

Century Marks

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Tipped off: Mark Kushner and Philip Sherman say they have performed more than 30,000 circumcisions since training together in Israel in the 1970s. Most of their business comes from traditional brit milah ceremonies for eight-day-old Jewish boys, but they have increasingly served Christian families who eschew a hospital procedure in favor of a \$300 to \$800 house call from Kushner and Sherman. Sherman sees a trend toward “holistic circumcision”: people want their babies circumcised “in the comfort of their homes, surrounded by family and friends, and they want it performed by someone highly experienced, who brings spirituality and meaning to the practice.” In the U.S., the overall rate of circumcision is on the decline (RNS).

Not color-blind: Mahzarin R. Banaji, a Harvard researcher who created a way to test racial attitudes, has devised a method to test racial bias in children. She expected that children ages five or six would not show any bias, but discovered to her dismay that children as young as three display a bias—and as intensely as adults do. She still believes that overcoming racism is possible (*Chronicle Review*, July 25).

Fund-raiser: Rob Hartwell, pastor of the Village Lutheran Church in Bronxville, New York, admits that he’d been overweight for 25 years. Then he was given the

motivation to do something about it: a donor promised to give \$5,000 to the church for every pound Harwell lost—if he lost at least 70 pounds. The proposal worked: Hartwell is now carrying nearly 100 fewer pounds, and the church’s building fund received almost \$400,000 (*Lutheran Trumpet*, September).

“Show me” candidate: Judy Baker, a Baptist pastor’s wife and a two-term state representative in Missouri, won the Democratic nomination for a seat in Congress. Baker has a master of divinity degree from Southern Baptist Divinity School in Louisville, Kentucky, and is a mother of three. She sees her role in politics as an extension of her original call to ministry. “First of all, Democrats were suspect of me because I was a Baptist, and Republicans were suspect of me because I was a Democrat,” she says of her initial entry into politics. She and her husband are featured in a DVD documentary, *Golden Rule Politics* (ethicsdaily.com).

Sharing Ramadan: To build bridges with non-Muslims, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is encouraging mosques, Islamic community centers and schools to invite their neighbors to an open house and an iftar, a fast-breaking meal during the observance of Ramadan. Iftar is a communal meal that comes after a day of abstaining from food and drink. Ramadan this year starts on September 1 in North America and continues for 30 days (cair.com).

Exaggerated report: Michael Guglielmucci, pastor of one of Australia’s biggest youth-oriented churches, pulled heartstrings by preaching about his battle with terminal cancer. He released a hit song called “Healer,” which appears on YouTube, in which he sings with an oxygen tube in his nose. But he’s not dying after all. The claim was a hoax, which apparently fooled even his family. His ministerial credentials have been suspended, and he’s seeking professional help of a different kind (*Australian*, August 21).

Class clown? Last year a Pew Research Center poll asked Americans to name the journalist they most admired. Jon Stewart, host of the fake news program *The Daily Show*, came in fourth. The show has taken particular delight in deriding the policies and pronouncements of the Bush administration, but it exhibits disdain for all ideologies and all political commentators who parrot the talking points of politicians. Stewart describes his own job as sitting in the back of the room “throwing spitballs” (*New York Times*, August 17).

Dissing marriage? Marriage isn't getting much respect on network TV shows, according to a study released by the Parents Television Council. The watchdog group claims TV shows recently have demonstrated an obsession with outré or bizarre behavior, including partner swapping and pedophilia. References to pornography, sex toys and "kinky" behavior are now common on TV. Visual references to practices such as voyeurism and sadomasochistic sex outnumbered references to married sex by a ratio approaching 3 to 1 (AP).

Slippery business: According to a Department of Energy estimate, there are 18 billion barrels of recoverable oil in offshore areas in the continental United States that are now off limits to drilling. That sounds like a lot, until you realize that it would meet only about seven months of global demand. Last year the DOE reported that it would take two decades for this oil to make an appreciable difference in domestic production and that its impact on fuel costs would be insignificant (*New Yorker*, August 11 & 18).

Dart on target: Century News editor John Dart has been given the 2008 William A. Reed/Religion News Service Lifetime Achievement Award by the Religion Newswriters Association. Dart, a religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times* for 31 years, joined the Century in 2000. In granting this award, RNA noted that Dart "chronicled the cutting edge of religious life, writing about the first gay church, the emergence of Scientology and the growing strength of evangelicals and charismatics. . . . Dart also opened up the world of biblical scholarship to readers. Dart explored topics such as the Nag Hammadi Library, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jesus Seminar." Dart's first aspiration was to be a sportswriter. A tournament-level table tennis player, he competes annually in the USA Table Tennis national championship.