

The Baptist Paper

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WEEK OF PRAYER FOR
INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

Grace of God

IMB missionaries help bring God's healing to
Ukraine's refugees, see story on pages 10–11

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Cover photo courtesy of the International Mission Board



**The crossword puzzle
can be found on page 27.**



GUEST EDITORIAL

for this week's issue of The Baptist Paper

Shawn Hendricks, director of product management

Resisting holiday chaos: 3 Christmas traditions to protect

It's that time of year again when my family takes our annual evening drive to see the houses with the crazy display of Christmas lights and decorations.

You'll find the usual suspects: Santa, his reindeer, Charlie Brown and gang, Frosty the Snowman, Mickey and Minnie, the Abominable Snowman and enough lights to trigger a massive power outage.

But there is one particular house that amuses me the most. It's the next-door neighbor displaying a sign with lights that spell out the word "Ditto." That's it — "Ditto."

While we get a kick out of seeing it, I think it's a good example of where a lot of us find ourselves during Christmastime. We too often end up going through the motions, just trying to get by. As a result, we miss out on the blessings and opportunities to enjoy the true reason for the season.

Savor the season

But it doesn't have to be that way. Here are three ways to savor this time of year:

1. Love our neighbors.

I recently shared with my wife that it seemed like most of the



Photo by Shawn Hendricks/The Baptist Paper
Shawn Hendricks shares about his collection of missions ornaments on the family tree. They serve as a reminder of spiritual lostness around the globe.

couples in our Sunday School class had something big going on — job loss, family drama and various other personal challenges.

In addition to helping with our church's food pantry, our class is taking up a collection of gift cards for a few of the families who are struggling with a particularly tight budget.

We also helped one couple with their move into a more affordable apartment. My family sends Christmas cards to some of the widows in our church to let them know we're thinking of them.

You don't have to look too hard to find a way to show kindness.

2. Think global.

Beyond your local community, there are a lot of missionaries needing financial support as well. Don't let the expenses of the season keep you from investing in missions.

When I worked for nearly a decade with the International Mission Board's media department, I had the opportunity to travel and see the ministry and needs of missionaries overseas. This year's Week of Prayer for International Missions (Dec. 4–11) has a national goal of \$196 million — an amount that takes all of us pitching in to accomplish.

Check out their stories in this week's issue and pray about how you can help.

3. Decorate with the birth of Christ in mind.

You'll find a lot of memories on our Christmas tree. There's a Route 66 ornament recognizing our family's two-week, 5,000-mile road trip out west a

few years ago. There's an ornament for the pesky skunk that we carefully removed after it got into our crawl space. There also is an ornament displaying a roll of toilet paper for the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when we drove all around town searching for routine household items that were selling out.

But there are also ornaments that represent the birth of Christ, missions and the hope only He can provide. There is the handmade butterfly-shaped ornament I purchased from a poor, elderly woman while on an overseas assignment in East Asia. It's a reminder of the poverty and spiritual darkness around the globe.

Serve and minister

I hope you have an ornament or Scripture verse in your house to remind you to serve and minister to others this Christmas. Over the next couple of weeks, we have an opportunity to put away our "Ditto" signs and make this Christmas season especially meaningful.

RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

By Jennifer Davis Rash,
President and Editor-in-Chief,
will return in January.



OPINION



your. voice

SHARE YOUR COMMENTS, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, BLOG EXCERPTS, SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

By David L. Chancey

McDonough Road Baptist Church, Fayetteville, Georgia

First person: Our brokenness is God's opportunity

Many years ago, my son's team played a baseball tournament against a team from Chattanooga. These kids were maybe 11 or 12 years old. Jonathan came to the plate and hit a scorching line drive that careened off the shortstop's leg. Jonathan made it to first base as the shortstop fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

The coach called time and trotted out to his player, talked to him for a moment, then scooped him up into his arms and carried him back to the dugout. As he picked him up to carry him across the diamond, the shortstop's leg fell to the ground and lay there. The horrified parents in the stands reacted with gasps and

groans. Another coach trotted out to the field and picked up the leg and carried it back to the dugout.

I'd never seen anything like that.

As we were processing this bizarre sight, our third base coach turned to the stands and said, "It's a prosthetic leg!" They reattached the leg, and the player returned to the field, good as new, and played a great game.

That's what God does in our lives.

He specializes in taking our broken lives, shattered dreams and colossal failures and putting us back together again.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "God has now revealed to us His mysterious will regarding Christ, which is to fulfill His own good plan. At the right time He will bring everything together under the authority of Christ" (Eph. 1:9-10).

Before God can bring something together, there must be something apart. Before God can heal, there must be sickness. Before there is restoration, there must be broken fellowship. Before God sends provision, a need must surface.

Our brokenness is God's opportunity to show His grace, power and provision.

And it's our opportunity to lean into God in trust and total reliance. In His timing, He brings everything together. Jeremiah prayed, "God, pick up the pieces. Put me back together again. You are my praise!" (Jer. 17:14).

Not only does God put us back together again, but as He works in us, He often works through us to fulfill His purposes and to advance His Kingdom.

Flawed heroes

Think about different Bible characters whom God used.

Not one was perfect.

Adam had a massive fall. Noah got drunk. Abraham was too old. Jeremiah and Timothy were considered too young. Jacob lied. Leah was ugly. Joseph was abused. Moses was a murderer. Samson was a womanizer. Rahab was a prostitute. David was a fornicator. Jonah ran from God.

Paul persecuted and murdered people simply because they followed Jesus. He did everything he could to stop Christianity in its tracks, but on the road to Damascus, Jesus stopped Paul in his tracks and called him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

God used each of these broken people in extraordinary ways, flaws and all. We often put these characters on pedestals, thinking they are super saints.

The original 12 disciples were just ordinary men doing routine jobs when Jesus called them to follow Him. They were just like us. They had good days and bad days. They often argued among themselves. They often misunderstood Jesus' mission. They fell asleep

while Jesus prayed. One denied Jesus, and another betrayed Him.

Yet, despite their failures God used them to do great things, especially in the early days of the church. They weren't super saints. They were simply willing to be used.

God can also use us if we allow Him to, even with our imperfections.

Are we willing for God to work through our lives as He continues to work in our lives to make us more and more like Him?

Do we pray, "God, use me today in some special way as your ambassador to point people to Jesus?"

Pastor, author and speaker Greg Laurie told about a Sunday School teacher who asked her class, "Can any of you tell me what a saint is?"

One little girl thought about the stained glass windows in her church's sanctuary with depictions of the 12 disciples. She remembered how beautiful the light shining through those windows looked.

She answered, "Saints are people the light shines through." Even when our lives are broken and flawed, God's light can shine through.

Expositional preaching

Expositional preaching of the Word is necessary to the life and growth of the church. Without this process being carried out in its proper and fullest way, our hearts would not be confronted with the reality of God's word, Christ's work and the call on our life to obedience in following Christ.

James Hammack
the-scroll.com

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Actions are essential for Christian unity

By **Ruba Rihani**
Special to The Baptist Paper

International Human Rights Day, observed Dec. 10, coincides with the Christmas holidays and is an important reminder to Christians that freedom, justice and equality are critical in the lives of every human being.

God's love for humankind is without discrimination and differentiation.

The angel of the Lord clearly declared this great love in Luke 2:10–11.

When we think about Christian unity, we must return to the source of this unity: Jesus Christ. All Christians agree and believe the core of the Christian faith is salvation in Christ and the eternal life prepared for those who believe in Him.

Notice in the nativity story that a rural girl, the priest Zechariah, Bedouin shepherds and the Magi received the announcement of Christ's birth. This good news unified different social groups together under the shadow of one message.

Christian unity must be based in humility, meekness, obedience to God's calling and the acceptance of others. This unity occurs when Christians support each other and embody a Kingdom citizenship based on justice, love, forgiveness and equality.

Christian unity must derive from 1 Peter 2:9–10.

We must demonstrate Christian unity by both words and deeds. The best way to achieve Christian unity within our multiple denominations spread across the world is to unite from within and focus on the gospel.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Ruba Rihani serves with Arab Woman Today in Amman, Jordan.

“SO NEITHER THE ONE WHO PLANTS NOR THE ONE WHO WATERS IS ANYTHING, BUT ONLY GOD, WHO MAKES THINGS GROW.”

1 CORINTHIANS 3:7

“Christmas hymns penetrate deeper, which is why we need to sing them over and over during this season and let the words once again settle into our souls,” said **Carrie McWhorter, content editor for TAB Media.**

“We’ve had an incredible adventure, but it’s not just about the adventure, it’s about the Kingdom,” said **Chuck Conley, pastor of First Baptist Church Grant, Alabama.** FBC Grant members served on a missions trip to Sitka, Alaska.

“Your affliction is just for a specific season and a specific reason. Remember, it’s only a test. It’s the other side of ministry. This too shall pass,” said **Fred Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans.**

“When you live your life by priority, you will always know what you need to say no to. ... If you’re not

saying no to some good things in your life, you can’t be saying yes to some of the best things that God has for your life,” said **Ken Adams, pastor of Crossroads Church in Newnan, Georgia.**

“I’m convinced and I’m convicted that there is so much more God wants to do in us and through us,” said **Willie McLaurin, interim president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee.**

Leading major change “is not for the fainthearted, the quick to leave or those looking for a greener pasture,” said **Jeff Iorg, Gateway Seminary president.** “It’s for those who say, ‘Here’s where I’m going to stand until we get it done.’”

“To God, who owns everything and owes nothing, we as believers — who own nothing and owe everything — must render to Him, in the Spirit of Christ, thanksgiving for all

of His benefits,” said **Robert Smith Jr., professor of Christian preaching and Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama.**

“You’ve got to disciple students before they move away or go to college. The main purpose is not for them to go into ministry, but for students to become mature young adults involved in a church, doing what God wants them to do in whatever church He leads them to,” said **Bill Hughes, associate/youth pastor at Priscilla Baptist Church, Bell, Florida.**

“In spite of everything we have in Ukraine, we do have people who believe in God’s calling,” said **Slavik Pyzh, president of Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary.**

“A cheerful heart is good medicine” —Proverbs 17:22



FROM THE

Twitterverse

@NWBaptist

It takes all of us here in the Upper Left. Glad you’re a meaningful part of it. As it’s said now and then: “Every person matters, so every church counts.” —@wcbcpastor

@richardblackaby

Don’t just COUNT your blessings; BE a blessing!

@tylereiland2414

Challenging thought today from another leader. Everyone is essentially wondering three things: Do you care? Can you be trusted? Can you help? The first is a question regarding concern. The second is a question regarding character. The third is a question regarding competency.

@AlistairBegg

When God is the object of our faith, we can have an audacious faith — one that believes the impossible is possible with Him.

@ExperiencingGod

If you find your heart has grown cold to God, that the spiritual life of your family or church has waned, call out to God to revive you, for only He can give life. It is not your activity but your relationship with God that brings life!

@philipnaton

What must a church do to move from consumer churchianity to missional Christianity?

@LeeStrobel

You. Matter. To. God.

@globalhike

“I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me.” —Psalm 13:6

@scottslayton

Rule of thumb — if you have to tell people that you are (insert positive descriptor here), then you probably aren’t what you think you are.

@jaroland74

“Waiting is not wasting when we are waiting on the Lord. God is always working while we wait.” via @louiegiglio

@DustinBenge

We would grow exponentially more if we examined ourselves half as much as we critique others.

Gospel seeds

By Mitchell Heinz
International Mission Board

Believers in Brazilian village endure persecution; church grows stronger

What would you do if you were summoned to a meeting where you were given an ultimatum — recant or lose your job?

This is what happened to Leo and Annie, new Christians from an Indigenous tribe in northeastern Brazil. They worked as schoolteachers in their community for several years. But now the community's leaders, the chiefs and shamans, told the couple they could not follow Jesus and continue in their jobs.

"They were angry and hateful toward us," Annie said. "They were saying we had become traitors and that we were abandoning our culture."

"It's not easy to follow Jesus, but I'm certain of one thing: I don't want to quit now," Leo said. "Persecution is biblical, and now we're experiencing it."

Would Annie be willing to give up her job for her new faith?

Boldness

Annie boldly answered, "Leo and I decided to follow Jesus together, and we're going to continue to follow Jesus together. I'm not going to turn my back on Jesus or on my husband."

Because they were faithful to Jesus, Leo and Annie lost their jobs. Their former students came to them in tears, embracing them and expressing their sadness.

"On the one hand, we feel sad to be hated for our faith and to have lost our jobs, but on the other hand, we feel happy on the inside, knowing we are standing firm in our faith in Jesus," Annie said.

To make ends meet, Leo has



IMB photo

New Christians like Leo from an Indigenous tribe in northeastern Brazil face persecution for their faith in Jesus. Join the believers in this tribe in praying that God will make them strong and help them spread the gospel in their community.

been doing other types of work, like farming.

Members of the Indigenous church are caring for them during this difficult time.

Though Leo and Annie are struggling to find enough work to provide for themselves and their children, they've decided not to litigate or retaliate against community leaders or the school where they worked.

They want their community to see how Jesus has changed them. They want people to know that no matter what they suffer, following Jesus is worth any sacrifice.

The community leaders also banned International Mission Board missionaries from entering the village.

Planting seeds

Leo responded to this, saying, "You can ban them from coming

in, but the [gospel] seed has been planted in us, and you can't take that away!"

Later that day as Leo shared this news with other believers, they responded in agreement.

"That's the truth!" one believer said. "They can't take the seed of the gospel away from us. Our enemies can threaten us, but the seed is going to grow. Now we just need to stay strong and not give up. Let's pray and ask God to make us strong and help us make this seed grow!"

Strength

Instead of weakening the church, persecution has actually strengthened the faith of believers in this tribe.

"Even though we have been banned from returning to the villages, the indigenous believers are still meeting and studying the Word together every week and encouraging one another in the faith," a missionary team member reported.

Leo and Annie recently made the decision to follow the Lord in believer's baptism. God has called them to be steadfastly present among the people they serve.

Pray God will provide good jobs for Leo and Annie so they can support their family. Pray God will use Leo and Annie's bold witness to bring glory to His name and to grow His church among this tribe in the years to come.

Join the believers in this tribe in praying God will make them strong and help them spread the gospel in their community.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Some names have been changed for security reasons.

“IT'S NOT EASY TO FOLLOW JESUS, BUT I'M CERTAIN OF ONE THING: I DON'T WANT TO QUIT NOW. PERSECUTION IS BIBLICAL.”

LEO, NEW FOLLOWER OF CHRIST

International & national headline news

Vietnamese church launches in Florida following 'radical obedience'

Prior to 2022, Chinh Nguyen was living in Denver where he owned and operated a construction and landscaping business and was active in his church — teaching Bible studies, doing outreach, serving the community and occasionally preaching when the pastor was away.

Nguyen enjoyed his volunteer roles, but was often encouraged to pursue full-time ministry.

In January 2021, Nguyen and his wife considered Jacksonville, Florida, as one option for their next season of life. Besides the warm weather and scenic coastlines, Nguyen said what struck them most was the more than 10,000 Vietnamese people with only one Baptist church (First Baptist Church Jacksonville) equipped to reach them.

After that visit, God's call on Nguyen's life became clear.

"I asked [my wife] if she was willing to sell our business, move to Jacksonville and take care of the whole family so I could pursue the ministry full time — she said 'Yes,'" he recalled. "I believe if God called me, He has also called my wife and kids. I needed to make sure she agreed."

In June 2022, the Nguyen family made the move. Around that time, Gary Lee Webber, pastor of Aspire Church in Jacksonville, was contacted by First Coast Churches, the area association, to see if his congregation could provide local support to a new Vietnamese-language church.

"When First Coast reached out, we felt we were ideally positioned to help Pastor Nguyen because we have embraced our role as an urban church and have a heart to reach those people God is bringing from all over the world to Jacksonville — many literally living within the shadow of our steeple," Webber said.

Nguyen and Webber coordinated with Craig Culbreth, east region catalyst for the Florida Baptist Convention, and James Peoples from the North

American Mission Board to begin the process of launching the new ministry.

Aspire Vietnamese Baptist Church held its first service Oct. 2 in a newly finished space on Aspire Church's campus. (Florida Baptist Convention)



Photo courtesy of Florida Baptist Convention

Send Relief's Puerto Rico Ministry Center celebrates grand opening

Send Relief's recent grand opening ceremonies for its ministry center in Guaynabo spanned two days and hosted local government leaders, Send Puerto Rico church planters, local pastors and Disaster Relief organization staff.

"Five years after Hurricane Maria, the North American Mission Board along with Send Relief has made a commitment to [establish] a permanent presence in Puerto Rico," said Jonathan Santiago, Puerto Rico Ministry Center director, during the Nov. 8–9 ceremony.

Hurricane Maria made landfall in 2017 as a Category 4 storm, bringing with it devastating winds and catastrophic flooding. Homes were destroyed, and residents were without power for months. The landscape of the island was permanently changed. Many people evacuated the island and chose not to return.

Send Relief, NAMB and several Puerto Rican Southern Baptists felt burdened by the destruction and answered a call to leave their homes and jobs on the mainland U.S. to begin ministering in Puerto Rico. (NAMB)



NAMB photo

Filipino missionaries ready to join IMB in reaching the nations

Filipino Baptists plan to mobilize missionaries from the Philippines to join the International Mission Board in addressing global lostness.

At a recent National Congress for Global Missions in Koronadal City, Mindanao, Philippines, 12 new missionary candidates were presented to more than 400 attending the conference.

The Filipino Baptists from different conventions and organizations gathered to dream about the future and how they could weave their new missionaries into IMB's Global Missionary Partner program. The program will have missionaries from the Philippines (and other countries) work together with IMB missionary teams to be steadfastly present among those who have never heard the gospel.

One Sending Body, a Filipino Southern Baptist missions agency, has worked with IMB since the organization began in 2008. It's been years in the

making — praying and training — to reach this point of sending and cooperating.

OSB represents five different conventions, seminaries, churches and the Filipino Woman's Missionary Union. Historically, each organization sent its own missionaries independently, whether that was within the Philippines or a nearby country. Through OSB, the entities pooled their resources to train and fund missionaries. Global Missionary Partners who serve alongside IMB teams are fully funded by their sending agency, such as OSB. IMB missionaries disciple national believers to embrace their role in the Great Commission. (IMB)

Uganda pastor wounded in attack during church meeting

A group of Muslim extremists in eastern Uganda seriously wounded 56-year-old pastor Jude Sitaalo and his wife in an attack on a meeting at their church Nov. 18, he said.

The knife attack during an evening service of Believers' Church in Nansonko village, Kibuku District, came in response to an evangelistic event in August where five young Muslim men, ages 19 to 27, put their faith in Christ, he said.

"I had been warned three times with threatening messages," Sitaalo said, adding the threats were made both face-to-face and in phone texts.

He said he and his wife, Naisiga Sitaalo, were meeting with 10 church members when he saw a mosque leader and a group of Muslims enter the service.

"They got hold of me and started beating me with sticks, while one of them cut me with a long knife," Sitaalo said. "One member of the church and my wife tried to rescue me, but they were seriously beaten up with sticks."

Other church members fled for their lives, he said. Sitaalo sustained knife wounds on his head, hand and back, and his wife was also cut on the forehead and back.

Uganda's constitution and laws provide for religious freedom, including the right to propagate one's faith and convert from one faith to another. Muslims make up no more than 12 percent of Uganda's population, with high concentrations in eastern areas of the country. (Morning Star News)



Morning Star News photo



Edward Beltran, pastor of Genesis Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, ministers to people in the public housing complex where he once lived.

Photo courtesy of the Southern Baptist Texan

Pastor ministers to public housing complex

By Jane Rodgers

Southern Baptist Texan

A metal fence divides the east and west sides of the Mirasol Homes public housing complex located just west of downtown San Antonio. It's familiar territory to Edward Beltran, pastor of Genesis Baptist Church, who was raised by his grandmother in public housing nearby.

"I grew up on government cheese, government butter, and powdered milk ... in the epicenter of the projects," Beltran said of his childhood in the Villa Veramendi apartments.

Beltran's story showcases God's provision that led him to plant Genesis, which successfully merged with the historic Hot Wells Baptist Church in 2008.

In December 2021, Genesis partnered with Cibolo's Everyday Christian Fellowship and its children's minister, Jimmy Turner, in an outreach begun by ECF the previous July to evangelize the Mirasol housing complex.

Every other Saturday, the group offered lunch, games and gospel activities. Residents from the com-

plex's west side attended.

To reach the east side, the Mirasol Block Party was born.

Drawing in residents

In April, with help from the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, the party kicked off, featuring Christian illusionist Edgardo Ferrer and artist Rik Moore, who "presented creative and entertaining gospel messages," said Bruno Molina, SBTC language and interfaith evangelism associate. A petting zoo drew children and a free meal attracted folks of all ages.

Some 60–70 Mirasol residents came, including three families from the east side. Eight people, seven children and one adult, professed faith in Christ that day.

Since then, Genesis and ECF have followed up with residents, said Beltran, who understands Mirasol.

His grandmother raised him after his mother, lost in substance abuse, could no longer care for him. "By

God's grace, my grandmother took me in," he recalled.

Beltran's mother's story doesn't end in tragedy, thankfully.

Through connections with Victory Outreach, a ministry connected to Adult & Teen Challenge USA, she was saved in 1980 and became a ministry leader.

She spent 27 years with Victory Outreach in San Antonio, Houston and Laredo, eventually remarrying. When she led the female side of a rehab house in Houston, Beltran spent summers there, sleeping in the men's section. He stayed with his grandmother in San Antonio during the school year.

"I spent my summers observing," he said.

Beltran's experiences with street ministry in the impoverished wards of Houston led to his becoming a Christ-follower. At age 31, in March 2003, he was ordained. He launched a church plant in 2007.

A short time after Beltran launched Genesis 15 years ago, he was approached by George Harrivale, pastor of the historic Hot Wells Baptist Church, about a merger between the congregations.

"We were a church plant. They had just celebrated 75 years of being in the community," Beltran said.

Proceed with caution

Beltran's mentors counseled caution, since mergers often do not work.

Genesis joined the Bluebonnet Baptist Association and the merger proceeded in 2008.

"I was like a kid in a candy store," Beltran exclaimed. "We suddenly had a sanctuary to seat over 200, an education building with a library, an administration building, a fellowship hall. They were faithful and hung on and preserved the property until the Lord brought us into the area."

Today, Genesis Church facilitates short-term missions projects in the inner city, partnering with other churches in San Antonio and across the state.

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Headline news

from the states

Florida

First Baptist Church Eastpoint may be small in number, but it is on a mission to nourish bodies and souls with a volunteer-run food pantry ministry.

“Eastpoint is in one of the most economically depressed areas in our association,” said Troy Varnum, director of missions of Northwest Coast Baptist Association. “The feeding ministry has been active for more than 15 years and has been a hallmark of the church’s missions advancement.”

The church receives food through farm shares and donations from members and local businesses. More than 120 families benefit weekly. Recipients find their way to the application process via word of mouth and the church’s Facebook page. Volunteers are mostly members. (Florida Baptist Convention)

Kentucky

Kentucky Baptists recently presented more than 500 households in the Bowling Green area with information and resources about Jesus Christ through the Gospel to Every Home initiative.

On Nov. 12, GTEH trained and launched about 50 volunteers into areas around First Baptist Church Bowling Green, Forest Park Baptist Church, Jennings Creek Community Church and Living Hope Baptist Church — all to help the South Central Baptist Association continue sharing Christ with homes adopted through the GTEH initiative. (Kentucky Today)



Photo courtesy of Kentucky Today

Louisiana

Organizers and participants of the recent Youth Evangelism Celebration praised God for the 830 students who made decisions for Christ at the Rapides Parish Coliseum in Alexandria, Louisiana. They also were grateful for the estimated 5,300 teens who attended YEC on Nov. 20–21, the largest annual gathering of Louisiana Baptists.

Both numbers were significant increases compared to last year’s event, which drew a crowd of 4,500 and facilitated 719 decisions for Christ.

YEC challenged youth to share their story of how Christ changed their lives.

In addition to messages by the North American

Mission Board’s Shane Pruitt, participants enjoyed music by KB and Rush of Fools, entertainment by Jared Hall and prayers led by students from around the state. YEC 2022 concluded with a concert by We Are Messengers, an award-winning contemporary Christian band.

Students and adult leaders also were challenged to share their testimonies with classmates, family members, co-workers and others.

“It’s not your job to save anybody,” Pruitt said. “But it is your job to point people to the one who can save, Jesus Christ.” (Baptist Message)



Photo courtesy of Baptist Message

Mississippi

Mississippi College on Oct. 10 announced “the first-of-its-kind, full-tuition scholarship program” named in honor of the late Leland R. Speed, one of the university’s biggest boosters who was also the longest-serving board of trustees member in the institution’s 196-year history.

Beginning with enrollment for the fall 2023 semester, the college announced eligible students from Mississippi who are admitted to the school and receive the Leland Speed Scholarship will pay no tuition after all federal, state and institutional grants and scholarships are first applied.

No other institution of higher learning in the state offers full-tuition scholarships for all qualified students from Mississippi, MC noted.

Speed, who died in January 2021 at 88, came from a family whose ties to MC date back to 1935. The Leland Speed Library is named for his father, the late Leland S. Speed, a successful investment banker who served as mayor of Jackson from 1945 to 1949.

Speed’s mother, the late Katherine Rhymes Speed Ettl, was a prominent sculptor whose works are displayed in the Leland Speed Library and Gore Galleries on the MC campus.

“Dad would be humbled to know his gift is being used by the university to give back to fellow Mississippi families,” said son Warren, whose wife, Marla, is a 1994 MC graduate, and whose



Photo courtesy of The Baptist Record

daughter is a senior at MC and son is a sophomore at MC. (The Baptist Record)

Missouri

More than 1,400 in Chillicothe recently witnessed death-defying stunts sponsored by Missouri Baptist Convention’s LIFE Outreach initiative. The stunts performed by motorcycles, BMX bikes and skateboards provided an opportunity for those with LIFE Outreach, working with Real Encounter, to proclaim the gospel.

The events organized by LIFE Outreach begin on Sunday when an MBC representative meets with local congregations to train and equip believers in what it means to be an active and faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

From Monday through Wednesday afternoon, small stunt shows are performed for area middle school and high school students.

The big finale takes place Wednesday night and showcases the best they have to offer in stunts before a gospel presentation is shared. An opportunity to respond follows and the host church will follow up with all who made decisions. (The Pathway)

Oklahoma

After serving 30-plus years at the state fair of Tulsa, Walker Moore received word that its chaplaincy ministry was being discontinued.

“I became interested in this work when I was invited to meet and explore ministering to those who travel from city to city,” said Moore, whose grandmother worked at carnivals in California.

The Tulsa State Fair Board provided chaplains a place in which to operate, allowing volunteers to hand out necessities to fair workers and those visiting the fair.

“We heard over and over that no one came close to taking care of the workers like the Tulsa state fair did,” he said. “Many of them couldn’t wait to come back, so they could update us about their lives. We saw pure joy on their faces when someone remembered their name.”

Moore encouraged those who attend the fair in the future to be “the chaplains, the missionaries, the ambassadors of the King of kings.” (Baptist Messenger)



Photo courtesy of Baptist Messenger

Grace of God

Feature story
International Mission Board

IMB missionaries help bring God's healing to Ukraine's refugees

EDITOR'S NOTE — Week of Prayer, December 4–11, kicks off the season of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions. This year's offer-

ing has a national goal of \$196 million. David and Shannon Brown are featured on Day 4 of this year's Week of Prayer. The offering supports the work of the Browns, as well as the work of the other 3,550 International Mission Board missionaries around the world. One hundred percent of all funds given to LMCO goes straight to missionaries who are making disciples and multiplying churches among unreached people groups.



IMB photo

David and Shannon Brown serve with the International Mission Board. The Browns' involvement with Moldova began through their church's partnership with ministry in Moldova. The Browns are members of Meadow Brook Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Olga wanted to go to church for years, but her husband forbade it. He didn't believe in God and didn't want his family dabbling in a faith he understood to be false.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in spring 2022, Olga, her daughters and grandchildren fled and were welcomed at the border of Moldova by Christians from Dancu Baptist Church in Dancu, Moldova.

Moldova shares an eastern, southern and northern border with



WEEK OF PRAYER FOR
INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

IMB photo

Olga shares how Dancu Baptist Church in Dancu, Moldova, is caring for her and her family. Many Ukrainian refugees have passed through the church and traveled to other countries in Europe, but Olga and her family decided to stay.

Ukraine and a western border with Romania.

When news of the war emerged, the Moldovan Baptist Union, comprised of 400 churches, converted its buildings, summer camp facilities and children's homes into shelters. Dancu Baptist sent buses to the border to meet refugees.

The church created a welcoming environment by placing stuffed animals on beds for the children and having school supplies on

hand. They provided Wi-Fi, three home-cooked meals a day and counseling.

David and Shannon Brown serve with the International Mission Board and they, along with their home church, partner with and support the pastors of Dancu Baptist and the Moldovan Baptist Union in ministering to Ukrainian refugees.

Safety and family

They've been impressed at the way Moldovan believers have embraced refugees like Olga.

Olga's family found safety and family in Dancu Baptist Church.

Her grandchildren found freedom and safety within its walls. The emotion rose in her voice — strong and insistent, but also trembling — as she said, "They've surrounded us with love and care.

"They are supporting us psycho-



IMB photo

Russ Wise, a volunteer with a Southern Baptist Disaster Relief team, offers water and snacks to Ukrainian children coming across the border into Romania. SBDR and Send Relief teams served Ukrainian refugees crossing the border by handing out snacks, water and hot drinks and providing cell phone charging stations.

Week of Prayer *for International Missions*

DAY 1 — *Global lostness*

One Christ follower can't be everywhere, and neither can his or her church. But by partnering together through IMB, churches can make a global impact.

DAY 2 — *Health care*

Around the world in hard-to-reach places, medical clinics run by missionaries open doors into communities that desperately need the hope of Jesus.

DAY 3 — *Students*

Missionaries Jess and Wendy Jennings invest their lives discipling and mobilizing stu-

dents to reach the unreached in the Philippines and beyond.

DAY 4 — *Refugee ministries*

As IMB missionaries in Moldova meet the needs of Ukrainian refugees, they're seeing God at work and lives changed with the gospel.

DAY 5 — *Cities*

IMB missionary Erik White said Southern Baptists send missionaries like him to cities across the globe to share Jesus with people who are searching for a better answer than Islam.

DAY 6 — *Diaspora*

Southern Baptists work together to reach

refugees, immigrants and international students God is moving to more accessible countries.

DAY 7 — *Missionary partners*

Partners all around the world work alongside IMB missionaries to reach every people, tribe and language with the gospel.

DAY 8 — *Global lostness*

IMB missionaries need prayers as they train national partners in South Asia to disciple new believers among a people group that previously had no known Christians.

logically, emotionally and spiritually," she continued.

The Browns recruited volunteer medical teams to meet the needs of refugees housed in Baptist churches, campgrounds and a medical clinic in the capital.

Olga called her husband to tell him how well the Baptists cared for them. She was astonished by his response.

"Praise the Lord! That's God's grace. God is good and protected you," he said.

She never imagined she would hear these words leave her husband's mouth.

She finally had what she waited so long for — the chance to go to church.

After attending church on two Sundays, Olga and her daughter, Alexandra, committed their lives to Christ.

Olga and her family often read a children's storybook Bible. The illustrations helped their understanding of the Bible stories.

The children were more interested in reading the Bible than their school lessons, and they paid attention during the church services. They affectionately called the senior pastor "grandpa."

"Did you listen to what grandpa said?" Olga asked after a service.

'Love your neighbor'

"He said to love your neighbor," they responded.

"We came here through God's grace, and we are in God's grace here," Olga said.

How you can pray:

Praise God that Dancu Baptist members are loving their Ukrainian neighbors and that their love led to Olga and Alexandra's decisions of faith.

Pray for and give thanks to the Lord for the Browns as they support Moldovan Baptists and continue to minister to Ukrainians.

Ask God how you can reach refugees and displaced people with the gospel.

THE WEEK OF PRAYER for International Missions is Dec. 4-11.



INTERNATIONAL
MISSION BOARD

LOTTIE MOON
CHRISTMAS OFFERING

National goal: \$196 million

For more information or to download resources like videos, social media graphics, posters and bulletin inserts, visit imb.org/lottiemoon.



IMB photo

Ukrainian refugees board a train in Suceava, Romania. The refugees are transported from the border to the train, where they travel on to other cities in Romania and to other countries in Europe. Ukrainians can travel for free. Members of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief teams took time to visit the train station to help and pray for refugees.



Dawn and Brian Pippen tell their daughter Olivia how loved she is, and how God wove her story together so beautifully.

Photo courtesy of Dawn Pippen

'A God thing'

By Grace Thornton

The Baptist Paper

Couple's adoption journey highlights God weaving child's story

Dawn Pippen remembers clearly the morning her husband, Brian, admitted he had written on the wall of their nursery with a permanent marker.

"We had her room ready," Pippen said. "The furniture was ready, painted and waiting for her."

The "her" was the couple's daughter, whom they hadn't yet met.

For 11 years the Pippens had

been walking through infertility. They tried treatments for several years, then began considering the idea of adoption after someone told them about the book "Adopted for Life" by Russell Moore.

It challenged them to get into the Word and wrestle with the truth that adoption wasn't God's plan B, it was plan A, recalled Pippen, administrative assistant for Pine Belt Baptist Association in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

"God adopted us. That's the

gospel message," she noted. "Our heavenly Father adopted us, and what greater way to share His love and gospel than by opening our hearts to His plan?"

'Praying in desperation'

So they switched gears and began all the paperwork, meetings and phone calls that go along with becoming adoptive parents. At first they were working toward an international adoption, but nothing seemed to be moving.

"Our hearts were just longing every day," Pippen remembered. "Friends we knew were married and having babies, and we had just gotten to this point of desperation."

So that's why one morning in November 2015 Brian "grabbed a Sharpie and wrote on the wall a prayer of a brokenhearted man to His God," Pippen recalled. "It said, 'We claim that You're going to bring our daughter home, and we're praying in desperation.'"

Pippen said when she woke up



Photo courtesy of Dawn Pippen

that morning he told her what he had done and not to be upset — he could paint over it.

But she told him not to. In fact, she added a prayer of her own. And a few days later, as her parents housesat, they saw the prayers on the wall and wrote their own too.

Pippen believed she was going to see her daughter before Christmas, even if that just meant receiving a photo from an adoption agency. As the days ticked by, she continued to pray for that.

A call out of the blue

On Dec. 17, her husband got a call out of the blue from a high school friend who had been following their adoption journey on Facebook.

“She told him about a baby girl she had heard of who had been born to a 13-year-old girl who was in search of a home for her,” Pippen recalled.

The baby was born in September and stayed in the neonatal intensive care unit until November. The young mother wanted to put her up for adoption, but decided to take her home when she was ready to leave the hospital.

After a month, the young teenager decided she couldn’t do it, Pippen said.

And starting with that phone call, the Pippens were amazed as they watched how God put the pieces into place.

First, He gave them favor with the family, she noted. When they all met together, Brian was able to share the gospel with the baby’s family — to tell them what it means to be adopted into the family of God.

As he shared, tears rolled down the face of the baby’s biological grandmother who said, “I know you’re going to be her daddy.”

On Dec. 21, they brought their new daughter, Olivia, home.

“I got to see my baby’s face before Christmas,” Pippen said.

Not too long after the Pippens brought Olivia home, God orchestrated some divine connections for them to reconnect with the NICU nurses who had cared for their baby girl.

Making connections

First, Pippen accidentally called the NICU number thinking she was calling Medicaid. The number was written in Olivia’s paperwork.

“I told the nurse who answered what her birth name was, and she pulled the phone away from her ear and said, ‘You’re not going to be-

Brian and Dawn Pippen meet their daughter, Olivia, for the first time. Dawn believed she was going to see her daughter before Christmas, even if that just meant receiving a photo from an adoption agency. On Dec. 21, they brought their new daughter home.

lieve who I’ve got on the phone!’”

The nurse told Pippen she rocked Olivia to sleep before her shift was over, and that she had seriously considered adopting her if no one else did. When the birth mother surprised all the nurses by taking the baby home, they were worried.

“She had prayed for God to keep His hand on her,” Pippen said.

Another nurse had a similar story.

“She had been so brokenhearted over [Olivia] because they knew the mother’s situation,” Pippen said. “She said the whole time Olivia was in the NICU, nobody came to see her, and she and the

other nurses would pick her up and do rounds with her in their arms.”

That nurse kept in touch, and when Olivia was 2, they got to see each other again.

“Livy gets out of the car and goes running to her and wrapped her arms around her leg,” Pippen recalled. “That wasn’t something she ever did to anyone. It was like she knew there was something between them, and to me that’s a God thing.”

‘A journey’

Olivia is now 7 and already has a lot of questions about where she came from, Pippen said.

Even though those are sometimes tricky to navigate, she said it just gives the couple a chance to tell Olivia how loved she is and how God wove her story together so beautifully.

“It’s been a journey, and it’s still a journey, but He has worked in it in such amazing ways,” Pippen said.



Photo courtesy of Dawn Pippen

As Olivia has gotten older, Dawn and Brian willingly navigate questions from her about her adoption story. Even though those are sometimes tricky to navigate, it gives the couple a chance to tell Olivia how loved she is.

“GOD ADOPTED US. THAT’S THE GOSPEL MESSAGE.”

DAWN PIPPEN



TURKEY DAY

After collecting their much-anticipated turkeys and sacks filled with other traditional Thanksgiving fare, Turkey Day recipients also can receive fresh produce and bakery items to add to their holiday celebrations.

Photo by Pam Henderson/The Baptist Paper

By **Trennis Henderson**
The Baptist Paper

Rio Vista Center in Phoenix meets needs with traditional holiday food and love of Christ

Dozens of bins overflowing with canned corn, green beans, cranberry sauce, boxes of stuffing mix, instant mashed potatoes and the main attraction: more than 1,000 frozen turkeys mean only one thing at Rio Vista Center in Phoenix — Turkey Day.

This year's 19th annual food distribution ministry attracted more than 200 volunteers from area churches and up to 2,000 community residents who began lining up early on the Saturday morning before Thanksgiving to receive entrées, sides and desserts for a festive holiday meal.

Leaders and volunteers describe the highly organized event as "beautiful chaos."

It features long lines of individuals, families and cars stretching across the ministry center's parking lot. Along with the hundreds of turkeys, guests could opt for packages of ham, beef, fish or ribs instead.

As the gates officially opened at 9 a.m., snippets of conversation quickly filled the air: "Bring more birds — we need more turkeys." "Have a blessed Thanksgiving." "Another ham. Another ham. One more bag."

Rosalinda Lopez was among this year's Turkey Day recipients

who arrived at 5 a.m. to claim her place in line.

"We get to have a turkey for Thanksgiving, so my family is really happy because of that," she shared.

Expressing appreciation for the volunteers who make Turkey Day possible, Lopez said she is grateful for their commitment to "wake up early and come to give their time."

Rio Vista, which has served the Phoenix area for several decades, has partnered in recent years with Arizona Baptist Children's Servic-

es & Family Ministries as one of ABCS's community resource centers. Rio Vista also partners with The Bridge Church, which meets in the resource center's facilities. Donations from individuals, churches and area businesses help supply the annual food drive.

Aaron Norwood, The Bridge's founding pastor, now serves full-time as director of Rio Vista Center. He recalls the first Turkey Day when volunteers distributed about 60 turkeys. That number grew to 200 the following year and has continued to expand over the years.

"WE WANT TO BE THAT REFUGE FOR THE COMMUNITY."
ISRAEL BARRAZA
PASTOR
THE BRIDGE



NORWOOD



Photo by Pam Henderson/The Baptist Paper
 Aaron Norwood (right), director of Rio Vista Center in Phoenix, offers volunteers a few last-minute instructions in preparation for Turkey Day 2022. More than 200 volunteers participated in the annual event.

Noting that several nearby neighborhoods “are well below the poverty level,” Norwood said, “There are homeless people where we are, but a lot of families just have generational poverty.

“We always try to affirm people’s dignity when we serve them here,” he explained. “That’s always been very important to us.”

Citing the priority of building personal relationships, Norwood said he wants area residents to “know where they can come, know who we are, how they fit and how they belong here.” He added that many people “feel like it’s their church, even if they don’t come on Sunday.”

Israel Barraza, pastor of The Bridge, noted that “this area of Phoenix has always been a place where there’s a lot of brokenness. We understand there is a community here that just really needs help from Christ. Our goal is to be that church where everybody who has been here feels accepted and welcome.”



BARRAZA

Refuge for the community

In addition to annual events such as Turkey Day, The Bridge’s Sunday morning worship features an English/Spanish bilingual service as well as one in English. The weekly services, known as the Sunday Brunch, include members

and guests gathering around tables both for worship and a fellowship meal together.

‘Always a cycle’

“We want to be that refuge for the community,” Barraza affirmed. “At the same time, our focus is to preach and teach the gospel. That is our main thing always.

“We have a lot of members at our church now who first started

when they came to get a food box,” he said. “It’s always a cycle; they come get a food box and then they see what we’re doing, so they want to volunteer. As they’re volunteering, they get to know the people here. We invite them to church, they start coming to church, and they come to know Christ.

“I love that it just goes hand in hand with Turkey Day,” Barraza added. “Our hope is that they get to see God’s love in the way that we treat them and serve them.”

Claire Troth, a member of SouthGate Church in Phoenix, is a longtime Turkey Day volunteer who coordinates sorting and bagging food to distribute.

“We pray over every bag that it goes into the right hands, and that it blesses them and nourishes their soul and their body,” Troth said.

“A lot of people in our community are really hurting, especially this year,” she acknowledged. “I love that there are so many volunteers that want to give of their time to help.”

As he oversaw Turkey Day 2022, Norwood said serving in practical, hands-on community ministries “has always been a part of my understanding of faith — that we serve those who are un-

derserved, those who are in need.”

“That’s what Jesus did, and I think that’s what He told us to do,” he reflected.

Relationships

“The relationships are important to the community,” he said, “but that’s also really important to what we do and how we share the gospel and how we really feel that we’re sharing Christ” — one frozen turkey at a time.



Photo by Pam Henderson/The Baptist Paper
 Turkey Day volunteers at Rio Vista Center in Phoenix provide area residents with donated food items for their Thanksgiving meal.



Photo by Pam Henderson/The Baptist Paper
 A lengthy string of cars and trucks lines up beside Rio Vista Center as drivers await the opening of Turkey Day. An estimated 2,000 area residents participated in this year’s Thanksgiving food distribution ministry.

PART 3 IN A SERIES

Endangered youth

By Denise George
The Baptist Paper

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Ways to help prevent bullying

EDITOR'S NOTE — Across the nation, children and teens are plagued by a host of escalating tragedies, from substance abuse to suicide, from bullying to gun violence. In this series we will look at the issues facing America's Endangered Youth. Check out our other stories at tbponline.org/endangered-youth.

Bullying has become an epidemic in the United States, too often escalating with tragic and deadly results.

In 2019, after reportedly being bullied on his school bus, 10-year-old Seven Bridges came home and hanged himself.

The boy from Louisville, Kentucky, had allegedly been repeatedly teased, harassed and physically attacked by older classmates.

School officials had downplayed the bullying when Seven's parents tried to address it.

This is just one of other similar stories.

Currently, more than 282,000 school-aged students are physically assaulted each month in secondary schools, according to educationcorner.com.

Refusing to go to school

More than 70% report they have witnessed bullying in their school; more than

“
CURRENTLY, NO FEDERAL LAW DIRECTLY ADDRESSES THE PROBLEM OF BULLYING, ALTHOUGH IN SOME CASES IT OVERLAPS WITH DISCRIMINATORY HARASSMENT.
 ”

160,000 each day refuse to go to school for fear of being bullied. Sixty-four percent who are bullied don't report it.

Different types

Bullying can be physical kicking, hitting or blocking, causing a child to fear for his safety. It can also be verbal, including threats, taunts, teasing, name calling or abusive language.

Social bullying can involve spreading malicious rumors, shunning a child or teen from social groups or embarrassing them in public.

The internet has taken this reality to a new level: cyberbullying.

A bully can now torment a victim continuously through text messaging, video and photo clips, emails, instant messaging, chat-rooms and other electronic means.

It can happen at school, home, church or on buses or community playgrounds.

Currently, no federal law directly addresses the problem of bullying, although in some cases it overlaps with discriminatory harassment.

Watch for signs

What can pastors, church and community members, teachers, caregivers and families do to help stop bullying?

Here are some suggestions:

▶ When you see it taking place, respond quickly. Call 911 if necessary.

▶ Provide adult supervision in areas where children and youth gather.

▶ Educate yourself and others who are responsible for caring for children on the facts of bullying. Join with others to enforce zero tolerance of bullying violence.

▶ Watch for the warning signs of a child being bullied:

unexplainable injuries, social isolation, sleeping difficulties or nightmares, self-destructive behavior, declining grades, a sudden loss of interest or changes in eating and other behaviors.

▶ Watch for signs of a bully — a child or youth who is increasingly aggressive, gets into fights, is verbally abusive or humiliates others.

▶ Talk with, listen to and teach children and youth that bullying behavior is serious, wrong and will not be tolerated.

▶ Work together with agencies in the community to address the issue through seminars, workshops and community functions.

▶ Seek out and help provide professional help for both the bully and the victim.

MORE THAN **70%** REPORT THEY HAVE WITNESSED BULLYING IN THEIR SCHOOL.

MORE THAN **160,000** EACH DAY REFUSE TO GO TO SCHOOL FOR FEAR OF BEING BULLIED.

64% PERCENT WHO ARE BULLIED DON'T REPORT IT.



Unsplash.com



Helpful resources

▶ To learn more about bullying: stopbullying.gov/resources/laws/federal.

▶ For information about how to talk with children and youth: stopbullying.gov/resources/how-to-talk-about-bullying.

▶ To become aware of current laws, policies and regulations: stopbullying.gov/resources/laws. (Note: All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories address bullying differently.)

▶ To learn how to support the aggressors and victims: stopbullying.gov/prevention/support-kids-involved#address.

▶ For more information about how to talk to children: unicef.org/end-violence/how-talk-your-children-about-bullying.

▶ For deeper insight into bullying read “A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Associated Risk Behaviors” at cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-technicalpackage.pdf.

Equip & disciple

By **Trennis Henderson**
The Baptist Paper

South Carolina WMU leader affirms ‘beautiful tapestry’ of service

Laurie Register knows Woman’s Missionary Union inside and out. It has been a major part of her life throughout her ministry career — and even earlier.

During nearly three decades in leadership roles with South Carolina WMU, she has served as an Acteens consultant, Women on Mission consultant and nearly 14 years as state WMU executive director. On the national level, she served on the WMU general board.

She also was an active member of WMU’s Mission Friends, Girls in Action and Acteens missions groups during her childhood.

Announcing her upcoming retirement more than a year ago, Register noted on her Facebook page at the time, “I can point to the exact day and approximate location in rural South Carolina when I heard God whisper into my heart, ‘It’s time.’ And I knew exactly what He meant.

“Even so, it was not a decision made without struggle. I’ve spent nearly half my life on the South Carolina WMU staff, and I’ve developed relationships across South Carolina, the U.S. and the world,” she reflected. “I’m not clear on my next steps yet ... but I trust God will show me in time.”

According to Sandy Wisdom-Martin, National WMU executive director, “I’m drawn to three things in a leader: passion, humility and a servant heart. Laurie Register exemplifies all three.”

‘Tireless ... advocate’

“Laurie is respected in her state and throughout the convention for being a tireless missions advocate,” Wisdom-Martin added. “The impact of her ministry will reverberate throughout eternity.”



Photo by Pam Henderson/The Baptist Paper

Laurie Register, executive director of South Carolina Woman’s Missionary Union since 2009, is retiring at the end of this year after serving nearly 30 years on the South Carolina WMU staff.

Early in her ministry with WMU, Register was preparing to lead a missions trip to Kenya when someone asked her, “Do you feel called to missions?”

Her response: “Yes, I do, but not in the way you are thinking.” Rather than a call to career missions service, she explained, “I’ve been called to missions in the role of equipping and discipling and helping others discover what their call is, what their role is and how to live it out.”

While she has been involved in more than 20 international missions trips on five continents over the years, as well as participating in numerous local and national ministry projects, “my call has always been that of equipping,” she affirmed.

Reflecting on significant moments during her years of ministry, Register said a missionary once asked her, “So tell me, where are the lost people in your life?”

Noting that her work, church and fellowship circles all were filled with fellow Christians, she said, “It took me aback for a moment. ... I realized, how am I going to have an impact on people who don’t know Jesus if I’m not around people who don’t know Jesus?”

Intentional change

She said that conversation led her to “change some things about how I lived. That involved coming back home and intentionally finding places where I could be around people who were not believers” such as the gym and a local bowling league.

“That would be my challenge for any of us who are followers of Christ: to look and see, where are the lost people in your life? And then how can you increase that number?” she urged.

“The important thing is to say, ‘OK, God, how and where can I

serve you?’ Then open your ears and listen and then open your heart and be obedient.

“Probably one of [my favorite things to do] is ... to actually be in the churches or in the associations, speaking and being among our people.”

Supporting missionaries

“We also have tremendous relationships with our missionaries,” she added. “A good deal of my time is spent corresponding with our missionaries, spending time with those who are here stateside, supporting them, encouraging them in any way we can.”

While some believers are called to serve God overseas, others are called to serve in their local communities. “It all works together in this beautiful tapestry, so we all have our place to be involved and in that way truly impact the whole world.”

As Register hands over the leadership reins to Jess Archer effective Jan. 1, she described South Carolina’s incoming WMU executive director as “energetic, creative, detail-oriented. She loves people, missions, and most importantly, she loves the Lord.”

Expressing gratitude to God for her ministry journey, Register said, “Personally, WMU has been a place where I can exercise the gifts that God has given me.

“In many of our churches, WMU is the place that gives women leadership opportunities,” she shared.

“We have many gifted women, many gifted young women, and WMU is the place where they have been able to live out that giftedness. I will always be appreciative that it’s given me the opportunity to hone those leadership skills to be who God created me to be.”

Headline news

from the SBC

Florida Disaster Relief prepares Thanksgiving meals for Ian survivors

Her husband had died just before Hurricane Ian made landfall in southwest Florida on Sept. 28. As her first Thanksgiving without him approached, Marilyn felt “so alone.” She welcomed the prayers of Florida Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers and gladly accepted the Thanksgiving meal they offered her.

Sam was struggling with cancer, but he couldn’t help but think of others in need. He eagerly picked up several Thanksgiving meals and headed out to share them with the homeless.

Financially strapped and exhausted, Rebecca was caring for her grandchildren while her daughter was in the hospital ready to give birth. She was thankful and delighted when she was offered a free Thanksgiving meal for her family.

Although FLDR volunteers had worked tirelessly for nearly two months since Hurricane Ian’s wrath was unleashed on southwest Florida, their ministry was not finished. The opportunity for FLDR to serve Thanksgiving meals was initiated by the state emergency operations center, which had received the request from Lowe’s.

Serving let those impacted by the hurricane know “we still care about them,” FLDR director David Coggins said. “Just because things have moved on and are getting back to some semblance of normal, they are not forgotten. There are people who still care for them, and we want them to know that.” (Florida Baptist Convention)

Robayna named IMB’s Hispanic church mobilization strategist

The International Mission Board named Annel Robayna as the new Hispanic church mobilization strategist, serving with the mobilization department. He began Sept. 26.

In his role, Robayna works with 3,390 Hispanic congregations across the Southern Baptist Convention to mobilize pastors and church members to reach the nations with the gospel.

Robayna, who is Venezuelan, grew up exposed to missions and evangelism because of his parents who were church planters in Venezuela and served as translators for U.S. missions teams.

He moved to the U.S. in 2003 and received a bachelor of church music from the University of Mobile in 2007, a master of arts in missiology from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2017 and a master of arts in music education from Anderson University in 2018.



ROBAYNA

Most recently, Robayna served in the role of intercultural missionary for the Alabama Baptist State Mission Board. (IMB)

Arizona churches using Taiwanese factory as opportunity for missions

It’s no news to the people in north Phoenix that the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company is building a \$12 billion factory and bringing in several hundred workers from Taiwan.

Electronic chips are at the core of technological growth around the world, used by cell phones, electronic machinery and electric cars. Apple iPhones, for example, use four chips per phone. The plant will open in 2024, with plans to employ 2,000 workers.

The opportunity to reach out to the new families moving in was first conceived by the leadership at Northwest Chinese Baptist Church, who shared the opportunity with Pastor Brian Bowman at Valley Life Church. Both churches are engaged with the ministry, and Joy Longaza, director of discipleship for Valley Life Tramanto, is spearheading the Valley Life outreach.

“Normally, when you are a missionary,” Longaza said, “you’re traveling to a new people and culture and learning a new language, but the Lord is taking a large group from Taiwan and bringing them to our own backyard.” (Arizona’s Portraits)

Former SBC seminary professor accused of sexual abuse files defamation suit

A former Southern Baptist seminary professor who resigned following accusations of sexual abuse has filed suit in Alabama against the Southern Baptist Convention and 11 other defendants claiming defamation of character and conspiracy.

David Sills and his wife, Mary, filed the suit Nov. 21 in Mobile County circuit court.

Sills was a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary until his resignation May 23, 2018. The following year, Jennifer Lyell, a former vice president at Lifeway Christian Resources, told Baptist Press she had been a victim of emotional and sexual abuse by Sills, who had been her professor. The initial reporting of Lyell’s story, which was criticized as characterizing the relationship as consensual, was one of the catalysts that led to a sweeping eight-month investigation conducted by Guidepost Solutions into the SBC Executive Committee’s handling of sexual abuse claims and mistreatment of victims who had come forward with allegations.

In their suit, the Sillses say their reputations were harmed, and they were subjected to “public contempt, disgrace, ridicule, or attack” because of the statements made against them.

The Sillses seek monetary damages from the named defendants: SBC; SBC Executive Committee; former SBC President Ed Litton; current SBC President Bart Barber; Lyell; Lifeway; Eric Geiger, a former executive vice president at Lifeway; Willie McLaurin, EC interim president; Roland Slade, former EC chairman; Southern Seminary; Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary; and Guidepost.



SILLS

In February 2022, the SBC EC reached a financial settlement with Lyell and issued a public apology for the BP coverage. On May 22, the SBC Sexual Abuse Task Force released the results of the Guidepost investigation that affirmed widespread mishandling of known cases of sexual abuse in the SBC and its churches.

Lyell’s case was cited in the SATF report. The Sillses’ suit claims Guidepost “never sought statements from or interviews with Dr. Sills and Mrs. Sills, or their pastor,” instead relying primarily “on statements from defendants Mohler and Lyell, as well as purported SBC documents.”

Though the Sillses are residents of Mississippi and the defendants are based in or reside in several different states, the suit asserts the Mobile Circuit Court has jurisdiction because the alleged defamation happened throughout the state; the SBC Executive Committee and Lifeway own property in the state; and defendant Ed Litton is a resident of Mobile County. (The Baptist Paper)

NAMB’s new podcast, Reconstructing Faith, focuses on leaders, challenges

The church is facing a credibility crisis according to producers of Reconstructing Faith, a new podcast by the North American Mission Board hosted by Trevin Wax, NAMB’s vice president of research and resource development.

Rather than critique the church, Wax said he hopes to take an honest look at the problems, consider timeless Christian truth and spur a conversation that helps rebuild and restore the church to Christlikeness. Each episode tackles a different topic that has often generated conversations and sometimes controversy within the church.

Reconstructing Faith is designed not to provide simplistic or final answers to hard questions, but to help pastors and church leaders begin having discussions along these lines, identifying rot where it exists in the Church and rebuilding so she reflects the holiness and beauty of Christ.

Reconstructing Faith can be found on any major podcast platform. (NAMB)



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5 ways leaders can shepherd their small groups

By Michael J. Brooks

The Baptist Paper

Ken Braddy, director of Sunday School for Life-way Christian Resources, said of the three roles for Bible study group leaders — teacher, leader, shepherd — his favorite is shepherd.

“Many great people in Scripture were shepherds, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Amos, David and others,” Braddy said. “And of course we serve the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.”

Braddy recently presented “Shepherding Your Sheep,” the final of 10 webinars in his Training Thru ’22 series. He noted several well-known shepherds in the Bible.

“The shepherds loved the sheep, and they would put themselves in danger to protect them,” Braddy noted during the webinar. “David said he fought the lion and the bear for his sheep. Shepherding required constant vigilance and a sense of stewardship. The shepherd was responsible to the owner for all the flock.”

Stewardship means the sheep belong to the Lord, Braddy said.

“I’ve had people in every church I’ve served tell me to back off and leave their group alone,” he recalled. “They failed to realize the purpose of Sunday School is to reach people, and new groups do this more effectively. The people aren’t their people, nor is the classroom their classroom! These belong to the Lord and His Church.”

See five tips below for how a Bible study leader can shepherd a small group.

5 characteristics

► The shepherd does not drop inactive group members. “I’ve had people say to me that we should drop nonattenders since they mess up our percentage,” Braddy said. “I explain gently that we’re not in the percentage business. And the difference between a class and a community is that we see members as a ministry list.”

► Every week the shepherd goes after straying sheep. “We cannot wait six weeks out and tell people we care,” Braddy said. “It’s best to make a quick phone call or text, or

an email or porch visit to let people know we love them.”

► Shepherds are pleased with incremental change. “Good shepherds tend to have a long-term perspective,” Braddy noted. “We may not see overnight change in the lives of our group. We prepare well, but we don’t keep our heads down in a commentary all week. We invest in people and encourage them to grow in faith.”

► Shepherds often can be spotted by their meeting space. “If I see a lectern in the room, I think this group has a teacher and little discussion,” Braddy explained. “A judge is elevated in the courtroom as a sign of authority. The best room arrangement is circular with the teacher sitting among the people.”

► Shepherds know their sheep, Braddy said, citing Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington in their book, “DiscipleShift,” who write, “[Jesus’] primary method was life-on-life.” “The good shepherd knows the sheep and their stories and guides his or her teaching accordingly,” Braddy added. “This is another rea-

son that we say the right-sized group should be ‘12, plus or minus four.’ This gives us a manageable community to relate to and teach.”

Creating margin

Finally, Braddy listed five kinds of sheep: guests, prospects, absentees, associate members (who serve the church in other areas) and regular attenders. All have unique needs.

“Carey Nieuwhof said, ‘Nobody should be able to out-local or out-community the church,’” Braddy said. Group leaders should purposely create margin in their schedules to “let people in,” Braddy encouraged, and if they feel inadequate, enlist others to help in shepherding.

Braddy plans to release two seasons of podcasts in 2023, he said. The first will release in February.

“We plan to do something similar with a season of seven podcasts based on a single theme,” he said.

Braddy noted the first season will deal with recruiting workers. The 10 Training Thru ’22 webinars are available for replay at lifeway.com/training22.

An advocate

By **George Bullard**
The Baptist Paper

Best title for the staff leader of Baptist associations

Recently I came across a file from when my father served on the staff of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina just after World War II. He was the key staff person related to associations.

Among his papers was information about the associational staff in the late 1940s. Forty-two people served as associational missionaries throughout the state. Twelve of these leaders were women. More about this later.

The title associational missionary is of keen interest as we think about the heritage of Baptist associations. It caused me to remember a conversation with J.C. Bradley, a renowned theoretician of associationalism who also served later as an associational missionary in North Carolina.

J.C. worked in the associational missions division of the former Home Mission Board (now North American Mission Board) beginning in the 1970s. He wrote or edited administrative guides for the work of Baptist associations. "A Baptist Association: Churches on Mission Together" published in 1984 is an important book he authored.

His memory and style of operation was like that of a mainframe

computer. He stored it in his mainframe-like brain. He then served as a ready resource.

He felt then, and still does today, that the best name for the staff leader of associations is associational missionary. He believes that speaks well into the core function of associations as a movement and family of congregations.



BRADLEY

Three types of associational missionaries served North Carolina Baptists during the late 1940s.

First were city missionaries: These missionaries served the key urban areas of the state.

This intentional focus was a partnership with HMB.

These city missionaries had a significant role in developing and guiding strategies to reach growing urban areas.

Connecting

Second were pastoral missionaries: These were men who served as missionaries in associations to relate to pastors, guide the growth of churches and connect them deeply with the state and national denomination.

Third were education missionaries: These were women. Their role was to help churches develop the Christian education programs needed

for effective church work. They acted as liaisons with state convention staff who led programs needed by these churches.

Women leaders

As a teenager, I got to know several of these women as they were friends of my parents. One was Elizabeth Campbell who served in Lenoir, North Carolina. We checked in with her annually when traveling to Ridgecrest Conference Center for various training weeks. Another was Ruth Prince, who served an association in eastern North Carolina and later was a state convention staff person in church programming.

Ultimately, all the women associational missionaries were replaced with men. These men identified well with the pastors, but may not have been as good at connecting with the laypersons leading the programs of the churches.

The women, who were often seminary trained in Christian education, were exceptional at working with rural and small town churches. They served an important niche.

In 1963, after a national conference on associationalism in Gulf

Shores, Alabama, the title for the leader of Baptist associations became an exercise in alphabet soup. We had DOM standing for directors of missions all the way to the name today that was decided in national negotiations, but is still struggling for acceptance: AMS, which stands for associational mission strategist.

Along the way, the name executive director or something similar was used in larger urban areas. This name was better understood when these directors related to outside organizations or were involved in dealing with legal and other associational issues.

I used this title myself during recent years when serving as director of an association.

It made things simpler when dealing with the uninformed secular world, real estate transactions, government filings and relationships with businesses.

Whatever title, the staff leader of the association must be clearly identified as an advocate for the con-

gregations. A deep commitment is essential for helping congregations fulfill the Great Commission.

What title does your association use and why?

IF YOUR ASSOCIATION HAS A STORY TO TELL, EMAIL GEORGE BULLARD AT BULLARDJOURNAL@GMAIL.COM.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Bullard spent 45 years in denominational ministry. He served on the staff of three associations, was a key staff person working with associations in two state conventions and served on the association missions division staff of the former Home Mission Board of the SBC. He retired in June 2022

as director of Columbia Metro Baptist Association in South Carolina. He has led strategic planning processes in more than 100 associations and has written extensively in this area. Bullard now serves as a strategic thinking mentor for Christian leaders through his ForthTelling Innovation ministry.

Firm foundation

By Lonnie Wilkey
Baptist and Reflector

‘Coaching has to be about Christ,’ says Carson-Newman coach

As a high school player in Union, South Carolina, Mike Clowney had never heard of Ken Sparks or Carson-Newman College (now University).

He will never forget his first conversation with legendary coach Ken Sparks who ended his career in 2016 with an overall college coaching record of 338–99–2, making him one of the college coaches with the most wins all-time.

“He sat down and talked to me and my mom, and I realized there was something different about him. Though the conversation included football, we really talked about everything,” Clowney recalled. “We talked about life, and he asked about my relationship with Christ.”

Clowney took a recruiting visit to Carson-Newman in Jefferson City, Tennessee, where he discovered Christ was as important to the coaching staff as football. He received his first Bible on that trip.

Clowney accepted the scholarship offer from Coach Sparks and would become an All-American football player. Though his playing career ended in 1996, he still holds several school records.

Establishing relationship

The relationship he established with Jesus during those early years at Carson-Newman is what drives Clowney in his third season as head football coach at Carson-Newman.

He laughs that he used to get frustrated as a freshman because “we talked more about Christ than football.” Clowney acknowledges it was only later in life that he began to understand “all the things it takes to be successful in football are the exact same things it takes to be successful in life.”



Photo courtesy of Baptist and Reflector

Mike Clowney is the head football coach for Carson-Newman University. “It is our job as coaches ... to provide guys with that experience so that when they get put in a tough spot, they have something to fall back on — Jesus Christ,” he says.

“I’m just grateful for [Sparks] as a coach from a player standpoint. [He was] willing to coach in a fashion that helps players connect the dots,” he said. “You don’t always connect them while you are playing, but when life starts to hit, we normally fall back on the things that we’ve experienced.”

“It is our job as coaches, especially here (at Carson-Newman) to provide guys with that experience so that when they get put in a tough spot, they have something to fall back on — Jesus Christ.”

Clowney felt called to coach while still a student at Carson-Newman. He majored in education. After earning his degree, he began his coaching career at Carson-Newman as a graduate assistant and earned his

master’s degree in education.

He then worked as an assistant high school coach in South Carolina before returning to Carson-Newman to coach in 2004–05.

He was named head coach and athletic director of Emerald High School in Greenwood, South

Carolina, and he served there for three years before returning to Carson-Newman in 2009.

He was again an assistant until he was named

head coach in 2020.

Clowney admitted he took a leap of faith when he returned to Carson-Newman in 2009. He took a large cut in pay to come back, but ultimately he says he felt there was so much more he could still learn from Coach Sparks.

About four years after Clowney’s final return to Carson-Newman, Sparks was diagnosed with prostate cancer, so Clowney assumed more responsibility. Still, he had no desire to be a head coach again, he said.

Learning offense

When Sparks stepped down in 2016, he was replaced by Mike Turner, another longtime assistant who spent four decades at the school. Turner coached three years before stepping down at the close of the 2019 season.

Clowney remained with Turner, coaching running backs to get more familiar with the offensive side of the ball and serving as associate head coach.

After being named head coach, Clowney knew he would have to put his own stamp on the program.

“I’m not a carbon copy, but a lot of what he taught is etched into me,” Clowney said.

The COVID-19 pandemic made his job more difficult. He lost 19 seniors from the 2019 team and had just completed his recruiting class when the pandemic hit. Carson-Newman had to cancel spring practice and only played one game (a win) in 2020. Clowney basically had a new, young team in 2021 and only recorded one win.

The 2022 version of the team had a winning season (6–5), the coach said. Clowney is resolute in “keeping Christ as the foundation” and reaching “kids where they are.”

Clowney also affirmed “coaching has to be about Christ. I coach because I want to, and because I am called to coach. If we are going to coach them, then we need to love them. We need to care about them, and we need to coach them in a fashion that’s going to help them grow.”

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Walk Through Bethlehem

By Jane Rodgers
Southern Baptist Texan

Rural church's Christmas event attracts visitors from across nation

One woman's vision has resulted in a small East Texas church reaching thousands with the message of Christ.

Wayne Frazier had only been pastor of Montalba Baptist Church in Palestine, Texas, a few years when the late Carolyn Bledsoe, a longtime member, made an unexpected request. Bledsoe's husband, Charles, chaired the board of deacons.

"I had a dream that we turned our little property here into Bethlehem," Bledsoe told Frazier.

That vision became a reality, resulting in gospel presentations to more than 10,000 people since 2008 through an annual Christmas event, A Walk Through Bethlehem, that continues to attract visitors from across the state and nation.

Envisioning the Holy Land

The property to which Bledsoe referred was a corner tract of 10 acres, mostly pastureland, beside the main church building. The house that once stood on the property had long been moved. All that remained was the black-topped driveway leading into a pecan grove.

Where most saw an empty lot, Bledsoe envisioned the Holy Land. It would take nearly the entire congregation of 40–50 in the unincorporated Anderson County community of fewer than 1,000 to pull it off, but they were fully committed from the beginning, Frazier said.

Bledsoe directed the first three years of the event before turning over the reins to volunteer Susan Shelton.

Held Friday to Sunday during the second weekend of December, the walk is a literal walk, although

it starts with an old-fashioned hayride.

Guests park at the church and enter the fellowship hall, where they enjoy cookies and cocoa and receive goodie bags filled with items such as gospel tracts, a Christmas ornament and Christmas crafts for children — all with an emphasis on the nativity.

Church volunteers greet guests and help load each group of 20–25 on a hay trailer.

"Then we take them through the 'time tunnel,'" Frazier said, describing it as an archway of lights.

The hayride takes guests past shepherds watching sheep and stops at the Bethlehem city gates, where passengers disembark and are led by a costumed guide through an East Texas version of

the streets of the town of Jesus' birth.

Shops and attractions change from year to year.

All actors stay in character inside the town walls. Children are apt to receive a silver coin from a money changer.

Guests may view a local potter's wares or pass a shop selling doves for sacrifice. Actual sheep, goats and donkeys provide further realism.

The walk culminates with a stop before the stable, where guests sit in a small amphitheater and view the nativity.

Either Frazier or his son Judson, pastor of First Baptist Church Fruitvale, Texas, will give a brief message about the real meaning of Christmas. They always present the

gospel during the message.

Since Wayne and his wife, Jennifer, have 10 children, some years a Frazier baby portrayed the baby Jesus.

But with December weather often unpredictable, the church purchased a lifelike doll for the nativity, Shelton said.

With 500–700 visitors per year, the event is a massive outreach for a small congregation.

Heart of the walk

Sharing the gospel is the heart of the walk, Frazier said.

"Our church hasn't grown a lot physically, but its outreach has grown exponentially," he said, explaining that Montalba Baptist's location in a primarily retirement-aged community with no school nearby precludes some traditional outreaches.

Still, Montalba Baptist's congregation desires to be Kingdom-focused. The walk provides an opportunity to do just that, as does the church's annual Fourth of July community picnic and fireworks show.

Both events are offered free of charge to attendees.

"We try to do all we can," Frazier said. "We want to invest in people so that when they go back to Fairfield, Crockett, Dallas or wherever, they impact their communities."

The day before the 2021 walk opened, Carolyn Bledsoe was laid to rest in South Texas. Frazier preached the funeral service and rushed back to Montalba in time for the first guests.

He knew "Miss Carolyn" would have wanted it no other way.

The 2022 Walk through Bethlehem is scheduled for Dec. 9–11 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

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BAPTISTS, VISIT
TEXANONLINE.NET.



Photo courtesy of the Southern Baptist Texan

Montalba Baptist Church in Palestine, Texas, has presented the gospel to more than 10,000 people since 2008 through an annual Christmas event — A Walk Through Bethlehem — that continues to attract visitors from across the state and nation.

Explore the Bible

LESSONS



By Darryl Wood

Wood is a hospice chaplain and interim pastor who retired from full-time ministry in 2017.

FOR DECEMBER 11

COME AND SEE John 1:40–51

What is the standard answer when coaches are asked how they choose a starting lineup? “We choose players that give us the best chance to win.” Did Jesus select the best men available to comprise the 12 disciples? He chose willing people. The four listed here exemplify the type of individuals Jesus desired as followers.

Andrew and Peter (40–42)

John the Baptist garnered a large following, including some outside his Judean base. When he saw Jesus, John affirmed Jesus as the Lamb of God. Andrew and an unnamed person heard John’s statement. The two spent an evening with Jesus and left convinced.

Andrew marched into discipleship. He first tracked down his brother Simon without hesitation. Simon heard Andrew’s claim that he had encountered the promised Messiah.

Andrew modeled discipleship. He brought Simon to Jesus, who gave Simon a new name: Cephas (Peter), meaning rock. Jesus peered into Peter’s heart to see who he could be, not who he was. Jesus invested in a flawed Peter and led him to his full potential as a rock-solid disciple. Discipleship is a work in progress. Do you find your identity in a job, the place you live, the people you know, or Jesus?

Philip (43–46)

The day after His experience with Peter, Jesus departed Judea for Galilee. He found Philip and invited him to follow. Philip located Nathanael to relay news about Jesus. Like Andrew, Philip

introduced another to Jesus. Philip explained to Nathanael he had discovered the One foreseen by Moses and the prophets. He appeared as Jesus, the son of Joseph.

Philip identified Jesus’ city of origin, Nazareth. Nathanael from nearby Cana knew the insignificant town of Nazareth and observed no good thing came from there. Philip urged Nathanael to come and see. Disciples bring folks to Jesus, and He takes it from there. Disciples don’t redeem the lost. Jesus does.

Nathanael (47–51)

Nathanael accompanied Philip. At first sight, Jesus read Nathanael’s transparent character. Nathanael was confounded and demanded Jesus disclose how He knew him. Jesus revealed He had spotted Nathanael beneath a shady fig tree. Some used such places to study the law.

The explanation led Nathanael to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. The term identified Him as divine. Jesus communicated to Nathanael how discipleship opens a window to experience greater things.

Jesus connected the disciples’ future to Jacob’s dream about a ladder (Gen. 28:12–16). An open heaven with angels climbing up and down depicted God providing access from earth to heaven and back through Jesus. His preferred self-designation, Son of Man, conveyed Jesus’ human status. God makes Himself reachable. Do you access His support regularly?

Disciples follow Jesus in faith and truth. Disciples are responsible to bring others to Him and give Him the opportunity to make them disciples.

FOR DECEMBER 18

I WILL RAISE John 2:11–23

Do you remember the days prior to autofocus cameras? The photographer twisted the lens this way and that until the picture became clear.

Jesus used signs, daily living, verbal teaching and prophecy to sharpen the disciples’ focus on Him and His purpose. You can use this passage to sharpen your focus on Jesus.

Glory Shown (11–12)

John put Jesus’ signs front and center. In the first sign, He turned water into wine at a wedding. The sign contrasted the old way of Judaism with the new way of salvation through Jesus. The Jews were selective in who they accepted. Jesus reaches out to all.

John explained the purpose of all Jesus’ signs as the revelation of His glory. This revelation disclosed His redemptive love. The miraculous acts conveyed deep spiritual meanings.

The Cana sign showed God’s power at work as the divine Jesus. The disciples had believed and followed Jesus, and this sign took their belief a step further. Discipleship is a process of growing daily in faith. As the disciples walked with Jesus, they drew closer to Him.

Worship Expected (13–17)

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem as people prepared for Passover, which commemorated God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The city was full. Out of towners needed a way to exchange currency for temple coinage. They also purchased animals for sacrifice.

A marketplace where costs were known to be inflated was set up inside the temple’s court of the Gentiles. Jesus took issue with where and how those in the marketplace

did business. Their dishonest practices amounted to theft, and the location left Gentiles nowhere to worship. Only Jews were permitted in the inner courts.

Jesus overturned the money tables and drove animals outside. He restored the temple as a place of worship. He condemned turning His Father’s house into a marketplace. The disciples saw Jesus protect the temple’s purpose as He challenged the authorities who sanctioned the flea market atmosphere. They recalled the psalmist’s zeal for the temple (Ps. 69:9).

Sign Remembered (18–23)

The people knew the priests were responsible for the temple. Jesus usurped their authority. Jewish hardliners insisted on a sign to show His right to do this. He gave one: Demolish the temple, and He would raise it in three days. They failed to understand the sign.

Jesus and the questioners operated on different wavelengths. He referenced the temple of His body, while they applied His words literally. How could He rebuild in three days a structure that required 46 years to construct?

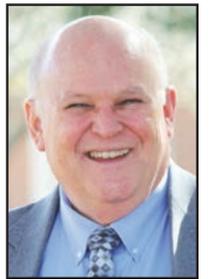
His death and resurrection flew below their radar. It was always on His. Sadly, the inquisitors missed an opportunity. Jesus offered them an option to the broken Jewish system and proposed a new relationship with God centered on faith and love.

At His resurrection, Jesus’ words became another building block in the disciples’ faith journey, and their commitment level advanced. Others saw Jesus’ signs and believed, but He saw through their superficial faith that carried no commitment.

What Jesus said and did brought reverence for God. The twists and turns of Jesus’ life always served to sharpen the focus on God.

Bible Studies for Life

LESSONS



By Mark Rathel

Rathel is a professor at the Baptist College of Florida in Graceville, Florida.

FOR DECEMBER 11

SECURITY IN PLACE OF FEAR Romans 8:28–39

We live in an era in which many people feel insecure. The causes of insecurity are numerous: fear of losing a job, fear of the future, fear of life and fear of death. The most debilitating fear is a fear of separation from God. Romans 8:28–39 provides three assurances that enable believers to be more than conquerors over our fears.

God works in all things for our good. (28–30)

Paul begins this passage by setting forth a truth all Christians know or should know: All things work together for the good. Paul did not claim everything that happens to us is good. Nor did he claim all things work together for all people. Paul reminds believers God is working in the lives of His people, namely Christians — people who love Him and are called to His purpose.

What is the purpose for which God works in our life through all things? God works in the life of a believer so the believer may be conformed to the image of His Son. God's purpose is that Christians are to become more like Christ.

Paul provided a list of God's activities in a believer's life. God predestines us, calls us to salvation through the Spirit, justifies us before His eyes (meaning God the Judge declares us not guilty because our penalty was paid by Christ) and glorifies us, a reference to our glorified bodies in a place of glory in heaven. The rich promises set forth in these verses apply only to believers.

Old-time believers referred to verse 30 as a golden chain that cannot be broken. God began

a good work in believers at the point of their salvation; God will bring His work in believers to completion when they enjoy an eternal relationship with Him.

No one can condemn us before God. (31–34)

Paul does not state we are not worthy of condemnation. Since God is for us, no one can be against us, even the accuser Satan. God did not spare His own Son. Rather, God gave up His Son for all of us in the sense that He handed Jesus over to the Jewish and Roman leaders to die.

Since Christ died on our behalf to meet our greatest needs, Paul asked a rhetorical question: Will He not give believers more?

Paul asked a series of rhetorical questions: Who is the one who condemns? No one, not even Satan the accuser, can condemn a believer. Why? Because Jesus died, rose from the dead to be in the presence of God and presently intercedes for believers in prayer. Who can separate us from the love of Christ? No one can.

Nothing can separate us from God's love. (35–39)

Paul follows up his claim that no one can condemn us with a claim that life experiences cannot separate us from the love of Christ. Affliction, defined as an oppressive state of physical, mental, social or economic adversity, cannot separate a believer from the love of Christ. Oppressive conditions cannot separate us. Nor can the physical circumstances of life such as hunger, nakedness, insufficient clothing or even death by sword — perhaps in persecution — separate a believer from the love of Christ.

FOR DECEMBER 18

LOVE IN PLACE OF FEAR 1 John 3:13–18; 4:14–18

Some people have nicknamed John the Apostle of Love. The concept of love occurs many times in his writings.

The reality of God's love for believers gives us confidence because we know our Father desires and purposes the best for us. Therefore, as John stated in the last verse for this study, "Perfect love casts out fear."

We can know and experience love because of Christ. (3:13–18)

As followers of Christ, we should not expect unbelievers to appreciate us.

In fact, John used strong language. "Do not be surprised" is an ongoing command rather than mere advice. Because Christians follow Christ, the world will hate us. Yet, while the world hates us, Christians should love fellow Christians. For John there was no middle ground.

The option within the Christian family is either love or hate. One who identifies as a Christian but does not love remains continually in a state of spiritual death.

Such an unloving person claiming to be a believer is a follower of Cain rather than Christ (1 John 3:11–12).

Throughout 1 John, the apostle uses the language "we know" to set forth reasons for Christian assurance.

For John, love and life go together and cannot be separated. John clearly described love as an action rather than an emotion.

As followers of the One who laid down His life for our benefit, we should be willing to sacrifice our lives for fellow believers. Laying down our lives for Christian brothers and sisters does not necessitate

death. Meeting needs through action and truth also demonstrates love.

God's love is in us because God remains in us. (4:14–16)

Love means giving. God has given us His Spirit (1 John 4:13), but He has also given or sent His Son as the world's Savior.

The death of Christ on our behalf is the greatest evidence of God's love.

John emphasized the mutual relationship of love between God and a believer.

The term translated "remains" in this passage is the same term and concept of the language of remaining or abiding in John 15. By use of this language, John described an intimate, ongoing and growing relationship.

God's love gives us confidence and dispels our fear. (4:17–18)

In this brief unit, the apostle highlighted key terms: fear and confidence.

A literal translation of the first phrase in v. 18 states, "fear not in the love."

John does not communicate that fear in general is not connected to love.

Rather, the apostle referred to a specific love not associated with fear, namely the love expressed through the cross of Jesus.

Because of the mutuality of the love of God for us and the continually abiding love of God remaining in us, believers have confidence in the day of judgment when Christ returns.

Because Christians experience God's love, we do not fear because love has driven out the fear of punishment.

A person who does fear has not experienced the reality of God's love.

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Tracy Riggs
The Baptist Paper

Anthony Evans shares mental health journey in new book

Playing injured. That's how former professional football player and Christian author and speaker Anthony Evans describes living with major depression and anxiety, a personal journey he shares in his newly released book, "When Faith Meets Therapy."

In the introduction to the book, Evans, son of pastor, speaker and author Tony Evans, writes, "I began a long, downward spiral into functional depression and anxiety."

He soon realized what he was taught in church about mental health wasn't quite enough to deal with his issues, so he decided to seek help.

After working with Stacy Kaiser — a nationally known licensed psychotherapist — Evans decided to share his experience and the practical solutions she taught him.

Practical solutions

Therapy helped his faith, showing him practical solutions for difficult areas, he said, and he wanted to share his experience in order to help others in the same situation.

"'Be anxious for nothing.' For some of us reading that, we need tools to not be anxious," Evans said.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health was a widespread issue. Since then, with the



ANTHONY EVANS

Photo courtesy of Anthony Evans

impact of financial and social complications, mental health struggles have only increased.

However, many Christians are hesitant to seek help because they feel it suggests something negative about their faith.

"There seems to be this stigma about therapy in some circles," Kaiser said. "Our intention is to try to break that stigma and tell people that you really can find a counselor who can give space for your faith and anything else that's important to you, while also finding practical tools to improve your life and overall happiness."

And, she added, a person doesn't have to tell anyone they're seeking counseling.

When Evans first realized he needed help, he was one of those hesitant to seek therapy.

"I just had to get to the point where it was like, OK ... what others think about you has gotten you

to the point where you're functional, but your heart is heavy constantly, and you can barely handle yourself anymore because you're worried about what others think," Evans reflected. "So, how about

you try a new pathway, because that's not working."

Another barrier to seeking therapy can be shame from feeling like a Christian should have it all together, Evans said.

"Shame sabotages grace," he declared. "So allowing certain scenarios that make you feel very, very shameful will sabotage grace and stop you in your tracks."

"There is no shame in admitting you need help. There is no shame in the blind man saying, 'I can't see Jesus. Can you do a miracle?' There was no shame with the woman with the issue of blood reaching out and touching Jesus — there was no shame with that."

Believers too often let their wor-

ries about what other people will think of them get in the way of self-care, Kaiser said.

"People get caught up in, 'Oh, I'm supposed to pray it away' or 'Oh, my family will judge me,'" Kaiser said, and as a result, "they don't attend to meeting their needs."

That's how Evans initially responded to his depression and anxiety. He continued working in public, sharing the hope of Jesus, even while he felt he was dying inside.

"There are athletes that can tape up an ankle and get out on the courts to play," Evans said. "Eventually I [realized] that there would be a larger injury if I kept playing injured. If I kept playing and patchworking my issues, there was going to be a major breakdown."

In hindsight, Evans said he wishes he had gone to therapy earlier and added its helpful tools to his faith toolbox.

That's one reason each chapter of the book ends with a reflection prompt from Kaiser. The prompt gives the reader something to think about or use as a starting point for journaling.

The book is "not just story time," Evans said.

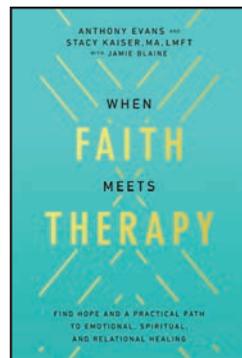
'Wise counsel'

To those who say therapy has no role in the church, Evans offers a different perspective. Scripture addresses seeking wise counsel and keeping good company, he said.

"I don't think there's any rule against finding practical help from somebody who's been trained the way the mind works and acknowledges faith to figure out a way to work that out. ... I have seen God multiply the efforts that I have made in therapy by adding practical tools to His word."

EDITOR'S NOTE

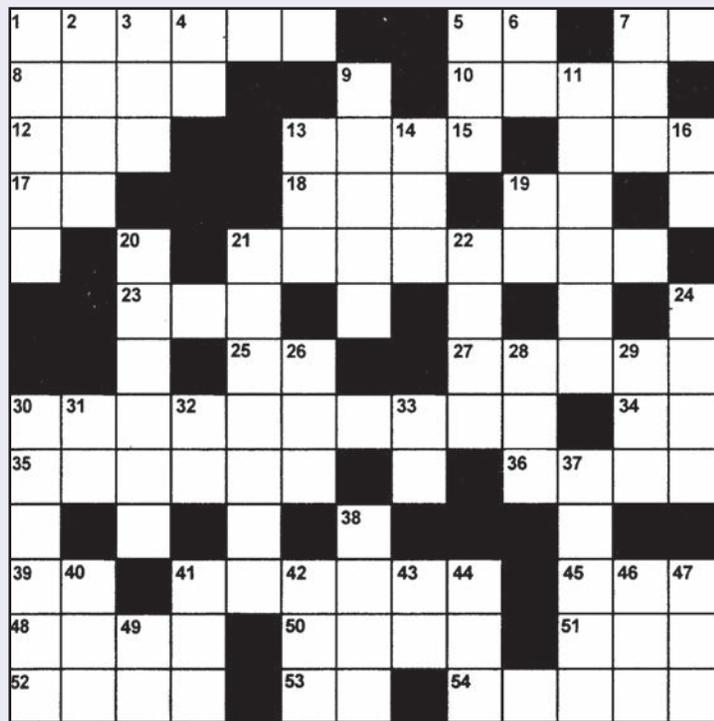
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CHRISTIAN crossword

ACROSS

1. Hannah's son.
(1 Sam. 1:20)
5. For ___ persecuted they the prophets.
(Matt. 5:12)
7. Spirit of the Lord came up__ David.
(1 Sam. 16:13)
8. John also was baptizing in A___ near to Salim.
(John 3:23)
10. The promise is ... to all that are ___ off.
(Acts 2:39)
12. An explosive.
13. The ___ of God.
(Ps. 46:4)
17. Whose Son is ___?
(Matt. 22:42)
18. How long is it ___ since this came unto him?
(Mark 9:21)
19. Either/___.
21. Hated.
23. A little bear.
25. ___ it not written?
(Mark 11:17)
27. I have never ___ any thing that is common.
(Acts 10:14)
30. That they might have life ... more ___.
(John 10:10)
34. To be a certain place.
35. The director ___ the play.
36. A carnivore ___ meat.
39. Printer's measure.
41. Call for the elders of the ___.
(James 5:14)
45. A torn-up piece of material.
48. The Thin Man's wife.
(Nick and ___)
50. In ___ was there a voice heard.
(Matt. 2:18)
51. Poetic for "before."
52. Walked.



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24. Industrious insects.
26. He was ___ at that saying.
(Mark 10:22)
28. Yes. (nautical)
29. Sat down to ___ and to drink.
(Ex. 32:6)
30. Slight variation in speech patterns.
31. Sheep's sound.
32. New Testament. (abbr.)
33. ___ have and ___ hold.
37. ___ with thine adversary quickly.
(Matt. 5:25)
38. Type of train.
40. Neither/___.
41. A heel.
42. Bezaleel the son of ___.
(Ex. 38:22)
43. 900 in Roman numerals.
44. A witch is an old ___.
46. He is, they ___.
47. And so ___ them up out of the land.
(Ex. 1:10)
49. Rosemary. (nickname)
53. I am (contraction).
54. ___ them that love us in the faith.
(Titus 3:15)

DOWN

1. Belonging to Adam's son.
2. English princess.
3. A witty saying.
4. United Nations. (abbr.)
5. Take ye no thought ... what ye shall ___.
(Luke 12:11)
6. A man ___ God.
7. Metal from mining.
9. He that is ___ days old.
(Gen. 17:12)
11. To capture a lawbreaker.
13. A yellow car in NYC.
14. Also.
16. Authority to ___ these things.
(Mark 11:28)
19. Firstlings of thy herds ___ of thy flock.
(Deut. 12:17)
20. ___ not a servant unto his master.
(Prov. 30:10)
21. Now ___ faith, hope, charity.
(1 Cor. 13:13)
22. A spool of film.

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

WORD search

- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| BLESSED | JUDAH |
| BRANCH | LAMB |
| CHRIST | MANGER |
| COLT | MERCY |
| COMING | MESSIAH |
| DAVID | MIGHTY GOD |
| DESPISED | NO END |
| DONKEY | PEACE |
| EPHRATHAH | PIERCED |
| EVERLASTING | REJECTED |
| FATHER | RULER |
| FIRSTBORN | SIGN |
| GOVERNMENT | SON OF GOD |
| GREAT DAY | SORROWS |
| HUMBLE | SPIRIT |
| IMMANUEL | STAR |
| JERUSALEM | THRONE |
| JESUS | VISIONS |
| JOSEPH | ZEAL |

Y K Y N E V E R L A S T I N G H
 B R Y R I M M A N U E L V Q A D
 L J D O G Y T H G I M L M H R J
 E O X B F R D T R L Z V T F E T
 S S K T H R E M Z M A A J S H D
 S E G S N A M A A E R M U T E R
 E P O R G M I N T H A S B T A C
 D H V I I W G S P D G L C T M C
 K J E F S E S E S L A E S T O T
 K C R V R D R W V E J Y I L H D
 S O N O F G O D O E M R T R S E
 H D M R R V D D R R I R O D N C
 E C E N Q I J O B P R N X N O R
 C T N L V R M N S P E O G E I E
 A Q T A M E B K J Z F L S O S I
 E C D K R K N E B C T A B N I P
 P B H C B B T Y K D F R T M V P
 R T Y R T H M G N I M O C H U F
 L B N T I D E S P I S E D K E H
 M M E L A S U R E J J U D A H R
 M L F X F F T L D R E L U R Y N

"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not."



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