

News Briefs

HOSTAGE SAYS "GOD BROUGHT" ATLANTA FUGITIVE TO HER

In the days after an Atlanta fugitive's capture March 12, few could stop talking about Ashley Smith, the 26-year-old widow whose 9-1-1 call effectively ended the two-day manhunt. Authorities say Smith's gentleness contributed to Brian Nichols' peaceful surrender after he held her for more than seven hours in her suburban Atlanta apartment, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. On March 11, Nichols, 33, a jailed defendant in a rape trial in Atlanta, overpowered a deputy and fatally shot a superior court judge, court reporter, sheriff's deputy and off-duty customs agent before taking Smith hostage. Smith reportedly talked to Nichols about faith, read from The Purpose-Driven Life and told him that he must be held accountable for what he did, but his life still has a purpose. By ministering to other inmates, "you can go to jail and save many more people than you killed," Smith told him. When Nichols let her go so she could visit her 5-year-old daughter, Smith called the police. While some observers say Smith was too kind to Nichols, others say she exemplified Christian principles, showing him that though he was wounded and messed up, he was not beyond redemption, the New York Times reported.

CALIFORNIA JUDGE RULES IN FAVOR OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

San Francisco County Superior Court Judge Richard Kramer ruled March 14 that withholding marriage licenses from homosexuals would constitute discrimination, the Associated Press reported. "Simply put, same-sex marriage cannot be prohibited solely because California has always done so before," Kramer wrote in his decision in a pair of lawsuits seeking to overturn the state's ban on gay marriage. The decision was automatically stayed for 60 days, allowing time for both sides to appeal. Both opponents and supporters are expecting a long fight. "The decision will be gasoline on the fire of the pro-marriage movement in California as well as the rest of the country," said Mathew Staver, president of Liberty Counsel, which is representing the Campaign for California Families, one of two groups defending the ban.

CARDINAL TELLS CATHOLICS TO SHUN DAVINCI CODE

One of the Roman Catholic Church's top theologians condemned Dan Brown's best-selling novel March 16, telling the faithful to avoid The DaVinci Code "because this is rotten food," Reuters reported. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone said Brown's book, which asserts that Christ married Mary Magdalene and fathered children, is "a sack full of lies" that insults the Christian faith. The highest-ranking Catholic leader to oppose the book, Bertone urged Catholic booksellers to remove it from their shelves because the novel sows doubt and confusion. "I am happy that a lot of people have been put on the alert and that I have sounded the alarm of vigilance against the spread of this book," he told Reuters. "I have arrived too late. Millions of copies have been sold. I can't hope to slow down sales, but at least to prompt a critical response." Brown declined to comment, but his publisher, Doubleday, issued a statement saying the book merely examined centuries-old ideas "in an accessible work of fiction," Reuters reported.

United Pentecostal Leader Nathaniel Urshan Dies

The Rev. Nathaniel Urshan, former leader of United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI), died March 11 at the age of 84. A former minor league baseball player, Urshan went into the ministry after surviving a near-fatal bout with tuberculosis. In 1949 the Pentecostal preacher's kid became pastor of Calvary Tabernacle in Indianapolis and served the ministry for 30 years. He went on to become general superintendent of the UPCI, a Oneness Pentecostal denomination that grew from 400,000 members to more than 4 million during his tenure from 1978 to 2002. Funeral services were held March 17 at Calvary Tabernacle. He is survived by his wife of 63 years, Jean; a daughter; two sons; 13 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren.

Pat Robertson Turns 75

More than 1,000 people gathered in San Antonio March 11-13 to celebrate Christian Broadcasting Network founder Pat Robertson's 75th birthday. Also a fund-raiser for the Robertson Endowed Honors Scholarship, the weekend included a Black-Tie-and-Boots gala, golf tournament and included Sen. Sam Brownback, Foursquare President Jack Hayford, former Rep. Dick Armey, author Max Lucado, Curves founder Gary Heavin and former Attorney General John Ashcroft, who is to serve as a distinguished professor of law and government at Regent University beginning July 1. The Oak Ridge Boys and Randy Travis provided special music.

200 Million to Convene For Global Prayer Day

As many as 200 million Christians are expected to unite in prayer May 15 for what is being considered the world's largest prayer gathering ever. Spawned from continentwide prayer gatherings that began in South Africa in 2001, the Global Day of Prayer () is expected to be broadcast on television, radio and the Internet, Assist News Service reported. Stadium events are planned in Fiji, Hong Kong, Indonesia, India, South Africa, Egypt, Switzerland, Northern Ireland, Argentina, Dallas, and Alberta, Canada.