series.

Ask the adults what they found most rewarding, and they'll talk about watching the kids pitch in to help each other. "They never gave up," said Emil Orlando, 44. Ask the kids, and their answers echo that of Cara Bezzant, a 12-year-old participant whose neck was creased with dirt. "Just to get it done," she said.

A couple of hours later, after the tents had been erected and dinner eaten, many of the kids found the energy to square dance. The next morning began more quietly, as the makeshift families rose and sat together to read Scriptures, pray and reflect.

"Pa" Brian Hervey talked to his family -- six boys and six girls -- about drawing on the kind of inner strength that got them over the last hill the day before. "Twenty years from now, there will come a time when you think you won't be able to finish a task," said Hervey, 44. "Remember what you did yesterday."

After breakfast, the energy picked up as they played pioneer games. There was tug of war; a relay race in which contestants stepped across boards held up like bridges by other players; and another game involving buckets of water that provided cool relief for a day already getting hot.

"The games replicate the games that the pioneers played," said Tum Vongsawad, 47, another volunteer pa. "When they struggled on the plains, they needed a way to get their their spirits up. They did it by dancing at night and playing games. We're just trying to put our struggles behind and have fun."

The pilgrim's progress, it seems, is measured by more than distance.

"It's hard, but you definitely learn a lot," said Logan Guinos, 16. "It's a fabulous experience. One of a kind."

Even so, Tavish Smith, who is 12, reckons he won't pass this way again. "I did it once," he said. "That's enough for me."
By the numbers

12.5 million Mormons worldwide

5.6 million Mormons in the U.S.

761,763 Mormons in California

50,000 Mormons in San Diego County

Source: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

End-of-Story
Templeton entry: Breaking news (with sidebar at end)

Date: May 04, 2006

Headline: FACTIONS OVER FICTION | Brown's book and movie prompt fervent reactions from backers and detractors

It's a wonder Mona Lisa can smile at all. So many secrets to bear. Jesus and Mary Magdalene and their baby. A clandestine society sworn to keep it all covered up. A church forged from fourth-century politics, rather than a first-century Resurrection.

"Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false," Dan Brown writes in "The Da Vinci Code," a novel rivaling the Bible lately for attention. It has sold more than 40 million copies and been on the best-seller list for three years.

And soon, there will be the movie.

Never mind that the book is fiction, a conspiracy thriller whose plot revolves around whether the early Christian church rewrote history, turning Jesus into God Incarnate and keeping secret his real relationship with Mary Magdalene for a host of reasons, including patriarchy. Leonardo Da Vinci figures into it because the Renaissance artist supposedly embedded clues into his works.

From Catholic groups to Protestant seminaries and even the religious left, the controversy has become a kind of ground zero in the newest battle over the historical Jesus. For its opponents, "The Da Vinci Code" is divisive on a basic us-against-them religious level.

"At stake is a totally different view of the world," says Peter Jones, a New Testament scholar at Westminster Seminary in Escondido. "What's at stake is getting it right or getting it wrong."

Last week, a Vatican official called for a boycott of the film, blasting the story for its "offenses, slander, historical and theological errors concerning Jesus, the Gospel and the church." A conservative U.S. Catholic group is calling for 1,000 prayer vigils outside theaters when the film
opens here May 19.

The archbishop of Canterbury used his Easter sermon to preach against "The Da Vinci Code." There are more books about the book than Jesus had disciples (Judas included). And congregations around the world, and across San Diego County, are holding forums to bless or blame this barnstorming novel.

What's the fuss all about?

"There are people believing it -- huge numbers," says Jim Garlow, pastor of Skyline Wesleyan in Rancho San Diego, one of county's largest churches, and a national leader in the code-cracking movement of critics.

Garlow calls the novel fact-ion, "where you put fact and fiction together in such a way that it gets terribly distorted." It's also creating factions within the world's largest religion.

"All Dan Brown had to say was, 'Folks, it's a novel. Chill out. Relax. I made it up.' And novelists have the right to make up what they want," adds Garlow, who has written two debunking books. One of them, "Cracking Da Vinci's Code," was co-written with Jones.

In a rare public appearance April 23 in his native New Hampshire, Brown told a sold-out audience that it's not his job to address the controversies. "Let the biblical scholars and historians battle it out," said the former prep school English teacher, according to The Associated Press.

You could almost hear the detractors in their collective response: Game on.

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Despite the calls for a boycott of the movie, along with a push to halt the release of it in Korea, there is a growing force who are urging folks to use this controversy to their advantage.

"I think they should read the book and see the movie," Jones says. "Brown is giving expression to the great objection to the Christian faith," he adds, referring to such issues as the sacred divinity of Jesus.

"Christians should know what that is and how to answer it. It's actually a good occasion for Christians to start seriously thinking about what they believe."
Pop culture as evangelism isn't new.

Two years ago, churches bought out movie screenings for Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." But in that case, much of the controversy was over the graphic violence in the R-rated film (the "Da Vinci" movie is rated PG-13). While fans credited "Passion" with eliciting conversion experiences, media critics lambasted it with such lines as the "Texas Chainsaw Jesus Massacre."

Skyline's Garlow recently led a training session for 200 local clergy and religious leaders in preparation for the movie's release. He'll hold a similar workshop for lay people at 7 p.m. Monday at his church. Last weekend, he began a monthlong sermon series.

Other congregations and coalitions also are launching initiatives – from the www.DaVinciOutreach.com, produced by Catholics to "undo the damage inflicted by this blasphemous novel," to a pair of community forums at College Avenue Baptist Church (8:45 a.m. May 14 and 7 p.m. June 1).

Garlow's four-point response plan culminates with urging people to throw post-movie parties to discuss the story's fallacies. "I don't care about 'The Da Vinci Code,' " he says. "I care about the enduring issues – the divinity of Christ and the reliability of the New Testament. That is front and center for me. I'm rather consumed with that."

The other side is consumed as well.

"It's one good thing 'The Da Vinci Code' has done and that is, raise these questions amongst a very enormous number of people," says Michael Baigent, one of the authors of "The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail," a 1982 book that may -- or may not -- have inspired Brown's conspiracy thriller (a London court ruled last month that Brown didn't steal from "Holy Blood's" theories).

"It's a very serious debate," says Baigent, a religious historian in England who argues in a new book, "The Jesus Papers," that Jesus was still alive a decade after traditional Christianity believes he was crucified.

He hopes what will come of this debate is a better awareness of the "spiritual system that Jesus was involved in and the way that Christianity manipulated the reality of Jesus eventually for their own particular purposes."

Ditto for Tom Sannar, co-pastor of One Heart-One Mind, a Religious Science congregation that meets in the Sorrento Valley. Sannar, who led his own seminar on the book last weekend, calls
"The Da Vinci Code" a noble effort — particularly when it comes to elevating women in religious leadership.

"I believe Dan Brown has tapped into this great spiritual longing and tells us if we look behind the plot, the facts and the characters, it is possible that a real wisdom can be revealed to us," according to Sannar.

"And that wisdom begins with the acknowledgment that the deep feminine energy of nurturing, compassion and healing has been suppressed not only by the Catholic church but modern technological society and that the secret of becoming fulfilled and happy people has nothing to do with creeds or dogmas and everything to do with re-establishing our connection with the earth and with the divine feminine."

Baigent and others point out that theories raised in "The Da Vinci Code" aren't really new. The so-called Gnostic Gospels, religious writings from around the second century, made some of the same arguments. But they, too, are in dispute — and they are hardly as popular as "The Da Vinci Code."

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The right place at the right time. A perfect storm of supply and demand.

When it comes to trying to understand why this novel has become such a phenomenon, you can pick your cliché.

Critics see it as more cannon fodder for the culture wars in general, and church-bashing in particular, by a society where it's chic to be more spiritual than religious.

"Dan Brown is touching a nerve in modern culture, which is a discovery of a sort of mystical spirituality," says Jones, the New Testament professor. He adds: "I think the wind is in the sail of this new spirituality, and Christianity will find itself in the face of a great persecution."

Garlow suggests that part of the staggering response is because the book "really does put Jesus down in a traditional sense that may be playing well in the culture." Besides, everybody loves a conspiracy. "There's something about us that wants to believe something sinister about anybody
in positions of authority. They must have a sinister motive."

Brown, in an question-and-answer segment on his Web site, denies his novel is anti-Christian.

"This book is not anti-anything," Brown says. "It's a novel. I wrote this story in an effort to explore certain aspects of Christian history that interest me. The vast majority of devout Christians understand this fact and consider 'The Da Vinci Code' an entertaining story that promotes spiritual discussion and debate."

Baigent echoes that sentiment. "I don't think there's anything in 'The Da Vinci Code' that could upset any Christian," Baigent says. "And if any Christian gets upset by it, then his or her Christianity is pretty vulnerable, it seems to me."

Lost in this maze of who's right and who's wrong are readers like Pam Mathison, a Clairemont woman who couldn't put the book down and is looking forward to the movie.

"Who really cares?" she asks. "It's just typical of everything - arguing about religion or politics or anything else. It's much ado about nothing. Everybody has their opinion and thoughts, and that's OK. It's all good."

But UCSD student Michael May, who finished reading the novel last week, says that while he liked the book a lot, he can understand the anger. Religion is an anchor, he adds, and yanking that anchor can be upsetting. "To them, you're messing with their lives."

SIDEBAR:

CRACKS IN THE CODE

A comparison of selected disagreements between "The Da Vinci Code" and its debunkers:

THE NOVEL: Jesus' divinity was decided for political reasons by a close vote of bishops at the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century. Until then, Jesus was seen by followers as an inspiring leader, but not God.

THE DEBUNKERS: The council in AD 325 wasn't called to decide Jesus' divinity, although one topic was the nature of this divinity. There were roughly 200 to 300 bishops in attendance, only two of whom refused to sign a statement of faith (the original Nicean Creed).
THE NOVEL: The figure to the right of Jesus in Leonardo Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" is really Mary Magdalene.

THE DEBUNKERS: It's John the Evangelist, one of the 12 disciples, and the effeminate look is a typical artistic representation of the time.

THE NOVEL: Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child together, and the church covered it up, a secret kept by a covert organization called the Priory of Sion. Mary Magdalene was pregnant when Jesus was crucified and fled to France. Jesus also intended for Mary Magdalene to take over where he left off.

THE DEBUNKERS: The New Testament does not mention Jesus having a wife. The Priory was a club created in the 1950s by Pierre Plantard, a Frenchman who later confessed that it was a hoax. Jesus' 12 disciples were all men. Mary Magdalene is a saint in the Catholic Church, regarded as an exemplary model of holiness.

THE NOVEL: Opus Dei is a Catholic group whose ranks include a robe-wearing, albino monk named Silas; they're involved in murdering and drugging people, among other sordid activities.

THE DEBUNKERS: There are no monks in Opus Dei; it is a Catholic institution for lay people and diocesan priests. It adheres to Catholic doctrine, "which clearly condemns immoral behavior, including murder, lying, stealing and generally injuring people."

End-of-Story
He touched the paper as if it were holy writ, a sacred list of 18 names that began with their ranks — specialists and sergeants, captains and a colonel — and ended with the date they died — March, April, June, September, October and December.

He held the hand of one soldier as the man took his last breaths, assuring him that he was not alone and praying for God’s presence. He unzipped the body bags of others, checking to make sure what was inside wasn’t too gruesome for buddies who came to pay their last respects.

It’s been a year since the Rev. Robert Blessing, associate pastor at the Good Samaritan Episcopal Church in University City, left for war.

Called up to active duty as chaplain of the 1st Battalion of the 184th Infantry Regiment of the California Army National Guard, Maj. Blessing headed out last January, bound for Iraq by way of Kuwait. He returned Monday with the rest of his unit, via a long weekend at Fort Bliss, Texas.

The battalion of more than 700 went on nearly 7,000 patrois and suffered more than 100 casualties, the highest count of wounded and killed in action of any California unit since the Korean War, according to a spokesman for the Modesto-based 1-184th.

Blessing, a noncombatant who does not carry a weapon, was shot at and held worship services punctuated by mortar fire. He saw the joy on the faces of Iraqis who want U.S. troops there and the terror wrought by those who want them to leave. He told of the heroics of a soldier who shielded a wounded medic with his own body and the shame of three sergeants sent to prison for abusing detainees.

"To be honest, I think when I first went out, I thought, 'Jesus is going to take care of this,' “ said Blessing, who turned 47 while he was in Iraq.
The reality is that war can test even a chaplain's faith. "Sometimes it was diminished because of the loss," he admitted, rubbing the shadows under his blue eyes. Diminished, but not lost. "I'm one of those people who believe that God does answer and deliver. He doesn't always do it. I don't know why — but I trust he knows why."

Dressed in the tan cammies of combat, a major's oak leaf cluster stitched on one collar and a cross on the other, Blessing said it's not only the deaths of soldiers that pains him, but also of civilians who were bombed and beheaded by insurgents.

Violence and evil are no longer distant abstractions — and neither are his convictions. "Evil people need to be taken out," he said. "They need to be gone."

The 1-184 arrived in Iraq in February, assigned to a base in a particularly divisive district of southeastern Baghdad. Their initiation with death began the next month, when a military police officer in their area was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade. The next month, one of their own was killed.

Most of the 18 soldiers on Blessing's remembrance list were associated with or assigned to the 1-184th, including five who lived in San Diego and Imperial counties, according to the National Guard. The others were regular Army who worked with them in their blended family.

What do you say to people who just saw a friend blown to pieces?

"He's just a body, a shell," is what Chaplain Blessing said. "Life with our Lord goes on."

What if they don't believe in God? "There are no atheists in Hummers," he said with a smile. Then he corrected himself. One of the men professed to be an atheist, though Blessing isn't sure he believed him. "He talked about God more than anyone else."

The congregation of Good Samaritan prayed for him and made prayer squares for his soldiers. "Every time I handed one out, they said, 'Thank you. Someone's praying for me.'"

He also handed out bandanas with the words of Psalm 91, a biblical prayer about God's protection: "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust."

Still, bad things happened.
In July, news reports emerged of an abuse investigation involving several soldiers from the 1-184th who were accused of mistreating detainees during an incident in June. Among the allegations: a stun gun was used on the testicles of at least one of the prisoners.

Three sergeants were convicted and sentenced to jail time. Blessing met with the sergeants just before they were taken out of Iraq. He told them they made a mistake but that God still loves them and they are not alone. "They grabbed onto it."

The men realized what they did was wrong, Blessing said. "Good guys just made wrong decisions," he said. He doesn't condone what they did. "But," he cautioned, "it's easy for outsiders to judge."

The scandal also brought a change of command. Lt. Col. Patrick Frey of Salinas was relieved of duty and replaced by Lt. Col. William Wood, who was regular Army.

If the summer was rough, September and October were heartbreaking. There were a dozen deaths in those two months, according to Blessing's list. Among them: their new commanding officer, who was felled by a homemade bomb in late October. Wood, promoted to colonel posthumously, was the highest ranking officer killed in action in Iraq.

There were highlights. The members of the unit are proud of their work training Iraqi security forces and helping ensure that the constitutional referendum took place in October. They hope they made a difference.

On Christmas Eve, soldiers went caroling through the barracks. "Hundreds of troops came to hear," Blessing wrote in an e-mail back to San Diego. "It was surreal. We had outgoing cannon fire going on with a John Deere tractor dressed up as Santa's sleigh."

On Dec. 31, less than two weeks before they were to leave, a mortar attack claimed one more life. Again, the chaplain had to prepare a eulogy.

"We are shocked because death does not honor our redeployment schedule," he told the men. "We are numb and we are angry. And that is OK. In our attention to the death of our brother today, let us not forget life. Let us remember that while death is inevitable, life is more powerful."

The dying. The wrongdoing. The woundings. "All of those things, they hurt us," Blessing said. "My part was to be there, to just be a sounding board."
Ask the soldiers about Chaplain Blessing and they'll say he always seemed to be where he was needed. He'd pat them on the back or hug them, ask them how they were doing and about their families.

"Just seeing him was a daily comfort," said Sgt. 1st Class Harold Benally, a 45-year-old letter carrier from Vista who led patrols in Iraq. "He risked his life just as much as we did."

"Consistency," is what Lt. Rusten Currie remembers about his year in Iraq with Blessing. "And for some reason, whenever he was around, we watched our mouths," said the 34-year-old Venice resident who was going to graduate school when he was called up.

Others agreed. "We were better persons when he was around," said Sgt. Chris Todd, 32, of Irvine. "He'd give us a blessing and hand out candy."

Though neither Currie nor Todd are particularly religious, they found themselves talking to God.

Currie would touch the cross on his class ring from Pepperdine University. "Remember me," he'd pray. Todd wore a St. Christopher's medal. "Me and the man upstairs have had a lot of conversations, let me tell you."

Gregory Dodds, a 35-year-old first sergeant from San Diego, credits Blessing with keeping up morale and hope. "I already knew where I'm going to church now."

Blessing plans to return to Good Samaritan in his role as associate pastor. He's also a candidate to become the rector, or senior pastor, replacing the Rev. Wayne Sanders, who retired last year.

Before Blessing goes back, however, he needs to download, to make the transition from being a soldier to a priest. He also wants to spend time with his wife, Anne, and two children, Joshua, 15, and Sarah, 12.

"I can't be the warrior at Good Samaritan," Blessing said. "And I won't be. I'm their father. I'm their shepherd. I'm their pastor."
On Monday afternoon he stood on the steps of an auditorium at the Los Alamitos Joint Forces Training Base in Orange County and called Anne's name, scanning the crowd of families embracing their returning loved ones.

The governor had just told them they were heroes during a brief welcome-home ceremony for the 1-184th. Blessing also spoke. "Lord, it's good to be home," he said to a cheering theater.

He sat in the front row, squinting up in vain to see his family in the balcony. When the program was over, he began to search for them, making his way outside as soldiers stopped him to introduce their mom, dad, wife, kids. He pressed on, still looking, still being interrupted. Finally, he borrowed a cell phone and told them where he was. And then it came: a crushing embrace from Joshua and Sarah, with Anne right behind them.

Hand-in-hand, husband and wife were sidetracked every few steps by clusters of picture-taking, teary-eyed people. "He's had it tough and he's going to need to talk along the way," Blessing told one man who came to welcome a returning soldier.

Ditto for Blessing.

The priest is deeply troubled by the radical, violent version of Islam that he witnessed from some Muslims in Iraq. "Islam has to deal with that issue. They've got to speak up about it forcefully."

He is fiercely loyal to the soldiers. "My goal and objective is to let the families know these guys are heroes."

He has no interest in debating the merits of the war. "The political issues are not clear cut. But there are a group of people who want to be free. The job has to be finished. There is no other option."

The priest went to war and survived. Now his challenge is to live in peace.

When he was at Fort Bliss, he described himself as having become less of a pacifist. He said he was even considering getting a gun for protection. After settling in back home, however, he softened that: "With the violence I saw in Iraq and the anarchy I saw in Louisiana (on television after Hurricane Katrina), I can understand why people would secure their homes with a weapon; not to assault another but to protect their families from those who would harm them when trouble came to their door."
"Yet, I must trust God to protect my family and friends. This is where I will stand."

End-of-Story
The plane is heading for Tulsa. Peanuts have been handed out, followed by the predictable flurry of fingers tearing at the red foil edges. I am less certain of the flurry that awaits my arrival. Last I heard, my Aunt Mary Lue was paralyzed on her right side and couldn't speak.

She's among my earliest memories, helping my grandfather sneak me contraband baby bottles filled with milk. My grandmother and my mother apparently thought it was time to wean me off, but Mary Lue, barely a teenager, felt my pain.

That was years ago. She grew up, got married, had children and became a grandmother. One of her grandsons, a Camp Pendleton Marine, recently returned from Iraq. Now it's her safety we are concerned about, after a sudden stroke -- one doctor described it as "huge" -- has left her struggling in an Oklahoma hospital.

It happened as I was working on a story about John Fanestil, a local United Methodist clergyman whose first book, "Mrs. Hunter's Happy Death" (Doubleday; $23.95), came out this week. Part mystery and part religious inspiration, Fanestil's book re-introduces a movement popular in the 18th and 19th centuries among some Christians called "happy deaths."

Rooted in faith, "this ritual encouraged those who practiced it to seek an experience of God's grace -- what today we would call a 'spiritual high' -- enabling them to transcend the pain and suffering and grief that come with death," Fanestil writes.

He stumbled upon this practice by accident three years ago in the basement of a seminary library where he was researching a paper for a seminar.

An avid student of church history, Fanestil wanted to do something about early Methodism in England, which is where the Protestant denomination got its start. As he browsed old Methodist magazines, he began to notice stories of people facing death with sacred anticipation.
"These accounts of happy deaths were replete," says Fanestil. "They (the magazines) were filled with them."

He was particularly smitten by an account of a "Mrs. Hunter," who died when she was 26 years old in England in the early 19th century. Despite the stilted style of old English writing, which is akin to Masterpiece Theater on steroids, Fanestil was caught up in the portrayal of the young woman's "holy life" and "happy death."

The germ of an idea had been planted. Fanestil wrote his paper about happy deaths. Then he began to write his book.

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It's said that people plan and God laughs.

Fanestil is a San Diego native and a Rhodes scholar who was ordained into the ministry in 1992. His first appointment was to a Methodist church in Calexico, and then he went on to other congregations in Southern California. He was serving a church in Anaheim when he discovered the happy death stories.

In summer 2004, only a month after Fanestil began his new appointment as senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in La Mesa, he got a book deal. He juggled both for a while and then took a sabbatical last July to work full time on his writing (he's also pursuing two other books about religious practice).

Fanestil's research turned up much about happy deaths in general, and Mrs. Hunter, in particular. Seated at the dining room table of his La Mesa home, Fanestil shows pictures on his laptop computer of the trip he and his father took to London, where they tracked down Mrs. Hunter's death record at Wesley's Chapel. She died Jan. 17, 1801, and was buried four days later.

Mrs. Hunter was an avid Methodist and lived in a neighborhood called Marylebone, a hotbed of early followers of John Wesley and his religious movement. It was also a time when sudden deaths were a constant reality.

"People in the 19th century learned to live their lives in the light of the prospect of death," says Fanestil. "They understood that death was always a possibility. And they thought it was really a sign of maturity to live as one who was prepared to die."
How they faced dying would be as much a testimony to their faith as how they faced living. And it wasn't limited to Methodists or even to that time period.

Since Christianity embraces a belief in heaven, the end of earthly life is supposed to be the beginning of an eternal one with God. "They really thought they were very important witnesses to the faith," Fanestil says of the happy death adherents. "It is what a good Christian was meant to do."

But "Mrs. Hunter's Happy Death" is only partly about history. The book's subtitle: "Lessons on Living From People Preparing to Die" hints of another theme in which Fanestil weaves stories of his own church members who personified this movement without knowing it.

These men and women did not conform to our expectations of how people should die, he says. They were, for one, not in denial of their mortality. They role-modeled a sense of peace and commitment to caring for others. Their faith remained strong.

"It became clear to me that they were dying in an ancient and patterned way of dying that was called happy death," says Fanestil.

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Tulsa, or at least this part of it, is flat and brown. The hospital is only six stories tall, but it seems like a high-rise on this pancaked land. My Aunt Mary Lue is on the third floor, in the intensive care unit.

Machines beep and make pumping sounds. I count five, no, six, tubes snaking in and out of her suddenly frail body, which turned 69 last Saturday. How could someone so larger-than-life, whose generous spirit is legendary among us, be so quickly diminished?

She opens her eyes, but the gaze is often vacant. She lies silently. Unable to swallow, she is being fed by a tube going into her stomach. Will she recover? A doctor with a bow tie says to be patient. Time will tell.

Fanestil, whose book is tucked inside my computer bag, is skeptical of the lengths science goes to in the name of life. "Are we really prolonging life or are we prolonging dying?" he asks during his interview back in La Mesa.
Doing the latter, he argues, is emotionally and financially draining. It's also not spiritually healthy. "I think that in prolonging dying, we trick ourselves into thinking that truly meaningful life is not dying. I think dying and living are intermingled, in my Christian way of thinking about things."

The Terri Schiavo case is emblematic of a tension gripping our culture, he says. The Florida woman was kept alive by mechanical intervention for years, with a family divided about her cognizance. When her husband decided enough was enough, religious and political conservatives entered the fray, arguing that pulling the feeding tube was tantamount to murder.

The tube was eventually withdrawn and Schiavo passed away. Fanestil argues that those who wanted to keep her hooked up, despite her being in a "persistent vegetative state," have too narrow a concept of God's will. "I believe God's will for us is to have life abundant -- and an outgrowth of that is God wills for us a happy death."

He shakes his head. "Always and everywhere seizing the most radical medical intervention, I believe that is the denial of God's will."

But where do you draw the line? How do you know what is an extraordinary measure and what is God's will? He has no simple answer, instead suggesting that it comes one case at a time.

"People who die happy deaths make the best decisions they can -- for themselves and their loved ones -- and then trust that by God's grace all things will be well. It's this spirit of spiritual confidence that I found so compelling."

He commends the hospice movement, which helps terminally ill people die peaceful deaths, and he's an advocate for advance directives, in which people specify what medical steps should -- and should not -- be taken if they become incapacitated.

"Mrs. Hunter's Happy Death," meanwhile, isn't just about the end of life. The lessons he develops in the books show how people would be better off if they lived like they were dying.

"The people who do it well, who live their lives in the light of the prospect of death, I think, are spiritually accomplished, spiritually mature," he says. "They really appreciate the blessings of each day."

Next month, he launches a series of local talks about the book. He clamors for reviving the happy death movement in this 21st century.
"It is time we reclaim this historic exercise of faith," he writes. "To do so will require, of course, that we confront anew our own mortality, and the mortality of those we love."

End-of-Story
He’s the owner of one of the largest alternative newspapers in the country, a father of seven and a Vietnam veteran decorated with a pair of Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart.

He’s also a conservative Catholic who attends Mass every day, teaches Latin to home-schooled students and rides the public bus from his Coronado home to his office in Little Italy.

But to understand what drives Jim Holman, why he has bankrolled two parental-notification initiatives for minors seeking an abortion in this state, you might want to turn the calendar to 1989.

That’s when his weekly newspaper, the San Diego Reader, ran a series of ads with photographs of aborted fetuses found in a storage container. "The photos awoke me to the horror," Holman would later tell a reporter for World, a conservative Christian magazine.

Before the year was out, he’d be arrested outside an abortion clinic in La Mesa. He was convicted and spent two weeks in jail for trespassing. "Under the circumstances, I consider it a great honor to go to jail," he said at the time.

Now, it’s his personal fortune that the 60-year-old Holman is putting on the line.

Since 2004, Holman has spent $3.5 million on parent-notification initiatives in California, far more than anyone else. Last year, voters rejected the first ballot measure, Proposition 73, by less than 6 percentage points.

On Nov. 7, they will determine the fate of Proposition 85, a reconstituted measure requiring that a physician notify a parent or guardian 48 hours before performing an abortion for a girl younger than 18, unless the girl receives a waiver from a judge or if there is a medical emergency.
Holman won't talk about his contributions, which come as checks, loans and free advertising in his publications. In a brief e-mail, he declined an interview, saying he wanted to stay out of the limelight.

"It's mostly because he's a quiet guy," said Margi Pearson, who belongs to the same parish as Holman, Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Coronado, and also is active in the anti-abortion movement. "He's kind of shy, and being in the limelight just isn't his forte. He's not good at that."

To Pearson and other friends, Holman is a hero, a man of deep faith willing to back it up with deep pockets.

"It's his commitment to life; that's his motivation," said Danny Ramirez, an Imperial County businessman and longtime friend. "Jim really believes in his heart about his own salvation and what he has to do. He knows that this money given to him is only on loan. We are all going to go somewhere eternally — either to rest in peace or burn eternally."

But his detractors have other thoughts. They'd like Holman to step out of the shadows so voters can take the measure of the man seeking to enact the most dramatic change in California abortion law in decades.

"The dishonesty is in his covertness and his reclusiveness," said Vince Hall, communications director for Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties and an outspoken foe of Proposition 85.

"I think the reason Jim Holman won't talk to the media or TV or to the public is that he recognizes his agenda is so far out of the mainstream that the people will dismiss him as an extremist," Hall said.

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Holman grew up in Monrovia, in a Catholic family of nine children, with a physician father and a stay-at-home mom, according to his older brother, William Holman, a San Diego attorney.

"He was the pebble in your shoe," his brother said. "He was the conscience."

Holman received a degree in government from Carleton College, a small, private liberal-arts school in Northfield, Minn., and served in the Navy.
In 1972, he started the Reader, working out of a Mission Beach apartment. Over the years, the paper amassed a reputation for taking on the establishment, with investigative writing and generally being a thorn in the side of movers and shakers. The San Diego Union-Tribune has been a frequent target of its wrath.

He left the apartment behind for a garage on Nautilus Street in La Jolla, then to a loft closer to downtown and so on — until arriving in the current headquarters on India Street.

According to the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, the Reader averages more than 220 pages each week, with a circulation as of December 2005 of nearly 170,000.

But it's not a typical alternative, counterculture tabloid. "It's very unusual," acknowledged Jim Mullin, who was editor of the Reader from 1977 to 1986 (Holman is now listed as the editor). "I'm not aware of another well-established alternative weekly paper whose owner follows Jim Holman's practices with regards to advertising."

Among those practices: The Reader won't take ads for abortion centers, classified personals for same-sex relationships or solicitations for strip clubs.

"I have moral objections and also taste objections," Holman told Editor & Publisher, a trade journal, about the latter category of "adult" advertising. "I'm a practicing Roman Catholic, and it's a business I didn't want to get into."

On the other hand, the Reader's stories are an eclectic mix of narratives that include words that don't see the light of day in the mainstream media and tawdry commentaries — including a column about crashing parties. And while there are no "adult" entertainment ads, there are plenty of seductive women pictured in advertising for tanning salons and plastic surgery.

In the 1990s, Holman began putting out San Diego News Notes, a lay Catholic newspaper, along with three sister monthly publications — Los Angeles Lay Catholic Mission, San Francisco Faith and La Cruz de Califonia. He started the News Notes to challenge a church hierarchy he believed was straying from orthodoxy.

"It seemed as though the diocese, for one reason or another, was not going to be firm on some issues, particularly pro-life issues," he said in a 1991 interview.

These days, News Notes is busy promoting the parental-notification initiative ("Help Pass Prop. 85," read the front-page headline in the September/October edition). Holman also used News
Notes to collect signatures for the initiative, inserting petitions in copies of the newspaper and having them returned to his India Street address.

"We know who our audience is, and it's something we assume our readers are in favor of," said Ernie Grimm, News Notes' editor.

The ballot measure has garnered widespread Catholic support. Kent Peters, director of the San Diego Diocese's Office for Social Ministry, lauds Holman's financial backing. "I would love to see Catholics more engaged on behalf of their values that way," Peters said.

Holman's generosity isn't limited to this issue. Among his other political giving: $25,000 in 2004 to try to defeat California's stem cell initiative, Proposition 71, and $5,600 last year for the 2006 campaign to elect state Sen. Tom McClintock, R-Northridge, lieutenant governor.

Locally, he has campaigned vigorously against certain downtown development projects -- including the Convention Center expansion, which drew multiple stories critical of its financing plan and of the special interests that would benefit.

Gary Shaw, publisher of San Diego Metropolitan magazine, once complained that the Reader "reads like it hates San Diego's leaders and hates new buildings, especially ones built after Alonzo Horton. It seems to hate economic growth, success and people who try to achieve it, which makes the irony all the more peculiar because the Reader's owner, Jim Holman, has ridden the population growth of San Diego since the 1970s to become a reclusive, middle-aged millionaire living in Coronado."

Holman's friends don't like the "reclusive" label put on a man who waits at the bus stop near his home wearing a windbreaker over his shirt and tie, and a backpack over his shoulder. Holman told World magazine that "the recluse label could be because I have not been interested in socializing with journalists and politicians."

Instead, his commitments revolve around his faith. For example, he sits on the board of governors for the traditionalist Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula and Ave Maria University in Florida. The latter school is part of a new community being heavily financed by Domino's Pizza founder and conservative Catholic Thomas Monaghan. The project drew headlines after Monaghan said he wanted the town to reflect Catholic principles.

Nicholas Healy Jr., Ave Maria's president, has known Holman for several years. Said Healy, "You would not know from meeting him or spending any time with him that he's a wealthy man."
Local politicians blistered by Holman's publications are reluctant to talk about him. San Diego City Council President Scott Peters declined an interview, and Assemblyman Juan Vargas and Rep. Bob Filner, who like Peters are Democrats, did not respond to requests for interviews.

As for Holman's silence over his financial contributions to parental-notification initiatives, Samuel Popkin, a University of California San Diego political scientist and well-known Democratic campaign adviser, suggests it's a double standard.

"I find it most ironic and hypocritical for a publisher to play the stealth game given the gotcha mentality of his whole newspaper," Popkin said. "The Reader is out to get everybody every day. Everybody is dirty, all money is evil, and everybody who gives a penny to anybody has bought them. There is nothing but avarice."

Hall, of Planned Parenthood, believes Holman is keeping quiet for financial reasons. "He wants as little press attention as possible paid to the fact that he's distributing an allegedly alternative newspaper to a lot of people who, if they understand where the profits of that newspaper were headed, would think twice before touching it," Hall said.

Planned Parenthood is campaigning heavily against Proposition 85, as it did Proposition 73, with its various branches donating millions of dollars. The San Diego chapter has given more than $600,000 to the two campaigns.

According to the Secretary of State's Office, supporters of Proposition 85 have raised $4.2 million while opponents have raised $5.6 million.

The Courage Campaign, a Los Angeles-based liberal coalition, refers to Holman as the "Catholic Crusader of Coronado" and News Notes as a "rabidly religious publication that crusades against Planned Parenthood and homosexuals."

Holman is using his wealth to impose his religious beliefs on public policy, said Rick Jacobs, chairman of the Courage Campaign and former state campaign chairman for presidential candidate Howard Dean. "I think he's the poster child for why we need initiative reform," Jacobs said.

But Catherine Short, an Ojai attorney who helped draft Propositions 73 and 85, said the ballot measure is not about one person. "It's about parental notification and whether parental notification is a good idea or not," she said.
Short said she understands Holman's silence.

"If you see what happens to people in (the) public light, the way they get savaged, I could fully understand the reluctance to expose not just oneself but one's family," she said. "The next thing you know, there will be reporters running up to his daughters (and saying), 'If you got pregnant, what would you do?'"