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'A designer society'

More Americans designing a make-your-own religion to fit personal preferences

If World War II-era warbler Kate Smith sang today, then her anthem could be "Gods Bless America."

That's one of the key findings in newly released research that reveals America's drift from clearly defined religious denominations to faiths cut to fit personal preferences.

The folks who make up God as they go are side by side with self-proclaimed believers who claim the Christian label but shed their ties to traditional beliefs and practices. Religion statistics expert George Barna said, with a wry hint of exaggeration, America is headed for "310 million people with 310 million religions."

"We are a designer society. We want everything customized to our personal needs — our clothing, our food, our education," he said. Now it's our religion.

Barna's new book on U.S. Christians, "Futurecast," tracks changes from 1991 to 2011, in annual national surveys of 1,000 to 1,600 U.S. adults. All the major trend lines of religious belief and behavior he measured ran downward — except two:

► More people claim they have accepted Jesus as their Savior and expect to go to heaven.

► And more say they haven't been to church in the past six months except for special occasions such as weddings or funerals. In 1991, 24 percent were "unchurched." Today it's 37 percent. Barna blames pastors for those oddly contradictory findings.

Everyone hears, "Jesus is the answer. Embrace Him. Say this little Sinner's Prayer and keep coming back. It doesn't work. People end up bored, burned out and empty," he said. "They look at church and wonder, 'Jesus died for this?'"

The consequence, Barna said, is that for every subgroup of religion, race,

gender, age and region of the country, the important markers of religious connection are fracturing.

When he measured people by their belief in seven essential doctrines, defined by the National Association of Evangelicals' statement of faith, only 7 percent of those surveyed qualified.

"People say, 'I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want,'" he lamented.

"People say, 'I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want.'"

George Barna
Religion statistics expert

Southern Baptist-affiliated LifeWay Research reinforces those findings: A new survey of 900 U.S. Protestant pastors finds 62 percent predict the importance of being identified with a denomination will diminish over the next 10 years.

Exactly, said Carol Christoffel, of Zion, Ill. She drifted through a few mainline Protestant denominations in her youth, found a home in the peace and unity message of the Baha'i tradition for several years and then was drawn deeply into Native American traditional healing practices.

Yet she also still calls herself Christian.

"I'm a kind of bridge person between cultures. I agree with the teachings of Jesus and ... I know many Christians like me who keep the Bible's social teachings and who care for the earth and for each other," Christoffel said. "I support people who do good wherever they are."

Hopscotch spirituality

And it's not only Christians sampling hopscotch spirituality. The Jewish magazine *Moment* has an "Ask the Rabbis" feature that consults 14 variations of Judaism "and there are many," said Editor and Publisher Nadine Epstein.

"The September edition of *Moment* asks, 'Can there be Judaism without God?' And most say yes. It's incredibly exciting. We live in an era where you pick and choose the part of the religion that makes sense to you. And you can connect through culture and history in a meaningful way without necessarily religiously practicing," Epstein said.

Sociologist Robert Bellah first saw this phenomenon emerging in the 1980s.

He sees two sides to the one-person- (See 'Connections,' page 11)

Alabama pastors not surprised by findings but concerned

Lawrence H. Phipps said he's surprised it's taken this long to catch up with us.

"Jesus said, 'Follow me.' He did not tell us to simply pray a prayer. He did not tell us to make decisions, but disciples," said Phipps, pastor of Vaughn Forest Baptist Church, Montgomery.

He said it's "pseudo-following" that has pushed Barna poll results (see story, this page) to show fewer people holding to traditional Christian beliefs but more saying they have accepted Jesus and expect to go to heaven.

"If we are not careful, we, the Church, can blur the lines. In our quest for changing methodologies to be more relevant, we cannot change the message," Phipps said.

Roger Willmore, pastor of Deerfoot Baptist Church, Trussville, said the Church's gradual acceptance of false doctrines is "the most dangerous issue facing the Church today."

"The claims of Christ upon us are serious," he said. "His claims call for death to self and sacrifice and separation from the world," said Willmore, who has taught pastors school courses on confronting cultural Christianity and is in the process of writing a book on the topic.

"Today it seems that we want to be Christian but we want our own brand of Christianity. It seems to me that many Christians adjust the teachings of Christ to make them more comfortable, acceptable and palatable."

The result, he said, is false doctrine and superficial Christianity, not to mention an outright disregard for the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Gary Hardin, pastor of Enon

Grove Baptist Church, Cedar Bluff, agreed.

"Alarming I meet a growing number of church people who believe that if you are a good person, you will go to heaven, regardless of whether you trust Jesus as Savior," Hardin said.

And more and more people are bending the Bible's teachings to fit their preferences, he said.

"We have more cohabitation couples attending on Sunday mornings than I've seen in almost 40 years of ministry. When you question them about living together, they readily admit they know their behavior is against Bible teaching, but they do it anyway," Hardin said. "We are losing today our commitment to the Bible as our authority for moral values."

But even though the decline is visible, the idea of people making their own gods is nothing new, said Richard L. Richie, pastor of Flint Baptist Church, Decatur.

"The concept of multiple individual religions is really nothing new. People have been trying to make sense of and define this world through the establishment of thousands of manmade gods, beliefs, religions and religious practices from the very beginning of time," he said. "Unfortunately, it all started with the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden."

Phipps agreed.

"I was not surprised by Barna's research," he said. "People have been trying to make God in their own image since creation. He does not need us for salvation. The focus is Jesus, but the self-centered want it to be them. To that end they make their own 'religion.'" (TAB)

"Today it seems that we want to be Christian but we want our own brand of Christianity."

Pastor Roger Willmore
Deerfoot Baptist Church,
Trussville

COMMENT

In the Meantime, Love

Last October, the rains did not come. What was supposed to be a rainy season to regenerate the pastureland, support new crops and provide needed water for the people turned into a second consecutive year of drought. In fact, the October–December rainy season was one of the driest ever.

Livestock — the symbol of wealth for most families in the Horn of Africa — began to deteriorate. Marginal crops, withered pastureland and dry water holes exacerbated what is always a challenging time for the area's people. But they lived in hope for relief when the rains returned in March.

But the rains did not return this March. What rain did come was late and erratic. It totaled only 30 percent of the last 15-year average. Cattle and sheep have died. Even camels have died. In localized areas, up to 60 percent of livestock have perished. Authorities say it is the worst drought to hit the region in 60 years.

A map of the Horn of Africa shows large areas of Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia coded crisis colors by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. More than 12 million people face a humanitarian emergency that is only compounded by political turmoil in parts of Somalia, where al-Shabab, an Islamist military organization, ravages what help the world offers.

Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, a four-day walk from the Somali border, shelters more than 400,000 people although it was built to house 90,000. More than 1,000 new refugees arrive each day. In Ethiopia, the Dollo Ado refugee camps care for about 120,000 people with hundreds more arriving daily. It is estimated that one-quarter of Somalia's population of 7.5 million is now displaced.

Authorities say up to 50 percent of children arriving at the refugee camps are acutely malnourished. The death rate for children under age 5 is nearly six times the normal rate. Officials predict that 800,000 children will die of malnutrition across the region this year.

Southern Baptists are in the area working with the Red Cross, UNICEF and many other humanitarian organizations to provide help to these suffering souls. Southern Baptists, through Baptist Global Response (BGR) — the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) relief arm, support two feeding sites in the Horn of Africa. A total of \$190,000 has been allocated for use in northern Kenya and southern Sudan. Leaders would like to open a third feeding site but funds are low. Only enough funds to operate existing hunger relief projects in various parts of the globe for six months are available and that does not include funds for the famine in the Horn of Africa, according to news releases from BGR.

Jeff Palmer, executive director of BGR, said, "Our Southern Baptist avenue of seeing the lost, last and least be helped both physically and spiritually is about to dry up."



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

Palmer was referring to the World Hunger Fund offering, which Southern Baptists will collect in October as churches observe World Hunger Sunday on Oct. 9. He said in 2010, Southern Baptists gave the lowest donations to the offering in 20 years. Actual gifts totaled \$4.3 million, which was only 40 percent of what Southern Baptists gave a decade ago, according to SBC officials.

How do we respond?

Simply giving money will not solve the long-term environmental and social problems prevalent in the Horn of Africa. One Southern Baptist representative serving in the region estimated that it could take a decade to solve the problems. Another declared, "It's a desperate part of the world — there needs to be something done. There needs to be a systematic answer." And there does. More than emergency feeding programs are needed.

But in the meantime, while these systematic issues are being addressed, how do Southern Baptists respond to the area's starving people?

One Southern Baptist representative said, "Southern Baptists are sharing the love of Christ with the hurting Somali people. That love is currently manifesting itself in the form of funding for food relief and medical aid, but it represents a deeper love — and may be opening doors for the message of God's love to be widely proclaimed in this part of the world."

Because the Cooperative Program helps provide a worldwide network of Southern Baptist representatives, all of the funds donated to the World Hunger Fund offering go directly to hunger relief projects.

Eighty percent of gifts to the offering go to international relief projects and 20 percent to domestic relief projects. International projects are directed by the International Mission Board. Domestic projects are channeled through the North American Mission Board (NAMB).

When the April 27 tornadoes struck Alabama, NAMB appropriated about \$40,000 to help with hunger projects, and more funding for Alabama hunger relief efforts are in the pipeline, according to state Baptist leaders. In 2010, Alabama Baptists also received about

\$60,000 for hunger-related programs in the state.

According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report released in early September, Alabama is fourth in the nation with 17.3 percent of the population living with "food insecurity, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals because of too little money for food or being hungry because of too little money for food." The national average is 14.5 percent. Alabama is third in the nation (7 percent) in the percentage of population going hungry or missing meals because they do not have food.

Domestic projects, whether to help feed tornado survivors or pay for a church-run feeding program in Los Angeles' Skid Row or breakfast program in Vermont, are channeled through Southern Baptist workers, and every dollar is spent on hunger relief.

Today world leaders wrestled with how to find the estimated \$2.5 billion it will take to respond to the famine in the Horn of Africa. National leaders look for ways to turn around an economy that has sent more and more Americans into financial distress. In the meantime, Southern Baptists are about demonstrating God's love by feeding the hungry just as His Word instructs.

The World Hunger Fund offering needs your support. Please pray about what God would have you and your church to do. More information about the offering is available through the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission at <http://erlc.com>.



"If ye continue in my word, then ... ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32).

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Someone You Should Know

By Julie Payne, Correspondent, TAB

Susan Loftin

Mexia Baptist Church
Bethlehem Baptist Association

FAVORITE BIBLE VERSES: Proverbs 3:5-6

FAVORITE HYMN: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

HOBBIES: Researching genealogy, participating in the Monroeville Music Club and running "The Loft" Bed and Breakfast in Mexia

FAMILY STATUS: Married to Billy for 49 years; two children, Brett and Holly; two granddaughters; and two stepgrandchildren



LOFTIN

Susan Loftin has played piano/organ at Mexia Baptist Church since 1964. Before that, her mother, Arvie Lee Thompson Purvis, was the pianist for approximately 40 years. Their combined service totals 87

of the 100 years Mexia Baptist will celebrate this year. Loftin also taught children's Sunday School and has served as church clerk for about 12 years.

Q: How did you come to know the Lord?

A: I was drawn by the Holy Spirit at a very young age to accept Jesus, joined the church and was baptized, but I didn't understand at the time what it meant to really trust in Jesus. Over the years, I knew I needed to be sure of my salvation, so I reaffirmed it as a young adult by trusting and receiving Him as my Lord and Savior.

Q: What led you to serve in the church's music ministry?

A: It was through taking music lessons as a child. Then when my mother retired [as church pianist] ... I played the piano until 1966, and then when we got the new organ, I became organist and I've played ever since.

Q: What do you personally get from serving in ministry?

A: It's the greatest blessing in the world to be able to serve the Lord and serve the church in that capacity.

Q: How have your family members supported your ministry?

A: They've been behind me 100 percent. My husband, Billy, has been very supportive.

Q: How do you see yourself involved in ministry in the future?

A: God has blessed me so greatly in my music ministry, and I hope I can continue in my service for Him and the congregation for many years to come.

Three Baptist Health System hospitals named among nation's top performing hospitals

On Sept. 14, three Baptist Health System (BHS) hospitals were named among the nation's best in quality treatment for needs such as heart failure, pneumonia and surgical care.

Princeton Baptist Medical Center (BMC) in Birmingham, Walker BMC in Jasper and Citizens BMC in Talladega, along with seven other Alabama hospitals, earned placement on The Joint Commission's 2010 list of Top Performers on Key Quality Measures. A total of 405 facilities were honored nationwide.

"Three years ago when we launched our systemwide initiative on quality, we did so understanding that safe, effective care is something our patients expect and deserve," said Shane Spees, president and CEO of BHS.

'Validates our efforts'

"And we have committed ourselves to continually striving to improve care at our hospitals through evidence-based clinical processes. [This] recognition from The

Joint Commission validates our efforts."

The commission requires that hospitals meet or exceed two 95 percent performance thresholds in the quality of their treatment measures to earn a place on the list.

"Recognition by The Joint Commission, the country's leading accreditation body for acute care and critical access hospitals, is a tremendous accomplishment and truly reflects our focus and commitment to quality in our hospitals," said Wayne Pate, chairman of the BHS board of trustees.

Dr. Mark R. Chassin, president of The Joint Commission, said the extensive data gleaned by the commission helps keep hospitals accountable for the people of Alabama and the nation.

"Today the public expects transparency in the reporting of performance at the hospitals where they receive care, and The Joint Commission is shining a light on the top performing hospitals such as Citizens Baptist, Princeton Baptist and Walker Baptist that have achieved excellence on a number of vital measures of quality of care," Chassin said.

Mike McLemore, executive director of Birmingham Baptist Association, called Sept. 14 a "red-letter" day in the life and ministry of BHS. BHS is a ministry of the association, which elects the board of trustees.

'Rejoicing over this honor'

"I join with you in rejoicing over this honor, and I am as proud as ever of our hospital system for the quality care it provides to the citizens of our state and region," McLemore said in an email to Spees.

"The entire family of Birmingham Baptists joins with all of you at the Baptist Health System in giving God the glory for what He has done and continues to do through quality health care in our hospitals and wants to express to every employee of the Baptist Health System our sincere gratitude for a great accomplishment."

For more information about the commission's report, visit www.jointcommission.org/accreditation/top_performers.aspx.

(TAB)

LifeWay plans to reduce Glorieta's operations to summer only

A bleak economic outlook continues to impact business practices as LifeWay Christian Resources approaches 2012. And the future of operations at LifeWay Glorieta Conference Center in New Mexico doesn't look so bright either.

During their semiannual meeting Sept. 12-13 at LifeWay Ridgecrest Conference Center in North Carolina, LifeWay trustees passed after open discussion a proposal to reduce operations at Glorieta, effective Nov. 1, to a facility offering only summer events for student groups. In 2012, Centrifuge Camps and Collegiate Week will continue as usual.

Significant changes in church practices, continued rising fuel and utility costs, Glorieta's remote location, an aging infrastructure, a volatile economy and changes in

state convention structures have combined to make financial viability increasingly difficult at Glorieta, said Jerry Rhyne, vice president of the finance and business services division and LifeWay's chief financial officer.

'Fiscal stewardship'

"As a matter of fiscal stewardship, LifeWay must control costs and manage resources in order to provide biblical solutions for life to individuals and churches in the most effective way," Rhyne said.

Additionally trustees approved pursuing viable options for the disposition of the property including, but not limited to, sales to or alliances with Southern Baptist Convention entities, state conventions and other ministries.

Rhyne pointed out that LifeWay bylaws require trustee approval before any sale of all or part of campus property.

As a summer-only facility, Glorieta will reduce its staff from 23 to seven employees. During summer operations, the regular summer workforce will continue to be aided by summer staffers and volunteers. The LifeWay Christian Store on campus also will cease operation, effective Nov. 1.

"Making a decision about Glorieta is difficult based on Glorieta's rich heritage and spiritual legacy, but it's a necessary decision for more responsible stewardship," Rhyne said.

For a complete statement on the Glorieta action, visit LifeWayConferenceCenter.org/Statement.

(BP)



Photo by Neisha Fuson

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

Shades Mountain Baptist Church, Vestavia Hills, celebrated 100 years Sept. 18. The Birmingham Baptist Association church celebrated the event all week long with historical information, photo albums, several antique items that were used in the early 1900s and more on display in the conference center. In addition to church members and their families, Hoover Belles (pictured here on left) admired the memorabilia Sept. 15.

Danny Wood is pastor.

Samford, UMobile, other state schools rank among best colleges in nation

U.S. News & World Report released its 2012 best colleges rankings Sept. 13, and two Alabama Baptist universities made the cut.

Samford University in Birmingham continues a decadeslong tradition of being ranked in the top tier of its peer group. Samford is ranked fourth among universities in the South. Spring Hill College in Mobile is tied with Converse College in Spartanburg, S.C., at No. 17 on that list, while the University of Montevallo is tied with two other schools at No. 36 and the University of North Alabama in Florence is tied with two other schools at No. 56. Troy University is in a five-way tie for the 63rd spot. Jacksonville State University is tied with three other schools for the No. 85 spot, just ahead of Auburn University at Montgomery and the University of West Alabama in Livingston at No. 89 with five other schools.

Continued success

Samford continues to be the highest ranked private institution in Alabama and is ranked very high among its Southern Conference peers. Only Elon University in North Carolina is higher, ranking second in the same category as Samford.

The University of Mobile (UMobile), along with two other schools, is ranked 30th among colleges in the

South. Also on that list are Tuskegee University at No. 17; Huntingdon College in Montgomery at No. 21 with Brescia University in Owensboro, Ky.; Faulkner University in Montgomery at No. 49 with two other schools; and Oakwood University in Huntsville at No. 65 with four other schools.

"We appreciate the recognition by U.S. News & World Report in best Regional Colleges (South)," UMobile spokeswoman Kathy Dean said. "College rankings such as this one are simply one of many tools prospective students have to help make the very personal decision about what school is the best fit for their college experience. Among other indicators are student satisfaction as evidenced by rising enrollment and residence halls filled to capacity, which the University of Mobile continues to experience."

The rankings are based on the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classifications and assess such criteria as academic reputation, graduation and retention rates, class size, faculty/student ratio and alumni giving, according to Sarah C. Latham, Samford's vice president for operations and planning.

Peer assessments from presidents, provosts and chief admission officers of institutions in the same classification also account for 25 percent

of the overall score for each institution. "It always is meaningful to be so highly regarded by your peers, and this very high ranking affirms the strong academic reputation that Samford University has developed over the decades," Samford President Andrew Westmoreland said.

Ranked regionally

In addition to its high ranking among peer institutions in the South, Samford's overall score ranks it among the top 10 regional universities nationally. Samford also is ranked sixth among regional universities in the South on the Great Schools, Great Price list.

According to U.S. News officials, only schools ranked at or near the top of their categories are included in this list because U.S. News considers the most significant values to be among colleges that are above average academically.

In addition, Samford is one of 19 universities in the South to be named an A-Plus School for B Students. Institutions on the list admitted a "meaningful proportion of applicants whose test scores and class standing put them in non-A territory but who have a decent shot at being accepted and thriving," according to U.S. News officials.

For more information, visit <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges>. (SU, TAB)

Syrian Baptists affected by country's turmoil

Baptists and other Christians in Syria have been adversely affected by public demonstrations and violent government crackdowns in the Middle Eastern country since January.

Several thousand protestors were reportedly killed. "Many families, especially Christians, have left cities like Homos for the rural areas. Others have chosen to emigrate," the Baptist World Alliance (BWA)

was informed. There has been "fear and tension among the children, especially those who are in areas that have witnessed daily shooting."

Businesses owned by Christians "have been impacted, and this has affected the livelihood of people."

Baptists have remained engaged in the midst of the turmoil. "The Baptist church in Syria is actively pursuing its mission, visiting families, sharing the message of the gospel, distributing Scripture, as well as distributing relief packages and medications as needed," the report, which came via Lebanon, said.

Syrian Baptists have requested prayer "that the Lord may bring peace and that He may preserve Syria from this trial that we're currently going through" and that "a sense of responsibility may be awakened amongst believers that their lives may witness to the grace, peace and love that we have in Christ."

Believers ask that prayer be offered for "ongoing meetings focused on resolving the issues in a nonviolent manner," the strengthening of new believers, the provision for needs of the church and believers, protection and "ministries of compassion that are currently under way."

"We place our lives and families in the hands of God," Syrian Baptists told the BWA. (BWA)

Baptists assist as Syrian refugees flee to Lebanon

More than 5,500 Syrian refugees who fled to Lebanon received assistance over the past several months from Baptists, coordinated by the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) and Rahbe Baptist Church.

Syria has been hit by a series of protests against the government and violent crackdown by military and security forces since January of this year. Several thousand protestors were reportedly killed.

Almost \$100,000 was received and spent with funding coming from Baptist World Aid, German Baptist Aid, Canadian Baptist Ministries, BMS World Mission (United Kingdom) and American Baptist Churches USA. Baptists were the first to

offer aid to several families who said they had left Syria months earlier, though some indicated they received aid from a Qatari nongovernmental organization.

LSESD helped to provide food, hygiene kits and medical supplies. "LSESD has decided to focus on a few issues that fill gaps being left by other organizations," the Baptist group reported. "It is important to support those who are opening up their homes and using their already-scarce resources to help the refugees. ... This will help decrease 'host-fatigue' and the need to move refugees to tented camps or communal living options."

In total, 615 refugee families and 248 Lebanese families have been helped. (BWA)



Bhutan seeks 'to deter conversion' to Christianity

THIMPHU, Bhutan — Christians in this Buddhist nation have been awaiting a decision on whether they will receive official recognition, but it appears they will first seek a measure against fraudulent conversion that the prime minister acknowledges is essentially designed to deter evangelism.

Prime Minister Jigme Yoser Thinley said the proposed clause in the penal code was "essentially ... to deter conversion," saying there was no reason why Christians should seek to induce others to join their faith.

"There are a few Christians and followers of other faiths as well (in Bhutan), and there is no difficulty with that," Thinley said. "That is good. ... We promote diversity of cultures. But then, when there are those who try to convert others without understanding the values, the principles and the essence of the other religion, we have here what constitutes the worst form of discrimination."

In an exclusive interview in his office, Thinley said Christians seek to convert other Bhutanese citizens with the power of money and an attitude of spiritual superiority, accusations that Christian leaders in the country denied.

Church leaders said they were distressed with the government's notion of Christians and Christianity, which they said is far from true. "No evidence of such allegations has come to our knowledge, but still we will never try to defend anyone who indulges in unethical conversions," said a Christian leader from Thimphu on condition of anonymity.

Bhutan's minister for home and culture, Minjur Dorji, said his department has yet to decide whether Christians could be recognized officially. "There is no legal provision for that," he said. "It's not in the constitution and not in the Religious Organizations Act."

Nigerian army allegedly help in slaughter of Christians

JOS, Nigeria — Muslim extremists with the alleged help of Nigerian army personnel killed 24 Christians in August in central Nigeria's Plateau state, area sources said.

The attacks started Aug. 11 in Ratsa Foron village, where assaults that day and Aug. 15 left six Christians dead; also on Aug. 15 in Heipang village, Muslim extremists killed nine members of one Christian family along with another Christian, the sources said.

"I can swear to God Almighty that the attack was carried out with the support of the soldiers; I saw them," said a tearful Nnaji John, who lost her family in the attack. Attacks Aug. 21 in Kwi, Loton and Jwol villages killed six more Christians, said the sources, who added that Nigerian army soldiers participated in the assaults or at least accompanied the assailants.

In the community of Chwelnyp in Jos on Aug. 14, Muslim extremists killed two and injured one woman, the area sources said. Chollom Gyangof Chwelnyp confirmed that the Aug. 14 attack on his neighborhood was carried out with the support or tacit approval of Muslims in the army's Special Task Force, a unit designed to stop sectarian attacks.

Plateau Gov. Jonah Jang called for immediate withdrawal of the Nigerian army because, he said, Muslims in the army have taken sides with Islamist assailants. "I am convinced that the armed forces are being polluted with the religious crisis in the country," Jang said.

"Before now, the military personnel used to stay in the barracks, but today the armed forces have started taking sides in this religious crisis, and if they are not called to order it will be dangerous for the country."

Uzbek Baptist denied permission to leave country

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan — Seven months after a fine for "illegally" bringing Christian magazines into Uzbekistan was overturned on appeal, passport officers stopped Tashkent Baptist Lidiya Guseva from leaving Uzbekistan, fellow Baptists said.

She was taken off a late-night train and had to return to Tashkent by taxi. Bailiff Sanjar Sultanov said the failure to cancel her exit ban was the fault of the court for failing to tell them it had cancelled the fine.

The court insisted it had told the bailiffs. This was the second known case since the beginning of September of an individual punished by an administrative court for his or her religious activity causing the denial of permission to leave the country.

Getting creative

Two 20-something Alabama Baptists use music to reach Hui Muslims in China

By C.S. Stanley and Susie Rain
International Mission Board

Hands On Challenge: Travel to a foreign country and make an everlasting impact for Christ in six-months. You most likely won't know the language or understand the culture. Most people you come in contact with have never heard the name Jesus. Chances are — your new friends will reject your beliefs! Are you up to it?

While the challenge seems overwhelming to some, it excites Ashley Benson and Mandi Mapes. They want to share their faith in an area of the world where the gospel is not welcome.

So, the 20-somethings from The Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham, put their young careers — Benson an accountant and Mapes a singer-songwriter — on hold and move to China.

Their goal is to share Christ with everyone they meet through words, love and actions.

"There are still places in the world where people can be born and live and die and not hear the gospel," Mapes said passionately. "That causes my heart to be burdened. Life is too short. When I stand before God, He's not going to care how many songs I wrote. He cares about His glory and all of the nations. I just had to go where He said."

Stepping outside their apartment and into the street brings the global evangelism map decorating their wall to life. On the map, most of Asia is lit up like a Christmas tree, indicating those who have yet to be reached with the gospel message. On the street, the dots become the faces and names of their neighbors and friends.

"They [the unevangelized] live right outside our apartment building," Mapes said, pointing out it's



IMB photo

JAM SESSION — Ashley Benson (right) and Mandi Mapes play a few songs at their favorite noodle stall in their Chinese city. The two work with the International Mission Board's Hands On program.

a huge change from her "Christian bubble" back in Alabama. "We know some of them by name. We have conversations with them. We've shared the gospel with them. Yet ..."

Various barriers

Benson nods, knowing Mapes' thought without her finishing it. Despite their zeal and enthusiasm, no one they come in contact with during their six months decides to put their faith in Jesus. The Chinese are taught in school, from a very young age, that there is no God. When you add that to the language barrier, it's been hard.

"It's exhausting sharing the gos-

pel and getting rejected," Benson admits.

Hands On Reality: The challenge is not as easy as you think, but it's definitely worth the struggle!

"I can see why people give up and get discouraged in ministry here. It's a hard, dark place. No one wants to hear at first," Benson said, noting that people laughed at her for sharing her faith and even walked away. "To be a Christian here, you definitely have to count the cost. It affects what job you get, how your family relates to you — it can even mean prison or persecution."

When the two get discouraged in their task, they look no further than the small community of Chi-

nese believers for inspiration. Some of these friends are among the first Christ followers among their people group. Their Chinese friends encourage them to keep sharing, no matter the results. Benson admits that when you can only speak Mandarin like a 3-year-old, you have to think of creative ways to share your faith on a deep level. They try everything from baking muffins to hanging out at the coffee shop. It's music, however, that opens the most doors for the duo.

Universal language

When Mapes and Benson pull out their guitars, people flock to them, whether it's in the park, a coffee

shop or on the steps of their apartment building. They sing in English, but that doesn't deter, music is a universal language. The best friends strum their guitars in the park. Mapes' strong voice carries from their grassy spot to the walking track. A Chinese man stops to find a seat on the nearby bench, grinning from ear-to-ear as he takes in the impromptu acoustic concert. Benson prays for him and the others listening as she accompanies her friend.

When they finish the song, Benson asks the man if he understood, since it was in English and not Mandarin. He smiles and says, "No, but it sounded like heavenly voices and gives me peace" — giving the two Americans and a Chinese friend the perfect opportunity to share the story of Christ. He tells them that "is a lot to think about," then leaves the park smiling and humming. Benson and Mapes are not discouraged. In fact, they are excited — a seed is planted. "When our Chinese Christian friends tell their testimony, most start out with, 'A few years ago, an American came and shared with me and I rejected it. Then, another American came and shared with me and I believed,'" Mapes said. "Our job is to plant the seeds. It might be hard now, but one day, a harvest is going to happen."

The young women hope someone will come after them and continue sharing with their friends. They pray that one day their friends from the unreached people groups in this city will have a testimony that goes something like this — "An American came and shared with me and I rejected it. Then, another came ... and I believed."

For more information, visit <http://thetask.org/handson>.

Will you be the next to share? Take the Hands On challenge and apply today. (IMB)

Workers continue Hands On program in China despite closed hearts

By Susie Rain
International Mission Board

The Chinese noodle shop didn't look like much, just some tables and chairs, but it was clean and cheap. The Muslim family who owned it offered a bowl of noodles for less than \$1.

The restaurant quickly became a lunchtime favorite of Hands On workers Ashley Benson and Mandi Mapes. It was just outside their apartment building and their five new friends always took time to help them practice their Mandarin.

The Americans teased back-and-forth with the family as they ate. At some point during the meal, however, their hearts always ached for this Muslim family.

"We were confronted with lostness every single day. That bothered me," Benson said about their six-months working in China with the International Mission Board's Hands On program. "In America, there are lost people but it's not in your face. These people were visible to us and they are our friends."

Ironically, just before moving to China their home church, The Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham, began praying for the Hui Muslims. It was through this that the women learned there are more than 13 million around the world with less than 200 known believers. Some segments of the Hui population are considered unengaged and unreached. However, all are considered unreached with almost 90 percent of the population having never heard the gospel.

Covered with prayer

Little did Benson and Mapes know God had plans for them to become friends with the exact people prayed for by their church family. They moved to China to work with English-speaking university students. However, they saw the Muslim family more than anyone because of the proximity to their apartment. They hung out at the noodle shop with their guitars and shared American chocolate from home.

After months of building a relationship,

Benson and Mapes decided it was finally time to share their faith beyond the simple sentence, "I am a Christian." They memorized and practiced the gospel presentation in Mandarin over and over, praying for God's guidance.

It was Easter and the family often talked about "American culture" with the young women. As they explained the meaning behind Easter, their friends looked at them with disdain.

"When we said that Jesus is God's Son, they laughed at us," Benson said. "They heard a little more, then they got up and left! 'I was really surprised that they just walked away,'" Benson continued. "We tried to give them a Bible, but they wouldn't accept it."

The Hands On workers took the rejection in stride but it was obvious there was a strain in the relationship. Benson said they felt compelled to rebuild the friendship, noting that

Jesus was rejected. They continued to eat at the noodle shop, practicing their Mandarin. They brought gifts of appreciation. They also continued praying for their friends. Eventually, the friendship was restored at an even

stronger level. At every opportunity they managed to share parts of their personal testimonies, until one day, the family accepted an Arabic Bible as a gift.

"We ask you to pray for them. We love them and are deeply burdened for them," Benson said. "There are days it is hard to keep walking from them to our apartment when I know they are not destined for heaven."

"Through our Hands On experience, an unreached people group became real people to us — people we want to see become believers," Benson added. "It's not always an easy task to share the gospel. When we are rejected, we see Christ's great sacrifice more clearly." (IMB)



HANDS ON

Across Alabama's Associations

AUTAUGA

► **White Pond Church, Prattville**, will celebrate its 99th homecoming Sept. 24-25. There will be an evening of gospel singing Saturday at 5:30 p.m. with The Men of Music. A dessert fellowship will follow. The Sunday morning service will be at 10 a.m. Former Pastor Bobby Holiday will speak. Lunch will follow in the fellowship hall. For information call Dora Huett at 205-755-4599. Woodrow Turner is pastor.

BIRMINGHAM

► **Robert Hope** is the new worship pastor for **The Church at Shelby Crossings, Calera**. He has served Concord Church, Calera, and Oak Grove Church, Birmingham. A Shelby County native, Hope holds a bachelor's degree in theology from Southeastern Bible College in Birmingham. He and his wife, Holly, have three children. Ken Letson is pastor. ► **Birmingham Association** will hold The Gathering to celebrate the work together with all its churches Oct. 2, 6 p.m., at Lakeside Church, Birmingham. Andrew Westmoreland, president of Samford University in Birmingham, will speak. The Lakeside choir and orchestra will provide music. Music artist Adam King will be featured. The focus for the annual gathering is "Developing Leadership." Breck T. Ladd is pastor of Lakeside. Mike McLemore is executive director of Birmingham Association. ► **Midway Church, Trussville**, will celebrate homecoming Sept. 25, 11 a.m. A covered-dish lunch and concert by The Kellys, of Lawrenceburg, Tenn., will follow. For information call 205-655-8242. Robert Wilkerson is pastor.

CALHOUN

► **Nances Creek Church, Jacksonville**, will hold a worship and praise service Sept. 25, 11 a.m., with The Birdsong Family, of Nashville. A nursery will be provided. For information call 256-453-2067. Garry Brown is pastor.

CLARKE

► **Stave Creek Church, Jackson**, completed its parking lot renovations. The church will begin Centershot Ministry for its children's ministry Sept. 28, 6:30 p.m. The meetings will continue for eight consecutive Wednesday nights. For information call 251-246-2701. Erica Weide is children minister. Jamie Lay is pastor.

COLUMBIA

► **Bethel Church, Dothan**, will host The Mike Speck Trio with a community mass choir from Bethel; Mount Enon Church, Dothan; and Bay Springs Church, Dothan, Sept. 25, 6 p.m. Child care will be provided. For information contact Kevin Brannon at 334-792-5908

or kevin@bbcdothan.org. Ricky Plummer is pastor of Bethel.

COFFEE

► **Hilary Stewart** is the new pastor of **Newbia Church, Elba**.

He has served as pastor of several Alabama churches. A graduate of Florida Baptist Theological College (now The Baptist College of Florida) in Graceville,



STEWART

he and his wife, Nadine, have two children. ► **Ken Wilson** is the new pastor of **Westside Church, Elba**. He previously served as associ-



WILSON

ate minister of education for Eastern Shore Church, Daphne. He is a graduate of the University of Montevallo and Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham. Wilson and his wife, Kim, have four children.

CONECUH

► **Bower Memorial Church, Evergreen**, will celebrate homecoming Oct. 2, 10:30 a.m. Dale Huff, director of the office of Leader-Care and church administration for the State Board of Missions, will speak. Lunch will follow in the fellowship hall. Willie Crutchfield and the Gospel Melodies will be special musical guests for the day. Jim O. Griffin is pastor.

COOSA RIVER

► **Blue Eye Church, Lincoln**, will hold revival Sept. 26-28, 6:30 p.m., with Charles Stone, pastor of Oak Chapel Church, Goodwater. Mike McBurnett will lead the music. There will be special music each night. For information call pastor Jacky Morgan at 256-268-7025.

ETOWAH

► **Mike Niemi** is the new collegiate/student minister for **Etowah Association**. He previously served as minister of education for First Church, Lanett, for three years. He was a journeyman in the Middle East and holds a master of divinity from Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Niemi and his



NIEMI

wife, Tina, have two children. Gary Cardwell is director of missions. ► The children's choir/drama department of **First Church, Gallant**, will present "Down By the Creek Bank" Sept. 28 and Oct. 2, 6 p.m. Proceeds will benefit Shelters for Souls, a project sponsored by churches in the Gallant community to raise money to rebuild a house that was destroyed in the Shoal Creek area by the April tornadoes. Tom Brown is pastor.

DALE

► **Ariton Church** will celebrate its 120th homecoming Sept. 25, 10 a.m. There will be praise, worship and testimonies. There will be a dedication for the new fellowship hall, youth center and classrooms at 11 a.m. A covered-dish lunch will follow at noon. All services will be in the new building. Dave Walsh is pastor.

MADISON

► **Brownsboro Church** will hold revival Sept. 26-30, 6:30 p.m., with Chris Guinn, pastor of First Church, Crossville. Joseph Cooper is pastor. ► **First Church, Hazel Green**, will celebrate its 45th anniversary with homecoming Sept. 25, 10:30 a.m. Former member Milburn Gross, who is currently pastor of Hurricane Grove Church, New Market, will speak. A covered-dish lunch will follow. Bobby Eads is pastor. ► **Mable Hill Church, Ardmore**, will hold a gospel concert with national recording artists Brian Free and Assurance Sept. 22, 7 p.m. For information call 256-420-8172 or visit www.mablehillbaptist.org. Mike Clark is pastor.

MOBILE

► **Hollinger's Island Church, Mobile**, will hold its 75th anniversary Sept. 25, 10 a.m. Rick Lance, executive director for the State Board of Missions, will speak. Lunch will follow. James W. Mercer is pastor.

MONTGOMERY

► **Trinity Memorial Church, Montgomery**, will celebrate homecoming Sept. 25, 11 a.m. Mickey Castleberry will speak. Carl Head Jr. will lead the music. Lunch will follow. The church also will hold revival Sept. 26-28, 7 p.m., with Castleberry and Head. Stan Holt is pastor.

PINE BARREN

► **Vredenburg Church** will celebrate homecoming Sept. 25, 11 a.m. Former Pastor Mitchell Murphy will speak. Lunch will follow.

TUSKEGEE LEE

► **Rock of Ages Church, Tuskegee**, will hold Sunday School night with Brother Billy Bob Bohannon Sept. 25, 6 p.m. Joe Johnson is pastor.

Alabama updates

People, churches making news across the state

FBC Luverne women take action against poverty

A *Missions Mosaic* article detailing poverty in Appalachia prompted the Women on Mission leaders of First Baptist Church, Luverne, to take action.

The women made contact with Bill Barker, a North American Mission Board missionary and director of Appalachian Regional Ministries serving in the region. Barker provided the group with information about the region and its needs. He also connected it with Debbie King at the TEAM Center (Together Everyone Accomplishes More) in War, W.Va. King and the center work with a Head Start program, after-school programs and summer programs with children of all ages.

King was thrilled to discover the children she works with daily were on the hearts and minds of the women of the Alabama-Crenshaw Baptist Association church, and she was aware of children who could use new clothes.

Armed with sewing machines and creativity, the women began making pillowcase dresses for girls and shirt and pant sets for boys.

Several women provided their own sewing and embroidery machines to use, while other church members donated fabric and T-shirts. The women bathed the sewing project in prayer and asked God to bless every child who received the clothes they made.

That included girls and boys in their own county as they took 10 dresses and seven T-shirts to Crenshaw County's Department of Human Resources to be distributed to needy families.

"I have had so much fun actually working on something to give to the children — a much bigger blessing than just giving funds," Mary Handley said.

Sellers marks 20 years at Cullman's Mount Zion

When smiling people poured into Mount Zion Baptist Church, Cullman, with hands full of casseroles and baked goods, Randy Sellers knew something was up.

On Aug. 28, the East Cullman Baptist Association church threw a surprise celebration for its pastor of 20 years.

"I didn't even get to preach [that day]," Sellers said with a laugh.

The congregation put together a DVD of pictures from his life and interviews with his parents and in-laws. Mount Zion Baptist presented him with a commemorative watch and his wife, Donna, who has served as the church pianist for 20 years, with a gift certificate.

A fellowship meal followed the DVD presentation.

Around 250 people were in attendance — that's 100 more people than on a normal Sunday. Of course, some of them were family; Sellers' two sisters, aunt, uncle, parents and in-laws all attended the celebration. Sellers, who accepted the call to preach in 1983, earned his bachelors degree in religion from Athens State University. He served at Friendship Baptist Church, Addison, for seven years and was led to Mount Zion in 1991.

In Randy Folds' opinion, Sellers has "set a good example."

"He's not just a church leader but a community leader, coaching teams at the schools and attending youth events," said Folds, chairman of deacons at Mount Zion. "[Sellers] is more like a family pastor, a great hands-on and personal-type pastor."

Former Gov. Brewer receives Samford Medallion

On Aug. 30, longtime professor and former Alabama Gov. Albert P. Brewer received the Samford Medallion, becoming only the third recipient of the honor since it was created by the Samford University board of trustees in 2006.

The medallion recognizes people whose good works have made a difference in society, community affairs, the life of the church and the quality of life for individuals.

Clark Watson, chairman of the Samford board, presented Brewer with the surprise honor, calling him a "tremendous example to lawyers, educators, government leaders and the population of this state at large."

As an Alabama legislator, speaker of the Alabama House of Representatives, lieutenant governor and governor, distinguished professor of law and government in Samford's Cumberland School of Law, chairman of the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) and faithful churchman, Brewer has dedicated his personal life to the public good through "inspiring leadership, warmhearted compassion and a genuine dedication to truth."

The Decatur native joined Samford in 1987 to lead PARCA and teach in the law school and undergraduate history department. He retired in 2005 but continues to teach a course in professional responsibility to law students.

'Power of Jesus'

First believer in remote village sharing the Word as result of Alabamian's help

By Ava Thomas
Special to The Alabama Baptist

Leroy Johnson didn't catch what Peter said, but suddenly everyone in the house was looking at him to respond.

"What?" Johnson asked.

One of the men gestured toward Peter and said, "He said that if Jesus can give new life, then he wants to believe."

Johnson looked at Peter, a sick, hopeless man at 25.

"When I first saw him, he wasn't a very striking person. He wasn't very well spoken. He wasn't neat," Johnson said. "He was an average, dirty, poor villager from the mountains of Asia. His hair was greasy and unkempt. His skin was dark and leathery from the sun, and he had dirty feet, dirty clothes and rough hands."

And Peter was sick.

"This sickness made his whole body weak to the point where he couldn't do any work. He couldn't do anything but stay around his

house — hopeless," said Johnson, an Alabama native who now serves as a Southern Baptist representative in East Asia. "This is the state in which I met Peter — the state in which Peter met Jesus."

When the men told Johnson that Peter wanted to believe, Johnson looked across the table at him and saw his hands trembling, his entire body wrestling with the Truth.

"I wondered what he was thinking in that moment. The day before, thinking he had tried everything to be healed, and the next day, hearing a whisper of hope

around a dirty wooden table," Johnson said.

He got so excited that he started sharing in English, forgetting no one there spoke English.

Then he watched as Peter prayed to receive Christ.

"We (Johnson and some believers from that country) gave him a copy of the Word and encouraged him to

"Peter was still the same dirty, poor villager but he looked alive."

Leroy Johnson
Southern Baptist representative



IMB photo

SEARCHING — People living in Asia's remote mountain villages have yet to hear the name of Jesus. People like Alabamian Leroy Johnson are working to find these villages and take the gospel there.

stand firm in Christ through every battle yet to come," Johnson said.

He had no idea how Peter's mother and the rest of his village would react to his new faith. But a few weeks later, he found out.

"I saw the power of Jesus," Johnson said. "Peter was still the same dirty, poor villager but he looked alive."

Peter grinned, hugged Johnson and told him he had been working. And not only that — he'd been reading the Word to people coming in and out of his home to hear about his new faith.

"They see the newness that Peter has been given and are drawn to it,"

Johnson said. "I'm confident that He isn't yet finished."

Peter is the first believer in the Asian mountains where he lives, a spiritually uncharted area in which Johnson has been hiking, finding villages and sharing Jesus.

Looking for villages

"While traveling with a volunteer team here doing some scouting with me this summer, we decided we would hike beside this big river, figuring it would give us water and thinking surely there would be villages beside it," Johnson said.

They followed the river until it went straight into a cave.

"Everything seemed to be going wrong that week," he said.

They stopped and ate with some villagers living nearby while they tried to figure out what to do next. Little did they know how divine it was that God led them there, Johnson said.

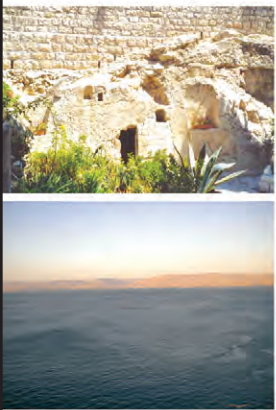
"I jokingly told one of the villagers it would be nice to have a boat right now," he said. "So the guy calls a friend, and bam! We have a bamboo raft."

The raft carried them through the cave and straight to Peter's village.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Names have been changed for security reasons. ☞

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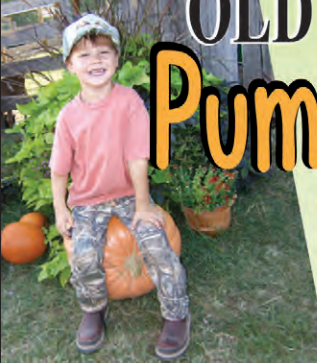


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Returning to life as a single adult not easy; church family can help

When a couple is asked to pledge “until death do us part” in a wedding ceremony, chances are no one really imagines then what that will be like. After all, it’s a celebration of the beginning, isn’t it? Why think about the end?

But the end comes sooner than later for some couples, either by death or by divorce, and life as they knew it must be reshaped to a new reality — being single again.

Meet Anita Snell. She never dreamed she would be one of nearly 700,000 women who lose their husbands each year. But in October 2007, the unthinkable happened. Snell became part of that statistic when her pastor husband, Jack, died from pancreatic cancer.

“It never occurred to me to think about the death part,” said Snell, who now lives in Jacksonville, Fla. “Then through the years as I began to face life-and-death issues with others, I always ‘planned’ to be the first to die because I observed it was much easier for men. Statistics show that men are able to rebuild a life with another much easier than women because of the numbers.”

Unfortunately her plan didn’t work out the way she had hoped. She was right about the numbers — according to the U.S. census, there are more than four times as many widows as there are widowers. But she was the one left.

That poses a real challenge for society in general and the church in particular. But Snell found both the church she and her husband were

attending and the church where he had been a longtime pastor to be real sources of comfort for them as they dealt with his illness and subsequent death. “The churches where we had served and where we were members could not have been more loving and supportive through the illness and the initial grief period,” Snell said. There were three memorial services, and the church family in each helped with all the planning and arrangements.

‘Two-way struggle’

“Such a wonderful tribute to him and comfort to me,” she recalled.

Even though they have continued to affirm the grief process, Snell said, the challenge has become more difficult for her as she seeks to find the place of new relationship — as a single. “This is a two-way struggle,” she asserted. “It is a difficult journey to rebuild a life that has been so thoroughly integrated with another — both for the widow and for the church family. There seem to be some of the same issues that occur with a divorce. It is rather painful for all concerned.

“Because of the difficulty, often it is just easier to avoid dealing with it,” she said. “It has been much easier for me to fill my life with work and avoid the ‘life alone’ issues. And strangely, it also has been a little easier to meet new people than to pick up the pieces with old friends who related to me as a couple.”

As long as the relationships are within the church program and activities, Snell has found the church

does a good job of including all who participate.

“As I am experiencing the social structures of life as a widow, I am finding it is more difficult to stay involved,” she said, adding that she understands it is a “two-way street.”

“I know that I need to be proactive in making a place, but I think I have also been guilty of thinking that ‘life goes on’ for those who are alone and not being proactive in including them in the common-day activities of life,” she said.

“Remaining alone and having a pity-party is no way to live though, and I think that God calls us to the ‘life more abundant,’ even through grief. God calls us to others for relationship — without others in our life, we lose touch with God.”

If she could offer any advice for congregations seeking to minister to people who have lost their spouses, she would say this: “It is important to know that grief is not over in a few weeks or even at a year. Most of the time, it takes years to rebuild.”

For her, the most difficult time is eating alone, so she would encourage members to invite someone who is alone to join them in a meal.

But her most important suggestion gets to the very basis of relating — and one of the most dramatic changes for one who has lost a spouse. It is something she thinks is needed the most.

“Give an affectionate holding of the hand, arm around the shoulder, or hug,” she said. “This can go a long way to keep them ‘in touch’ with a sense of belonging.” (ABP)

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Pastors say value of denominational affiliation will wane

A majority of pastors with denominational affiliation believe it is vital to be part of a denomination, but a majority also believe that the importance of identifying with a denomination will diminish over the next 10 years.

That is the finding of a survey by LifeWay Research of more than 900 American Protestant pastors. The survey, conducted in March 2010, excluded pastors of non-denominational churches.

In response to the statement, "Personally I consider it vital for me to be part of a denomination," three-quarters of pastors (76 percent) agree. That includes 57 percent who strongly agree and 19 percent who somewhat agree. Ten percent somewhat disagree and 14 percent strongly disagree while 1 percent don't know.

Similarly three-quarters (77 percent) of pastors agree with the statement, "Our congregation considers it vital for our congrega-

tion to be part of a denomination." Fifty percent strongly agree, 27 percent somewhat agree, 9 percent somewhat disagree and 14 percent strongly disagree. Two percent don't know.

Despite the convictions of identity, however, nearly two-thirds of pastors (62 percent) believe the importance of identifying with a denomination will decline over the next decade.

Looking ahead

Survey participants were asked, "I believe that the importance of being identified with a denomination will diminish over the next 10 years." Twenty-eight percent of pastors strongly agree and 34 percent somewhat agree. Fifteen percent somewhat disagree, and 18 percent strongly disagree. Five percent don't know.

"Many talk about the decline of denominations today, prompting us to ask pastors of churches that belong to Protestant denominations if

they consider their affiliation vital," said Ed Stetzer, vice president of research and ministry development at LifeWay Christian Resources.

"Many will be surprised at how strong their response was in favor of denominational connection, but also intrigued that their outlook on the future is much less optimistic."

The survey results reveal that pastors who consider themselves mainline are more likely than evangelicals to agree (strongly or somewhat) that their personal membership in a denomination is important. While 85 percent of mainline pastors agree that it is vital to be part of a denomination, only 74 percent of evangelicals agree.

Education and age also affect pastors' opinions of denominations. Those with at least a master's degree (62 percent) are more likely to strongly agree that their personal denominational identification is vital than pastors with a bachelor's degree (41 percent) or some college (48 percent).

Pastors ages 65 and older are more likely to strongly agree (71 percent) that their personal denominational identification is vital than those ages 55-64 (58 percent), 45-54 (55 percent) and 18-44 (48 percent). The same groups — mainline versus evangelical, education and age — have differences in responses from pastors regarding whether their congregations consider identifying with a denomination to be important:

► Those who consider themselves mainline (85 percent) are more likely than evangelicals (77 percent) to agree (strongly or somewhat) that their congregation considers it vital to be part of a denomination.

► Pastors with at least a master's degree (53 percent) and those with some college (45 percent) are more likely to strongly agree that their congregation considers

Voice your opinion on Facebook

Is denominational affiliation really that important anymore?

A survey conducted by LifeWay Research found that the majority of more than 900 American Protestant pastors believe it is vital to be a part of a denomination — but that the significance of denominational affiliation will most

likely shrink in the next decade.

The survey's findings also show education and age play a role in a pastors' opinion (see story, this page).

Friend *The Alabama Baptist* newspaper on Facebook and share your thoughts on this subject. The question is currently posted on the wall awaiting comments. (TAB)

denominational membership vital than pastors with a bachelor's degree (35 percent).

► Although age does not affect total agreement, pastors 65 and older (62 percent) are more likely to strongly agree that their church considers denominational affiliation vital than pastors ages 55-64 (48 percent), 45-54 (49 percent) or 18-44 (45 percent).

Larger churches

Pastors of larger churches are most likely to agree (strongly or somewhat) that the importance of denominations will diminish over the next decade.

Seventy-two percent of those with churches averaging 250 or more in worship agree, compared with 62 percent of those averaging 50-99 and 53 percent of those averaging fewer than 50.

Pastors with less than a bachelor's degree (28 percent) are more

likely to strongly disagree than pastors with at least a master's degree (14 percent) that the importance of identifying with a denomination will diminish over the next decade.

Although the majority of all age groups agree that identifying with a denomination will decrease in importance, pastors 65 and older are the most likely age brackets to strongly disagree. While 27 percent 65 and older strongly disagree, only 16 percent ages 55-64, 15 percent 45-54 and 16 percent 18-44 strongly disagree.

"Ironically the future value of most denominations depends at least in part on the very pastors who predict their decline in influence," Stetzer said. "The group most likely to predict denominational decline is pastors of larger churches, which is probably not surprising to most observers. Yet it does point to the future challenge for denominational leaders." (LifeWay)

Connections lost by individualism

(continued from page 1)
one-religion trend. On the positive: It's harder to hold on to prejudices against groups — by religion or race or gender or sexuality — if

everyone wants to be seen individually.

"The bad news is you lose the capacity to make connections. Everyone is pretty much on their own," he said.

And all this rampant individualism also fosters "hostility toward organized groups — government, industry, even organized religion."

Paul Morris, an Army medic at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and veteran of six tours in the Middle East, said he has seen Christianity, Judaism and Islam in action, for better and for worse, and, frankly, he'll pass.

Morris grew up "old-style Italian Catholic," but said he never felt like his spiritual questions were answered.

So "I just wiped the slate clean. I studied every major religion on the face of the planet. Every one had parts that made sense, but there was no one specific dogma or tenet I could really follow," Morris said.

"So now, I call myself an agnostic — one who just doesn't know. What I believe is that if you can just do the right thing, it works everywhere." (RNS)

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Christian man pays for faith in Iran's harshest prison

It was early in the morning the day after Christmas. It was cold. Mehdi Forootan sat in the back seat of an undercover police car in front of his house in Tehran, Iran.

An officer pointed a camcorder at him. "Do you know why you were arrested?" the officer asked him.

"No," Forootan said.

The officer turned off the camera and looked Forootan in the eyes.

"I can beat you until blood is coming out of your mouth and every part of you. The next time I turn on the camera, you tell me why we are taking you," the officer said and turned the camera back on.

Forootan spoke of his faith in Christ, and he spent the next 105 days in Iran's harshest prison.

On Dec. 26, 2010, authorities

had arrested Forootan in a wave of persecution against Iran's underground church; more than three months later, he was one of a few who had not been released.

During one interrogation, an officer turned on a camcorder and pointed it toward him, demanding that Forootan tell him about his "crime."

'I found Jesus'

Forootan began to tell him how he had struggled with substance abuse as a teenager, "and how when I was in university I found Jesus and He saved me, and I have been free ever since. But he became angry and turned off the camera. He said: 'I asked you to tell about your crime, not evangelize us.'"

After months of trying to get him to write statements confessing

a crime, authorities inexplicably released him.

Forootan said his first month out of prison was one of the worst of his life.

He couldn't speak to anyone of his prison experience for fear that authorities were watching and would re-arrest him.

His parents had given the deed of their house to authorities as bail. He and his fiancée decided it was best for him to leave Iran and go to Turkey as a refugee, which he did.

This meant an illegal escape through the mountains, because authorities had confiscated his passport. (CDN)

Want to know God?

By Pastor Greg Hyche
Brent Baptist Church

Recently I attended a pastors conference.

While there, I was challenged to see "the greatness of our calling and the greatness of the lost in need of Jesus." The challenge gripped my soul to think that God would use someone like me to tell others about His saving grace. I left the conference moved and encouraged in my ministry. As I boarded my flight home, my heart was full, my body was tired and I was looking forward to a restful journey. However, God had one more conference session that He wanted me to attend.

Seated across the aisle from me was a soldier. He was full of energy and dressed for battle. I sat there studying his uniform, his mannerisms, his boots, and then I studied his face. We engaged in conversation and the more we talked, the more the joy of the Lord exuded from his body.

He began to quote Scriptures from memory and tell me about Jesus. Verse by verse, he poured into me about how vast, wide and deep God's love is for me — even as a pastor. It was evident he knew God because he knew His Word. It was not just quoted from memory; it was written upon his heart. He encouraged me to preach the gospel, and in "that great calling God put upon my life," I was reminded to tell others over and over "that if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). As my new friend sat there prepared for battle, I could see that he had taken up the full armor of God because he had the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

So friend, with all exuberance, I ask you today do you want to know God? I implore you to read Romans 10:9 and simply "confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead."

I then encourage you to write God's Word upon your heart by memorizing and meditating upon it. His Word is filled with awesome promises. Lastly I encourage you to share with someone how God has changed your heart.

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RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

by Jennifer Davis Rash • executive editor • jrash@thealabamabaptist.org

Listening in context

The phone call caught me off guard. Immediately following my hello came a gruff voice of exaggerated volume filled with sarcasm and anger. The caller obviously was not happy and determined to let me know.

The frustration he was experiencing came simply from a misunderstanding of the situation, but he refused to have a two-way conversation. He only meant to express his anger and disappointment without allowing me the opportunity to explain. On top of that, he has trouble hearing so the few words I slipped in were misheard and thus more misunderstanding evolved. It was a no-win situation.

A few days prior to this phone conversation, I had a face-to-face conversation with someone who also left with an inaccurate view of the situation we discussed.

The information I shared was misinterpreted because the person didn't truly focus on what was being said and had entered the conversation with preconceived ideas about the situation. A lot of negative energy and unnecessary grief resulted from a simple misinterpretation.

In between these two conversations, I was chatting with a dear friend about faith and various aspects related to faith. We are on the same page and actually follow the same line of thinking, but during that conversation, we described some aspects using different words. To me, we were still saying the same thing, just in different ways. But to her, we weren't.

And as I outlined these three conversations in an attempt to process them, I experienced one

more, albeit somewhat familiar, misunderstanding — a misunderstanding

standing that results in my husband, Jason, missing the details of what I'm trying to explain.

Sure Jason understands me in general and knows my heart through and through, but he also has learned an amazing fake listening skill that allows me to talk and talk and talk (and I know that shocks all of you who know me) while I think he is hearing me and helping me process. Instead he tunes out the details and hears the main points, thus faking me off that he is listening. But the problem is he misses the fine nuances of the story. He walks away with a general overview but not a true understanding.

By the time the week of misunderstandings ended, I spent a great deal of time evaluating my communication skills. I was obviously the common denominator in all four situations.

After seeking answers in God's Word, praying for direction and asking a close friend to shoot straight with me about me, I discovered that the communication breakdown came because I winked at context rather than taking it seriously. In all four cases, I expected the other person to understand me in my context, but I should have studied and understood his or her context first and then communicated in a language that made sense to him or her. This does not mean one context is better than the other but that communication can only truly take place if the words we say are defined the same by both parties. A person's background, knowledge base, experience, understanding of the topic at hand, etc., also influence his or her interpretation of what is presented. If all of this can be considered and understood before an explanation is given, then the odds of successful communication are increased.

It does require more effort, but if we add up the time wasted on frustration and clearing up confusion, then we might be surprised which one actually saves time.

In the next "Rashional Thoughts," I will explore how we sometimes exemplify the characteristics of one of the listeners above when claiming to understand God's Word.



Rashional EXTRAS ...

What topics are on your mind?

Email jrash@thealabamabaptist.org

My comment on your recent food article (Aug. 25 "Rashional Thoughts") is that all food has nutritional value, by definition. It doesn't go away in a freezer, else everyone would be effortlessly skinny. I have some really strong feelings about discarding or disdaining food based on dates and commonly held opinions. Fresh is simply a marketing ploy.

Expiration dates promote waste. In my experience, farmers who have ample supplies of the freshest food are not healthier and do not live longer.

On the contrary. :-)

Bob Cosby, M.D.
Birmingham, Ala.

Honor God with prayerful eating

By Church Health Center staff
Memphis, Tenn.

Hypertension is just one health problem among many that can be managed by a change in diet, but it can be so difficult to find the motivation to really change the way we eat.

So instead of focusing just on the health aspect of eating, we can turn our attention to ways to eat prayerfully, honoring God with our nutritional choices and honoring the bodies that God has given us at the same time.

When we eat prayerfully, we remember where the food we are eating comes from and what its purpose is.

Some easy ways to honor God and to eat prayerfully are:

1. Embrace the variety of God's creation.

How often do you look at your dinner plate and see mostly beige food?

Take a look outside and see the amazing and beautiful variety present in God's creation.

When we fill our plates with fruits and vegetables of many different colors and textures, we reflect the beauty of God's creation.

2. Embrace the natural flavors of God's creation.

Many of us are used to only using salt to season our food.

But God has given us many ways to add flavor to our meals that do not include salt. Try using fresh or dried herbs such as cilantro, oregano and mustard to add flavor instead of salt.

3. Remember that the healthiest foods are those foods that are kept closest to the state in which they are grown.

Try to avoid heavily processed foods and foods that are cooked in heavy sauces or fried. Instead try grilling or baking meat and fish, steaming vegetables or eating fruit fresh and raw.

4. Pray each time you eat.

Give thanks to God for each of the items before you in the meal, on your table, on the plate.

Look and see the care and love that God has for each of us by providing us with such beautiful and flavorful food.

For more information about how to manage hypertension and to honor God with our bodies and our food, visit <http://www.healthcareyoucanlivewith.com/40DaysSeries>.



BELLE AND HER AUNT JEN JEN

September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month

This is a good month to support one of the many nonprofit organizations working to eradicate childhood cancer and pray for kids like my 4-year-old niece Belle, who is fighting cancer. Belle has a choroid plexus carcinoma, which is a rare brain tumor. The original tumor was removed in September 2009, and she has been fighting the remaining cancer since then.

A family new to pediatric cancer...

Finding out that our son Carson had leukemia was by far the most devastating moment of our lives. It seemed like a death sentence at first, but for the last two months God continues to show us that He is bigger than cancer. After six weeks of treatment at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, our son is now in remission and we anticipate his full recovery. Through various human means, God is healing our son and we are grateful.

Perhaps equally amazing is all that God is teaching us through this trial. Our eyes are now open

to the number of people hurting because of this dreaded disease. Pain creates such openness to the gospel when we use our trial to minister to others.



CARSON

In addition, the outpouring of love and support from fellow Christians is unbelievable. We have a new appreciation for the fellowship of the gospel. Also, a fresh awareness about life's preciousness and priorities has changed us forever. There is little time for the trivial when we consider the brief moments we have to prepare for eternity. I

TELL US YOUR STORY.

I know there are many families out there fighting a similar battle. Email jrash@thealabamabaptist.org or comment on our Facebook page or on our blog at thealabamabaptist.wordpress.com.

would not choose this path for my son, but I am thankful God is using it for His glory.

Pastor Adam Dooley
Dauphin Way Baptist Church
Mobile, Ala.

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For September 25

Explore the Bible

By Robert Olsen

Assistant Professor of Christian Studies, School of Christian Studies, University of Mobile

IT'S ALL ABOUT GRACE

Romans 5:1-11, 15, 20-21

We Have Peace With God (1)

It has already been established in Romans 3 that everyone has sinned and as a result of sin, there is separation from God. This is a theme found throughout the Bible. Isaiah 59:2 says, "But your iniquities have built barriers between you and your God, and your sins have made Him hide [His] face from you so that He does not listen." God is a holy God, and as such, He punishes sin. However, if we have all sinned, then how can we be reconciled to God? The answer is that we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. As the mediator between God and man, Jesus was punished on our behalf so that those who believe in Christ and His atoning work on the cross may be declared righteous. Christ enabled us to have peace with God. While once we were objects of God's wrath (see Ephesians 2:3), now we have been reconciled to God through Christ.

We Have Christian Hope (2-5)

Now that we have this guarantee of salvation, it changes the way we live. We live with a strong hope in our eternal security. Because of this, we do not face suffering as unbelievers do. Instead Paul said we rejoice in our afflictions. While no one wants to face trials, we understand that through trials, God is producing character in us, which produces hope. He has a plan for us, and because we can trust God and know that He loves us, we can face trials knowing that we are in His hands. Another reason that we need not fear suffering is because we have a hope for our future, a future spent in eternity with God. This hope is not just some sort of wishful thinking. Because Jesus was raised from the dead and defeated death, we can be assured that all His promises to us are valid and will be fulfilled.

We Have God's Love (6-11)

This passage contains some of the strongest verses about God's love for us. Once again, it is important to emphasize that ev-

eryone is guilty of sin. As such, why should God bother to care for us? We all have insulted a perfect, righteous God and justly deserve death and condemnation. However, in spite of our lowly condition, God sent His Son, Jesus, to die for us, while we were still sinners. There are times in human history when a person is willing to die for another person. For example, a soldier may sacrifice his life to save the lives of his fellow soldiers. But how likely would it be for a soldier to die for enemy combatants? Imagine Gen. George Patton dying so that Adolf Hitler could live; that makes no sense. As sinners, we are God's enemies and He does not owe us anything. We do not deserve any mercy at all, and yet in spite of this, God loves us so much that He was willing to have Christ, perfect God and perfect man, die for us. Christ was sinless — He did not deserve to die. In fact, He is the only man who was perfect, and thus was the only one who could be an acceptable sacrifice on our behalf. As man, He took our punishment, and as God, He is able to be a worthy sacrifice. Now, because of Christ's atoning sacrifice, we are declared righteous in God's sight. While we still sin, God no longer counts our sin against us because Christ has paid the price for our sins and we no longer have to face God's wrath. This is the beauty of the gospel.

We Have Eternal Life (15, 20-21)

Paul now affirmed that salvation is for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Even though the Gentiles did not have the law given by God to the Jews, they were still guilty of sin demonstrated by the fact that they still died. God gave the law to His people so that they could see their sinfulness, which should have driven them to seek Him and His mercy. Adam's sin separated all men from God and brought death into the world, but Christ's death and resurrection reversed the final result of Adam's sin. Adam's trespass brought death but Christ's death and resurrection bring life to the believer. This eternal life is available to all who accept Christ as their Savior. This is God's supreme gift of grace to us.

Bible Studies for Life

By Eric Mathis

Instructor of Church Music and Worship Leadership, School of the Arts, Samford University

GO AND TELL

John 1:29, 35-46, 49-51

This week's Bible study concludes a four-week series exploring ways to pursue balanced spiritual growth. Perhaps this week is an appropriate time to reflect on not only the topics covered but also the ways in which you have applied them to your Christian growth.

The first week unashamedly claimed that participation in a Christian community is vital. The second week highlighted the importance of individual growth by exercising discernment, following good examples and studying Scripture. The third week, Paul called us to renew our minds and get to work exercising our gifts within the body of Christ. This week focuses on Christian witness as a component of spiritual growth.

Why We Go (29, 35-39)

The passages in this study highlight three elements: John's testimony of the long-awaited Messiah, the disciples' testimony about Jesus and Christ's testimony of Himself.

John the Baptist announced Christ as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (29). John's identification of Christ as the Lamb of God held significant connections to past, present and future events. First the image of Christ as the Lamb of God connected Jesus to the Passover lamb from ancient Hebrew culture (see Exodus 12). Second the image foreshadowed Christ's death (see John 19:36), and finally the image identified that He had come to change individuals enslaved to the world's sinful condition.

John announced Christ as the Lamb of God a second time (35-36), and after his second announcement, the first two disciples followed Christ (37, 39). These disciples named Christ as teacher and stayed in His presence (39). The significance of these passages is the example John provides in elevating Christ above himself. As we "go and tell," we would do well to follow John's example, making central the good news of Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Whom to Tell (40-46)

Both Andrew and Philip spoke of Christ to

close acquaintances: Andrew told his brother Simon (41), and Philip told his friend Nathanael (45). Andrew described Him as the "Messiah" (41). Philip described Him as "Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth," connecting Him to Moses and the prophets. Because Nazareth lacked prestige as a city, Nathanael reacted with skepticism about Jesus' validity. However, Philip encouraged Nathanael to "come and see" Christ for himself (46).

John and his two disciples, Andrew and Philip, each described Christ differently. The disciples recognized and publicly acknowledged the power they believed He had within the world. This power was confirmed when Simon received a new name (42), and his renaming suggests that following Christ requires a new way of living.

What Results (49-51)

In this passage, Christ again hinted at the great things that are yet to come through Him. While Nathanael enthusiastically recognized that Christ is the "Son of God, the King of Israel," Jesus reminded Nathanael that he was clueless about those things to come through His work. In this final claim, Christ reminds us that any attempt we make to identify Him and predict the nature of His work in the world will be both inaccurate and inadequate. Thus, while we are called to be witnesses to the glory of God seen among us (see John 1:14), we are to trust even more in the work of God, who through Christ continues to transform, call and equip disciples in the world.

As you reflect on previous lessons and engage in this week's study, remember that growing spiritually is more about learning a process than producing a product. It is more akin to running a marathon than a sprint. Just as children do not learn to converse with adults or dress themselves overnight, we do not learn to speak and act as mature followers of Christ overnight. Rather we become spiritually mature through the cumulative power of engaging in faith practices over a long period of time. And we can never underestimate God's power working within us to bring us to complete spiritual maturity on the day when we are made complete in Christ.

Christian Crossword

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Across

1. Los Angeles. (abbr.)

3. Paul came to _____. (Acts 18:19)

10. National Basketball Association. (abbr.)

12. To make joyful.

13. 3.14159265.

15. Tool for weeding.

17. This is the way, walk ye in _____. (Isa. 30:21)

18. Even ____ Christ forgave you. (Col. 3:13)

19. They ... traveled as far as _____. (Acts 11:19)

21. Ehud the son of _____. (Judg. 3:15)

22. Distress signal.

24. ____ not.

25. Where is the king of ...? (2 Kings 19:13)

26. Ready ... also to ____ at Jerusalem. (Acts 21:13)

28. Cast ____ between me and Jonathan.

30. Catholic service.

31. Over the brook _____. (John 18:1)

32. Jacob called Rachel and _____. (Gen. 31:4)

34. Mistreat.

37. You. (biblical)

38. ____ of the Chaldees. (Gen. 15:7)

40. Intending after ____ to bring him forth. (Acts 12:4)

42. ____ came out to meet Barak. (Judg. 4:22)

43. Holland cheese.

44. God ____ loved the world. (John 3:16)

45. An unruly crowd.

Down

2. Unknown author. (abbr.)

3. Each. (abbr.)

4. Art thou ____ that should come? (Matt. 11:3)

5. ____ and Semachiah

6. Jesus ... wearied ... ____ thus on the well. (John 4:6)

7. Western state. (abbr.)

8. All flesh shall _____. (Luke 3:6)

9. A relaxing pool.

11. Now Philip was of _____. (John 1:44)

14. Belonging to Abraham's son.

15. ____ is the father of Canaan. (Gen. 9:18)

16. A person may have many ____ in his life.

20. We would call Samson a ____.

21. Shall Christ come out of ____? (John 7:41)

23. Exclamation.

24. Porcius _____. (Acts 24:27)

25. To make part of a group.

26. Belonging to the man who did not fear the

27. Exists.

29. Used to carry other objects.

30. Mother.

33. Belonging to Canaan's son. (Gen. 10:15)

35. South America. (abbr.)

36. Out of the ____ of Jesse. (Isa. 11:1)

39. Take ... a ____ for a burnt offering. (Lev. 9:2)

41. Adam's ____.

42. Yes in German.

Religion In America

Compiled from Wire Services

Abortion remorse lawsuit rejected by Ill. appeals court

WASHINGTON — An Illinois appeals court has ruled a Planned Parenthood clinic was not obligated to tell a woman who later regretted her abortion that the procedure would take the life of a human being. The woman, identified in the case as Mary Doe, had an abortion in 2004 at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Chicago. She later filed suit against the clinic, alleging wrongful death of her unborn child, intentional infliction of emotional distress and malpractice, according to the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin.

Doe asked a Planned Parenthood counselor before the procedure if the abortion would end the life of a human being, and the clinic staff member said it would not. She said she would not have gone through with the abortion had the clinic told her the procedure would end a human being's life, according to the news report.

The First District Appellate Court affirmed Aug. 22 a lower court decision dismissing the suit.

"No court, regardless of where it sits, has found a common law duty requiring doctors to tell their pregnant patients that aborting an embryo, or fetus, is the killing of an existing human being," Justice Rodolfo Garcia wrote in the court's opinion, the Daily Law Bulletin reported.

"The negative answer from the Planned Parenthood counselor to the plaintiff's question of whether 'there was already a human being in existence' during the plaintiff's intake evaluation simply reflects the opinion of Planned Parenthood on when life begins," Garcia wrote.

Court allows Wisconsin graduation ceremonies in church

MADISON, Wis. — A federal court ruled Sept. 9 that two Wisconsin public high schools' practice of holding graduation ceremonies in a church did not violate the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

A divided three-judge panel of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against nine pseudonymous plaintiffs who claimed forcing graduates to attend ceremonies in a highly religious and sectarian setting was an establishment of religion barred by the First Amendment. Upholding a lower-court's ruling, the appellate court agreed that public-school students may not be compelled to participate in religious activities but distinguished that from the mere viewing of religious symbols.

The judges said the Elmbrook School District in southeastern Wisconsin did nothing wrong when it honored requests of seniors at two high schools to move their graduations from hot and crowded school gyms to the more spacious and air-conditioned Elmbrook Church, a local nondenominational congregation with trappings including crosses and other religious symbols.

The plaintiffs, all non-Christians, said the venue made them uncomfortable and implied endorsement of the church's teachings about other religions. The court agreed the atmosphere was "indisputably and strongly Christian," but rejected their argument that all graduation ceremonies held in houses of worship necessarily convey a message of endorsement.

Advocates lobby to save hunger programs from budget ax

WASHINGTON — Anti-hunger advocates are racing to save federal programs that feed needy families from being automatically slashed if Congress can't agree on a deficit reduction plan this fall.

As Congress resumes deficit-reduction talks this month, advocates for the poor worry that programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will suffer drastic cuts and hurt families that are already struggling.

One in five Americans receives SNAP benefits.

"Despite major gains made for hungry and poor people in 2010, millions of households are still struggling to put food on the table," said David Beckmann, president of the ecumenical anti-hunger group Bread for the World.

Congress's Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction — commonly known as the "Super Committee" — must agree on deficit reduction measures by Nov. 23 or automatic across-the-board cuts will be implemented. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported Sept. 7 that 59 percent of all "food-insecure" households in 2010 participated in at least one of the three largest nutrition assistance programs.

"The fact that the overall figures remain unchanged but SNAP participation is at an all-time high speaks to the necessity of safety-net programs," added Beckmann. "The Bible calls on us to protect the 'least of these.'"

CAMPUS News

JUDSON COLLEGE

► Massey Inaugurates Judson Chapel in New Academic Year:

James Earl Massey, of Greensboro, made his 10th consecutive annual visit to Judson College chapel Sept. 6. Massey was founding pastor of Metropolitan Church of God in Detroit and served as radio preacher for the Church of God's "Christian Brotherhood Hour" for five years.

He taught at Anderson University in Indiana and Tuskegee University before becoming adjunct professor of preaching at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham.

Platform participants included Massey; Leah Washburn, office manager for the admissions department at Judson; Judson student Miriam Hart, of Tallahassee; Judson student Staci Chessner, of Bessemer; and Judson choral director Judy Ransom.

► **Judson to Host Preview and Scholarship Day:** Judson College will host Preview and Scholarship Day on Sept. 24.

Interested students can test for scholarships that include one full-tuition and five partial-tuition awards. The day also will include tryouts for music and athletic scholarships.

For reservations or more information, call 1-800-447-9472 or visit www.judson.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF MOBILE

► **UMobile to Offer New Class, Trip to Paris:** A new course at the University of Mobile (UMobile),

Walking Through Paris: Aspects of France's Cultural History, includes the option of a trip to Paris with UMobile French instructor Barbara Brousseau.

No prior study of French is required for the course, which will be offered in spring 2012. Students enrolled in the course have first priority for the trip, which is also open to UMobile students, faculty, staff and alumni. Brousseau will lead the Paris trip May 14–22, but the spot in the class must be reserved by Oct. 31.

For more information, email Brousseau at bbrousseau@umobile.edu.

► UMobile Press Releases New Book:

There are seven lessons every American must remember in order for our nation to thrive, according to a new book titled "We Forgot! The 7 Unlearned Lessons of 9/11" by Joe Savage, director of the University of Mobile Center for Leadership and the Twelve23 Movement.

Savage said the current national crisis is due, in part, to the American people's failure to remember the foundational truths conveyed by our nation's founders. The lessons in "We Forgot" are drawn from events surrounding the 1789 inauguration of George Washington and the national response following Sept. 11, 2001.

For more information, visit www.twelve23.org or call 251-675-7551.

► UMobile to Sponsor Winter Jam 2011 Tour Spectacular:

The University of Mobile (UMobile) is the local tour sponsor of six stops of the Winter Jam 2011 Tour Spectacular, a multiartist extravaganza featuring some of the top names in Christian music.

The record-breaking Winter Jam Tour Spectacular — the No. 1 tour

in the world for the first quarter — will return to the road this fall, hitting 11 cities in the western United States.

UMobile also will be a sponsor of some concerts on the 2012 tour, which will continue on to multiple cities in the South and on the East Coast as the new year begins.

For more information and a complete tour schedule, visit www.jam-tour.com.

SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

► New Testament Scholar Brad Braxton to Give Samford's Holley-Hull Lectures:

Biblical scholar and teacher of preaching Brad Braxton will present Samford University's 2011 Holley-Hull Lectures Sept. 28–29.

Braxton, an ordained Baptist minister and a respected voice among today's progressive religious leaders, will speak on the theme "The Beloved Community in a Pluralistic World" during two lectures at Samford and one at Birmingham's Sixth Avenue Baptist Church.

On Sept. 28, he will speak at the church at 6:30 p.m. He will speak Sept. 29 at Samford at 10 a.m. in Reid Chapel and at 3 p.m. in Brooks Hall Auditorium.

Braxton earned a doctorate in New Testament studies at Emory University in Atlanta and a bachelor's degree in religious studies at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. He has held professorships at Vanderbilt University in Nashville and Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C.

For more information, call the Samford religion department at 205-726-2925.

Eliff urges spiritual awakening

Either beg God for spiritual awakening or sink into irrelevance — that was the plea International Mission Board (IMB) President Tom Eliff voiced to trustees at their Sept. 13–14 meeting in Orlando, Fla.

"I see this as the critical issue facing us as Southern Baptists," Eliff said.

"The truth of the matter is that if we don't experience spiritual awakening we will forfeit our capacity to effectively partner with others in carrying out the Great Commission."

The call for stateside spiritual awakening was unusual for the IMB's president, who would normally focus his report on issues facing Southern Baptist missionaries overseas.

But Eliff said, "God had instead placed a huge burden on my heart that couldn't be ignored."

"[Spiritual] awakening is a missions issue, because if we don't have an awakening in the hearts of Southern Baptists, then the pool out of which we fish for missionaries gets smaller and smaller," he explained. "We'll just become another denomination that had its day and has now slipped off into irrelevancy, and when people say 'Southern Baptist Convention,' they will probably say it with a yawn."

Eliff extended his appeal beyond trustees, asking IMB missionaries and all Southern Baptists to join him in praying weekly for the United States and the nations of the world.

Eliff designated a specific 24-hour period every week, from sunset Sunday to sunset Monday, for Southern Baptists to join together in petitioning the Lord for spiritual awakening. (BP)

Muslim extremists kill Christians

Armed Muslims from Niger entered Nigeria's Kaduna state in August to help Islamists there invade Christian communities, where they killed two Christians, including a 10-year-old boy, area sources said.

Aug. 21 the Muslim extremists attacked the home of Andrew Allahmagani, the district head in Fadiya.

"They moved to the quarters of my brother, where they shot and killed my nephew, Fidelis Ishaku, who was 10 years old, and shot and injured my mother, who is 70."

One of the assailants has been arrested, state police said. (CDN)

More than 'entertainment'

Gospel singer shares 'powerful message' in music, book

By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

During his teenage years, Jason Crabb and his siblings began singing at church services on Sunday mornings and offered their songs of praise to the Lord. It didn't take long before word quickly spread about this talented family, and they began receiving invitations to perform at local churches.

They had no idea how the Lord was working and that they were embarking on a musical journey that would lead them to performing in sold-out venues across the country and receiving Grammy nominations, Dove Awards and 16 No. 1 songs on the national radio charts.

In spite of its rapid success, the Crabb Family stayed true to its humble beginnings and desired to reach people from all walks of life with the message of the gospel. For 15 years, its unique blend of bluegrass, country and southern gospel music brought more than "entertainment" to audiences — it brought a powerful message.

In 2007, Crabb and his siblings felt it was time to enter a new season in their lives. Although Crabb was hesitant at first about performing without his siblings, his debut solo album has been extremely well received.

In 2010, he won a Grammy Award for Best Southern/Country/Bluegrass Gospel Album. That same year, his song "Somebody Like Me" won a Dove Award for Country Recorded Song of the Year, and he also received a Dove Award for his participation in the multi-artist Special Event Album of the Year, "Glory Revealed II: The Word of God in Worship."

After attending the Grammy Awards in 2010, Crabb and his



Photo courtesy of Turning Point Media

SINGING THE GOSPEL — Jason Crabb sang with his siblings in church when he was a child. In 2010 he won a Grammy Award for his solo album.

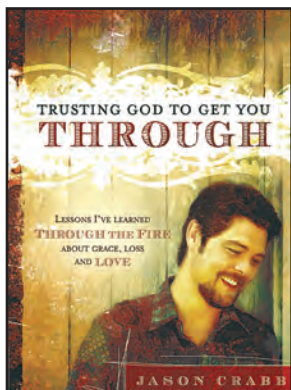


Photo courtesy of Turning Point Media

wife, Shellye, stayed in California for a few days and thought it would be fun to attend a taping of the game show, "The Price is Right." Crabb was surprised when a contestant recognized him in the audience. Later that day, Crabb struck up a conversation with a man who needed to be encouraged and reminded of God's love.

"As we were talking, the man shared that he had been in prison and was now in rehab," Crabb said. "I asked how things were going now, and he shared that he was having a hard time trying to get over some difficult circumstances. I started encouraging that man and telling him that if he placed his faith in Christ, then God could help him through these trials."

"When I was talking to the man, I felt like God was remind-

ing me that while I may have thought I was there for the Grammy Awards, this was actually why I was really meant to be there — to share Christ's love with this man. Before I left, I told the man: 'Get ready, because God's got great things in store for you.'"

In 2011, Crabb once again garnered multiple Dove Awards. The song "Sometimes I Cry," which is featured on his debut solo project and was written by his father, acclaimed songwriter Gerald Crabb, received the honors for Song of the Year. His father also received the prestigious title of Songwriter of the Year.

This fall, Crabb is releasing a live CD and DVD project, "The Song Lives On," in response to his highly successful solo album. In 2012, Crabb and his siblings will host the "Crabb Fest" concert series during a five-day cruise to the Bahamas aboard Carnival Fascination.

Desiring to connect people with the message of the gospel, Crabb has written the book, "Trusting God To Get You Through: Lessons I've Learned Through the Fire About Grace, Loss and Love."

Life challenges

In this book, Crabb opens up about the challenges he faced growing up as a result of his parents' divorce; the rise and unprecedented success of the Crabb Family and the uncertainty he felt stepping out to pursue a solo career. In addition, he shares about the pain and heartache that he and his wife experienced as the result of two miscarriages before their daughters were born.

By sharing these personal experiences and struggles, Crabb hopes that people will resonate with both the hardships and joys and will seek the Lord as their source of strength despite any circumstance or obstacle they may be facing.

"Everyone walks through the fire of adversity, but whatever your experiences — joys or sorrows — our amazing God can use every bit of your life to produce the most unexpected results," Crabb said.

Two Pakistani Christian men injured by Muslims

Two Christian men were seriously injured by young Muslim men in August in Karachi when they refused to convert to Islam, a family member said.

Ishfaq Munawar, and another young Christian man, Naem Masih, were returning home after an early morning prayer service at their

church in Sohrab Goth on Aug. 14 when ethnic Pashtun youths near Sea View harassed and later attacked them. They eventually went back to their car.

Later, "the Muslims got out of the car armed with iron rods and attacked Ishfaq and Naem, shouting that they should either recite the

Kalma or be prepared to die," Liaquat Munawar said, Ishfaq Munawar's brother. He said the Pashtuns severely beat the two Christians, fracturing Ishfaq Munawar's jaw and breaking five teeth, and seriously injuring Masih. He said the family had not registered a case with police, fearing reprisal by the Muslims. (CDN)

World of Religion

Compiled from Wire Services

Czech government may turn over seized churches

PRAGUE, Czech Republic — A prominent Czech church leader has welcomed an agreement that would allow churches to reclaim land and buildings seized under communist rule, but forfeit state subsidies in return.

A draft settlement was finalized in Prague on Aug. 25 that allows religious groups to retrieve assets that were confiscated after the 1948 communist takeover, while obtaining financial compensation for others.

"The ball is now in the government's court to prepare the necessary legislation," said Joel Ruml, chairman of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic and a member of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren.

Ruml said the restitutions — expected to begin in January 2013 — would particularly affect the Czech Republic's predominant Roman Catholic Church, which lost the most under communist rule.

However, he said all denominations would have to prepare for the gradual end of state support in a country where clergy salaries have been paid by the state since the 18th century.

"Although we've dreamed for years of becoming free from the state, this will pose a great challenge," said Ruml, whose council represents 11 Christian denominations, including Catholics as associate members. "Many church members are used to state support, and will need to be shown how this new situation offers opportunities for stabilizing our position and opening society to our work."

Muslim groups support law forbidding Islamic law

LANSING, Mich. — As a federal appeals court in Denver considers whether Oklahoma voters had the right to ban Islamic law in state courts, a coalition of Muslim groups say they don't want to live under Shariah law in Michigan or anywhere else.

An umbrella group called the American Islamic Leadership Conference recently announced its support for a proposed Michigan law that would forbid state judges from enforcing foreign laws, including Shariah, when they violate the U.S. Constitution.

The statement said the group recognized that people of faith had the right to religious arbiters so long as their decisions didn't conflict with American law.

At the same time, the groups said the Michigan bill would protect "Muslims and non-Muslims alike from extremist attempts" to use Shariah to institute a "highly politicized and dangerous understanding of Islam" in the West.

Said Manda Ervin, one of the nine signatories and head of the Maryland-based Alliance of Iranian Women: "Many of us fled the Muslim world to escape Shariah law. ... We do not wish these laws to follow us here."

While many Muslim organizations have called the anti-Shariah laws discriminatory and unnecessary, the statement said such bills "protect and integrate our communities into the fabric of this great nation, by strengthening our accountability to the laws of the land, and the constitutions of the various states in which we live."

Pope links British riots to 'moral relativism'

VATICAN CITY — Pope Benedict XVI linked August's riots in England to the corrosive effects of "moral relativism" and warned that preserving social order requires government policies based on "enduring values."

Benedict made his remarks Sept. 9 to Britain's new Vatican ambassador, Nigel M. Baker, at a meeting in the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, outside Rome.

The moral basis of government policies is "especially important in the light of events in England this summer," Benedict said, in an apparent reference to riots in London and other English cities in August, which left five people dead and caused at least \$320 million in property damage.

"When policies do not presume or promote objective values, the resulting moral relativism ... tends instead to produce frustration, despair, selfishness and a disregard for the life and liberty of others," the pope said.

Benedict called on government leaders to foster the "essential values of a healthy society, through the defense of life and of the family, the sound moral education of the young, and a fraternal regard for the poor and the weak."

The pope's words echoed remarks by British Prime Minister David Cameron, who said the riots were a consequence of his nation's "slow-motion moral collapse."