

HEAVENLY VISIONS

...and They Lived To Talk About It

An Edmonds author tells a Kitsap County audience about the heavenly descriptions in her latest book

Rita Bennett went to heaven before she ever set foot on earth.

That was 64 years ago, during her birth. Her mother nearly died during the delivery, Bennett said, "and saw the streets of gold and the gates of pearl" before coming back to life.

"My mother," the Edmonds writer said, "always told me, 'I went to heaven to get you.'"

No doubt that helps explain her fascination with the subject. Even though Bennett, the widow of an Episcopalian priest, traveled and spoke frequently about heaven for years, she said she never truly explored the subject until her husband, Dennis, died in 1991.

"I started studying about heaven when Dennis went there," she told a crowd of more than 150 last week during a Woman's Touch Ministry meeting in Silverdale.

Her studies led to her latest book, *To Heaven & Back*, which describes the near-death experiences of people who claim to have been there, sometimes just for fleeting moments. But, all brought life-changes back with them.

Bennett is the author of eight books, including the bestselling *The Holy Spirit and You*, written with her husband, and *You Can Be Emotionally Free*.

She acknowledges in her speeches and interviews that her latest work is on a controversial subject, but it's one attracting fast-growing interest. Some polls place the number of people claiming near-death experiences at 12 million.

Some Christians don't want to hear about near-death experiences, she said, because they be-

lieve they're occultic. Or they feel the descriptions are an affront to God because they say he has told us all we need to know in the Bible.

But Bennett's dealings with those who report near-death experiences help demonstrate that what the Bible teaches is true, she said.

She mined the experiences to help herself and other Christians seek God's truth, she said.

"My book is a book of hope," she said, "hope that we're not just sent here to become fertilizer one of these days."

She describes in detail what seven people learned when they "crossed over."

*Valvita Jones of Kansas, liked Bennett's mother, had her near-death experience during childbirth. The delivery ended in the baby's death. But Valvita described being met by Jesus, who led her through three heavens. The experience changed her dramatically, Bennett said, leading Jones toward a new life of service to children.

*Deborah O'Donnell, an Oregon music teacher, nearly choked to death. She saw people walking around a huge, "glorious" city and a sign telling her, "You will return."

*Dr. Gerard Landry, a Texas anesthesiologist, suffered a heart attack and was dead for four minutes. He saw "multitudes of saints" in white garments greeting him and described Jesus telling him, "Gerry, my peace be with you."

*Carolyn McCormick, an artist who nearly lost her own life giving birth, was made to sit through a "life review" revisiting experience and learning how God had used all the painful moments. She protested she didn't



want to leave because heaven was so peaceful, but an angel convinced her God had a purpose behind all she had been through on earth.

*Pam Johnstone, a banker in the Seattle area, had her experience during surgery to solve severe gall bladder pain. She found herself in a meadow, walking toward a bridge over which hovered a beam of light. She told the light she wanted to cross over because the pain was so great. A soothing voice told her, "It's not your time," but assured her the pain would end.

*Lorraine Tutmarc, a non-believer, lost a child during birth and described descending to a river of death. All the pain that had left her at death came back to her. She heard a voice and saw Jesus reaching a hand out to her from above and was taken to a city of light with a "glorious, transparent wall."

*Craig Gottschalk took an overdose of drugs. He stood before God and reviewed his life. He was judged to go to hell and felt drawn like a magnet toward Satan, feeling increasing pain. But, he saw Jesus, who said, "No, he's mine" and told him his

grandmother's prayers had been answered.

"Craig says that in the moment he took his first breath after his near-death experience, he was born again," Bennett said. "In fact, to this day, he doesn't even acknowledge his biological birthday, he only recognizes his spiritual birthday."

In the final section of her book, Bennett describes a biblical picture of heaven, taken from a study she made of Revelation and all the parts of the Bible mentioning heaven. Many of the descriptions given by the seven people, she said, confirm the biblical picture.

"Everyone has a different experience," she said, "and you just see a little glimmer of the whole."

The interviews and the research had a powerful, affirming effect on her faith, she said. And the response has been overwhelming, the author added, especially from those who are grieving for whatever reason. They tell her the book has given them new hope.

"I'm so thankful I have a faith that says 'this is not all there is to life,'" she said.

—Richard Horn, Sun Staff