

# BUCKINGHAM

## REPORT

AN IN-DEPTH CRITIQUE OF THE ISSUES, PEOPLE & EVENTS AFFECTING TODAY'S CHRISTIAN LEADERS

### ARE STAFF MEMBERS CALLED, TOO?

Bailey Smith is one of the most well-known names in Southern Baptist circles. Now an Atlanta-based evangelist, he was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention while pastor of the First Baptist Church in Del City, Oklahoma. At that time, his church led all churches in America in recorded annual conversions (to Baptists, this means the number of people who were baptized in water).

In July, the pulpit committee from the 5,000-member North Jacksonville Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, extended a "call" for Smith, 52, to come as pastor. Smith accepted, but only after stipulating various conditions. For one, he wanted the church to fire its present minister of music and hire an Oklahoman of Smith's choice.

Church officials, eager to have Smith come and help them with their huge building debt, quickly replaced their minister of music. (All other staff members were given notice, also.) The Oklahoma musician then quit his job so he could move to Florida and work with Smith.

Then, in August, three days before he was to assume the pastorate, Smith pulled out. He denied that the huge debt amassed by the North Jacksonville church—which has curbed its spending—had anything to do with his decision. Nor, he said, was he influenced by the fact that his former church in Del City had just gone through the largest-ever church bond default in history. Rather, he said he had a "rediscovered call to evangelism."

Smith is to be commended for stepping aside before he stepped out of the will of God. However, his actions leave everyone else shaking their heads—much as if a groom were to say to the minister at the wedding, "I do not" instead of "I do," then walk out the door, leaving his bride at the altar.

This not-so-uncommon mess brings up an old, but valid question: Are staff members—other than senior pastors—called or hired? Are pastors the only ones God calls, or does He also call youth

pastors and ministers of music? I believe He does.

Church officials often fire pastors because they are not producing nickels and noses—just as an NFL football team owner might fire a coach who does not win. But is it right to fire a "called" person simply because the church isn't growing? I doubt if a single New Testament leader could last as a pastor in any of today's superchurches. In most cases, you have to be more like Simon the Magician than Simon Peter to make it in today's market.

A more pressing question, accented by the mess in Jacksonville, is: Do pastors have a right to fire a staff member? The answer is yes. As chief shepherds, sometimes they must. However, they should do it only for due cause—not because they have found a more attractive person in another state. (That's like a man divorcing his wife because he found a prettier woman down the street.) We all understand the desire to work with people we know and trust. But just as pastors don't bring their former congregation with them when they accept a call to a new church, they should not necessarily bring their former staff members—especially if it means displacing those who have served well. After all, church staff members are called, too.

### CHANGE WITH SOCIETY—OR DIE

George Barna is one of the nation's top researchers. Speaking recently to a group of Southern Baptist leaders on the trends of the 1990s, he said: "We need a new awakening in the church. We cannot go on playing the same games we have for years. We have to ask ourselves, 'Is the church culturally relevant to where we are today?'"

Sadly, Barna said, most churches do not understand the changing mind-set of the



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American people. For instance, a growing number of Americans are forming a new "syncretic" faith by choosing values and ideas they like from several religions and institutions and combining them. His telephone surveys reveal:

- 66 percent of Americans believe there is no such thing as absolute truth;
- 64 percent believe all people pray to the same god, even though they use different names for that god; and
- 63 percent believe the purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment.

Even more alarming, he stated, is the large number of people who have been attending Protestant churches for years but have never made a personal decision to accept Christ as Savior. Fifty-five percent of all persons sitting in any given Protestant church on Sunday are not Christians, he said. And many of those have been sitting there for 10 years or more.

According to Barna, growing churches in the '90s will be those bodies of believers that offer relevant ministry to families. Churches must keep in mind that the family in America is not dead—just changing. By the year 2000, 52 percent of the population will be 35 or older. If you live in Florida or Arizona or any of another dozen states seen as retirement areas, more than half of your congregation could be made up of "over 50s" by the year 2000. As a result, the nation's focus will soon shift from child care to elder care. Churches need to be ready.

Barna also listed these changes to watch for:

- Ethnic population growth. A 13 percent growth rate for blacks, 27 percent growth rate for Hispanics and 35 percent growth rate for Asian Americans is expected over the next eight years.
- Ascendancy of women. The 1990s will find more women in roles of authority both in secular and religious circles. Three out of every 10 businesses in America are now owned by women, and five out of every six new businesses opening this year will be started by women.
- Use of the Bible. While 93 percent of all households own one or more Bibles, only 12 percent of adults read the Scriptures every day, and 57 percent do not read the Bible at all during a typical week.

### **QUO VADIS EPISCOPALIANS?**

Earlier this year, in a strong editorial, this magazine called for the resignation or ouster of

John Spong—bishop of Newark, New Jersey—and Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning from leadership in the Episcopal Church. Both men were either active or supportive in the ordination of homosexuals as priests in the 2.4 million denomination.

Spong, with Browning's approval, had ordained Robert Williams, an avowed homosexual. Almost immediately, Williams entered into a crusade to tear down the remaining strongholds in the Episcopal Church, which stood against homosexuality in the priesthood. He attacked the church, went on public television with his lover, and stated that he felt Mother Theresa would be better off if she had a lesbian fling. The entire denomination was thrown into crisis. Spong had no choice but to fire Williams from his post.

Now, as if he is determined to maintain his quota, Spong has ordained another practicing homosexual. Barry Stopfel (43) was ordained before 450 people at the Church of the Atonement in Tenafly, New Jersey, where he will serve as assistant pastor. Carter Heyward, a lesbian Episcopal priest, preached. She said the church is in the midst of a "second reformation" involving not only the recognition of homosexual clergy, but also an overhaul of the denomination's "patriarchal" structure.

During the Episcopal ordination service, there is a time for dissenters to speak. No one generally does; however, Austin Menzies, a former member of the Church of Atonement who left when Stopfel was ordained a deacon by an assistant bishop the year before, stood and spoke. "Priests are role models to all Christians, particularly the young," he said. "Ordination of this person will encourage children to believe there's nothing perverse or immoral about homosexuality, that two men showing their mutual affection by making genital contact is perfectly normal."

His prophetic voice was ignored. The service continued. Stopfel's lover, a United Church of Christ clergyman, was then introduced. The audience applauded.

In 1979, the Episcopal Church's General Convention passed a resolution saying the ordination of practicing homosexuals was "not appropriate." According to Integrity, however, the gay and lesbian caucus of the Episcopal Church, at least 50 practicing homosexuals have been ordained to the priesthood in recent years. Recently, meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, the

convention refused to bar practicing homosexuals from the ministry, though it did concede that sex among clergy is appropriate only within marriage. No mention was made of homosexuality being sin.

I love this great church. I love many of its priests and bishops whom I look upon as men of God. Some of the strongest churches in this nation are charismatic Episcopalian churches. At one time, speaking at an Episcopalian convention, I jokingly described myself as a "closet Episcopalian." Now "coming out of the closet" has taken on other meanings among the priesthood. It's sad.

One of the few dissenting voices speaking out is Dennis Bennett, in whose Episcopal church the modern charismatic movement started. Bennett likens the Episcopal Church to Paul's shipwreck recorded in Acts 27. "The Episcopal Church actually ran aground some years ago," he wrote, "and small pieces began to break off. The present issue could cause another major break-off...I believe the people of the Episcopal Church, if they could vote directly, would turn down these 'far-out' issues...However, the average Episcopalian does not have a direct voice or vote, and since our leaders are not really accountable to us for their actions...we must speak out loudly and clearly. My own conscience will not let me stay unless I make my position clear and can do something to help."

Pray that Bennett and others who are willing to step forward and be heard can do something to help. Otherwise the Ichabod sign will surely be raised over the doors of this once-great church.

## ANOTHER VIEW OF BRIGHTON '91

In the last issue I wrote a report on the July conference in Brighton, England, sponsored by the International Charismatic Conference on World Evangelization. As I expected, I received an answer from my friend Larry Christenson, chairman of ICCOWE and longtime Lutheran charismatic leader.

**Christenson's Evaluation:** Your article on Brighton '91 in the *Buckingham Report* (Sept/Oct) paints a different picture of the conference than I have been getting back from delegates on an evaluation survey. Some of the items you reported were factually inaccurate.

- You reported that Michael Harper stated he hoped for an attendance of "up to 25,000." The decision to hold the Brighton conference was made at a prayer vigil in Jerusalem in May 1989. The

purpose of the meeting was written up in the minutes like this: "to gather about 5,000 leaders in the worldwide charismatic renewal..."

- You reported that the Brighton Conference was first announced as the "greatest gathering of charismatic leaders in world history." The charismatic renewal has certainly fed inflated rhetoric into the common discourse, and those of us who had responsibility for planning the Brighton Conference have probably contributed our share over the years. On the other hand, some of the ecumenical problems we had to work through tempered this tendency considerably. Your in-quoted phrase may have been an attempt to summarize some of the early announcements of the conference that came your way, but I believe that it carries a triumphalist tone that we consciously tried to avoid.

- You reported that registration from the United States was alarmingly light. This is accurate. However, the report that Vinson Synan and I "crisscrossed the nation" to ask people to attend is not accurate. I only made one trip—at someone else's invitation—to promote Brighton in the United States. I don't believe Synan made any trips to promote Brighton.

- You reported that "most of the delegates were English." If you meant "English-speaking," that would be accurate. If you meant citizens of the United Kingdom, it would not be accurate. Less than 25 percent of the delegates came from the U.S.

You also reported that non-denominational Protestants outnumbered all other groups. Our registration figures show this: Catholics, 800; Anglicans and denominational Protestants, 1,545; non-denominationalists, 500; classical Pentecostals, 225.

These inaccuracies in the article contribute to an overall impression that sees more to fault than to commend in the Brighton Conference. This is not the picture we are getting back on the detailed evaluation survey from other people who were there. Many said Brighton was the high point of their involvement in the charismatic renewal.

Your parenthetical remark at the close of the article injects gratuitous stereotypes of Catholics and evangelicals that run contrary to everything that led up to and took place at Brighton. You wrote that "World evangelization (especially when you mix Catholics, who often believe that evangelization is getting people to join the Catholic church, with evangelicals, who base their concept of evangelism on having a personal experience of Jesus Christ)

a fuzzy focus for a major conference.”

I do not know of a single group whose evangelism does not include the objective of getting people to join some church. On the other hand, I never heard a view or characterization of evangelism by a Catholic that was not centered on a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.

When you get to naming the “high point” of a conference, you are, of course, dealing with a matter of personal judgment. You suggest that the “highlight for some” came on Wednesday night when three people led brief times of intercession. This was not mentioned in a single evaluation that came back to us. The overwhelming majority cited the talk by Raniero Cantalamessa on Thursday evening. Here you had an outspokenly Roman Catholic participant speaking on the stickiest point of all—Christian unity.

One of the surprises we encountered at Brighton was the degree to which the topic of Christian unity dominated the agenda. I can only shake my head when I read a report on Brighton that does not even mention this part of the event.

You concluded your article by saying that “future planners will do well to seek God for clear direction before planning conferences.” It’s hard to avoid the inference that the Brighton planners must have been derelict at this point. The Lord, of course, must be the final judge of that. We certainly made mistakes and missed opportunities. Yet Brighton did involve a consultation of about 100 leaders from various national cultures and religious traditions over a six-year period. We held three international meetings before it was decided to convene the Brighton conference. I can only say that I personally have never been involved in a process of discerning the Lord’s will that was more carefully and soberly entered into and carried on than this one.

**My Reply:** I apologize to my respected friends, Larry Christenson and Canon Michael Harper, for the accuracy errors.

However, in rereading the article, I find far more commendation than fault. I began by commending the Christian unity fostered by the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury when he endorsed the charismatic movement. As to the still lingering foundational differences between Catholics and evangelicals, it is time we faced the fact that, despite the giant strides made by open-minded, Christ-honoring, Bible-believing American

charismatic Catholic leaders, the vast majority of world Catholic leaders still equate salvation with joining the Roman Catholic Church. Not ignoring the message of Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the papal household, I have to state that much of my overseas travel puts me in contact with Catholic leaders who not only are “old world” in their thinking, but still hate evangelicals. Many bridges have been built, nearly all by charismatics and through conferences such as Brighton, but the differences have not budged at the foundational level. Let us recognize this, then redouble our efforts to bring down the walls.

This was the first conference in years that I have attended without being saddled with leadership responsibilities. I found it wonderfully refreshing. I came and went as I wished. I was not responsible for worrying about the size of the offering, having to dress up and sit on the platform; and I could join in the worship and prayer without having someone pass me a note saying we were 15 minutes behind schedule. Things look much different, I discovered, from the balcony than they do from the platform. Thus, to my laicized eye, the prayer times were much more powerful than the speeches by visiting prelates. I am disappointed that none of the evaluators seemed to understand that the greatest thing to come out of this great conference were prayers that touched the heart of God.

