

A dog named Baby

A lesson on not taking anything for granted

Mark Twain said: "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in."



Kim Wier

Every dog owner knows the truth of that statement, for dogs can be far more "righteous" than their owners. They are better at offering unconditional love. They are loyal and faithful, quick to forget neglect and always forgiving. If merit were the way to heaven (and thankfully it is not), dogs would be first in line — and my dog would be in front of all the others.

For 16 years I have enjoyed the loyalty and friendship of a cairn terrier mix named Baby. Rescued her from the pound, she started her tenure in our family as my daughter's dog, when Hannah was only 5 years old. For years Baby and Hannah were inseparable.

Baby was a patient and loyal companion for her, able to keep secrets and always there — the kind of friend we might never find in life. Her only flaw was her propensity to annoy our cats, but considering her patience with the parade of other animals we brought into the Wier household over all those years, we easily overlooked it. Even when she was replaced in my daughter's life by a new puppy, she remained steadfastly loyal, always willing to take whatever was left over for her.

Over those years, Baby and I also developed a deep bond. Perhaps it began as she kept me company all those years in the carpool line; or laying at my feet as I toiled away in my home office. Maybe it was because she was the one who was always there to greet me — equally ecstatic at my return from a long trip or just a trip to the grocery store.

Along the way, Baby became "mom's best friend." And like you would with any friend, my heart began to break as I saw her growing older and her body beginning to fail. Severe arthritis in her back legs began to take a toll on her quality of life and it became apparent she was suffering. I put off dealing with it as long as I could and then the day came that the choice had to be made.

So I decided to spend one last day totally committed to her happiness, a small gift in light of a lifetime she committed to me. So on that fateful morning, I started by letting her have forbidden cat food for her breakfast. Then I popped a bowl of popcorn and we ate it together watching a movie because she loved popcorn and snuggling. It was the very least I could do if I was going to kill her.

Then we took one last errand run together, to the bank drive-thru, to pick up dry cleaning and to pay my speeding ticket (that is another story). Then it was off to the park. For two hours she gimped around in the sunshine sniffing and exploring until exhausted she laid down under a tree and enjoyed the breeze — completely unaware that the next stop was the vet for our final errand together.

Oh how I agonized over the decision. Everyone in my family said the compassionate thing to do was to let her go, but I was torn. Sitting in the

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AP photos

British comedians and co-founders of the Sunday Assembly, Sanderson Jones, right, and Pippa Evans sing a song at the Sunday Assembly on Sunday in Los Angeles. A new mega-church movement is generating buzz from London to Los Angeles, but this time it's a belief in non-belief that's drawing crowds on Sunday mornings. Sunday Assembly began in London in January and soared in popularity among atheists looking for a place to air their views with other likeminded people and now the concept has taken hold across the pond.

Church with no God?

Atheist 'mega-churches' take root across US, world

BY GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — It looked like a typical Sunday morning at any mega-church. Several hundred people, including families with small children, packed in for more than an hour of rousing music, an inspirational talk and some quiet reflection. The only thing missing was God.

Nearly three dozen gatherings dubbed "atheist mega-churches" by supporters and detractors have sprung up around the U.S. and Australia — with more to come — after finding success in Great Britain earlier this year. The movement fueled by social media and spearheaded by two prominent British comedians is no joke.

On Sunday, the inaugural Sunday Assembly in Los Angeles attracted several hundred people bound by their belief in non-belief. Similar gatherings in San Diego, Nashville, New York and other U.S. cities have drawn hundreds of atheists seeking the camaraderie of a congregation without religion or ritual.

The founders, British duo Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, are currently on a tongue-in-cheek "40 Dates, 40 Nights" tour around the U.S. and Australia to drum up donations and help launch new Sunday Assemblies. They hope to raise more than \$800,000 that will help atheists launch their pop-up congregations around the world. So far,



An attendee grabs a brochure at the Sunday Assembly, a godless congregation.

they have raised about \$50,000.

"They don't bash believers but want to find a new way to meet likeminded people, engage in the community and make their presence more visible in a landscape dominated by faith."

Jones got the first inkling for the idea while leaving a Christmas carol concert six years ago.

"There was so much about it that I loved, but it's a shame because at the heart of it, it's something I don't believe in," Jones said. "If you think about church, there's very little that's bad. It's singing awesome songs, hearing

interesting talks, thinking about improving yourself and helping other people — and doing that in a community with wonderful relationships. What part of that is not to like?"

The movement dovetails with new studies that show an increasing number of Americans are drifting from any religious affiliation.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released a study last year that found 20 percent of Americans say they have no religious affiliation, an

Mega-church » 6A

CHURCH NOTES

Antioch Baptist Church will host the Nacogdoches Minister Wives Council's Ruby Wade scholarship program at 6 p.m. today. Vivian Avant and Casey Deckard will be awarded scholarships for 2013. Iris Harris and Nancy Davis will be speaking. A reception will follow the program.

Bethel Chapel Baptist Church will host the gospel group Legacy 5 in concert at 6 p.m. today. Everyone is invited to attend. For more information, contact Dr. David Digmon at 409-584-2461 or 409-893-3621.

First Baptist Church Garrison will host several upcoming events:

- The Relay for Life FBC Team will be selling to-go lunches and baked goods starting at noon, Sunday. The lunch will be chicken spaghetti and spaghetti, a salad, a roll and tea.

- The Children's Choir will have rehearsal at 4 p.m. Sunday and the Adult Choir meets at 5 p.m. for Christmas Musical practice.

- The Observance of the Lord's Supper will be at 6 p.m. Sunday in the CLC.
- The WMU Ladies will prepare chicken and dressing for the Baptist Student Ministry's Wednesday lunch. Volunteers are needed to help prepare and serve Monday through Wednesday.

- Men's Prayer Breakfast will be at 7:30 a.m., Nov. 24. Men of all ages are invited to join.

Greely Christian Methodist Episcopal Church will be hosting their annual Men in Black and Women in Red Program at 3 p.m. Sunday. The Rev. Anson Lawson of Salem Christian Methodist Episcopal in Nacogdoches will be the guest speaker.

Harvest Point Church will feature Pastor Lee McDowell's message "Who Will Cast the First Stone?" Learn how to

experience complete freedom from condemnation. Bible studies begin at 9:15 a.m. followed by worship at 10:30 a.m. The church family will share a Thanksgiving meal following the morning worship.

Lilly Grove Baptist Church will feature a sermon by Dr. Mark Simmons, professor at Stephen F. Austin State University, at 6 p.m. Sunday. Dr. Gene Russell's sermon Sunday morning is titled "When You Turn to Christ" from Ephesians 1:2-12.

Little Zion Baptist Church will be holding Ladies' Night Fellowship at 7 p.m. Friday. The theme will be "God's Love is Everlasting" from John 3:16 and I John 4:7-21. Speakers will be Roxanne Lathan, Nicia White and Carrie Walker. All sisters in the community are invited.

Lone Star Baptist Church will host two upcoming events:

- A two-night pre-anniversary celebration for the pastoral anniversary will be at 7 p.m. Friday. The Reed Chapel Baptist Church of San Augustine and the Mt. Moriah Baptist Church of Nacogdoches will be featured guests and guest speaker will be the Rev. Daniel Holman, accompanied by the New Jerusalem Baptist Church of San Augustine.

- The 8th pastoral anniversary celebration will be at 3 p.m. Nov. 24. The featured soloist will be Gospel recording artist Kellee Johnson of Shreveport, La. The guest speaker will be the Rev. Jerome Newsome, accompanied by the New Jerusalem Baptist Church of Many, La.

Deadline for church announcements is noon Wednesday for Saturday publication. Mail information to The Daily Sentinel, P.O. Box 630068, Nacogdoches, Texas 75963; bring it by our office, at 4920 Colonial Drive; fax: 936-560-4267; or email: news@daily sentinel.com.

FAITH TRADITIONS

A time to give thanks

Religious diversity part of what makes country so great

It's so close, you can almost taste it. Thanksgiving — the time for decorative turkey hands and construction-paper belt buckles. It's time for cranberries congealed into that familiar can-shaped mold, cornucopias, and fighting over the last piece of pecan pie.

We pack so much tradition into the holiday and place so much emphasis on the myths that the Pilgrims (those early Puritan settlers in New England) bequeathed to us, sometimes we forget to give thanks for the many other diverse religious groups that graced our colonial history. While the Pilgrims are certainly interesting, and they did have fantastic taste in hats, they had very little lasting impact on the colonies. With larger groups of Puritans in Massachusetts Bay, Anglicans and Africans in the southern colonies, Quakers in Pennsylvania, and Catholics in Maryland, the Pilgrim's particular and peculiar traditions represent only one note in the chorus of religious voices that defined the early colonies.

The Pilgrims were not the first (nor were they the last) group of English settlers to make their way to the "New World." Although they arrived in 1620, which is pretty darn early, other Englishmen had already set up the swampy settlement at Jamestown, and made it the capital of the Virginia Colony. The first Africans actually arrived in Virginia in 1619, a year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. They only numbered 20, but the historical record indicates that Africans actually arrived in the English colonies well before the Pilgrims steered the Mayflower to the rocky New England shores. Whether they came over as slaves, indentured servants, or free men and women, African settlers brought their own rich traditions to contribute to the religious life of the colonies, an influence that only grew over time.

Most white settlers in that Virginia Colony called themselves Anglicans (members of the state-led Church of England) but didn't really practice their faith with much fervor. To be honest, many of them worried more about what they would eat during those first winters than where they were going to set up the church. Later, Virginia would adopt Anglicanism as the state religion, but most people focused on what they were growing in the fields rather than how to grow their faiths.

As more and more settlers poured in to Virginia, the Pilgrims' Puritan brethren expanded their impact on the northern coast. Pilgrims were a specific type of Puritans — kind of an extreme bunch who wanted to completely reform the Church of England. Although only a handful of Pilgrims came over, a larger group of Puritans travelled to set up Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s and set up a colony based totally on their religious beliefs — beliefs that did not provide much room for negotiation. Every person who lived there was legally obligated to go to church and only church members could vote. Puritans embraced the notion of predestination (that only God can



Charity Carney

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