

SNAKE-HANDLER SUCCUMBS TO BITE

One of the prominent leaders of snake-handling churches in the Southeast died Oct. 3 after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a church service at the Rock House Holiness Church in rural northeastern Alabama. John Wayne "Punkin" Brown Jr., of Parrottsville, Tenn., was preaching with his own 3-foot-long timber rattler in hand when the reptile sank one fang into his finger.

According to a *Knoxville News-Sentinel* report, eyewitnesses from the congregation said that after being bitten, the 34-year-old evangelist "emerged from behind the pulpit, stepped down onto the church floor and toppled over." Church officials immediately phoned for a medical team, but Brown died just 10 minutes after being bitten. Some members of Brown's family have offered that his death may have been the result of a heart attack.

Brown, who began handling snakes in worship services at age 17, had been bitten 22 other times before the fatal bite. Three years ago, his wife, Melinda, died after being also bitten by a timber rattler during a church service at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus' Name Church in Middlesboro, Ky.

According to the *News-Sentinel* report, "It is a misdemeanor in Tennessee and Kentucky to endanger others with a deadly animal in a church service."

Those espousing the snake-handling religion base their belief on the often-disputed concluding verses of the 16th chapter of Mark's gospel.

—MKG

MARIAN APPARITIONS IN GEORGIA TO END

The Virgin Mary was alive and well and living — or at least appearing — in the state of Georgia. That's what a group of 100,000 people believed. The crowd gathered in Conyers, a town about 30 miles east of Atlanta, in mid-October to receive a message from the Virgin Mary. The revelations are delivered through Nancy Fowler, a woman who claims to have had reoccurring visitations since 1990 from the mother of Jesus Christ.

Fowler alleges that Mary began appearing to her in October 1990 and gave her messages on the 13th of each month. The monthly apparitions lasted through May

1994, when Fowler announced the visitations would be reduced to an annual event each Oct. 13. In 1997, Fowler said that the October 1998 message would be the last public declaration from the Virgin Mary delivered through her. She did not specify as to why the visions were stopping.

Fowler, reading from handwritten notes, presented generic messages to her audience. "If you are worried about the future, put not your attention to those matters. The future holds no concern to those who truly seek God and love him and remain in his favor," she announced. Also during the 30-minute message she claimed that her final vision included a multitude of souls accompanying the Virgin Mary, which were supposedly released from purgatory into heaven in Mary's honor.

Roman Catholic officials from Fowler's area have not sanctioned the apparitions.

—MKG

CONVENTION MARKS 20TH ANNIVERSARY

The Witnesses Now for Jesus Convention held its 20th gathering Oct. 23-25 at Blue Mountain Christian Retreat in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

From humble beginnings in 1979, the convention has been a consistent source of counsel, support and encouragement for people whose lives have been torn apart by the Watchtower Society. During the past two decades, help to Jehovah's Witnesses who desire to break free from the organization and to families who have lost loved ones to the sect have been a primary focus of the meetings. The three-day conventions are filled with doctrinal teaching, examinations of Jehovah's Witness doctrine and practice, and testimonies by those who have made their exodus from the Watchtower and have found true salvation through Jesus Christ.

The convention was started by Bill and Joan Cetnar as a way for former Jehovah's Witnesses, family members of current Jehovah's Witnesses, and apologetic ministries to interact and network. Bill served on Personal Freedom Outreach's board of directors from 1984 until 1991 when he went home to be with the Lord. Since Bill's passing, Joan has served as a PFO director and continues to host the conventions.

The first convention was held in October 1979. Dr.
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