

Christianity not only issue for 'new' missionaries

By KEVIN BEGOS
Media General News Service

BOONE — Samaritan's Purse has gone to Africa, but in subtle ways Africa is coming back to North Carolina, too.

During casual office conversation in Boone, Ed Morrow has been known to startle fellow employees by voicing a longing for fried termites, a delicacy he just hasn't been able to find in North Carolina.

Morrow spent 27 years in Africa as a missionary and now works as the director of World Medical Missions for Samaritan's Purse.

Culinary questions aside, Morrow's story is part of a larger exchange, said Bill Leonard, the dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University.

The first wave of missionaries in the 1700s went to non-Western countries to evangelize "the heathens," Leonard said, and all those other religions were completely foreign.

Now, organizations such as the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism — which lost two people when its plane was shot down in Peru in April — are still doing mission work, as are groups in Africa.

"But the thing that's complicated is now representatives of those foreign religions are living next door to us, and our children are marrying them," Leonard said. "It's quite possible this is going to become a Judeo-Christian-Muslim nation rather quickly. Some estimates show 6 million Muslims in the U.S. and, by midcentury, there could be more Muslims than Methodists here."

Muslim and Buddhist missionaries are coming to the United States, too.

"That's creating a theological dilemma for many groups," Leonard said. "How do you think of these other religions? Globalism has raised serious questions about how we relate to people and their cultures."

Myths and facts

Charles Kimball is the chairman of the department of religion at Wake Forest, and he has made more than 35 trips to the Middle East, some of them on behalf of the White House and State Department.

"What tends to happen in a lot of the mass media is that complex and interrelated issues ... get boiled down to somehow only Christian/Muslim," Kimball said. "People

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have on a very shaded pair of glasses, whether they know it or not."

The government in Khartoum and other groups in the world are doing terrible things in the name of Islam, he said. But that doesn't mean such acts represent all Muslims, or even all Muslims in Sudan.

"My experience has been that most people in the largely Christian west would not think to look at Jim and Tammy Bakker or David Koresh or an Irish Republican Army explosives expert as a fine example of Christianity," Kimball said.

Most people know so little about Islam, they tend to stereotype from the extremes, he said.

In Sudan, issues of religion and culture are front and center for Samaritan's Purse workers.

Muslim prisoners of war have been taken to the Samaritan's Purse hospital in Lul, said Ed Densham, Africa field coordinator. "And of course we treat them the same as everyone else."

Ken Isaacs, the director of International Projects for Samaritan's Purse, recalls working with the governor of an area in Sudan where there is a peaceful — and very personal — relationship between Muslims and Christians.

"They get along — one little house is Muslim, and one is Christian," he said. The late governor was Muslim and his children were Christian, and many families in the area have similar mixes.

Densham said that those who view the war in Sudan as being solely about religion are mistaken. "There are Christians who are being persecuted for their faith, but that's just one aspect of a much bigger picture," Densham said. Oil plays a central role in the conflict, as do racial tensions between Arab Muslims and African Muslims, and hostility between southern rebel groups

from different tribes. Volunteers at the Samaritan's Purse camp for child soldiers in Rumbek had some surprises working with fellow Christians who are members of the Dinka tribe. The Dinkas are fervent Catholics, but tradition also allows a man to take multiple wives.

Staff members who needed to find the local camp manager in a hurry one night were slowed down by the fact that he has 10 wives; they didn't know which hut to go to in order to find him.

Christian groups sometimes throw the local population for a loop, too.

"The Seventh-day Adventists marched down one Christmas time and started lecturing everyone at the (Lul) hospital not to celebrate Christmas, because it was a pagan holiday," said Scott Huggert, the Samaritan's Purse director for Africa projects.

But when people apply to work on projects for World Medical Mission there's no doubt about the ultimate mission, according to Franklin Graham, the head of Samaritan's Purse.

"No matter how many doctors we send or how many hospital wards we refurbish, without faith in Jesus Christ, the sick and suffering overseas will perish," Graham wrote in an application packet. "Because the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the goal of everything we do at World Medical Mission."

Other side of the coin

Kimball said that many Americans totally miss out on an important dynamic in Sudan and in the Muslim world. When a dispute with the west comes to a head, even brutal governments get the benefit of the doubt from many Muslims.

In many places Christianity has often been associated with

the colonial era, Kimball said. People suspect — sometimes simplistically — that the missionaries themselves may be agents of cultural imperialism.

Graham said that the obvious difference between the U.S. presence in the Middle East and in Africa is an issue too.

"We have tremendous assets in the Middle East in case there's war so we can protect the oil," Graham said, "while in Africa we have almost no presence."

"I believe we ought to have huge assets in Africa — but not military," Graham said. "I think we ought to have relief and food stored, and aircraft in position. So the United States can be the first to respond to the people of Africa — not the last."

There's one problem with talk like that, Leonard said. "Can you talk like that and raise missionary money? No," he said. "I can answer that right quick."

Unless, he said, people learn to think differently about what missionary work is all about, and where it can lead.

The future

"It's not that religions shouldn't be sending mission-

aries," Leonard said of some current opinions. "It's that people are free in this kind of global culture to shop around. But that means that your religion — evangelical Christianity — is also in the marketplace along with Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism and whatever."

"And so a lot of Christians are having to live in this transition time saying, 'We believe that our religion is unique.' But we also know that we're going to have to stand in the marketplace with everybody and make our case."

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Noted dancer will present workshop

One of India's foremost dancers, Sonal Mansingh, will present a free, public lecture demonstration at Davidson College on Wednesday, Sept. 12. Her presentation begins at 5 p.m. in the C. Shaw Smith 900 Room of the Alvarez College Union.



Mansingh

"Sonal," as she is known, is an unparalleled representative of the dance traditions of India. She has danced on stage since 1964, but has also won acclaim as a social activist, thinker, researcher, orator, choreographer, and teacher. She founded the Centre for Indian Classical Dances in 1977, and has trained many highly

acclaimed young men and women in dance arts. She is the youngest recipient of the Padma Bhushan Award, which is presented to the country's top artists.

Through seminars, round table discussions, writings, workshops, and lectures, she has shared her perceptions and concerns on a wide variety of issues. She was featured as keynote speaker at a recent seminar in Delhi on "Women, Environment and Culture."

A leading exponent of "Odissi," the ancient and traditional dance style of Orissa, she also has decades of training in Indian music and the dance forms "Bharata Natyam" and "Chhau." She has also choreographed original works based on Indian mythology and contemporary Indian social issues. Lately

her work has veered towards issues concerning women and the environment.

As Sonal explained, "A dancer is not just a dancer. She is part of this environment. She does not exist in a vacuum. If an art form does not reflect the existing milieu, it stagnates. Dance can be the medium to present the viewpoint of those who often do not get a platform to speak."

For more information on Sonal Mansingh's appearance at Davidson, contact Professor Job Thomas, director of the South Asian Studies Program, at 704-894-2352.

Novelist to lecture at Davidson

Award-winning poet and novelist Ha Jin will visit Davidson College on Sept. 11 and 12 to present the college's McGraw Lecture Series.

Jin will read from his work in a presentation entitled "My Choice of Writing in English" on Tuesday, Sept. 11, at 7:30 p.m. in Love Auditorium of Chambers Building. He will speak on "The Writer as Human Being" on Wednesday, Sept. 12, at 8 p.m. in the C. Shaw Smith 900 Room of the Alvarez College Union. Both appearances are free and open to the public.

Jin grew up in a rural town in Liaoning Province of China. He joined the People's Liberation Army at the age of 14, and served for six years during the Cultural Revolution. He began to learn English during three years of work as a telegrapher, and then enrolled in Heilongjiang University in 1977. Jin received his B.A. in English in 1981, and his M.A. in American Literature two years later.

He came to the United States in 1985 to continue his graduate work, and completed his Ph.D. in English in 1993 at Brandeis University.

He permanently settled in the United States as an exile following China's Tiananmen Square Massacre.

Unlike other Chinese authors in exile, Jin writes exclusively in English. He has published three volumes of poetry, three books of short fiction, and two novels.

"Waiting," the winner of the 1999 National Book Award, tells the story of Lin Kong, a doctor in the Chinese army who falls in love with a nurse and must wait 18 years to end his arranged marriage and marry the woman he loves. The National Book Award award citation praised the work for its profound understanding of "the conflict between the individual and society, between the timeless universality of the human heart and constantly shifting politics of the moment."

Jin is also a recipient of The Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, and the PEN/Hemingway Award. His short stories have been

Play revival opens 25th theater season

Charlotte Repertory Theatre will open its 25th anniversary season with a revival of "The Foreigner" by Larry Shue, Sept. 14-30 at the Booth Playhouse of the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

First performed by Charlotte Rep during its 1984-1985 season, this cast of seven brings back some of the best-known and most popular performers in the theatre's history.

"We decided to bring back one of the best of the best plays from our past to kick off the season," says Steve Umberger, artistic director and founder of Charlotte Repertory Theatre. "The comedy's theme of the little guy fighting the system is always popular even more so in today's complex world."

Winner of two Obie Awards and two Outer Critics Circle Awards as Best New American Play, "The Foreigner" drew large crowds across the country, but Southerners especially appreciate how the play mirrors ideas of the Old South and the New South, Umberger said.

"The Foreigner" will begin its run with preview performances Sept. 14-16, featuring post-show "talk-back" sessions with the director and cast. The play's official opening will be Wednesday, Sept. 19. Performances for the duration of the two-week run will be evenings, Wednesday through Saturday, with Sunday matinees. A Sunday evening performance will be added Sept. 23.

Tickets range from \$19 for preview nights to \$26.50 for weekends, and may be purchased through the Performing Arts Center Box Office at 704-372-1000 or

online at www.charlotterep.org

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