

Should non-Jewish spouses convert?

NEW YORK (AP) — Christine Benvenuto embodies a Jewish ideal.

Her kitchen is kosher, she attends synagogue and has read rabbinic writings and Torah.

But for many American Jewish leaders, she has an even more compelling quality. The mother of three, whose husband was born Jewish, is a convert.

“A lot of things attracted me to Judaism,” said Benvenuto, whose book “Shiksa” chronicles her path to conversion and the choices of other non-Jewish spouses. “I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in New York and my friends were always Jewish.”

As intermarriage continues at a high rate, many community leaders believe the survival of Judaism lies with people like Benvenuto. Over the last year, top rabbis have urged Jews to overcome their fear of offending non-Jewish spouses and suggest outright that they convert.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, and Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, each called for a more assertive approach at national religious meetings of their movements in the last year. Together, their organizations represent about 75 percent of North American synagogue members.

The American Jewish Committee, a leading advocacy group based in New York, released the first major study in nearly two decades of why people decide to become Jewish. Among the central findings is that advocating for conversion works.

Even some Orthodox, who have traditionally discouraged conversion, have joined in.

Rabbi Leib Tropper, who runs a school in Monsey, N.Y., for Jews who lack basic religious education, started Eternal Jewish Family a year ago to train rabbinic courts on proper conversion for non-Jewish spouses. Tropper says hundreds of rabbis have attended the training sessions.

“One has to look at how Orthodox leaders are acting rather than what they’re saying,” said Steven Bayme, an expert on contemporary Jewish life for the American Jewish Committee. “On the ground, the attitudes toward conversion have been more open, although they vary from community to community.”

Jewish leaders have tried before, unsuccessfully, to promote the idea.

In a 1978 speech that was considered a transformation in Jewish

thinking, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, the then-leader of the Reform movement, said conversion of non-Jewish spouses should be the community’s goal. The American Jewish Committee optimistically estimated the new emphasis would bring one of every three non-Jewish spouses to Judaism.

Instead, the conversion rate plummeted as acceptance of interfaith marriage grew. Jewish parents, rabbis and synagogue members stopped suggesting it for fear of appearing insensitive. Now, with around one-third of Jews in mixed marriages, less than 20 percent of interfaith unions are leading to conversion.

Resistance remains strong to this day.

Many Jewish professionals who work with intermarried couples say that suggesting conversion will insult the non-Jewish spouse and drive them away. The community should be focused on making the family feel welcome first, outreach workers say.

“You need to change the culture of synagogues to get this going. You need to develop a game plan where one can even ask those questions,” about conversion, said Rabbi Charles Simon, executive director of the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, which trains lay people and Conservative rabbis to work with couples in mixed marriages. “Now, the most common phrase you hear when you walk into a synagogue is, ‘You’re sitting in my seat.’”

Another obstacle is Jewish distaste for anything that resembles proselytizing, since Jews have so often been the target of those campaigns.

“That, in turn, has been made it more complicated for Jews to turn around and say, ‘It’s really OK for us to proselytize others,’” said Jack Wertheimer, professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. “So, what Jews have preached is, ‘Don’t proselytize ours and we won’t proselytize yours.’”

That silence has created the false impression that Judaism does not accept converts — a misperception rooted partly in rabbinic teaching. The rabbis said that converting was so serious, that only those prepared to fully observe the complex body of Jewish law and ritual should be allowed to do so. This is the basis for the tradition of rejecting a potential convert three times as a test of his or her readiness, Wertheimer said.

Kline to push for funeral picketing bill

TOPEKA (AP) — Attorney General Phill Kline promised Thursday to renew the push for new state restrictions on funeral picketing, and he is supporting a federal proposal to prevent what he calls a “shakedown” when such laws are challenged in court.

But only hours after Kline’s news conference, the Rev. Fred Phelps Sr., whose Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka is the target of the legislation, issued an open letter saying Kline had invited a church member to a political fundraiser. Kline’s re-election campaign said if that happened, it was a mistake.

Phelps wrote, “Please do not drag Westboro Baptist Church into your political race for re-election.”

Westboro Baptist has received national attention for picketing soldiers’ funerals.

The church contends soldiers’ deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan are God’s punishment for the United States tolerating homosexuality.

Kline and a half-dozen fellow Republicans plan to introduce a

bill on funeral picketing once the 2007 Legislature convenes in January. They also are endorsing a proposal from Rep. Todd Tiahrt, R-Kan., to prevent anyone who challenges such a law in court from recovering attorneys’ fees.

“I’m supportive of any constitutional method available to shut the mouth of the Phelps,” Kline said during a news conference. “A reasonable restriction at a funeral is not harmful to free speech.”

Shirley Phelps-Roper, an attorney and church member, dismissed Kline and other supporters of such efforts as demagogues. She called Kline “a fool” and “pitiful,” saying he is trying desperately to hold onto his office as he faces re-election.

“Shortly, this nation is going to have bodies stacked so high, you can’t bury them,” she said during a telephone interview from Albuquerque, N.M., where the church was picketing a funeral.

“All those laws and all this activity and all this mischief isn’t going to help them one iota.

“They hate God. They hate his judgments.

They will not obey his commandments,” she added.

Kline, locked in a close re-election race, has been criticized by Democratic challenger Paul Morrison, the Johnson County district attorney, over a \$500 contribution Kline received in October 2002 from Ben Phelps, a son of Westboro Baptist’s pastor.

Kline has said he didn’t know the donor was connected to Westboro Baptist, and he subsequently donated the same amount to the Patriot Guard, a group that protests against the Phelps.

He’s also repeatedly denounced their activities.

In his letter, the senior Phelps said his son gave Kline the money only “in his private capacity,” not on behalf of the church. The senior Phelps also said Kline promised to return the money during a Topeka radio show broadcast Aug. 16.

“You not only did not refund to Ben his \$500, you thereafter invited Ben to another fundraiser,” the senior Phelps wrote, saying the event was Aug. 29.

Kline spokeswoman Sherriene

Jones said Kline never promised to return the \$500 contribution to the younger Phelps.

As for the invitation to the fundraiser, she said, “I can’t verify that, and if it did happen, it was a clerical error.”

Westboro Baptist’s funeral picketing has inspired outrage and legislation across the nation.

The federal government and more than half of the states, including Missouri, have enacted laws restricting funeral picketing, but Kansas legislators couldn’t agree this year on a proposal. Some worried that if the law were too restrictive, Fred Phelps and his followers would successfully challenge it in court — and be awarded attorneys’ fees, further financing their activities.

Laws in Kentucky, Missouri and Ohio are being challenged in federal court by Westboro Baptist, the American Civil Liberties Union or both.

Phelps and his church have been sued in Maryland and Missouri by family members of dead soldiers.



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COLLEGE DRIVE ASSEMBLY OF GOD, Pastor, Jeremy Gundling, 245 W. College Dr. - 462-8234, Early Service - 8:00 a.m.; Sunday School 9:30 a.m., Morning Worship - 10:45 a.m.

BEREAN CHURCH, 1000 S. Franklin, 460-2763, www.colbyborean.com; Sunday School 9:30 a.m., Sunday Worship 10:45 a.m. Awana Clubs, Wednesday, 7 p.m., Middle & High School, Wednesday, 7 p.m. @ the Heartland Christian School Gym

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, Grant & Webster Street, 462-2867. Sunday School 9:15 a.m., Morning Worship 10:30 a.m., Youth Group 7:00 p.m., Wednesday Kids Club (K-6) 7:00 p.m.

COLLEGE VIEW BAPTIST CHURCH, (SBC), Pastor Tom Huffman, 1185 Wheatridge Rd. at College Drive, 460-7144, Sunday Bible Study 9:30 a.m., Sunday Worship services, 10:45 a.m.

MINGO BIBLE CHURCH, 420 Main Mingo, 785-462-2992: An independent community church served by Village Missions Pastor Chris Shubert. Sunday School: 9:30AM - all ages. Sunday Services: 10:45AM. Sunday Nights: 1st Sunday of the month: potluck following morning service - no evening service; 2nd Sunday: services at 6:30 PM; 3rd Sunday: informal fellowship - bring a snack to share!; 4th and 5th Sunday: services at 6:30 p.m.

SACRED HEART CATHOLIC, 462-2179, Father Dana Clark, Pastor, Saturday Eve. Mass 5:30 p.m., Sunday Masses 8:00 & 10:00 a.m., Confessions will be heard Saturday 4:30-5:05 p.m. and from 7:30-7:45 a.m. and 9:25-9:40 a.m. on Sunday.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, Rev. Carol Rahn, 515 W. 4th, 462-6342, Worship, 9:00 a.m.

WESLEYAN CHURCH, 320 W. Pine - 462-8391, Sunday School 9:30 a.m., Sunday Worship 10:40 a.m., Sunday Evening Cell groups at 6:00 p.m., Wednesday Youth Ministries, Kids Clubhouse 7 p.m.

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS, 1145 S. Franklin - 460-6605, President Gary Slavens, 460-2656; Rocky Robbins, 1st counselor, 460-1101; Tim Wilson, 2nd counselor, 785-846-7796. Sacrament meeting 10 a.m., Sunday School and Primary 11:20 a.m., Priesthood, Relief Society, YM/YW, 12:10 p.m.; Family History Center open to public, 7-9 p.m. Thursdays or by appointment. Call 462-3571.

COLBY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, Rev. James Mardock, pastor, 950 S. Franklin, 462-6521, Sunday Worship Services at 8:30 and 11:00 a.m., 6:30 p.m., Fellowship coffee 9:30 a.m., Sunday School, 9:45 a.m., KXXX broadcasts 11:00 worship. http://www.gbmg-umc.org/colby-umc/

REDEEMING LOVE MINISTRIES, INC., 345 N. Franklin, Apostle W.G. and Rev. Orvella Romine, Equipping Class, Sunday, 10 a.m., Sunday worship, 11 a.m., Wednesday, R.L.M Training Center (Bible School), 7 p.m.

CHURCH OF CHRIST, 510 E. 4th, Jay Kelley, minister, Sunday Bible Study 9:30 a.m., Sunday Worship 10:30 a.m., Sunday Eve. Worship 6:00 p.m., Wednesday, Bible Study 7:00 p.m.

COLBY EVANGELISM CENTER, Rev. Robert Cooper, 815 West 3rd - 462-2062, Sunday School 9:45; Sunday service 10:00 and 6:30 p.m.; Wednesday Bible Study 6:30 p.m.; Friday Youth Power Hour at 7:00 p.m.

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH, (Disciples of Christ), Pastor Bradley L. Herndon, 385 W. 3rd - 460-2718, Sunday Morning Worship at 9:00 a.m.; Sunday School at 10:30 a.m. E-mail: fccolby@st-tel.net

TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH, Rev. John L. Schmidt, East 5th & Country Club, 462-3497, Services, Sat., 5:30 p.m., Sunday; Sunday School and Adult Bible Class 9:15 a.m.; Services, 10:30 a.m. Visit us at www.trinitycolby.com

OUR SAVIORS LUTHERAN CHURCH, Brewster, Sunday worship 9:00 a.m.; 2nd Sunday of the month at 8:00 a.m.

PLEASANT HOME CHURCH, Pastor, Charlie Busch, 694-2242, 3190 Road 70, Edson, Worship, 9:00 a.m., Sunday School 10:00 a.m., Evening service, 6:00 p.m.

LEVANT COMMUNITY CHURCH, 205 1st St., Pastor Jerry Vincent, 586-2376, Sunday School (classes for 3 years & up and 3 adult classes) 9:30 a.m., Morning worship 10:30 a.m.

WINONA METHODIST CHURCH, Rev. Michael Eurit, Sunday School, 10:30 a.m., Morning Worship 9:30 a.m. (CDT)

BREWSTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, PO Box 250, Brewster. Pastor Dorine Chambers, 785-462-6044, Sunday School: 9:45 a.m.; Worship Service, 10:45 a.m.

THE SHEPHERD’S STAFF, REXFORD, Joan Dingwerth, Director, 687-2565

REXFORD COMMUNITY CHURCH, Rexford, Pastor Lane Purcell, 687-3305, Sunday School 9:30 a.m., Worship Service 10:30 a.m.

BREWSTER COMMUNITY CHURCH, Mike Pinkelman, Pastor, Brewster - 694-2720, Sunday School (all ages) 9:30 a.m., Worship Service 10:30 a.m., Bible Study 7:00 p.m., Wed. mornings 6:30 a.m. - Men’s Bible Study, Wed. 7:00 p.m. - Children’s Ministries (Royal Rangers/Missionettes), Wed. 7:15 p.m. - Intercessory & Prayer, Thurs. 4:00 p.m. - Women’s Bible Study

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