

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [November 16, 2004](#) issue

Church discipline or politics? Two United Methodists from Iowa are trying to get fellow Methodists George Bush and Dick Cheney kicked out of church for their part in the war in Iraq. And a Catholic in California is seeking to have John Kerry excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church because of his position on abortion. The Methodists have created a Web site (www.theymustrepent.com) to solicit signatures on a petition to subject the president and vice president to Methodist church discipline. Although they admit that their gambit is politically motivated, they said they decided to take such action because the president claims his decision to go to war was guided by prayer. The anti-Kerry Catholic activist in California claims he is not trying to determine the outcome of the election, but he felt compelled to defend the faith (*Des Moines Register*, October 26).

Study war again: Some 30 faculty members at the University of Chicago Divinity School have signed a statement that condemns the Bush administration's Iraq policies and in particular criticizes his use of religious rhetoric to defend the war. Noting that the president argues "that America's sole interest in Iraq is to establish freedom, thereby serving God's plan for humanity," the statement maintains that this claim veils the much more complex motives for the war, including "geopolitical calculations, desires for vengeance, military opportunism, and corporate interest (most notably greed for oil). . . . To justify it as God's will, however, seems little short of sacrilege. As faculty members of the University of Chicago Divinity School, we deplore this attempt to wrap failed policies in religious rhetoric."

A different breed: The dominant culture in the U.S. military, argues Robert D. Kaplan, is lower middle class, especially in the ranks of the noncommissioned officers (NCOs). With the exception of enlistees from the urban poor, military personnel come mainly from the South and the Bible Belt of the Midwest and the Great Plains. The military culture is a world of beer and cigarettes and chewing tobacco and profanity. These are people who hunt, drive pickups and have a simple yet demonstrative faith in God. They tend to be nationalistic, not cosmopolitan, and their task—to defend the homeland and use lethal force if necessary—is bolstered by

an evangelicalism tinged with an Old Testament orientation that is both martial and compassionate. These people understand President Bush, who speaks plainly and without subtlety and says openly that it is OK to kill. This is a world that American elites, including the media, don't understand. Even the Pentagon and the military academies are at odds with this military culture (*Atlantic Monthly*, November).

Religious genocide: When a business professor at Imperial Valley College in California suggested to a class that the only way to end the war on terrorism is to kill all Muslims, one student objected. The protesting student was neither a Muslim nor a Christian, but rather an attorney for the Hindu faith, who was ordered by the professor to leave the class for being disrespectful. The Los Angeles chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-LA) asked the college to launch an investigation. The administration responded by promising to organize sensitivity training. The student was reinstated in class, and the professor apologized for what he called "out of context" comments. CAIR-LA termed the response a whitewash.

Worlds apart: Thirteen-year-old Malik Burnett lived in a housing project in Chicago until his building was demolished and his family was forced to move to a run-down part of the West Side. Malik loves his teachers, he's proud of being third in his class, and his mentor keeps encouraging him to think about college: "You know all those famous universities all over Chicago?" she asks him. "They want you to come and they have great financial aid packages to make sure you'll have the money to go. You just keep concentrating on your reading and math." Malik responds in disbelief: "The white people who won't come live in my neighborhood, or even visit it, will welcome me in theirs? Why should they feel any differently about my coming to live with them than they do about coming to live with me?" (Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, University of Chicago Press).

In the national interest: *Books & Culture* magazine (November/December) has suggested a new cabinet-level post for American government—a secretary of history. Whereas most of the president's advisers are usually caught up with the future, or preoccupied by the ubiquitous opinion polls, the secretary of history's role would be to spend at least a half hour every other week with the president to talk about an era of the past—with its own enigmas and ironies—when choices were made for good or ill, choices that have a bearing on present circumstances. *B&C's* own preference for this proposed post is Mark Noll, an occasional contributor to the *Christian Century* (see p. 11). *B&C's* choice for president of the United States is Bono, lead singer of the Irish rock band U2.

Take the pledge: J. Nelson Kraybill, president of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, has a response to the debate over the “under God” phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance (see p. 30). He’s written an alternative pledge for Christians:

I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ,
and to God’s kingdom for which he died—
one Spirit-led people the world over, indivisible,
with love and justice for all.

(Submitted by Gordon Houser of Newton, Kansas)

Sit ye and reflect on this: German archaeologists believe they have found Martin Luther’s toilet, according to the *Daily Telegraph*. The *Daily Telegraph* makes the claim that Luther may have been sitting on this toilet when he penned the 95 theses that spawned the Protestant Reformation. Luther himself had said that he had made his discovery about justification by faith *in cloaca*, meaning in the sewer. The 450-year-old toilet, advanced technology for its time, was found in the annex of his house in Wittenberg.

Pigging out: Fred Kinsie, pastor of the Preston (Ontario) Mennonite Church, wrote the following apology to readers of the local newspaper: “I am writing to apologize to those who may have come to . . . church on Sunday morning as a result of reading the *Record*. My sermon topic was “Wrestling with the Pagan Christ,” not “The Pig in Christ” as listed in the ad on Saturday’s faith pages. Pig wrestling fans obviously went home disappointed. While Jesus did cast demons into a herd of pigs and drove them into a lake, the scriptures are silent on the possibility of him actually wrestling with them. Also, Jesus was a Jew and the likelihood of him eating pork is pretty remote, so having a pig in him is a matter of pure conjecture. I’m sure the pigs of Waterloo Region will now breathe a collective sigh of relief” (*Kitchener-Waterloo Record*).

Fashion statement: With celebrities like Britney Spears wearing rosaries, the beads have become a fashion statement, prompting the Roman Catholic Church in Britain to issue a leaflet stressing the religious significance of rosary beads. Some jewelry stores and Christian bookshops have reported record sales of rosaries (*Chicago Sun-Times*, October 24).