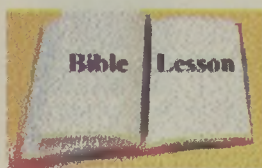


8B

RELIGION



John: Forerunner of Jesus

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant that he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine in those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

1. Tell how Zechariah saw that John's birth initiated the fulfillment of messianic prophecy.
2. List the various reasons for Zechariah's joy and praise to God.
3. Express praise and thanksgiving to God for the salvation that is ours through Jesus Christ.

Black teens much more likely to attend church than whites



PHOTO/MONICAA, MORGAN

The Chevrolet-Stellar Youth Choir performed during the Stellar Awards Nominations Dinner.

By Donald Bradley
SPEAKIN' OUT NEWS

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — No matter how late Nick Johnson stays out on Saturday nights, the Rockhurst High School senior drags himself out of bed the next morning and heads to church.

Nobody makes him go.

Johnson is like many black teenagers. They like church. They see it as a second home; the people there an extension of family.

White teens, researchers have found, are more apt to sleep in on Sunday morning. When they do arise, it's probably to grab the remote, not their Sunday shoes.

According to the new National Study of Youth and Religion, a research project being conducted at UNC-Chapel Hill under the direction of Dr. Christian Smith, Professor in the Department of Sociology, Black youth are far more likely to attend religious services regularly than their white peers. The gap is largest among high school seniors, with black students nearly 50 percent more likely to go to church at least once a week.

Among seniors, 45 percent of blacks reported weekly church attendance, compared to 31 percent of whites.

The survey showed the attendance rate for black youth has climbed since 1995. The white rate has held steady.

"I think we always suspected the disparity, but I was surprised by the margin and quite surprised that the trend was still growing," said Kristin Moore, president of Washington-based Child Trends, the non-profit, nonpartisan research organization that released the study.

Please see **BLACK TEENS/7B**



Many Christmas folkways have pre-Christian origins

By Richard N. Ostling
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nativity scenes of Jesus' birth as depicted in Matthew or Luke are visible this month — though rarely on government property, because of federal court rulings. But many other much-beloved Christmas folkways have secular or pre-Christian origins rather than biblical ones.

Consider the date itself. The Bible doesn't give Jesus' actual birthday and implies it was in the springtime. In A.D. 320, Pope Julius I arbitrarily set Dec. 25 and the Emperor Constantine, a recent convert, soon made the feast permanent.

Their idea was to imitate and compete with Rome's orgiastic Saturnalia, which celebrated the passing of the year's shortest day and the promise that spring would eventually follow winter.

Pagan origins were one reason New England's strict Puritan founders outlawed Christmas observances. Also, the Christmases they knew

back in "merrie" 17th-century England were a drunken, somewhat sinister combination of Mardi Gras and Halloween trick-or-treating.

Roving beggars would visit wealthy homes, demanding goodies with thinly veiled threats. The carolers ("we won't go until we get some") weren't good-naturedly seeking pudding or eggnog.

In some ways, Christmas has gradually become more Christian, according to the book "Stories Behind the Great Traditions of Christmas" (Zondervan) by Ace Collins, which might make a nice little gift.

Some of Collins' other observations: **Trees, logs, plants.**

Pagan Europeans burned what became "Yule logs" to defy the dead of winter, and found hope and even miraculous powers in evergreen trees, as well as holly and mistletoe that not only survived the harsh cold but bravely sprouted colorful berries.

Martin Luther supposedly Christianized Germany's tree tradition,

with evergreens representing God's eternal love shown in Jesus and candles to signify Jesus as the light of the world.

The red-leaved poinsettia was a 19th-century addition, brought back from Mexico by U.S. Ambassador Joel Poinsett, an amateur botanist who reaped handsome profits from the plants.

Colors.

Because of pagans' fascination with wintertime trees, green was probably the oldest color later associated with Christ's advent. Red represented blood and the salvation offered to all who accepted Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Gold stood for the Wise Men's Bethlehem gift designating Jesus as king.

Candy canes.

Supposedly, a 17th-century choir-master in Cologne, Germany, placated his restless young singers with candy. To make eating during worship acceptable, he bent white candy sticks (the color representing Jesus'

sinlessness) into the shape of Bethlehem shepherds' crooks (or maybe "J" for Jesus). Red was added later to symbolize Jesus' blood. Mass production devices in the 20th-century made the canes ubiquitous.

Christmas cards.

This is also a modern custom, by definition, because it requires postal service and cheap four-color printing. Secular year-end greeting cards spread from 19th-century England to Germany to the United States, where immigrant publisher Louis Prang of Roxbury, Mass., produced the first commercial cards in the 1870s. But not until the 20th century did printers begin wide use of Christmas imagery on holiday cards.

Gifts.

New Year's gifts are a far older tradition than Christmas gifts, even though the latter nicely echo the Wise Men's gift-giving and Jesus as the gift of God. One major inspiration was the legends surrounding St.

Please see **MANY/5B**

South Wire: Baptist's summer Bible school curriculum offends some

By Karin Miller
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — "Rickshaw Rally," the Southern Baptist curriculum for next summer's Bible school, features a race through Japan with children running through Tokyo streets, climbing Mount Fuji and diving for pearls.

But its use of stereotypical images — including rickshaws, kimonos and chopsticks — has upset some Asian-Americans, who say the Vacation Bible School material is "grossly misguided and inappropriate."

At least one group of Southern Baptists in New England voted last month not to use the curriculum from the LifeWay Christian Resources publishing house in Nashville.

"We just determined that it was insensitive to Asian culture, and we didn't feel we could stay sensitive to our culture and context in New England and promote this material," said Jim Wideman, executive director of the Boston-based convention, which includes 240 Southern Baptist churches in Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and Rhode Island.

"We felt that this material, however unintentionally offensive, could prove to be a huge stumbling block for us as we attempted to reach and minister to Asian-Americans."

Wideman said the New England convention will use alternate material from LifeWay.

Vacation Bible Schools vary from church to church, but they are typically three-hour, five-day courses in the summer for children grades 1-6.

More than 1 million children are expected to attend Vacation Bible Schools next summer in churches that belong to the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

The main complaint about the "Far-Out Far East Rickshaw Rally — Racing to the Son" material is the prominent image of the rickshaw, a two-wheeled passenger cart pulled by a person.

The Rev. Paul Kim of Berkland Baptist Church in Cambridge, Mass., and a trustee on the Southern Baptist Convention's international missions board, said the rickshaw is "an image of poverty in Asia," outlawed in many countries.

"We want to have children of future generations to have the right understanding of who Asians are," Kim said.

He wrote LifeWay President Jimmy Draper, a friend for three decades, and was disappointed at his response, which was simply that the materials were not meant to offend.

Please see **BAPTIST/7B**

CHURCH NEWS

Pastor John P. Kee received his seventh Grammy nomination last week for his CD "Blessed by Association."

This CD has also received five Stellar Awards nominations.

December 11-14

Faith Memorial Baptist

Church at 211 Lakewood Ave. will celebrate Pastor Billy Casey's anniversary at 7 p.m.

Night celebrations will be held at 7 p.m. and conclude Sunday at the 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. services.

December 12

The Bible Factory Outlet's

Concord Mills store, New Life 91.9 WRCM and Concord Mills Mall will host a free mini-concert and album signing with singer-songwriter Warren Barfield at 1 p.m. at Food Court Stage.

December 14

Greater Mount Moriah Primitive Baptist Church at

747 West Trade Street will hold a Christmas Cantata: "Joy! A Soulful Celebration of the Season" at 6 p.m.

• Mount Prospect Baptist Church and Saint Mary's Catholic Church will present "A Celebration in Song of Christmas Past" at 7 p.m. at Oakland Baptist Church,

1067 Oakland Ave., Rock Hill, S.C.

Admission is free.

December 19-20

Alive nativity performance will be held at 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. at Spirit of Joy Lutheran Church at 8600 Potter Road, Weddington.

December 20

The United Men and Women of Faith Seminars Ministry will host an afternoon and evening of Christian fellowship, worship, praise and fun.

The event will be held at Joseph Grier Academy 7740 Grier Road at 3 p.m.