Cornell Award

First Place

Jeff Brumley
Florida Times-Union
Headlines: DIVORCE
THE STATE OF SEPARATION AND CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIANS

Byline/Title: By
Source:
PubDate: Sunday, 3/2/2008
Correction:
Body Text: It took them three years, but conservative Christians finally won a place for the Marriage Protection Amendment on the November 2008 ballot.

If approved by voters, supporters say the measure would protect the institution of marriage by amending the state constitution to forbid the performance or recognition of same-sex unions in Florida.

But some observers, including those with impeccable credentials as religious conservatives, wonder when a similar movement will emerge against another major threat to marriage: divorce.

"My concern is you don't see the same energy and fervor to stop divorce" among Christian conservatives that they expend on stopping same-sex unions, said the Rev. Rick Marks, a Southern Baptist minister and a marriage and family therapist in Jacksonville.

What's most worrisome, Marks and others said, is that the divorce rate among Bible-believing Christians is keeping pace with that of the general population.

Survey after survey for nearly a decade have also shown that Christians, including born-again and evangelical believers, are divorcing more than agnostics and atheists.

There is a growing acceptance of -- and a reluctance among pastors to preach about -- the sin of divorce in conservative churches, a lack of effective pre-marital counseling programs and an inability to provide ministries and therapies to couples experiencing marital problems, said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

"The problem is, too many evangelical Christians are quoting the Bible by the yard and living it by the inch," Land said.

Land is quick to note that divorce is common in all Christian denominations and movements,
from Pentecostalism on the right to the United Church of Christ on the left. He also said that atheists and agnostics have a lower divorce rate because they tend to cohabitate more and avoid marriage altogether.

But because religious conservatives are so vocal on moral issues, they should be held to their own higher standards when it comes to divorce, said Nadine Smith, executive director of Equality Florida, a gay-rights group fighting the Christian right's Marriage Protection amendment.

"It doesn't escape our notice that the group talking about protecting marriage" has high divorce rates, Smith said. "They'd rather attack other people instead of examining their own lives."

'THE HYPOCRISY OF THE EVANGELICALS'

Christians including Land and some involved with the Florida Marriage Protection Amendment say it is unfair to compare the proposed same-sex marriage ban with divorce.

"That's apples to oranges," said Mat Staver, founder and chairman of the Orlando-based Liberty Counsel, a Christian legal advocacy group.

Divorce undermines marriage, but same-sex unions threatens its very existence by redefining the institution beyond the historic, universal standard of one man, one woman, said Staver, one of the leaders of the amendment initiative. Just "because marriage with some is wobbly doesn't mean you push it off the cliff."

But other Christian marriage experts view divorce as the more immediate threat.

"I find this whole gay marriage issue distracting," said Mike McManus, co-founder Marriage Savers, a national ministry based in the Washington area that seeks to restore and strengthen marriages.

McManus said he agrees with the goals of same-sex marriage bans, but said premarital cohabitation and divorce are bigger threats.

Marks said divorce robs the church of the credibility necessary to be the moral voice in society that God wants it to be. "This is the hypocrisy of the evangelicals. Evangelicals are fighting gay marriage, saying it will break down traditional marriage, when divorce has already broken it down."

The latest numbers provided by The Barna Group, a California-based evangelical polling organization, report little difference between the divorce rates of Christians and the general population.

The rate among all American adults 18 and older is 33 percent, compared to 34 percent among Protestants and 26 percent among Catholics. The rate among born-again Christians is 32 percent and 26 percent among evangelicals, according to 2008 numbers the organization provided the Times-Union.

That's compared to 33 percent for born-again Christians surveyed by Barna in 2001. That poll also reported that more than 90 percent of divorced born-again Christians ended their marriages after accepting Christ as their savior.

Respondents identified as "born-again" were those who said they had made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and believe their confession of sins will get them to heaven after
death, the group said. "Evangelicals" met those criteria but also said they believe in Satan, that salvation is possible only through Christ and say they are responsible for sharing their faith.

While the recent figures are slightly better in some categories than in previous years, the change has done nothing to convince pollster George Barna that Christians, conservative or otherwise, are taking the divorce seriously.

"When the information came out it startled them, but then it was business as usual," Barna said. "I haven't seen much in the way of change in churches the last decade."

A PROBLEM IN JACKSONVILLE

The problem of divorce transcends theological debates as a major contributor to dangerous social trends, said the Rev. Mac Brunson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville and a member of Mayor John Peyton's ongoing Jacksonville Journey anti-crime initiative.

A 2006 JCCI report, Reducing Murder: A Community Response, identified divorce as a key factor in the city's homicide rate. Likewise, Jacksonville's Blueprint for Prosperity said reducing divorce rates is crucial to reversing the trend of family instability that leads to violence.

Murder, other violent crime and suicide "all go back, in my opinion, to the breakdown of the family," Brunson said. "If you want to see what happens in a society when the family falls apart, look at what we're suffering in Jacksonville."

As far as divorce goes, Brunson said, the church must lead by example.

"I think we have stuck our head in the sand for too long," Brunson said. "We have not been willing to hold up a godly standard."

Land agreed, adding that the number of divorced people has reached such a high proportion that the pressure is on church leaders sometimes to look the other way. Ministers also skip the topic to avoid stigmatizing members who were divorced against their will, said Steve Grissom, president of North Carolina-based DivorceCare, a national ministry that provides support groups for divorcees and people going through divorce.

Neptune Beach resident Tim Slater, a divorced born-again Christian who signed a petition favoring the Marriage Protection Amendment, said he understands why pastors may shy away from the topic of divorce.

"There was a point in my life where those types of sermons may have been hurtful or distasteful to me," said the now-remarried Slater, who participates in marriage seminars to prevent others from divorcing. "At the same time, I think it's important to preach how important it is to stay married."

Brunson agreed that preachers, including himself, must do just that.

"In [the book of] Malachi it plainly states that God hates divorce," he said.

In the New Testament, Jesus said divorce is forbidden except in the case of marital infidelity, said the Rev. Timothy Lindenfelser, who oversees the annulment process for the Jacksonville-based Catholic Diocese of St. Augustine.

There are instances in the Old Testament where divorce was permitted but "this
understanding of marriage being till death, with few exceptions, was unique to Jesus," Lindenfelser said.

Yet in even some of the most conservative churches, people have been stretching terms like "adultery" to include forms of "emotional betrayal," said Marks.

"Adultery is not just sexual, it's also emotional," Marks said. When one spouse bonds with another person on the Internet, for example, "there is an emotional betrayal to the relationship."

But Marks said he restricts the biblical standard to sexual adultery.

LOOKING TO THE CATHOLICS

Land, Marks and other conservatives also blame the state of divorce on a sexually-saturated culture in which the media, pornography and the Internet contribute to a view of marriage as disposable.

No-fault divorce laws, which make it possible for one spouse to divorce another without mutual consent, are also a factor, Land said.

"Everywhere I go, pastors tell me they've never seen more marriages in trouble," he said.

Believing their immediate happiness outweighs the holiness of matrimony, Land said, Christians are "walking away from marriages even though they know this is not God's will."

One solution, McManus said, is for Protestant churches in all communities to band together to create city-wide marriage support ministries that will help prevent bad marriages from happening and to help married couples through tough times.

McManus pointed to lower Catholic divorce rates and noted that the church's requirement for extensive pre-marital counseling and its emphasis on the scriptural basis of marriage as examples for others to go by.

Annulments are granted if it can be demonstrated that the original vows were inauthentic because of fraud, coercion or fear, Lindenfelser said. If Catholics divorce without that consent from the church, they are considered in a state of sin and cannot receive communion or other sacraments.

McManus' Marriage Savers program, which includes older couples mentoring younger pairs, has helped reduce divorce rates by an average of 17 percent in communities with participating congregations, he said.

GROWING MOVEMENT?

In the meantime, the church needs to target no-fault divorce laws, said the Rev. Bob Calhoun, assistant pastor of single adult ministries at North Jacksonville Baptist Church.

Staver said he's already seeing the beginnings of a movement to go after no-fault divorce laws.

"The amendment process has made counselors and pastors more bold to come out and say, "We have a problem," " Staver said.

The idea is that if divorces are more challenging to obtain -- perhaps with longer waiting
periods -- fewer people may seek them, said Calhoun, who runs the congregation's DivorceCare ministry.

"It does need to be tougher to get divorced," he said.

Slater said it would be even better if more couples avoided divorce altogether through church-sponsored marriage counseling and workshops.

"If more people could do that, those [divorce] statistics will dramatically change in the churches and the churches can become a good example again."

DIVORCE RATES

26% 33%

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN GENERAL POPULATION

The Barna Group's findings on rates among other groups, D-5
Gay - and feeling God's love  
More homosexuals are finding religion and their sexuality compatible

Byline/Title: __________
Source: __________
PubDate: Sunday, 6/8/2008
Correction: __________

Body Text: As a teenager, Sondra Best quoted Scripture from memory, spoke in tongues on Sunday mornings and shared Jesus Christ with friends and strangers alike.

"I was a warrior for God," the 35-year-old Hastings woman said. "I knew the Bible front to back and everything in between."

She also knew she was attracted to women, feelings her Pentecostal upbringing told her were abhorrent. The struggle between the two impulses overwhelmed her. Believing she faced the fires of hell demoralized her.

"It was like, 'There was no way God can love me - I'm an abomination in God's sight.' "

The collision of sexuality and spirituality plunged Best into years of confusion and anger. Out of guilt she got into a heterosexual relationship at 16, had a child at 18 followed later by what she described as a "promiscuous phase - with men and women."

Had you asked her in the 1990s, Best would have sworn she'd never darken the door of a church again, having concluded that "if God can't love me for how God made me, I don't need him."

Best's experience is typical for many homosexuals who had religious upbringings, experts in faith and sexuality say.

But like Best, the experts add, many of those gays and lesbians are reconciling the conflicts between their religion and sexuality.

Now there is an array of organizations founded to help believers integrate homosexuality and faith and pushing for same-sex blessings and equal opportunity for church leadership and pastoral positions.

Some say the advent of gays reconciling with their faith results from an increased awareness that they, like heterosexuals, have gifts from God that can benefit the church and society.
Others say it's the result of a softening of biblical standards.

Either way, the trend catches conservatives, liberals - and gays themselves - by surprise.

'OPEN AND AFFIRMING'

It is becoming increasingly accepted in some Christian and Jewish traditions that a person can live an openly gay lifestyle and be authentically religious, according to Melissa Wilcox, author of the 2003 book Coming Out in Christianity.

In part that can be seen in the number of institutions that allow the ordination of actively gay and lesbian ministers, said Wilcox, an assistant professor of religion and gender studies at Whitman College in Washington. Those include the Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church and Reform and Conservative Judaism.

The Metropolitan Community Church, founded as a special outreach to gays and lesbians, ordained them at its inception in 1968. The United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist traditions followed in the '70s, but momentum picked up during the 1980s and '90s, Wilcox said.

There was a corresponding rise in para-church groups pushing for equal treatment either from inside or outside denominations, Wilcox said. They include Dignity USA (Catholic), Integrity (Episcopal), Affirmation (United Methodist), the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists and Evangelicals Concerned.

It's not a phenomenon exclusive to Christianity. Hindus have The Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association, and Judaism has the World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews.

Gays are living more open lives and advocating for their own inclusion, Wilcox said. They have more vocal and numerous allies and even those once opposed to homosexuality are changing their minds. More and more congregations are taking it on themselves to open their doors to homosexuals.

The Rev. Ruth Jensen-Forbell, a lesbian and the pastor of FirstCoast Metropolitan Community Church in St. Augustine, said that she's learning of Baptist, United Methodist, Presbyterian and other area congregations who are welcoming homosexuals.

At one, Memorial Presbyterian in St. Augustine, the Rev. Dudley Weaver said his denomination allows gays (and unmarried straights) into pastoral positions only if they are celibate. But Presbyterian USA congregations are free to develop cultures where unmarried straight and gay couples and individuals can develop and contribute spiritually.

Developing that culture means getting past politics and stereotypes and seeing people as children of God, Weaver said.

'SURPRISING TO SOME'

Among the most astonished at all of this are gays themselves, said the Rev. Linda Girouex, pastor of Riverside United Church of Christ in Jacksonville.

Girouex, whose fully "welcoming and affirming" congregation celebrated five years in February, said many gays and lesbians come through the doors resistant to the inclusive message they hear preached there.
"They're very surprised to learn they can be gay and Christian," the lesbian minister said. Her counseling with church members, about 70 percent of whom are homosexuals, often involves battling those "internalized voices" that tell them they are "evil and God doesn't love you."

Just as hard for some is coming out as a Christian to their gay friends. Many gays are hostile toward religion because they were scarred by their experiences growing up, Girouex said. So revealing a faith to fellow gays can be dicey for those who've already been ostracized by society.

"When they come to the realization that God accepts them as they are, and they can be themselves, then they're scared to death that they're going to lose their friends," said the Rev. Harvey Carr, the homosexual son of a Southern Baptist preacher.

Also shocking to some gays and straights alike is that homosexuals can be theologically conservative, said Carr, 59, the retired worship arts pastor at Christ Church of Peace in Jacksonville.

Carr said he believes Jesus Christ is the son of God who died for humanity's sins and that the Bible is the inspired word of God. He also believes Jesus loves all people regardless of sexuality.

"Christ comes first - sexuality is not the important thing. You don't hear people running around saying they are a 'straight Christian.'"

'STILL FIGHTING IT'

By the late 1990s Best found herself tugged back toward church.

A co-worker was shot in Key West, and Best held him as he lay dying. Days later, she heard a voice telling her to stay off the turnpike as she drove to Jacksonville to be with family. The car broke down a few hours later in front of a 24-hour grocery store where a security guard rescued her and her child.

"Looking back on it, I see God's hand in that whole situation," Best said; otherwise she would have been "on the turnpike stuck in the middle of nowhere with a 6-year-old."

But she still believed her sexuality disqualified her from a life of faith. "I was still fighting it."

That attitude is shared by a majority of Americans, according to different polls.

Nearly 53 percent of respondents in a 2005 Baylor University religion survey said sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are "always wrong." A 2004 survey by the National Opinion Research Center reported 56 percent had the same opinion.

A 2001 Barna Research Group survey said 49 percent of all adults believe homosexuality is a product of upbringing and environment, compared to 34 percent who believe people are born gay.

In addition, voters in more than 20 states have approved constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. Floridians will vote on such a ban in November.

'BIGGER THAN DIVORCE'

Scripture is clear that homosexuality is a sin, said Alan Chambers, executive director of
Exodus International, an Orlando-based ministry that aims to help gays and lesbians abandon those lifestyles.

"The Bible calls a number of things sinful," he said. "Homosexuality is one of them and that's why we believe it is not compatible with our faith."

Chambers agrees the faithful have been too harsh in dealing with gay members. Homosexuals historically have been unfairly targeted as worse than other kinds of sinners, such as liars and adulterers.

"We've made it [homosexuality] bigger than divorce," Chambers said. "And because of that we have sent a lot of people running bloody and bruised into the arms of the gay community, which is all too happy to have them."

But some churches have gotten theologically lax in trying to reverse that tendency, Chambers said.

"Churches must be compassionate but also truthful," he said. "If not, they fail on all counts."

'WASHED IN THE BLOOD'

Affirming congregations base their ministries on the belief that homosexuality is a God-given trait, Jensen-Forbell said, and Biblical verses viewed as condemning homosexuality are either misinterpreted or apply only to the ancient times to which they refer.

It took awhile, a few months of going to church, some conversations with Jensen-Forbell, and a lot of prayer, but Best began to change her mind, as well. One day in about the year 2000, she became convinced her sexual orientation was not a ticket to hell.

"God don't make trash, I'm not an abomination," she said.

Now Best sees her purpose as being a Christian witness to gays and lesbians.

"I also feel a heavy burden for people who judge us and say 'God cannot love you.' " "I say to them, 'Yes, God loves me, yes God sent Jesus for me the same way he sent Jesus for you.'"

And Best said she's still a Pentecostal. She speaks in tongues, raises her hand during praise songs, says "amen" during sermons, quotes Scripture and shares Christ with friends.

"I am just as much washed in the blood of the Lamb and I am just as much free as you are."
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Back to doing God's work

Five years after a gay bishop's consecration, diocese, those who left it, have moved on

Byline/Title: [Redacted]
Source: [Redacted]
PubDate: Sunday, 11/2/2008
Correction: [Redacted]

Body Text: Two years ago, the Rev. Kurt Dunkle's ministry involved waging legal battles with current and former Episcopalians intent on leaving the Episcopal Church.

Dunkle was Bishop Samuel Johnson Howard's right-hand man in a struggle over the future of the Jacksonville-based Episcopal Diocese of Florida.

Today, Dunkle's life couldn't be more different.

He's rector of Grace Episcopal in Orange Park, a parish that saw close to 100 percent of its members leave on Easter 2006. Tuesday found him leading a morning service for about 150 elementary day-school children. His homily utilized toy hands and feet to symbolize the body of Christ and ended with one child's prayer for "all pets including Luke's fish, who died."

The change in mood and job description struck Dunkle as he left the sanctuary.

"This is a different gig than managing the lawsuits," he said with a smile.

The fact is, today it's a different gig for just about everyone here who was caught up in the controversy surrounding the Right Rev. V. Gene Robinson, the openly-gay priest consecrated as bishop of New Hampshire on Nov. 2, 2003.

Leaders and lay people on both sides say the makeup of this diocese has allowed it to get past the schism and move on sooner to the sorts of ministries they feel called by God to do. As a result, dioceses elsewhere in the country are consulting Howard for advice on what to do.

'EXCITING' TIMES

Robinson's election and consecration began the ongoing split in the U.S.-based denomination, which has seen two dioceses vote to leave along with thousands of clergy and lay people.
Membership declined from 2.2 million in 2003 to 2.1 million in 2007 - although some of that can be attributed to the overall drop among mainline denominations, said Kirk Hadaway, director of research for the Episcopal Church.

The event made Howard's North Florida diocese ground zero for theological and legal wrangling that resulted in all or parts of close to 20 congregations leaving, representing a decline in membership and giving of around 12 percent.

Howard attributes that to the more conservative, Southern setting of his diocese, giving it a "critical mass" of Episcopalians who were alarmed by what Robinson's elevation meant to their church and spirituality.

As a result, the local crisis occurred relatively early on, enabling both sides to move on to issues like church growth and church planting.

"It's exciting," said the Rev. Gene Strickland, the priest who led All Souls parish out of the Episcopal Church and into temporary worship space at Mandarin Middle School in July 2007. "A lot of that stuff from the past we've let go. That's not where we live."

UNENVIABLE POSITION

Howard, who was also elected bishop in 2003, spent roughly the first three years in office dealing with unhappy priests and congregations.

The Rev. Neil Lebhar, a leader and spokesman for the congregations and clergy that eventually left the denomination, said Howard was in a most unenviable position from Day 1.

"I think it's arguable he became bishop in the most difficult season in the history of the Episcopal Church, or at least within the last century," Lebhar said.

Lebhar is rector at Redeemer Anglican in Jacksonville and leader of the Anglican Alliance of North Florida and Georgia. The Alliance represents close to 20 congregations made up mostly of about 3,000 former members of Howard's diocese.

They came from a large and well-organized core of Episcopalians who saw Robinson's election as the last straw in the denomination's gradual-but-steady abandonment of biblical orthodoxy and Christian tradition.

At first, Lebhar said, he and other conservatives saw Howard as an ally who would lead the diocese out of the Episcopal Church if necessary.

It was when Howard refused to join the Anglican Communion Network - a decision he declared on his first day - that they knew he was not an ally.

Though he initially favored joining, Howard said he abandoned that plan once it became clear the organization was evolving into an alternative church. "I had no choice. I took vows to uphold the unity of the church."

The rift grew wider when Howard refused to break communion with the denomination's House of Bishops, which by then included Robinson.

It was a difficult pill for Lebhar and like-minded Episcopalians to swallow, especially since Howard's predecessor, the late Bishop Stephen Jecko, was solidly in the then-burgeoning secessionist movement.
"Went from a bishop who was leading the charge... to a bishop who put a higher value on remaining loyal to the denomination."

But Howard said the surprise was his.

He thought some of those conservative leaders would be his allies because he made it clear during the interview process that he couldn't imagine leading the diocese out of the denomination.

Howard said he also was surprised because he is a theologically conservative bishop. He does not allow same-sex blessing services in his parishes, wouldn't have voted for Robinson if he had had the chance and forbids clergy to be sexually active outside of traditional marriage.

PAIN IN THE PEWS

The resulting conflict was emotionally taxing for both sides.

The conservatives tried unsuccessfully to work the system by proposing resolutions at diocesan conventions to distance the diocese from the national church. Then Lebhar and other priests began to take their congregations out of the denomination.

Other Anglican bishops, mostly from Africa and South America, extended oversight to those congregations and clergy who had departed.

Lawsuits over property ensued.

"It was a painful and disillusioning time," Lebhar said.

The diocese successfully sued Lebhar's parish to establish the precedent that departing congregations cannot remain on church property.

Bruce Dougherty, senior warden at All Souls Anglican, said many in the congregation were devastated to leave behind the facilities they'd held dear for nearly 30 years. Many continue to grieve.

At Grace Episcopal, member Richard Cobb, 66, was one of 35 who remained behind on the 7-acre, 21-building campus in 2006. He said it caused him "great sadness" to see hundreds of friends abandon the parish and denomination.

In April, Howard rescinded the holy orders of Lebhar and 21 other priests and deacons, many of whom already had led their congregations out of the diocese months or years before.

During the past five years, more than 20 provinces of the worldwide Anglican Communion have declared a broken relationship with the Episcopal Church. The dioceses in Pittsburgh and San Joaquin (Calif.) have left.

"It's not the way Anglicans have ever done business," Howard said.

Howard, whose previous post was as a priest at Trinity Church on Wall Street, where he helped counsel people on and after 9/11, said the schism's emotional impact on him "was more difficult than 9/11."

TRANSFORMATIONS
But the months and years since have changed things, Howard said. Membership has returned to about 30,000 and giving is back up to pre-2003 levels. He is focused on planting churches, developing a rural medical outreach program and expanding prison ministries. He also plans to install a priest focused solely on youth ministry.

Dunkle said that while his role defending the diocese was rewarding, "the fuel for his fire" is the challenge of growing a church, which has gone from the remnant of 35 who stayed behind to as many as 400 now.

Cobb said his parish, Grace Episcopal, has its focus back on sacramental things after losing it to issues surround Robinson's ordination. "It's . . . a great joy that we are engaging in what we regard as the true purpose of our church."

It's the same for those who left the denomination and diocese behind.

All Souls has adopted a nearby apartment complex where it plans to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of its residents. The parish is also ramping up its prison outreach and planting more churches.

Dougherty said it's a relief to be out of the "limbo" created by battles with the national church. A relief to be sharing the gospel again. And a relief to be almost completely oblivious to the turmoil that continues in some parts of the Episcopal Church.

"I deliberately stopped reading the blogs and reading the e-mails, because we're not part of that any more," Dougherty said.
Headlines: **What would Jesus blog?**

The Internet has been both a blessing and a bane for religious organizations -- giving them an easy way to spread the word but also providing a forum 'to sling stones'.

Byline/Title: [Redacted]

Source:

PubDate: Sunday, 12/7/2008

Correction:

Body Text: The Rev. Mac Brunson knows a thing or two about the marriage of the church and Internet worlds.

The First Baptist Church pastor has pushed the 28,000-member congregation headlong into the digital age in his two-plus years there with staff blogs, podcasts, video podcasts and the like. The payoff is getting letters and e-mails from people around the globe saying they were uplifted by the gospel preached electronically from Jacksonville.

"I think anybody in the ministry and any church should stay up with latest technology and use it as much as we can use it for the kingdom's sake," he said.

But the merger of Web and faith has its ugly side, too, Brunson and other ministers have discovered in recent years. It has given rise to a new generation of church critics and gossips who throw stones from behind the firewall of anonymity.

"All my ministry I've had people complaining," Brunson said. These newer Web-based complaints are "an old sin of gossip with a new twist."

This new twist presents churches with a dilemma: The Internet can transform individual spirituality, congregations and, in some cases, the future of entire denominations -- for good and bad.

**ANONYMOUS AND CRITICAL**

For Brunson, the bad has come in the form of an anonymous blogger who asserts to be a First Baptist member. The blogger has criticized Brunson and some members of his staff during the past couple of years over issues including salary and plans to open a church school.

The blog's title and address are not being published because the blogger declined a Times-
Union request to identify him- or herself.

First Baptist is not the only church to be attacked online. The Rev. Skye Jethani, managing editor of Leadership Journal, a national magazine for church and ministry leaders, said he's hearing of the anti-pastor blogs in a number of congregations and denominations.

The trend of anonymous, critical blogs within the religious world is reflective of the secular world, Jethani said.

Faith-based blogs generally take one of two tracks: Either to share one's spiritual journey or to criticize or affirm religious authority, said Heidi Campbell, an assistant professor of communications at Texas A&M University.

"People are definitely using it to make private conversation public," said Campbell, who is writing a book that will be titled When Religion Meets New Media.

But even ministers must be careful about what they write in their blogs because even well-intentioned opinions or musings can alienate church and community members.

"The danger of the medium is you start to ad lib, and you put it out there and before you know it millions of people have seen it," Campbell said.

'AFFORDABLE, EFFECTIVE'

That's the kind of stuff Pastor Eric Jaffe stays away from in his blog at Journey Church in Orange Park.

Jaffe said his focus is keeping church members and thousands of other readers up to date on sermon topics and his family life.

Why write about his family? Because blogs can "help create a sense of connected community" within a congregation, Jaffe said.

In fact, Journey Church was created with Web-savvy people in mind when it was launched in 2007.

"There's a whole group of people whose community is online," Jaffe said. "I don't get it, but that is the way they connect."

Plus it's affordable. Average weekly attendance at the physical church is almost 600, but Journey Church sees thousands of visitors every month through its blogs, online forums, audio and video podcasts, and social networking sites MySpace and Twitter. The church spends about $200 a month on Web-related outreach, Jaffe said.

"It extends the reach of the church," he said. "I post a message [on the blog] and thousands can see it instantly."

A BOOST TO MOVEMENTS

The Chabad Jewish movement has used the Internet aggressively to conduct its outreach throughout the world, said Rabbi Nochum Kurinsky, spiritual leader of Chabad at the Beaches in Ponte Vedra Beach.

Founded 250 years ago in Russia, the Jewish spiritual and educational movement today has 4,000 full-time emissary families operating 3,300 centers -- including Kurinsky's -- worldwide,
according to Chabad.org.

Kurinsky said the organization's Web site and those of Jewish educational centers such as his help encourage attendance and inspire Jews to further their religious education.

The rabbi said he uses his blog and page on the social networking site Facebook to stimulate religious thought and education, and in turn curiosity and understanding about Judaism, holidays and the Torah.

"They give you an opportunity to express yourself in a laid-back format," Kurinsky said. "And people feel like they're really talking to you versus just reading your comments in an article."

'EMPOWERING THE LAITY'

While the Internet spread the outreach of the Chabad movement, it was also instrumental in the ongoing split within the Episcopal Church.

The schism began to pick up speed after an openly gay priest was elected bishop of New Hampshire in 2003. Since then, three dioceses and thousands of theologically conservative Episcopalians have left the denomination and aligned themselves with like-minded Anglican groups in the United States and around the world.

"A slew of liberal bloggers and a slew of conservative bloggers" have helped galvanize the opinion and action that has caused the split, said David Virtue, founder of Virtue Online, a news site critical of the Episcopal Church.

While some of them are clergy, most of the bloggers are lay people who are "kicking and screaming" about the issues dividing the denomination.

"This is all coming from the bottom up, not the top down," he said.

While it's good that blogs and other Web-based technologies have given lay people a voice, it's also spawned an unfortunate trend in anonymous carping -- on both sides of the issue, Virtue said.

"People want to be able to smack someone without ever being discovered who they are."

'PEOPLE ARE THE PROBLEM'

Jethani, the religious magazine editor, said the rising number of anonymous, faith-based bloggers is troubling because it goes against Scripture. The New Testament is clear that disputes between Christians are to be handled lovingly and, when possible, privately.

"It's so easy to sling stones when we don't see the human beings on the other side of our remarks," he said.

In addition to being vicious, Brunson said the blogger dogging him and First Baptist has been inaccurate.

Brunson said he doesn't make anywhere near the $300,000 annual salary the blogger claims, and the anonymous writer also has been wrong about the congregation's displeasure about the creation of a new school.

The pastor and other church officials declined to say what the pastor makes, but Brunson said salaries and budgets are overseen by deacons and trustees and voted on by the
congregation. Church members have also consistently been updated about the school, which is to open in the fall of 2009.

"I'm sure there are folks not in favor of the school, but they handle it in a mature, biblical, Christlike way," Brunson said.

So, are blogs and other technologies inherently flawed?

Brunson and Jethani agreed they are not.

"The problem isn't blogs or the Internet; its people," Jethani said.
Headlines: Yoga: A conflict of religion?  
Millions of Americans practice it, but some claim it violates the principles of their faiths

Body Text: Avondale's Kim Mason is a Christian who takes her faith seriously. She also practices yoga several times a week.

Conflict?

No way, said Mason, who scoffs at the notion that yoga is an overt or subliminal homage to ancient Indian gods or spirituality.

"You don't have to worship anything" during yoga, Mason said. "You can worship a Gucci purse if you want to - you have to look at your motive."

Mason's motive? Glorifying Christ.

"It is a form of praise and worship, in my opinion."

Given that nearly 16 million Americans practice yoga and spend $5.7 billion a year on classes and related products, Mason isn't alone in embracing the practice. But there are also many who view it as spiritually suspect at best and spiritually corrupting at worst.

The issue was thrust into the spotlight in November when an Islamic religious council in Malaysia banned Muslims there from practicing yoga because it includes postures, rituals and chants with ancient Indian origins.

That ruling mirrors the concern of some Jewish and Christian leaders who warn their followers against participating in any activity violating the biblical prohibition on idolatry and that tends to claim that all religions are equally valid paths to salvation.

And the issue is on the minds of studio owners and others as doctors, psychologists and other health professionals are increasingly recommending yoga as a way to combat everything from depression to stress.

IS YOGA A RELIGION?

Yoga teachers and studio owners draw a distinction between "spiritual" and "religious" when describing the practice: It's spiritual because it can do as much to strengthen existing faith as it can muscles, they said.
"It's a spiritual path," said Shri Hamilton-Hubbard, owner of Bliss Yoga in San Marco. "It works very well if you practice a religion along with it."

Yoga postures are more effective in both the physiological and spiritual realms if a practitioner is focused on what is most sacred to them during a session, whether it's Buddha, Jesus, Ganesh or simply "spirit," she said.

Spirit?

"Spirit for you can be connecting with your breath," said Kate Cordell, director of Ocean Yoga in Atlantic Beach. "Spirit could be connecting with a particular deity - maybe you're a Christian, and Jesus is who you honor."

Hamilton-Hubbard, Cordell and other teachers and studio owners said they never push a particular deity or agenda in their classes - just the principle of connecting with the sacred through practice.

CLERGY ADVICE: 'BE CAREFUL'

Rabbi Yoseph Kahanov said he's no yoga expert, but he knows for Judaism some forms are acceptable and some are not.

Kahanov, spiritual leader of Mandarin-based Chabad Lubavitch of Northeast Florida, said he's often asked if it's OK to participate in yoga. He reminds people that Judaism prohibits worshipping or honoring other deities in any form.

"I tell them it's OK when it's just trying to help people focus and meditate properly," Kahanov said. "But when it starts becoming religious in any way, I advise them not to be involved in that."

The Rev. Pradeep Thorat said he advises people to stay away from the practice, period.

Even yoga that's completely devoid of Sanskrit spiritual terms should be avoided because some of the postures originate from Hindu worship.

"If it comes from a spiritual background, it does carry some sort of spiritual effect," said Thorat, pastor of First Baptist Church of India in Jacksonville.

'GATEWAY TO NEW AGE'?

For Laurette Willis, there is no middle ground on yoga. She describes it as a gateway to the occult or New Age religion, and, at best, a diluted, one-size-fits-all spirituality.

The Oklahoma resident and author spent more than 20 years practicing and teaching yoga before reconnecting with her Christian faith and inventing PraiseMoves, a Bible-based exercise program that pairs individual verses with postures, some of which are similar to yoga poses.

In those two decades, Willis said yoga opened her to astrology, metaphysics, crystals, channeling, psychic readings, out-of-body experiences and other practices.

"You hear all this bantered about in the classes," Willis said. "Yoga has this skewed idea that there are many paths to God - and that's what New Age says."

As far as the Malaysian claim that the practice is inherently Indian in origin, Willis presents the dictionary as evidence.

"Webster's dictionary ... calls it a mystic and ascetic Hindu discipline for achieving union with the supreme spirit through prescribed postures."

She advises people to stay away from yoga, no matter how much instructors and studios
play down those spiritual components.

'STRANGE' TO FIRST-TIMERS

Yoga studios and instructors are aware of, and often sensitive about, the issue. Some declined to be interviewed for this story.

The fact is, the seemingly exotic sights (such as Buddha statues), sounds (chanting) and smells (incense) can alienate someone entering a yoga studio for the first time, said Siddie Friar, the manager of M Body Yoga on the Southside.

Friar said she was very turned off the first time she walked into a studio a couple of years ago and was asked to chant "ohm," a Sanskrit word whose sound is said to foster inner peace.

"We went through some postures, put our hands at heart center and the teacher called for us to 'ohm,'" Friar said. "I said, 'What is this?' It was very strange."

That's why some studios, including M Body, go easy on the Sanskrit and minimize or avoid the concepts and statuary denoting Eastern spiritual and physical concepts, Friar said.

"Saying 'open your heart chakra, feel your kundalini energy rising' - that's not going to make any sense to some people," she said.

'OHM, AMEN OR SHALOM'

That's why instructors teach differently depending on the setting, Cordell said.

If she's teaching at a YMCA, church or a community center, Cordell said she drops the Sanskrit words for poses and any spiritual terminology.

"I don't 'ohm' and I use the word 'breath' instead of 'spirit,'" she said. "I want to be careful not to make them feel uncomfortable or that I am confronting their beliefs."

Back in the studio, it's also about respecting people's faith, said Sara Torbett, owner of Yoga Life in Southside.

The music played at her studio tends more to be nonvocal and, because she's a Christian, Torbett said she stays away from chants that invoke the names of deities, even if they are meant only as spiritual principles instead of actual personalities.

There are also no statues, but instructors do lead students through saying "Ohm" and "namaste" (pronounced nah-mahs-day), Torbett said.

Ohm to her is a "neutral spiritual principle" and namaste can easily be translated into "the Holy Spirit dwelling in you and the Holy Spirit dwelling in me."

But using those words in a studio is not meant as a challenge to belief, she added. Sanskrit is used in studios much as Latin is used in medicine or Italian in classical music.

"Whether it's 'ohm,' 'amen' or 'shalom,' we're all saying the same thing - we're saying peace."

YOGA IN AMERICA: Billions spent, mainly by women

$5.7 BILLION

Spent by Americans on yoga classes, equipment, clothing, vacations, DVDs, books.
15.8
MILLION
U.S. adults participate in yoga, 6.9 percent of the population.
72%
Of yoga practitioners are women.
71%
Of yoga practitioners are college educated and 27 percent have post-graduate degrees.
14
MILLION
Americans report that a doctor or therapist has recommended yoga to them.
45%
Of Americans say yoga would be helpful during treatment of a medical conditions.
Source: Yoga Journal's 2008 "Yoga in America" market study