

Death--A Last Frontier
Comes Out of the Closet

By Bonita Sparrow

FOR WORTH (BP)--Death is coming out of the closet.

A subject usually avoided, death--a last frontier--is more and more an open topic for discussion.

The research and writings of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and others on death and dying are contributing to a new, greater discussion of death and the Christian belief in a life after death, believes C. W. Bess, pastor of First Baptist Church in Olney, Tex.

Bess, who teaches his own congregation concerning the reality of God in dealing with death, conducts about 40 funerals a year:

"It's hard to bury your friends, but we have conducted seminars so death won't be a stranger," he says. The programs include as speakers, hospital chaplains and doctors, attorneys who discuss wills, and funeral directors, in preparation for the event of death.

"People are talking more about death now," says Bess, citing the Karen Quinlan case and Kubler-Ross' writings as among contributing factors:

"Kubler-Ross talks about the five stages experienced by a person who is dying--shock and disbelief, anger, frustration, bargaining with God, and, finally, acceptance. Not everyone goes through these five stages, but they don't seem that difficult for Christians."

Donald E. Evans, pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Wichita, Kan., feels it is hard for a person--Christian or otherwise--to learn he or she is about to die.

"But," he added, "all of us are terminal. What we need to do is live each day to the fullest. We have only three days, you know. Yesterday and tomorrow are God's. All we really can count on is today. When we live that to the fullest, death isn't the enemy."

Christians can "face death...the same as you face any other major issue--honestly and realistically," says Roy E. DeBrand, pastor of First Baptist Church in Richmond, Tex. "Death isn't something to be feared," he notes: "It begins a new kind of life in the presence of God. There's a natural fear with death. But, to a large extent, that fear can be overcome through faith."

Even with the traditional Christian views of a heavenly afterlife, even Christians tend to shy away from the word, "death."

"We're gradually calling death, 'death,'" reflects Stanton H. Nash, vice president for development at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., "but we don't like it much.

"Some of still prefer to say, 'gone to sleep,' 'gone to rest,' 'slipped away,' and 'went to his or her reward,'" Nash said.

A Christian view of death sees it as "a transition to a better world," says Ramsey Pollard, retired pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., and a former Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) president: "It's a continuity of the human personality."

"Death is a friend," says Herschel H. Hobbs, also a former SBC president and the retired pastor of Oklahoma City's First Baptist Church.

"In one split second after death," Hobbs explains, "we are more alive, more conscious, and more aware than we've ever been in our existence. Death is a release," he says.

"We can liken death to birth," Hobbs continues: "Birth is death to the pre-natal child's conception of existence, but birth takes that child from the narrow confines of the mother's body to a broad experience of life.

"And death to this life is birth out of the narrow confines of this body and this existence into life infinitely greater than anything we have ever known," Hobbs says.

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Hobbs and Pollard both consider funerals "celebrations."

"There are tears," Hobbs says, "but we we p for ourselves. Our loved one has gone to a better place and we have been left behind. A funeral is really the Christian's coronation."

At Swope Park Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo., pastor Olan H. Runnels has led his deacons in a family ministry program dealing with death and dying.

"We had a six-week training program for our people on how to deal with death," he said. "We talked to people about the stages of dying, then stages of grief. We taught our people that when people are hurting we must be empathetic with a big ear instead of a big mouth. We tell them they should not be afraid to touch the person who is dying, to hug them. We teach them to listen to the person if he or she wants to talk about dying and tell them to give and take in a positive experience--'If you want to shed tears, shed them,'" says Runnels.

Swope Park has a senior adults' ministry to the dying and their families. "As a result of this continuing witness we have baptized several people in their 60s, 70s and 80s," Runnels notes.

While several pastors agreed they occasionally battle the temptation to become blasé about funerals, Runnels considers them "some of the most meaningful times in my ministry. Crisis ministry is when you have the greatest opportunity to reach open hearts."

James W. Hackney of Maplewood Baptist Church, St. Louis, Mo., feels Christians are "more open about death than we used to be. Many children are kept from funerals because they are considered too young to understand," he said: "I think, where a child has been close to someone who dies, he or she should be told about death..."

"Children, where they are aware, will ask questions. Those questions should be answered from a Christian point of view and a spiritual standpoint, in the realm of the child's understanding

Death, faced honestly and openly, loses much of its fear and apprehension although it is still "the last frontier and we approach it with some apprehension," says Jesse C. Fletcher pastor, First Baptist Church, Knoxville.

"But we draw our courage from Christ," Fletcher notes: "Many times, now, people know when they have a terminal illness. When that happens, just getting ready for death does not relieve us of the right to continue to pray that God might change the verdict.



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Top 10 SBC Churches
Include 7 From Texas

NASHVILLE (BP)--Seven churches in Texas, headed by First Baptist Church, Dallas, rank in the 1977 Top 10 tabulation of Southern Baptist churches by size of membership.

The ranking, based on 1976 statistics, the latest available, show the Dallas church in the number one spot, with 18,869. That's an increase of 363 over the congregation's leading total of 18,506 in 1975, the last time Baptist Press released the Top 10 rankings (using 1974 statistics).

Although all churches in the Top 10 exceed 7,000 in membership and 10 other churches top 6,000 members, statistical breakdowns show most churches in the 12.9-million-member Southern Baptist Convention have under 300 in membership.

Statistics, compiled from 34,652 churches which reported out of the 35,073 in the nation's largest Protestant denomination, reveal 21,461 churches--or 61.9 percent--in the 299 member and below category; 10,779 churches--or 31.1 percent--in the 300 to 999 category; 2,242 churches--or 6.5 percent--in the 1,000 to 2,999 category; and 150 churches--or four tenths of one percent--in the 3,000 to 5,999 category.

Other individual Top 10 rankings, based on statistics provided by the research services department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, show Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tenn., second with 11,407; and First Church, Lubbock, Tex., third, with 10,445.

No other church exceeds the 10,000 mark, although First Southern, Del City, Okla., ranks fourth with 9,935, and First Church, Amarillo, Tex., holds fifth spot with 9,244.

Others, ranked sixth through tenth respectively, are First, Houston, Tex., 9,049; First, San Antonio, Tex., 8,961; Dauphin Way, Mobile, Ala., 7,276; First, Wichita Falls, Tex., 7,188 and Travis Avenue, Fort Worth, Tex., 7,132. No other churches exceed 7,000 members.

Nine of the 1975 Top 10 churches repeated in 1977. First Baptist Church, Beaumont, Tex., ranked eighth in 1975, with 7,080 members, dropped out of the running in 1977, reporting 4,579 members. Dauphin Way, Mobile, 11th in 1975, with 6,595 members, took over the 1977 eighth spot, with 7,276.

The first three spots, the sixth spot and the eighth and ninth place finishers in the 1975 rankings remained the same in 1977, but First Southern, Del City, jumped from seventh to fourth; First, San Antonio, dropped from fifth to seventh, and First, Amarillo, dropped from fourth to fifth. All increased in size.

The 10 Southern Baptist churches in the 6,000 member range, which comprise the second 10, are First, Jacksonville, Fla., 6,918; First, Atlanta, 6,784; North Phoenix (Ariz.), 6,657; South Main, Houston, 6,562; First, Tulsa, 6,522; Walnut Street, Louisville, 6,373; First, Jackson, Miss., 6,356; Cliff Temple, Dallas, 6,226; First, Midland, Tex., 6,188; and First, Lawton, Okla., 6,048.

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1977 TOP 10 RANKINGS

SBC Churches by Membership

	1977 a	1975 b
1. First Church, Dallas	18,869	18,506
2. Bellevue Church, Memphis	11,407	9,803
3. First Church, Lubbock	10,445	9,790
4. First Southern, Del City, Okla.	9,935	7,886
5. First Church, Amarillo	9,244	9,012
6. First Church, Houston	9,049	7,941
7. First Church, San Antonio	8,961	8,332
8. Dauphin Way Church, Mobile	7,276	6,595
9. First Church, Wichita Falls, Tex.	7,188	7,045
10. Travis Avenue Church, Fort Worth	7,132	7,040

a Statistics gathered in 1976

b Statistics gathered in 1974

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'Use Energy Wisely, Avoid
Credibility Gap,' RPRC Says

Baptist Press
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MINNEAPOLIS (BP)--As President Jimmy Carter attempted to sell his energy proposals to the public and Congress, the national Religious Public Relations Council (RPRC), meeting here, warned its members to avoid a credibility gap that "exists when we, too, fail to act to conserve and use energy and resources wisely . . .

"We challenge our RPRC membership and those whom we serve, where we or they have not done so, to join those who are consciously working to use and conserve resources," the interfaith group said in a resolution during its three-day, 48th annual convention.

"The earth is the Lord's and not ours to exploit," the resolution said, and members of RPRC must "recognize that a credibility gap exists" when actions fail to uphold the wise use of energy and resources.

The resolution was adopted during final business for the meeting, for which more than 100 members and guests from 16 states and Canada were registered.

Theme for the event was "Who Believes Us?--The Credibility of Religion in the Marketplace." Speakers and seminars addressed themselves to the theme in the context of such issues as women's rights, religious education, medical and political ethics. Workshops highlighted the various methods available to mass communicators in the field of religion.

The "credibility" resolution was a synopsis of the theme and issues to which the group expressed its concerns.

Speakers Sydney Ahlstrom, professor of American history and modern religious history at Yale University, New Haven, Conn., and former White House correspondent Forrest Boyd, presently director of communications for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Minneapolis, spoke to the theme from historical perspectives.

Ahlstrom traced "civil religious piety" down from the "placid Eisenhower era," as he called it, through the Civil Rights and Vietnam War eras. He charged that a "credibility gap" has often existed in the guise of differences between what national church or religious leadership does and says and what the various, respective constituencies are saying and doing.

Boyd used the Nixon presidential administration to illustrate a "bad example" of "packaged politics." Recalling the Watergate corruption, Boyd, who worked for the Mutual Broadcasting System as a White House Correspondent during the Nixon and Ford Administrations, cautioned the public relations professionals that while image building was necessary, the image conveyed "must be real and truthful, not a lie."

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Public relations professionals in religion, Boyd continued, face a generally biased secular news media, with exceptions, who range from uninterested to hostile.

The RPRC members, in their resolution, had noted earlier: "We have been admonished in this meeting that a credibility gap often exists between what religion groups have traditionally taught and what is practiced and that a prevalence of civil religious piety often diminishes the sense of integrity and values and the understanding of basic doctrine and articles of faith."

The group then resolved to intensify its efforts to "endorse and promote with its various national leaderships such issues as freedom of the press and other information media, factual reporting of women's rights, religious freedom and ethnic equality--such issues affecting human dignity and well being."

They further admonished that RPRC members "make every effort to close the gap of credibility brought on by" confusing culture with allegiance to God, recognizing that while we are a product of our culture, we can still be in the world but not of it . . ."

They then reaffirmed efforts toward straightforward, honest, responsible interpretation and reporting, to clarify the truth about religion--both by the secular and religious media.

And they urged that "obscure theological terms, sometimes meaningless to the general public . . . be eliminated or explained" to avoid a credibility gap because of language and meaning.

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Catholics, Methodists,
Baptists Lead RPRC Awards

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MINNEAPOLIS (BP)--Catholics, Methodists and Southern Baptists respectively captured the top number of awards here in the national, interfaith awards competition of the Religious Public Relations Council (RPRC).

Catholics won 10 awards, Methodists nine and Southern Baptists seven, with religious communicators from each denomination winning one of RPRC's major "Best in Class" awards.

John Earl Seelig, vice president for administrative services at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, won a best in class and a first place category award of excellence for the seminary's fund raising campaign, "Eight by Eighty." Seelig also won a second place certificate of special merit in the folder category.

Other Baptist winners were Donald S. Hepburn, director of communications for Southwestern Seminary, awards of excellence in the folders category and newsletters category; W. C. Woody, vice president for special projects, Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, Fort Worth, certificate of special merit as executive producer of the TV special, "Daybreak;" and freelance writer, Frank H. Olsen, an award of excellence for program number one of the Radio and Television Commission's TV series, "Listen."

Other best in class award winners, who also won individual categories within their respective classes, are Nancy Montgomery, an Episcopalian, who directs communications for the Washington (D. C.) Cathedral, print class; Jeffrey Weber and Nelson Price, United Methodist Communications in New York, audio visual class; Frances P. Frost, director of creative services, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, broadcast class; Howard E. Royer, coordinator of communications and editor of Messenger and Agenda, Church of the Brethren, Elgin, Ill., writing class.

In other action at the RPRC annual meeting, the group elected national officers for 1977-78, launched a national history-gathering project looking toward the RPRC's 50th anniversary in 1979, passed a resolution on credibility and cited unparalleled distribution of the RPRC Handbook on Church Public Relations, of which some 33,500 copies have been distributed in the first 12 months following its publication.

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J. Robert Christiansen of the Evangelical Free Church of America, director of development for Trinity Evangelical School, Deefield, Ill., was elected national president.

Other officers are Sue Couch, director of public relations, United Methodist Communications, Nashville, Tenn., vice president; Leonard Perryman, associate editor, The Interpreter, United Methodist Communications, Dayton, Ohio, treasurer; and Clara Alice Beaver, editor of First Presbyterian, Houston, Tex., secretary.

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Fire Hits Yemen Hospital;
No Injuries Reported

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JIBLA, Yemen (BP)--Fire struck the Jibla Baptist Hospital here but no injuries were reported, according to Southern Baptist missionary Dr. James M. Young Jr., hospital administrator.

However, Young said the fire severely crippled the 70-bed hospital's operations.

The fire, which Young said probably began with a faulty water heater, completely destroyed a 4,000 square-foot building containing the hospital generators, storeroom, laundry, employees' restrooms and bath and the morgue.

All drug supplies, four generators and all hospital linens, except those on the beds, were destroyed as well as spare parts for all hospital equipment, the water heater, the electrical distribution center, the telephone (intercom) system, two commercial washing machines, a commercial sewing machine and all shelving.

Threat of a complete loss prompted the evacuation of the entire hospital, but now equipment and beds have been returned. A new generator escaped damage so that water and electricity have already been restored. The hospital sent home all patients except those in critical condition, with the anticipation of reopening an outpatient clinic in one week.

However, Young said the hospital cannot begin operating on a regular basis without first replenishing supplies and some equipment.

Young sent the description of the damage and a preliminary estimate of the hospital's financial needs to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board by telegram, April 22, two days after the fire struck.

The board will take action when a more accurate damage report is available, according to Baker J. Cauthen, executive director. Meanwhile, Dr. Franklin T. Fowler, medical consultant for the board, sent hospital personnel a cable April 21, which assured that the board will provide full financial assistance.

The hospital serves a wide area in Yemen, where the ratio of doctors and nurses to population, in spite of some improvement, is probably the poorest in the world, according to John D. Hughey, the board's area secretary for Europe, the Middle East and South Asia.

In addition to Young, a Louisianan, medical doctors, Ronald C. Pirtle of Georgia and Jon Tillinghast of Oklahoma, and dentist, Raymond Odle of Illinois, are assigned to the hospital.

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Bullard Announces
Retirement in 1978

Baptist Press
4/25/77

HARRISBURG, Pa. (BP)--G. W. Bullard, executive secretary-treasurer of the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania-South Jersey, has announced his retirement effective May 31, 1978.

The action came during a quarterly meeting of the convention's executive board at which directors approved reorganization and were told of the resignation of A. C. Queen, director of the convention's division of communications and promotion and editor of the Penn-Jersey Baptist.

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The executive secretary-treasurer will assume the role of editor, a post he held before Queen, 61, a veteran of 34 years pastoral and denominational service, joined the staff in 1974.

Bullard, 65, became executive secretary-treasurer of the young state convention, formed in 1970, on Aug. 1, 1972. A native of North Carolina and a veteran of over 43 years of pastoral and denominational service, Bullard has held many Southern Baptist leadership roles, including the presidency of the North Carolina and Maryland state Baptist conventions and the second vice presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Before joining the Pennsylvania-South Jersey Convention staff, he had served as pastor of churches in North Carolina, Maryland and Texas; superintendent of missions for associations in Pennsylvania and Maryland; and both state superintendent of associational missions and associate state Sunday School secretary for North Carolina Baptists.

Queen will become regional director of evangelism for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, based in Carson City, Nev. He will work in Nevada, Utah, and Idaho, cooperating with evangelism departments of the Arizona and California Baptist Conventions.

In the reorganization, the Pennsylvania-South Jersey executive board deleted the communications and promotion division and divided its responsibilities, which had included evangelism, stewardship, Brotherhood work and editorship of the Penn-Jersey Baptist.

The board created a division of missions, which will include Brotherhood, Woman's Missionary Union and Christian social ministries, and a division of evangelism-stewardship. A division of religious education, including Sunday School, Church Training and other programs related to the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, will continue.

Calvin Bailey, a pastor from Pittsburg and president of the Pennsylvania-South Jersey Convention, said he will soon name a chairman of a five-person search committee to find a successor for Bullard.

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Seminary Honors McCall,
Renews Nigerian Ties

Baptist Press
4/25/77

LOUISVILLE (BP)--The 61-member board of trustees of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, meeting in annual session here, honored President and Mrs. Duke K. McCall on the 25th anniversary of his inauguration, renewed long-standing ties with the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, elected seven faculty members, filled three endowed professorships, and considered future constraints on the spiraling enrollment of the denomination's oldest institution.

The McCalls were presented a new automobile as a personal gift from members of the board in recognition of a quarter-century of service by the seminary's seventh president.

At the request of the Nigerian Baptist Convention and its seminary at Ogbomosho, the trustees agreed to revise and reactivate a special relationship in which Southern Seminary will once again grant degrees to students who complete specific academic programs offered by the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary.

The agreement would be governed by standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which is Southern Seminary's accrediting agency. The degree-granting relationship began in 1948, but was discontinued 10 years ago.

The board tabled for further study a proposal on future enrollment constraints, noting that the explosive growth of Southern Seminary in recent years had strained the seminary's resources and could threaten its ability to maintain high quality programs.

Trustees acknowledged that continued excellence is dependent on the success of the seminary's \$10 million endowment campaign, which will be launched in Louisville this spring, then move to the national level in late 1977.

The fund-raising drive is the seminary's first such comprehensive effort since 1925, when the denomination's Cooperative Program began.

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Seven faculty positions were filled by trustee action: Andrew B. Lester, associate professor of psychology of religion; Ralph Hardee, associate professor of church administration; Robin Kent Rogers, assistant professor of church social work; Ronald Turner, assistant professor of church music; Michael Hawn, adjunct professor of church music; Martha Powell, adjunct professor of church music; and Edward L. Byrd, visiting professor of church administration and pastoral studies.

In other action, the trustees:

--Increased student matriculation fees to \$150 per semester and \$40 per J-Term (one month terms in January, June and July), effective August 1, 1977, as part of a joint move by all six seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention.

--Accepted in principle an offer by the Baptist Sunday School Board to fund a professorship for a five-year period, with the professor and the teaching duties to be determined by the seminary. Similar teaching posts will be established by the board at the other five SBC seminaries.

--Honored three members of the faculty by naming them to fill endowed professorships-- C. Anne Davis to the Woman's Missionary Union Chair of Church Social Work, Allen W. Graves, dean of religious education and professor, to the Gaines S. Dobbins Chair of Church Administration, and George Raymond Beasley-Murray to the James Buchanan Harrison Chair of New Testament interpretation. (The Harrison Chair is currently occupied by Frank Stagg, who will reach retirement age but continue to teach after August 1, 1977, as senior professor of New Testament Interpretation.)

--Promoted three members of the faculty: James W. Cox to professor of Christian preaching, David L. Mueller to professor of Christian theology, and James W. Good to associate professor of church music.

--Designated Henlee H. Barnette, who will retire from teaching on July 31, 1977, as "Emeritus Professor of Christian Ethics."

--Elected Joseph E. Stopher, a Louisville attorney, as the new chairman of the board, succeeding Richard M. Stephenson, executive secretary of the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Other officers are first vice-chairman, Albert Cardwell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Macon, Ga.; second vice-chairman, T. T. Crabtree, pastor of First Baptist Church, Springfield, Mo.; and secretary, J. Cleve Iler III, president of The Creasey Company of Kentucky, Louisville.