



Newspace Edition

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Researchers to study connection between physical pain and faith

London (RNS)—Can religious faith affect the perception of pain? That's a question that a group of Oxford University researchers plans to investigate.

The project hopes to develop a better understanding of how the brain works, when people are thinking and when they are not.

"Very little is known about pain and how the brain copes with it," said the project's deputy director, Dr. Toby Collins.

Officials with the Oxford Centre for Science of the Mind said the study will bring together six university departments: anatomy, pharmacology, philosophy, physiology, theology and the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, which concentrates on medical ethics.

Collins said carefully controlled and monitored experiments will help them find out how subjects react to painful stimuli, either by applying a chili-based gel to the skin or by applying a heat pad that also produces a burning sensation.

Among other things, researchers will show volunteers religious symbols while subjecting them to the painful stimuli to see how they respond.

Collins told Associated Press that subjects will be asked to access a belief system, whether secular or religious, with results compared.

"Everyone, when they suffer pain, has a strategy for coping, and often they will turn to religious beliefs," Collins told AP.

The longest yards



Walking aisle stops some potential members

By **Dannah Prather**
Partnerships Editor

Louisville—Each Sunday, a group of worshippers scattered throughout various churches experience clammy hands, suddenly-sweaty brows and hearts hammering so hard their owners are certain everyone can hear.

These might resemble the symptoms of cardiac arrest, but for some people there is another cause for such discomfort: having to walk the aisle to join a local church.

While the tradition of walking

the aisle dates back only about 150 years, for most Kentucky Baptists it is as time-honored as vacation Bible school and potluck dinners.

Kevin Hamm, pastor of Valley View Baptist Church in Louisville, recently asked whether tradition had become a barrier for some of the shyer souls who wanted to join the church.

"If we had people write down their five greatest fears, for a lot of them, their first fear would be standing up in front of a large group of strangers," Hamm said.

Inside: Walking aisle linked to emphasis on "public profession" of faith. *Page 6.*

That "short trip" down the aisle might be a journey some guests are unwilling to take, not because of their spiritual condition, but because they fear feeling the eyes of an entire congregation on them.

"Just because someone is afraid to walk the aisle doesn't mean they are a closet Christian or not a sold-out believer," Hamm said.

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Dated material. Please deliver by Wednesday, March 2

Author: False gospel leading churches to create nominal Christians

By **John Hall**
Baptist General Convention of Texas

Irving, Texas (ABP)—By teaching forgiveness without discipleship, many churches are distorting Christ's message and creating "nominal Christians," according to author and professor Dallas Willard.

Pastors are preaching alternative "gospels" that do not reflect the true meaning of Christ's message, Willard said.

Conservative ministers present Christ's work as one that provides forgiveness of sins. Liberals emphasize a "gospel of liberation." Other ministers present a "gospel of the church" that says the church will take care of believers if they take care of the church, he added.

Christ's work is liberating and enables the forgiveness of sins, but

the gospel is that salvation brings "life now in the Kingdom of God," where God's will is followed, said Willard, professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California.

Jesus called people to rethink their lives because they can now move into "God's effective will."

"The root of nominal Christianity is people have moved away from a gospel of life and replaced it with something else," Willard said during a missions and evangelism conference sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"If you're preaching the gospel as forgiveness of sins because Jesus died for you, what you will have is nominal Christians you will have to prod to get going."

The availability of the Kingdom is the only message that leads to

character transformation through discipleship, Willard said. The gospel encourages people to trust Jesus for life in God's will.

"I think there will be a lot of people who will be in heaven who believe that (Jesus died only for their sins)," Willard said. "I think they will have a lot of catching up to do because they are not all that different from those in the other place."

"Who He was is much bigger than that. What He offers and calls people to do is trust Jesus."

Trusting Jesus involves rethinking one's life, becoming humble and being born from above, Willard said. God will assist people in following His will and changing their lives through grace, a term the author described as God helping individuals accomplish what they could not do on their own.

Churches can correct the creation of nominal Christians by intentionally forming disciples, which Willard described as apprentices of Jesus.

This is done by depicting a clear picture of "new life" through trusting Jesus, including many of the disciplines—prayer, Scripture memorization, fasting and worship—that strengthen spiritual lives.

"As a disciple of Jesus, I am to lead my life in the Kingdom of heaven as He would lead my life if He was I," Willard said.

To accomplish this goal, many churches should rethink what they are doing and focus all efforts on following the Great Commission of sharing the gospel and creating disciples, he added.

"What we need is people who are more Christ-like."

The longest yards: Some visitors won't walk aisle

"They said they would probably never join the church because their fear of walking down the aisle was so high."

Kevin Hamm, pastor of Valley View Baptist Church in Louisville

Continued from page 1

The extent of this fear was driven home, he said, while visiting a couple who frequently attended Valley View, but never had joined.

"They said they would probably never join the church because their fear of walking down the aisle was so high," Hamm recalled. Approximately 2,300 people attend the two services Valley View hosts each Sunday.

The couple's comments bothered Hamm enough that he wondered how visitors and regular attendees would respond if they could become church members without walking the aisle.

To answer the question, church leaders scheduled a Commitment Sunday in January. Using a detailed bulletin insert and follow-up strategy, Valley View offered people attending the worship services that day a chance to join "from the pew."

The bulletin insert directed people to indicate if they were joining through a statement of faith in Christ, a transfer of membership from another Baptist church, or if they wished to make a first-time profession of faith in Christ.

Hamm recalled that after the second morning service, he went to the church office to discover a small stack of inserts on his desk. Encouraged by the number, he said he was "amazed" when someone pointed to another desk with a large pile of inserts yet to be sorted.

Matching follow-up to response

In total, 152 people joined Valley View that Sunday. Of those, 96 new members already were Christians. The other 56 made first-time professions of faith, were enrolled in a new members' class and were counseled regarding baptism.

Hamm said every new member received follow-up visits. A few cards referenced people who couldn't be found, so they were not included as new members.

Two church growth specialists applauded the effort.

"They (Valley View) have tapped into an alternate response that our churches might do well to offer from time to time," said Dan Garland, leader of the Kentucky Baptist



Convention's church development and evangelism team. "Having people immediately available to follow-up with these folks is imperative."

Thom Rainer, dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, agreed.

With appropriate follow-up, a from-the-pew opportunity does not circumvent a public confession of faith in Christ by a new believer, he said.

"The public profession is the time of baptism rather than aisle-walking or filling out a card," Rainer said.

"I'm not as concerned as to the mode of decision as the opportunity for response," he added.

Through research and consulting with "hundreds" of churches, Rainer said he believes there is "anecdotal evidence" that points to a reduction in altar calls in Baptist churches.

"I have known some large churches that have commitment times

once a month or once a quarter," Rainer said. "I'm concerned about those people who have a sense of conviction other than at that time."

Response & declining baptisms

Noting there is "no hard data" at this time to support such a trend, Rainer said the decline in baptisms in Southern Baptist churches could be a result of providing fewer opportunities for worshipers to share spiritual decisions with others.

"I don't have an answer as to why we're moving away from a time of decision in a service," he said. "I believe that every message, every service, should lead toward a decision. There should be some opportunity for response."

But, in some cases, a reprieve from aisle-walking could provide an opportunity for a clearer understanding of salvation for some people, he said. Aisle-walking "serves a purpose very well that is often misused," Rainer said.

"On the one hand, it is a time of affirmation to see decisions that have been made. On the other hand, theologically, some of our church members equate walking the aisle with salvation."

A 2004 study by his Rainer Group research team asked a group of current church members "diagnostic" questions about the method and meaning of salvation.

Rainer said the results found many "unregenerate" members who did not have a biblical view of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

"We found that around 45 percent were probably unregenerate members," Rainer said. "I emphasize probably. We cannot know the true heart condition of a person. No kind of research can know with certainty matters of salvation."

Providing different methods of response could facilitate a better understanding of the gospel, he said.

Hamm said he is also concerned that visitors, regular attendees or even church members are misunderstanding basic facts of faith.

"(Baptists) have to be very strategic and thorough in our follow-up from the altar to the baptismal waters," he said.

"Seeker-friendly" approaches

Hamm, Garland and Rainer agree that aisle-walking is here to stay and that the tradition has many positive aspects.

"It's an encouragement to the church body to see how God is working in a service," Rainer said.

"I believe in walking the aisle," Hamm said, noting that on Valley View's Commitment Sunday, when worshipers had the option to join from the pew, a number of people still walked the aisle in response to the invitation.

He said the church might offer the bulletin-insert approach once or twice annually.

Garland said more churches should seek such "seeker-friendly" approaches.

"We have to meet people where they are. We think you have to get saved at church or at youth camp," he said. "The key is to find creative ways people can respond to Christ."

Advocates cite history and Scripture for 'public profession' of walking aisle

By **Dannah Prather**
Partnerships Editor

Louisville—The act of walking the aisle of a church to convey publicly a spiritual decision is rooted in mid-19th century America, and, many say, by way of the Gospel of Matthew.

Biblical scholars point to several Scriptures they say support the "outward expression of an inward decision," but Matthew 10:32-33 is perhaps the most-often referenced:

"Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in heaven."

Kentucky church growth experts Dan Garland and Thom Rainer agree that in Southern Baptist and other evangelical churches, baptism is considered by many as the ultimate act of public confession.

Nevertheless, aisle-walking remains a "first step" of faith for many new believers.

Charles Finney & D.L. Moody

If anyone could be dubbed the "father" of the altar call, it probably would be Charles Finney. The University of Virginia American Studies program provides one of many summaries of Finney's background and ministry.

A Connecticut native and one-time lawyer, Finney was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1824.

By 1830, he was one of the major figures of the Second Great Awakening—a period of Christian revival with Kentucky as one of its epicenters.

Encouraging listeners to repent and accept Christ as Savior, Finney would invite them to the "anxious seat," also known as the "mourner's bench," at the

front of a church or whatever gathering area was being used.

At the anxious seat, men, women and children would receive prayer and counsel from a pastor or other church leaders.

From the anxious seat came the "inquiry room," a method brought into prominence by evangelist D.L. Moody, according to Daniel Whitesell's book, "Great Personal Workers."

When a message came to a time of decision, people who felt under conviction were led to a room away from the larger crowd where they could be counseled personally.

Some biographers tell the story of a Sunday night service in Chicago in 1871 that led Moody to emphasize immediate public decisions.

Reportedly, he asked the crowd gathered that night to ponder their spiritual

condition and return the next week to further explore any decision they needed to make. But the infamous great Chicago fire broke out during the service, scattering the congregation and burning the church. There was no opportunity to regroup the following week.

Evangelist Billy Graham's stadium-sized altar calls testify to the acceptance and effectiveness of the method, but pastors and biblical scholars are quick to point out that the act of walking an aisle or repeating a collection of phrases cannot be equated with a heart-felt acceptance of God's grace through Christ.

"People can respond to Christ anywhere," Garland said. "I think the best venue of response is in the home—parents leading children to Christ, or children leading parents to Christ. Then, they come to church to have that decision affirmed."