

Weary cyber-pilgrims and seekers by the thousands have found comfort in the words of a gentle Texas pastor. | BOB SMIETANA

A Real Live Preacher

Gordon Atkinson was tired. Tired of trying to be the perfect pastor. Tired of having to know all the answers. Tired of hiding his fears and struggles from his congregation.

Rather than leave the ministry, Atkinson started a weblog, or blog for short, an Internet diary where he could be honest and vulnerable without fear of what his congregation might think.

Dubbing himself the “Real Live Preacher,” Atkinson launched his blog, (reallivepreacher.com) on December 5, 2002, with this confession: “I know this—it can get lonely in the pulpit,” he wrote. “Folks in church expect a lot of things from their pastor. Gut-level honesty is not one of them. Don’t get me wrong, the folks in my church are as nice as they come, but let’s face it, they don’t want to hear the pastor’s deepest doubts and fears.”

Atkinson thought his blog might at-

tract a few dozen readers or so. Instead, they came by the thousands, weary pilgrims and seekers who found comfort in the preacher’s honest and vulnerable writing. The site has become one of the most popular religion blogs in the world, attracting more than 900,000 visitors since December 2002. A collection of Atkinson’s essays, entitled *RealLivePreacher.com* was published by Eerdmans in October.

All of this comes as a surprise to Atkinson, who in real life is pastor of a small church that lies in a stand of oak and laurel trees just off of Nacogdoches Road on the far northeast side of San Antonio.

Many of the blog’s readers aren’t Christians, Atkinson says, and are surprised to hear from a preacher who is “willing to be honest and own up to weakness.”

“I think people have the idea that ministers are mostly a façade,” Atkinson said in a phone interview. “I am not

saying that they are—but our culture has the idea that the minister is a façade up on a stage and not accessible. That is a perception not reality, but it’s the perception. Real Live Preacher is vulnerable, he is faulty, he makes mistakes, he cries, he gets angry—that seems to be important to people.”

That kind of vulnerability is missing in many congregations, says Atkinson. He fears that many Christians refuse to be “honest about their own failings, sins, and disappointments,” embracing instead a “Martha Stewart” view of faith—“a sugary, imaginary world of happiness to people who are hurting and looking for real answers.”

“Church is the last place you’d admit your weakness,” he says. “You might go to an AA group or talk with some neighbors who aren’t Christians about your struggles because they’d hear you—but church is the place where you’d want to get cleaned up and look your best. It’s entirely backwards and tragic.”

“The Passion of Elliot”

I don’t know how the Kramers found our church. We’re off the beaten path and we don’t advertise. Maybe it was God, I don’t know.

Jennifer was only nineteen and David was twenty, but they already looked beaten, worn, and creased. They were rough in speech and manner. He worked construction and she worked off and on at the 7-Eleven. Their marriage was shaky at best, and their three-year-old son David Jr. was acting out in ways that one might expect.

This family definitely had some rough edges.

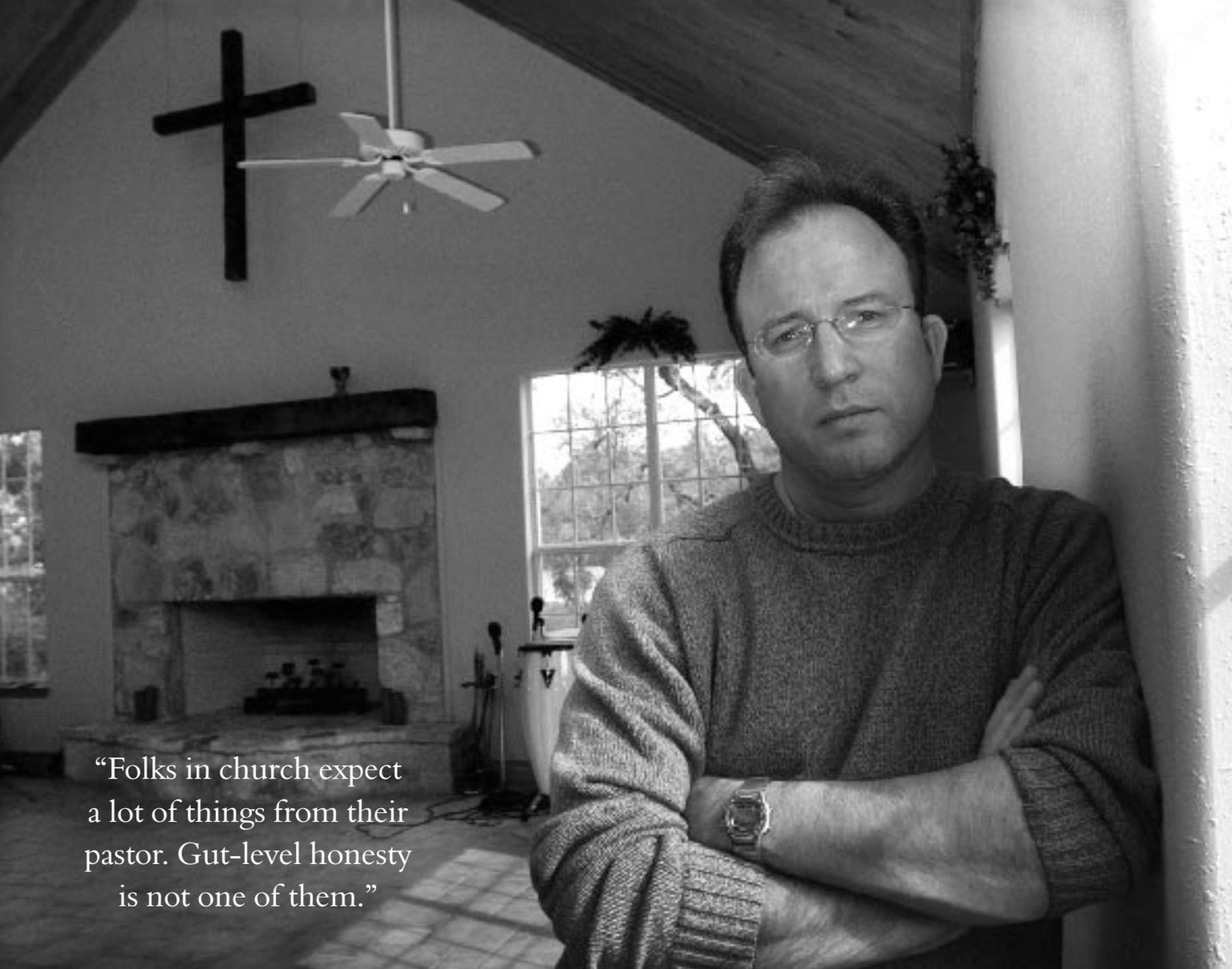
About a month after the Kramers started coming to church, we were gathered together for our Wednesday night meal. Everyone was sitting around the tables chatting after supper

when we heard a terrible scream from down the hall.

The first thing I saw was Stan and Carol running toward JoAnn, one of our deacons, who was carrying Elliot into the kitchen. He was screaming at top of his lungs, and there was something in the scream that made every parent stop talking. You knew it was something serious.

Everyone rushed to the kitchen. JoAnn put Elliot on the counter, and people crowded around talking all at the same time. Carol pulled up Elliot’s shirt and everyone fell silent. On his back were eight vicious bites, two rows of four oval wounds. The skin was broken and oozing blood. Angry, red welts were rising around the teeth marks.

Do you know the horror that borders on disbelief? Do you know that sad, squinting face people make when they mouth words, but do not say them? That’s how we were. The ugliness made us squint. Helpless, we formed words with our mouths,



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Unlike many bloggers (and some preachers), Atkinson, for the most part, steers clear of rants or soap boxes. Instead, he tells stories of heartache and hope born out of the day-to-day life of a pastor.

Like the one about Earl the grave

digger, who at six foot, nine inches, bore a shocking resemblance to Lurch, the butler from the Addams Family. A fierce-looking man who had no interest in God, Earl was also tenderhearted—one of his most prized possessions was a cross made out of construction

paper with “Jesus loves you Daddy” written on it in crayon, a gift from his daughter.

Or the story of Tom, a preacher friend, whose wife filed for divorce.

Bob Smietana is features editor of the Companion.

but did not speak.

It was JoAnn who found them in the Sunday school room. David Jr. had dragged Elliot to the ground and was growling as he bit him over and over. Innocent little Elliot, only two years old, didn't even know how to struggle. He was bitten fourteen times, each one drawing blood. He had bites on his back, arms, and head.

As everyone fussed over Elliot, David Jr. walked into the kitchen and watched with an innocent and unconcerned expression. I stared at him in wonder. How can a three-year-old have such rage? How can his anger come and go so quickly? Where did he learn to bite like that?

David and Jennifer came rushing around the corner and immediately saw what had happened. Jennifer cried out, “Oh my God, not again. David!” Then she ran out of the church, crying hysterically.

Later I discovered this was not the first time this had happened. The Kramers had developed a tragic pattern. They would find a church they liked, settle in and begin to make friendships. Then David Jr. would bite a child, forcing them to leave in shame.

They should have warned us, but they were young and foolish. Their denial about their son was only one of the ways they were out of touch with reality.

David picked up his son and pleaded his apologies. As he edged toward the door he kept saying the same thing over and over. “I'm sorry. He knows better. I'm sorry. He knows better.”

Tossing one final “I'm sorry” over his shoulder, David ran out the door. I followed him and found Jennifer in the parking lot talking with one of our deacons. I don't know what he was saying to her, but she had a crazy look and was edging toward their old pickup. ➤

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When the leaders of Tom’s congregation—where he’d served for ten years—found out, they laid hands on him, prayed with him, promised to stand beside him and “walk with him through these hard days,” then fired him two days later.

Then there’s the stories of two babies, Elliot and Everett. Elliot was adopted by Carol and Stan, a couple who had given up their dreams of becoming parents after spending most of the nineties in infertility treatment.

“Everything stopped on the Sunday they brought him to church for the first time,” Atkinson writes in a piece called “The Advent of Elliot.” “We who had walked in darkness saw Stan and Carol coming down the aisle with Elliot. We saw a great light. God, the look in Carol’s eyes. Sweet Jesus.

“We passed Elliot up and down the rows like a little offering plate, with Stan and Carol standing at the front crying for joy. He bobbed along through the people like a little Moses in the river.

“That was a good day. Carol says God had them wait all those years because God knew Elliot was going to need a family.”

Everett was little boy born at twenty-two weeks to John and Denise—their second child to be born prematurely, and their second to die because of it. Atkinson rushed to Denise’s hospital

room in the middle of the night when he heard the news. He knew there were no words he could say, or no prayers he could offer that would save Everett from death or take away his mother’s pain. But still he came.

“I am keeper of a most sacred truth,” he later wrote. “It is the incarnation truth that enables ministers to go into the grief storm unafraid. If you come in the name of Christ and stand with people in their grief, you have done the single most important thing you can do and the only thing they will remember. You might bring words with you, and they might even be good and helpful ones, but your presence is what matters.

“If you know this truth, whatever you have will be sufficient. If you do not know this, all that you have will not be enough.”

Atkinson has taken the same approach to blogging that he did in the hospital room—the important thing is being present, even in cyberspace.

He worries that with the release of his book, Christians will try and turn blogging into a tool or technique for evangelism. That, he says, is missing

the point. He didn’t start the blog to reach people—he started the blog because he needed to be honest about his life. And he says he’s received just as much from the blog as he’s given to it.

In February 2003, Atkinson posted a note about his mother, who had suffered a breakdown. When he returned from going to see her in the hospital, his email box was jammed with notes from visitors to the blog, offering prayers and words of encouragement. It was overwhelming, Atkinson says.

If there one thing he’s learned from the blog it’s this—relationships are more important than flashy evangelism techniques.

“It’s so tempting to make everything we do into a technique,” he says. “We humans are so sinful, and part of our sinfulness is that we take everything that is beautiful and offered honestly and quickly try to turn it into a tool to get something accomplished and it always spoils it.”

Plus, he adds, “how dreary would that be—I am writing a blog to accomplish a list of goals. Then it’s just another job. My whole life is like that. All of our lives are like that—we spend all of our lives trying to accomplish goals. This is my time to be honest with myself and with God and to share that in some way.” □

I could tell they wanted to leave. Who could blame them? To be honest, I was hoping they *would* leave. I was in such shock. I was trying to be nice, but I was so angry and so sad all at once.

Then the front door of the church banged open and Carol burst out. She ran toward Jennifer who froze and whispered, “Oh my God.” As Carol approached, Jennifer lowered her eyes and began to weep and apologize. “I’m so sorry. My God, I’m so sorry.”

Carol didn’t say anything at first. Then she put her left hand on Jennifer’s shoulder and her right hand under her chin. She lifted Jennifer’s face and spoke in a very soft, but firm voice. “Stop.”

“Listen to me,” she said. “Elliot is going to be fine. He will heal, and he will get over this. I’m not worried about Elliot. Do you know what does worry me?”

Jennifer shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m worried that you and David will be so embarrassed about this that you will never come back to our church. That’s the only thing that worries me. We’ve come to love your family, and you

need to be here with us. You need church, and I want you to promise me that you’ll come back *this* Sunday.”

Jennifer didn’t answer her. I don’t think she could, really. She did what felt right. She melted into Carol’s arms, sobbing. There was something different about the way she was crying, too. It was sad crying, but not as crazy and not as lonely as before.

They stayed like that for a long time, two mothers holding each other in the parking lot. Two mothers crying for their sons.

I watched and had the strangest impulse to take off my shoes.

It’s one thing to read about Christ in Bibles and books. It’s quite another thing to meet him in person. Quite another thing.

I’ll never forget the sight of those horrible wounds on Elliot’s little back. They are a stark reminder of the reality of evil and the high price of redemption. □

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