

(BP)

BAPTIST PRESS
News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE
SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Herb Hollinger, Vice President
Art Toalston, Editor
Fax (615) 782-8736
CompuServe ID # 70420,17

October 9, 1996

96-178

SAN ANTONIO--Help for hurting ministers described as biblical mandate; photos.

SAN ANTONIO--Family also wounded when pastor is fired.

SAN ANTONIO--Figures show terminations waste lives, witness, money.

LOUISIANA--Judge rules professors' lawsuit against conservatives may proceed.

GEORGIA--Martin King to return to Home Mission Board.

ILLINOIS--Ferrell Foster named editor of Illinois Baptist journal.

KENTUCKY--Balance near-death experiences with Scripture, pastor counsels.

KENTUCKY--Anti-Christian tone noted in various near-death books.

KENTUCKY--Near-death experiences can have value, profs say.

**Help for hurting ministers
described as biblical mandate**

By Craig Bird

**Baptist Press
10/9/96**

SAN ANTONIO (BP)--No one but the pastor's wife knew he spent hours every Saturday night curled into a fetal position, battling his emotional demons until -- with her help -- he pried himself upright and struggled into the pulpit to preach one more time.

But everybody found out when he killed himself after another stormy Wednesday night church business meeting.

"They never told anyone how he was hurting, never asked for help because the pastor isn't supposed to need help, didn't know where to go for help," Bob Anderson said. "But we all need help. Most ministers who are lost to the Christian church don't commit suicide -- but we still lose their commitment, their wisdom, their training and their gifts when grief or anger or depression result in a firing or their resignation."

In November, Anderson ends a 22-year run as pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, La., to head -- "by faith" -- The Antioch Affection. The foundation will work to rehabilitate fired church staff members and teach churches and pastors Christian reconciliation. The Antioch Affection was launched at a recent meeting at First Baptist Church, Castle Hills in suburban San Antonio. It has no advance underwriting or guaranteed income.

The decision to leave the pastorate is a formal structuring and expansion of a key part of Anderson's lifetime ministry.

"Every six hours a senior pastor at a Southern Baptist church is forcibly terminated," Anderson, current first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention, told the 500 pastors, pastors' family members and laypeople at the rally.

"An estimated 225 church staff members are fired every month. Research in Texas shows 40-60 percent of Baptist church staff members would leave their positions if they could get jobs in the secular work place of equivalent salary."

The Antioch Affection also works with churches to teach Christian reconciliation methods to conflict. "We're looking for a win-win solution where the church and the staff member will each continue to be what God wants them to be," Anderson explained. "Everybody has a following. When a church fires someone, it not only hurts that person and his or her family but it harms the church. Some members always leave when a firing takes place. Often a church will split."

One congregation Anderson is working with balked at his standard request that it pay their soon-to-be-ex-pastor's salary for six months while he was in transition. "We were asking them for \$23,000 while we placed him on another church staff so we could minister to him, work with him and try to place him in another church full time. I asked them how many people would leave if the man was fired. They said 800! When the deacons realized those 800 would carry \$100,000 in tithes and offerings with them, they began to see the validity of our approach."

--more--

Anderson "took the small end of a church split when he went to Parkview in the 1970s," recounted Jack Terry, vice president for institutional advancement at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. "Since then, he has not only grown a great church but has placed almost 250 men on his staff, helped them deal with their pain, taught them more effective ways to lead and motivate their congregations -- and helped 98 percent of them return to full-time pastorates."

The recent Antioch Affection "birthing session" in Texas featured separate seminars for church staff members and spouses (mostly pastors), children of staff members and laypeople concerned about the problem.

"We're working with one man who has been fired by three churches," Anderson said. "He's an ex-Marine and his leadership style is 'get ready to take this hill the way I tell you to or get out of my way.' We're helping him understand that in Baptist churches, the laypeople have a say, that he needs to consider what they have to say too."

The church belongs to the laity, Anderson pointed out. The staff members come and go but the congregation remains. Neither are firings self-contained, he continued. A fired staff member takes anger and hurt and fear into the next church, and the church that did the firing is suspicious and distant to staff members who follow.

"This problem is epidemic," he said. "And we need you sweet laypeople to help us straighten it out."

Two San Antonio pastors praised the value of The Antioch Affection.

"I recently took a two-month sabbatical when I recognized the symptoms of burnout," George Harris, pastor of the host church admitted. "It probably saved my ministry. But that was possible because my church loves its pastor and was willing to let me do that. Sadly, there aren't enough churches like First Baptist Church Castle Hills that support the staff members that way."

Buckner Fanning, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, noted, "Sometimes a man goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he falls. Often it's his own fault but he is still beaten up and still needs picking up. Some of us are like the priest and the Levite and we pass by on the other side. Thank God for Bob Anderson. He's a good Samaritan. He wants to teach us to bind up the wounds and pay the hotel bill while fallen ministers recover."

Later it was announced Fanning had made available a 55-acre ranch as a retreat center for The Antioch Affection, as well as committing one month a year when he, along with his wife, will work for and with the organization.

Ken Hemphill, Southwestern Seminary's president, delivered the key address, "Touched by an Angel," at the ministry's launch. He drew parallels between today's ministers in crisis and the Old Testament prophet Elijah, noting:

-- Immediately after Elijah's greatest spiritual moment -- when he singlehandedly faced down 450 prophets of Baal and called down fire from heaven -- his life was threatened by Jezebel. Despite his recent successes, he promptly fled into the desert to die. "He understood the nature of God and had a firm theological understanding undergirding everything he did," Hemphill said. "But spiritual conflict takes incredible physical energy. And his depression got so great he went to the desert to commit suicide."

-- God sent an angel to nourish him with food and water and to let him rest for 40 days and nights. "You need time and resources to recover from crisis and depression," Hemphill noted.

-- Even after being physically restored, Elijah still felt totally alone and abandoned by others and under severe persecution. "The fact that he was incorrect, and there were 7,000 like him, isn't germane to his emotional state. It is a common misconception by a man of God that he stands alone for orthodoxy. But facts are not relevant -- the point is Elijah FELT alone and that was his reality," Hemphill said.

-- Elijah looked for God in places of power -- the great wind, the earthquake and the fire -- but the Lord was not in them. "I guarantee you the greatest concern of every minister in crisis is the fear that he will never again hear God's voice calling him to do something for his Lord again," Hemphill stated.

-- Then Elijah found/heard God in a still small voice. "God still has things for him to do," Hemphill reminded.

-- Elijah became useful again. "God sent him to anoint the next king of Syria, anoint the next king of Israel -- and anoint his own successor as prophet, Elisha," Hemphill said.

"From a Christian viewpoint we can't not do this," Hemphill concluded. "If we don't do this, I don't know where we will stand before God as Southern Baptists. We have a biblical mandate to heal and comfort the wounded. We will throw away opportunities to witness by destroying churches and tossing out countless lives along with the time and money invested to train those ministers if we don't do this."

The service ended with the 100-voice choir and 35-piece orchestra performing, "Wounded Soldier," as Harris urged, "Let's not let another wounded soldier die on our watch. Let's minister healing to them."

**Family also wounded
when pastor is fired**

By Brian Smith

SAN ANTONIO (BP)--When a pastor is dismissed, the pain is real. And the pain extends to his wife and children -- people whose needs often are neglected during the decision to remove a minister from a church.

"PKs are the innocent victims," said Mercy Foster, 16-year-old daughter of Aubrey Foster, who was terminated earlier this year from the pastorate of a Port Barre, La., church. "When a church runs off its pastor, they run off a whole family. A church is supposed to be a house of love -- how could they be so cruel? I felt like a piece of trash thrown out, thrown in a box on the side of the street."

Foster's comments came during the "birth rally" of The Antioch Affection, a restoration ministry for terminated ministers and their families headed by Bob Anderson, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church, Baton Rouge, La., first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention and a trustee of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas. The rally was held at Castle Hills First Baptist Church in San Antonio.

"I was bitter -- I hated God," she continued between sobs in her testimony to the San Antonio audience of about 500. "I thought Christian people were kind. They lied about my dad, and it hurt. I wanted to end my life -- then I wouldn't have to go through this."

"I want to ask Ken Hemphill and Bob Anderson to help us," Mercy concluded. "(Churches) are throwing out little boys and little girls who don't know what to do."

The rally, with testimonies and keynote speakers Anderson, Southwestern President Hemphill and San Antonio pastor Buckner Fanning, served to kick off public awareness and fund-raising efforts for the program. It also featured breakout sessions that offered information for pastors, staff and their spouses; lay leaders and their spouses; and staff and lay children.

"Your parents need your support," Roy Davis told about 35 children and youth who attended the staff/lay children session. Davis is a terminated minister who now serves as associate pastor of Parkview Baptist Church and speaks on behalf of The Antioch Affection.

"Even though (a pastor and wife facing termination) get a lot of criticism, don't push them out of your life -- they're trying to model Jesus for you. And don't give up on those people who are criticizing your parents."

James Ramos, 17, attended the youth session. His father, Mario, was fired from a church in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas and now serves as pastor of Seacroft Baptist Church in San Antonio. "The church didn't want Dad as pastor anymore, and we had to move from a small town to San Antonio," the younger Ramos said. "It hurt to leave the city and leave my best friend."

Davis reminded the youngsters the same things happen to their parents. "A pastor and his wife also leave friends -- not just a church."

He then asked what happens to youth "when you are teased at school about being a goody-two-shoes because your father is a minister."

"We sometime rebel to fit in with our friends," answered Annetta Box, 17.

Davis urged the group not to allow rebellion and bitterness to take hold. "If you allow negative peer pressure to turn you against your parents, you'll lose the best friends you have."

He also suggested they talk to fellow ministers' kids, as well as youth directors. "Youth ministers will be tickled pink to talk to you -- that's why they're there. But what's important is to find someone to talk to about the pain."

Sherrie Foster, mother of 16-year-old Mercy, told the larger gathering that her husband being fired was "the most awful thing I've ever experienced. You want to love, but when they won't let you love them it's hard."

For more information about The Antioch Affection, contact Anderson at 2052 Magna Charta Place, Baton Rouge, LA 70815.

--30--

**Figures show terminations
waste lives, witness, money**

**Baptist Press
10/9/96**

SAN ANTONIO (BP)--Facts and figures driving the need The Antioch Affection seeks to address -- as quoted by speakers at a rally launching the ministry for terminated ministers and their families -- include:

-- Research by the Baptist General Convention of Texas indicating 40-60 percent of Southern Baptist church staff members in the state would resign if they could find employment in the secular work place at comparable salary and benefits.

--more--

-- One senior pastor being forcibly terminated at a Southern Baptist church in the United States on an average of every six hours. Baptist Sunday Board figures reflect that 125 senior pastors are fired in SBC churches each month, with an estimated 100 more not reported.

-- Five years ago, SBC national agencies tracked the calls received from severely discouraged, ready-to-quit pastors. There were 40 to 50 a day, or 18,000 calls a year, in a denomination with 62,000 staff members.

-- Church splits sparked by the firing of a staff member costing the Southern Baptist Convention an estimated \$300-\$400 million annually in lost tithes and offerings.

-- Real cost for educating a graduate at a Southern Baptist seminary around \$50,000. Using the BSSB figure of 225 monthly firings and using a conservative estimate of 50 percent of those quitting, the SBC throws away a minimum of \$50 million a year in wasted training costs.

Additionally, in a recent survey, according to Hemphill:

-- 70 percent of the pastors responding said they did not have a single close friend.

-- 40 percent indicated at least one serious conflict in their church each month.

-- 90 percent were working 46-plus hours a week.

-- 80 percent felt their vocation had a negative effect on their families.

-- 33 percent felt their vocation was an outright hazard to their families.

-- 75 percent reported at least one stress-related illness.

-- 90 percent felt inadequately trained to cope with demands of ministry.

--30--

Judge rules professors' lawsuit against conservatives may proceed

By C. Lacy Thompson

**Baptist Press
10/9/96**

ALEXANDRIA, La. (BP)--A Louisiana judge has ruled a lawsuit filed by four Louisiana College professors against the "Louisiana Baptist Conservative Resurgency" group may proceed.

According to the ruling by Judge Tom Yeager of the Ninth Judicial District Court in Alexandria, the issues in the case do not fall under the First Amendment, which guarantees religious freedom and which has been interpreted to forbid courts from interfering with ecclesiastical matters. The professors' lawsuit challenges what they claim are defamatory and derogatory statements meant to harm their professional and moral reputations.

However, the lead attorney for the Louisiana Baptist Conservative Resurgency said he disagrees with Yeager, who issued the ruling the last week of September, and his clients will appeal the ruling on that issue. "This is a legal conclusion that we think is incorrect," Dale Smith of Pineville, La., said. "We feel the judge too narrowly defined what a church is."

Smith said his clients believe the activity challenged in the lawsuit falls under the umbrella of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, which should be defined as a church. By that reasoning, the case falls under First Amendment protection and should be dismissed by the court, Smith said.

The professors' lawsuit alleges letters distributed by Leon Hyatt of Pineville and others were defamatory and derogatory and meant to harm the professional and moral reputations of several Louisiana College professors. The lawsuit, which requests a jury trial, was filed June 10 by professors Carlton Winbery, Fred Downing, James Heath and Connie Douglas. The college itself is not involved in the suit.

The plaintiffs contend Hyatt and others issued "malicious and derogatory" statements in an attempt "to wrongfully expose the plaintiffs to ridicule, contempt and hatred, as well as further seek to deprive them of public confidence." A lawsuit is a legal statement of grievances against a defendant and must be proved in court.

Events related to the suit date back to May 1995, when Hyatt and others organized a group for the purpose of calling the state convention "back to its biblical and moral roots." Members of the group adopted four goals, two of which related directly to Louisiana College.

In addition, in the weeks after its organization, the group began distributing a packet of 21 letters citing concerns with Louisiana College. The letters addressed a range of past and recent incidents at the school and named several professors.

The lawsuit asserts the charges made against the professors are "absolutely and patently false." Plaintiff attorney Vic Sooter of Alexandria said the suit was filed after it became obvious the situation could not be resolved through any other means.

In July of this year, Smith responded to the suit by asking an Alexandria court to dismiss it without a trial. He offered two reasons -- the case fell under First Amendment protection and there was too much vagueness in the charges.

--more--

Yeager heard arguments regarding the requests earlier in September then ruled against both of Smith's arguments.

"The petitioners (or plaintiffs) in this case are not ministers of 'a church' but rather professors at Louisiana College," Yeager ruled. "The Louisiana Baptist Convention is not 'a church' but rather an association of 'messengers' from various Baptist churches in Louisiana.

"Louisiana College is not 'a church' but an institution of higher learning governed by a board of trustees and articles of incorporation. ... At the trial of this exception, Hyatt testified he was not a pastor ... but he was general chairman of the Louisiana Baptist Conservative Resurgency which was composed of individuals which he characterized as a 'theological movement' not affiliated with Louisiana College of the Louisiana Baptist Convention."

Yeager said it is "well established the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and Article 1, Section 4 of the Louisiana Constitution both guarantee religious freedom and have been interpreted to forbid courts from interfering in the ecclesiastical matters of religious groups, including internal disciplinary matters, government and religious doctrines of churches."

Yeager cited two cases supporting that view of protection. However, he also noted the current situation differs in that it involves people "who were acting on their own, outside of a church as a 'theological movement,' who had no authority from any ecclesiastical board of any church, Louisiana College or the Louisiana Baptist Convention to conduct any disciplinary proceedings concerning the (plaintiffs)."

Because of that, Hyatt and others involved in the distribution of the letters have removed themselves from First Amendment protection and exposed themselves to the jurisdiction of the court, Yeager said. "To so decide (in that way) will not violate sacred constitutional principles in that the court will not interfere with the defendant's right to worship, his ability to engage in worship activities in his church and does not involve the court in any internal or administrative matters within any church."

Yeager also rejected the request for dismissal of the suit on grounds the charges are too vague to allow for preparation of a defense. Yeager noted the plaintiffs are responsible only for presenting enough details to show the nature of the case and to enable defendants to prepare for defense. "This court believes the petition (or filed lawsuit) places Hyatt on notice of the nature of the facts sought to be proved so that he can prepare a defense," he stated.

Yeager noted most of the details challenged by the move for dismissal are things Hyatt himself would be in a better position to know than the plaintiffs -- such as names of others involved in the letter distribution efforts and specifics of meetings.

Had Yeager ruled in favor of the motions to dismiss, the matter would have been settled. Now, however, plaintiff attorney Sooter said he is preparing to proceed. "I'm obviously pleased that the judge adopted in his reasons all our arguments made in brief."

Meanwhile, defense attorney Smith said he plans an appeal of Yeager's ruling to the Third Circuit Court of Appeals and to the state Supreme Court if necessary. "We respectfully disagree with the judge," he maintained.

According to the lawsuit, the letters distributed by the conservative group allege the plaintiffs taught in violation of traditional Christian values, assigned and exposed students to pornographic materials, accepted homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle, justified and approved of sexual impurity, engaged in or approved of displays of nudity, condoned the use of profanity, disparaged the sanctity of human life, declined to recognize the divine inspiration of the Bible, saw the Bible as no more significant than other books on religion, expressed disbelief in biblical miracles and departed from the biblical and moral roots held by most Louisiana Baptists.

Calling such charges "absolutely and patently false," the lawsuit also contends, "Such statements attack the basic moral character of a minister of God and professor of religion, wrongfully offering up these plaintiffs for public ridicule based upon the political agenda of those who may disagree with them on finer points of theology."

In an earlier news Baptist Press story, the president of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, Michael Claunch, a Slidell pastor, said the conservatives' goal "has been and still is to get the truth about what is being taught and practiced at Louisiana College to Louisiana Baptists. We believe that when Louisiana Baptists know the truth, they will do the right thing."

Claunch said, "It is not our (conservatives') desire that these matters go before a secular court," he said. "The Scriptures strictly forbid one Christian from suing another. We believe the passage in 1 Corinthians 6 is God's truth for us today, and we believe we ought to obey it. If, however, these plaintiffs insist on bringing the truth out in a secular court of law, we have no choice. We will speak the truth in love as we have tried to do all along and let witnesses confirm the testimony. Ultimately, I believe God will cause the truth to come out where all can see. I will rejoice to see that day."

**Martin King to return
to Home Mission Board**

By Sarah Zimmerman

ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)--Martin King, vice president for institutional advancement at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, will return to the Home Mission Board Oct. 28 as director of news services and public relations.

King served in a similar role at the Home Mission Board for three years before being elected to the Midwestern position last October. King has worked in various media positions since 1969, including broadcast journalism, hospital public relations and advertising.

King was elected by the HMB board of directors executive committee. Andy Antonson, retired pastor from Kansas who made the recommendation to elect King, said, "In light of our consolidation, we felt we needed to fill this position." He referred to the merger of the Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission and Radio and Television Commission into a new North American Mission Board, to take place next year under the Southern Baptist Convention "Covenant for a New Century" restructuring.

Mark Coppenger, president of Midwestern Seminary, said, "We're grateful to the Home Mission Board for loaning us Marty King for a year. He played a strategic role in our year of transition at Midwestern and now will play a strategic role in a year of transition at the Home Mission Board as they become NAMB."

An Indiana native, King received a bachelor's degree from Indiana State University and has completed the course work toward a master's degree from Ball State University, Muncie, Ind.

In other business, board members appointed 46 missionaries and learned of 18 chaplaincy endorsements. They also heard testimonies from Terry Moncrief, home missionary who serves in an Atlanta housing community, and Carter Bearden, HMB staff member who leads churches to develop ministries among the deaf.

--30--

**Ferrell Foster named editor
of Illinois Baptist journal**

**Baptist Press
10/9/96**

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (BP)--Ferrell Foster has been named editor of the Illinois Baptist newsjournal and director of Illinois Baptist State Association's communications department, according to IBSA Executive Director Bob Wiley.

Foster, 41, had been serving as the department's acting director since March 1, when former director Bill Webb became editor of Missouri's Word and Way newsjournal.

"(Foster) has done an effective job in the interim," Wiley said. "His attitude is that of serving all the people. He's proven himself to be capable and is doing a very fine job."

Foster joined the IBSA staff in 1987 as associate editor of the Illinois Baptist. Previously, he had worked three years on the public relations staff at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and seven years for a daily newspaper in east Texas, the Marshall News Messenger.

He holds a bachelor's degree from East Texas State University in Commerce, Texas, and a master of divinity degree from New Orleans Seminary. He currently is enrolled in the doctor of ministry degree program at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Mo.

Foster and his wife, Trese, have four children, Tiffany, 14; Tabitha, 13; Landon, 9; and Meredith, 2. They attend Chatham Baptist Church, Springfield, Ill.

--30--

**Balance near-death experiences
with Scripture, pastor counsels**

By Ken Walker

**Baptist Press
10/9/96**

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--When Stella Jarboe checked into the hospital last fall with severe pneumonia, she felt so bad she wanted to die.

Her doctors believed she would soon get her wish. Wires sprouted from her body. A yellowish substance clogged her lungs. Her two daughters maintained a 24-hour bedside vigil.

The 82-year-old Louisville, Ky., woman remembers little of the first two days of her three-week stay at Baptist East Hospital, except the vision that remains so vivid she tells others about it constantly.

--more--

Jarboe said she was standing in a big open space. Then, as if a movie were flashing in front of her, she saw a line with people standing on it. Most of the faces belonged to members of her family, including her five sisters and two brothers.

Suddenly a sister who had died in 1981 and a late brother, who would have been 100, appeared beside her. Each took an arm in their hands. "Oh, is this the way Jesus does things?" Stella asked. "He sends loved ones that have died and gone to heaven back after the other ones?"

"Yes," her sister replied.

"I'm not afraid. Let's go. I'm ready."

As Stella raised her foot to cross the line, a sweet, yet commanding man's voice sounded from behind, "No, not yet. You've got some extended time."

Believing the voice must be Christ's, Jarboe turned to look. Nobody was there. When she turned around, her brother and sister had vanished. The next thing she recalls is lying in her hospital bed.

At first, the retired nurses' aide didn't talk much about it. She was afraid others would think she was nuts, although she is a born-again Christian who once taught Sunday school for 38 years.

Today, that reticence is gone.

"I've had dreams before and this wasn't a dream," said the member of Clifton Baptist Church. "I know this was the Lord speaking to me, because he and I are good friends."

Twenty-five years ago, Jarboe might have drawn strange glances for her account. But that was before near-death experiences became a popular phenomenon.

A 1990 Gallup Poll reported 12 percent of adult respondents said they had survived a near-death experience. If representative of all U.S. adults, more than 22 million Americans claim to have encountered such incidents.

Raymond Moody's 1975 book, "Life After Life," detailed 50 near-death experiences and sold more than 12 million copies. Although he has been criticized as anti-Christian, Moody's writings are credited with launching widespread interest in the topic.

The wave of interest also spurred the creation of the International Association for Near-Death Experiences. The group, also criticized by some Christian researchers, reportedly has several thousand members in the United States and branches in a dozen foreign nations.

While Stella Jarboe's pastor doesn't discount the validity of her experience, Jim Holladay cautions that Christians must test any experience against the truth of Scripture and Jesus as he is revealed in the Bible.

Holladay said it is impossible to know whether Christians will enter heaven in the way Jarboe described. But the crucial element of her experience is the positive impact it made on her life, Holladay said.

"I wouldn't deny that God tries to communicate hope to us in a variety of ways when we're inclined to give up," he said. "Whatever happened was so spiritually powerful that she has a reason for being here. It has motivated her to be of service to ministry and the church."

Jarboe said she's not certain why she survived the sickness, but one reason has been suggested by the sick and shut-ins she calls regularly. They tell her she encourages them tremendously and have suggested that is her purpose for living, she said.

She added no matter how long she remains on earth she will not fear death. "When I pray at night, I say, 'Lord, if you come and get me tonight, I know I'll be with you forever.' If I die tonight I've had a wonderful life, even with its ups and downs."

The fascinating accounts make it easy to understand why near-death experiences attract such attention.

In his book, "Caught Up Into Paradise," evangelical Christian Richard Eby wrote of falling off a balcony and splitting his head open. He wrote that before doctors resuscitated him, he saw heaven awash with beautiful sights and sounds and communication with God on a mind-to-mind level.

Others have told of bright lights, pleasurable sensations and out-of-body visions. Among them is Phyllis Tickle, editor-at-large for Publishers Weekly. For many years, she served as religion editor of the New York-based trade publication.

About 40 years ago, she received the wrong drug to prevent a miscarriage and stopped breathing. Although revived in an ambulance, she relapsed in the hospital.

She recalled watching doctors operate on her amidst bright lights, with music in the background. She wanted to depart for this other world, but said she realized she couldn't leave her husband of 18 months and decided to return.

"It's like a conversion experience," Tickle said. "It forms every thought thereafter. It's not something you can hide or fake. But I couldn't find anyone who wanted to talk about it back then. As the spiritual movement has grown, it has become more acceptable to talk about subjective experience."

**Anti-Christian tone noted
in various near-death books**

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Interest in near-death experiences waned after sales of Raymond Moody's "Life After Life" slowed. But it revived in recent years with the publication of "Embraced By The Light," Betty Eadie's near-death experience account that has sold more than 4 million copies.

That disturbs veteran cult watcher Richard Abanes, who says neither Moody nor Eadie is a Christian. Abanes is the author of a new book, "Journey Into the Light: Exploring Near Death Experiences."

Abanes said he wrote the book because much of the near-death genre has an anti-Christian flavor. The 10 best-selling near-death experience (NDE) books take an anti-Christian, New Age or occultic view of the afterlife, he said.

"I wanted to bring out information the public rarely saw in these popular books," said the Southern California author. "I was also troubled by the way Christians were accepting these things from anyone who calls themselves a Christian, whether they were or not."

Two years ago he wrote "Embraced By The Light and the Bible," highlighting Eadie's Mormon beliefs and the anti-biblical tone of her best-seller.

Eadie has made questionable statements in other venues. Writing last year in Ladies Home Journal, she said of her near-death experience, "I knew, for the first time in my life, that I could be whoever I wanted to be and judge myself by my own standards" -- contradicting a belief in God's judgment.

That the work of a Mormon author could sell so well in Christian bookstores highlights another disturbing aspect of NDEs. Abanes said believers often overlook the movement's occult and New Age influences because the "Christian" accounts sound so uplifting.

It's not only the books that should concern believers, he added. Much of the research in this field takes an anti-Christian stance, as well as the International Association for Near-Death Experiences, he said.

He quoted Wheaton College psychology professor Elizabeth Hillstrom for the claim many IANDS members hold New Age beliefs -- especially the "universalist" position that one doesn't have to be a Christian to go to heaven.

Wayne Oates, former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the University of Louisville, agreed with Abanes about the New Age influence behind near-death experiences' popularity.

The idea of communicating with the dead sounds like channeling and other New Age practices that have generated volumes of books but little documented evidence, he said.

"To what extent do these people attribute these experiences to the living Christ or the Holy Spirit?" he asked. "I've read a lot in the press about out-of-body experiences but very little that relates to Judeo-Christian experiences."

From an empirical point of view, he said, there are psychiatric reasons for NDEs. He termed them "hynogagic" -- a half-waking, half-sleeping state that many have experienced outside of near-death situations.

He said a friend recently claimed to have heard his late wife calling him by name and saying, "Come here." Since he was daydreaming and had heard this sound hundreds of times, Oates said the man's mind naturally could have reproduced that image.

"I know the average person who has had such an experience wouldn't accept that," he said. "They feel it was total reality. Surgical patients have had these experiences, because they're not as thoroughly asleep as the anesthesiologist thinks they are."

However, Oates said he doesn't want to downgrade those who have been through a near-death encounter.

Such experiences have led some to alter their lives significantly, he said, such as giving up alcohol or finding comfort in knowing a loved one who died is now safe in God's hands.

"It's an article of faith and I'm not going to talk them out of it," he said. "But I would ask: How they are different and what are the results of their experience?"

**Near-death experiences
can have value, profs say**

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Near-death experiences can be of benefit to individuals who experience them, say two former professors at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Each experience must be examined on the basis of the person's life, said Frank Tupper, noting near-death experiences can help prepare Christians for death.

"My inclination is to say that there are moments when God gives us a sense of confidence," said Tupper, a former professor of Christian theology who continues to reside in Louisville, Ky. "More than losing the fear of death, it's an embrace of the possibilities on the other side of death."

Near-death experiences can provide believers a sense of well-being and shouldn't be repudiated, he said, adding not every experience reported should be considered authentic.

Skeptics may ask if it were an experience with God or merely an indication of a psychological needs, but Tupper said near-death experiences dramatically affect the way that individual looks at life and death.

The most powerful experience Tupper knows of appeared in the book, "A Whole New Life," by Duke University English literature professor Reynolds Price.

Price was lying in the hospital, diagnosed with terminal cancer. The author told of suddenly finding himself beside Jesus and the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. He described Christ saying his sins were forgiven and he was healed.

Although Price lived, he lost the use of his legs and suffers from pain. Still, Tupper said, when he read the book he was convinced Price had an experience with God.

"If people I know are comfortable with telling about (this kind of experience) and it's absolutely pivotal in describing their life experience, I tend to accept it," he said. "I think there are exceptional moments when God speaks to us."

Near-death experiences have become a popular topic in the past two decades, but Ed Thornton said they have been recorded throughout history. Many 19th-century books chronicle people's dying words, containing accounts of near-death experiences, said Thornton, retired professor of the psychology of religion. "It's not a new phenomenon at all; it's just better documented."

In the past, when Thornton served as a retreat leader, people often approached him individually to tell of out-of-body or near-death experiences they were afraid to share with their pastor or other Christians, he said.

"Judging by the numbers who will talk about them convinces me there must be quite a few," Thornton said.

Those who go through near-death experiences often will feel compelled to change vocations or undertake new missions, he said. They also have a new view about the presence of God in the world and a different perspective on dying, he said.

However, both men say the key to such experiences is the aftereffects. When people seek Thornton's advice about the significance of an event, he advises measuring it by Jesus' great commandment to love God and others.

"If it's consistent with a deeper devotion to God and loving their neighbor, it needs to be affirmed and supported as a word from the Holy Spirit," he said. "If it leads away from that, a pastor needs to question it."

Nor should near-death thrills be treated as a badge of superiority, Tupper said. Christians should not view those who survive near-death experiences without such visions as not blessed. "It doesn't mean they have any less of a relationship with God," he said.

HOUSE MAIL

(BP)	BAPTIST PRESS 901 Commerce #750 Nashville, TN 37234
F I R S T C L A S S	Southern Baptist Library and Archives