

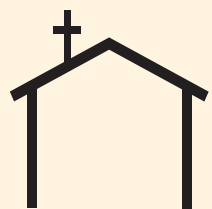


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Photo by Toni Wall

Southern Baptist Convention President Fred Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans, greets attendees at Impact Birmingham.

IMPACT Birmingham

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

SBC President Luter helps Birmingham churches put 'existing unity on parade'

Fred Luter is no stranger to Alabama Baptists. He has been preaching in venues across the state since Hurricane Katrina sent him and his family to Birmingham for a few months in late 2005. Birmingham was an easy choice for the temporary relocation because Luter's daughter, Kimberly, lives there.

So when Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans, and recently elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), received an invitation to headline the Sept. 23 Impact Birmingham evangelism rally, the decision was once again "easy."

"They know how to get me," he said. "They know where my soft spot is."

But this time Luter brings with him historical prominence and a schedule filled with national media requests, calls from high-profile people like President Obama and a visit with famed evangelist Billy Graham.

The perfect choice

Being elected the first African-American SBC president made Luter the perfect choice for Impact Birmingham. The Sunday night evangelism rally — sponsored by Living Faith Baptist Cathedral, Birmingham, (where Johnny Williams is pastor) and Winewood Baptist Church, Birmingham, in partnership with Birmingham Baptist Association — was held at Huffman Baptist Church, Birmingham, where Ron Ethridge is pastor. About 800 people attended the event.

John Davis, Winewood Baptist's pastor, said Impact Birmingham's purpose was to "demonstrate the unity and mission of Baptist churches in Birmingham ... to put our existing unity on parade."

"Unity is at work. We are here. We are work-

ing on it. We are into it," he said. "Enjoy it and let it grow in your heart and your spirit and let's make the best of it. Christ is up to something very special ... it's more than black ... it's more than white. He's after that one new man."

Mike McLemore, executive director of Birmingham Association, underscored Davis' description of the already existing unity among Birmingham Baptist churches. Thirty of the 135 churches in the association are predominantly black churches, he noted.

"Collectively we work together as an association to reach our city and our state for Jesus Christ," McLemore said. "[Impact Birmingham was] a historic moment for the state, for the SBC. I truly believe it is the desire of every Christian who loves Jesus to love their neighbor as their self."

"From this gathering ... you'll tell the story that it was a great coming together of God's people, seeking God's will and to do God's work from this place," he said. "We achieved our goal — to glorify God."

Preaching from Romans 1:16-17, Luter said, "Our nation is in trouble. Our states are in trouble. Our society is in trouble. If you want to see change, preach the gospel of Jesus Christ ... the transforming power of the gospel."

Current issues may seem perilous, Luter said as he named off concerns such as rampant crime, senseless murders, sexual abuse, an attack on marriage and family, drug abuse, racism, etc., but these are not new concerns.

"Paul knew about these times," Luter said. "[Paul] said men shall be lovers of themselves, disobedient, unfaithful, unholy, lovers of pleasure

rather than lovers of God — what an accurate picture of today's society!

"What's it going to take to change America?" Luter asked. The same thing that changed every believer, he answered: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Somewhere along the line you heard the gospel, the good news of our Lord and Savior," Luter said. "You heard, you believed and you trusted. ... If the gospel transformed your life, I believe the gospel can change the lives of those in ... places we are afraid to go."

"If God changed us, why can't God change them?"

Luter outlined four ways the gospel's power is transforming.

1. The gospel is personal. "It can come on your pew ... and speak a ... word that is meant just for you," he said.

2. The gospel is powerful. "It is the power of God unto salvation," Luter explained. "The Word of God that can penetrate years of sin and save a lost soul."

3. The gospel is practical. "The gospel can be accepted by anyone," he said. "You don't have to fix it up, dress it up or sugarcoat it. Just preach the Word of God. "Whosoever will let him come."

4. The gospel is persistent. "No matter where you've been or (what you've) gone through, you can always depend on the gospel," Luter said. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but God's Word shall stand forever."

"Only the Word of God can change America. The only hope for our nation is the Word of God. ... If you want to see change, preach the gospel of Jesus Christ." ❧



McLEMORE

"If you want to see change, preach the gospel of Jesus Christ ... the transforming power of the gospel."

Southern Baptist Convention President Fred Luter

COMMENT

Does Your Pastor Feel Affirmed?

And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer. 3:15).

"We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thess. 5:12-13).

"Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke and exhort with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2).

"In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14).

Sometimes we forget the role of pastor is a God-given role. It is not a human creation. God's Word establishes the office. God's Word provides guidance for how a pastor functions. God's Word also teaches how one is to relate to their pastor.

Baptists generally expect their pastor to be an evangelist guiding people to repentance and faith in God through Jesus Christ. A pastor is to be a preacher proudly proclaiming God's message to the congregation. In addition, the pastor is to be a teacher leading people into a deeper relationship with God and a broader understanding of His Word.

Baptists generally expect their pastor to be a caregiver. This may be expressed in pastoral counseling, through comforting people in times of crisis and through visitation with sick or the homebound. The pastor represents the loving presence of God during special events often called rites of passage — times like baptisms, weddings and funerals. The pastor voices the demands of God to the wayward.

Myriad expectations

Baptists generally expect their pastor "to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:12). Included in this broad statement is everything from planning training events to individual mentoring to administering the church in an effective manner.



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

Baptists generally expect their pastor to take the lead in missions efforts and social outreach programs. The pastor may be expected to provide the theological undergirding, to recruit the volunteers and to lead the effort.

Baptists generally expect their pastor to be an ambassador for that particular congregation. The pastor is the church's representative in the community whether at a social occasion, a service club or a political meeting. As no other human being, the pastor embodies the identity of the church.

In some cases Baptists even expect their pastors to be secretaries, janitors, chauffeurs and repairmen.

Is it any wonder that according to a survey done by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 70 percent of pastors have lower self-esteem now compared to when they started in ministry?

The multitude of roles expected of a pastor is crushing. The pastor is always changing hats, as it were. One moment he is an evangelist, the next he is a counselor. In one conversation he is a supervisor, in the next a committee member.

Skills for the various roles may not overlap. Perhaps that is why Ephesians 4 lists evangelists and pastor-teacher as separate gifts to the church, but Baptists have bound them together in their expectations of pastors. Being an ambassador for the church in a social setting may require different skills than repairing broken equipment in the church office.

No one can do everything that is required.

And there is never enough time. There are always people who need a word from the Lord. There are always sermons to prepare and programs to lead. There are always meetings to attend. And there are always the needs of the pastor's family, many of which are subordinated to the demands of the church.

Again the Fuller Institute survey provides insights into the emotional condition of pastors. Ninety percent reported feeling inadequately trained to cope with the demands of ministry. Fifty percent confessed they felt personally unable to meet the needs of their calling as pastor. Seventy percent said they had no one they considered a close friend.

Churches, especially Baptist churches, are good at holding pastors accountable for their work. Evidently, we are not so good at providing encouragement in the work. Maybe that is one reason why about 1,500 pastors, on average, leave the ministry every month in the United States, according to Peacemaker Ministries.

Opportunity for encouragement

Because October is recognized as Minister Appreciation Month, it is a wonderful opportunity to encourage your pastor and other staff ministers. Help your pastor know he is not alone in the work of the church. Every pastor longs for others to walk alongside him in doing the work of ministry. It is not to get someone else to do his job. It is "to prepare God's people for works of service." It is to multiply resources. It is to have trusted friends involved in encouraging, teaching and leading. It is to focus God-given talents in areas where those gifts are most needed and most appropriate. It is to allow people to work from their strengths and not from their weaknesses.

Every pastor longs for a church where he knows that his ministry is not at risk every time he preaches a sermon that is not popular or takes a stand on a social issue with which others disagree. Pastors live with criticism and with risk like few others. Every sermon invites criticism. Every stand against sin involves risk: risk of ministry, of reputation, of financial support.

Every pastor wants to know if he can fail and still be loved. Can he disagree and still be pastor?

Minister Appreciation Month gives individuals and churches an opportunity to affirm the pastor and other ministers in their calling and in their service. It is an important time. After all, it is the churches that allowed circumstances to develop where most pastors feel inadequate, unprepared and alone in their ministries. Now it is up to the churches to change that perception. That can begin by expressing appreciation to your pastor during this special month.





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

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Photo courtesy of Calhoun Baptist Association

A volunteer stacks shelves with canned goods at the CBA Baptist Service Center South. The supplies are funded in part by the Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund.

'A lifesaver'

World Hunger Fund helps Alabama Baptist ministries meet people's needs

By Carrie Brown McWhorter
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

When Alabama Baptists contribute to an offering to "feed the hungry," images of children with bloated bellies in faraway countries may come to mind. However, international efforts represent only one aspect of the global food crisis that the Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund (WHF) seeks to address. The other need is much closer to home.

Dan Wiggins, director of missions for Pleasant Grove Baptist Association, sees the need weekly at the association's Christian Ministries Center in Brookwood. The center serves residents of Bibb, Jefferson and Tuscaloosa counties. According to Wiggins, 1,234 families have sought help from the center this year, and the center has given away more than 55,000 pounds of food donated and paid for through a variety of sources, including the WHF.

"The money we get from the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM) [for hunger relief] is a lifesaver," Wiggins said. "What they give us is strictly used for food."

Wiggins said the center has assisted 240 more clients this year than the last, and he does not see the need diminishing.

"If anything, what we see is more and more new people and more and more new clients," Wiggins said.

Last year Alabama Baptists gave \$863,227 to the WHF offering, about 10 percent of the total amount given by Southern Baptists. All of the money collected through the WHF goes directly to help feed hungry people — none of the funds are used for administrative costs. This year's emphasis offering is Oct. 14.

When Alabama Baptists contribute to the WHF, one-quarter of the contributions stay in the state to assist associations with food pantries. Of the remaining amount, 80 percent goes to overseas hunger projects through the International Mission Board and 20 percent goes to the North American Mission Board to support hunger projects in the United States and Canada.

According to Gary Swafford, director of the office of associational missions and church planting for the SBOM, \$107,750 in hunger funds have been distributed in 2012 — "all for

the true purpose of sharing Christ while alleviating hunger."

Those funds support numerous local efforts, such as the Love in Action food pantry operated by Judson Baptist Association, the Southeast Alabama Baptist Hispanic Ministry Coalition food pantry operated by Coffee Baptist Association and The Daily Bread Shop operated by Shelby Baptist Association. Other associations operate full-service ministry centers like that of Pleasant Grove Association, including Covington Baptist Association and Columbia Baptist Association, Swafford said.

Valuable resource

Calhoun Baptist Association (CBA) receives funds from the SBOM as well. Jim Davis, associate director of church and community ministries and director of the association's two service centers, said the funds help provide a valuable resource for the people in his area.

"The mission statement of our Baptist service centers is to be 'a spiritual resource for the poor and downtrodden in our community,' and one way we do that is through the distribution of food," Davis said.

The CBA Baptist service centers distribute 9–10,000 pounds of food each month, so keeping food on the shelves is a constant challenge, Davis said. While churches provide much of the financial and volunteer support to the CBA service centers, hunger funds are another valuable part of the overall effort.

"The funds we receive through Southern Baptist World Hunger contributions help us buy food and cover the cost of food vouchers we provide to clients for the purchase of perishable food items," Davis said.

Ministering to the needs of the hungry then provides an opportunity to share the gospel with clients, Davis said. Last year 69

people were saved through the CBA service centers ministry. So far this year, 34 more have accepted Christ, Davis said.

"The downturn of the economy has definitely brought an ever-increasing number of people to our centers to request assistance, but it has also brought us ever-increasing opportunities to share the gospel of Jesus Christ," Davis said.

Davis said he often receives thank you notes from those who have sought help at the service centers, and sometimes, those notes include checks.

Wiggins believes it is important to remember that many people who seek assistance do so as a last resort, like a woman from Tuscaloosa County he encountered recently at the Pleasant Grove Association service center. The woman lost eight relatives in the March 2011 tornado that struck Tuscaloosa and her home was severely damaged. Once her home was repaired, she took in eight homeless friends.

Last week, he said, they came to the point where none of them had any food and there was no other help available. The ability to help people like her, he said, is what it truly means to feed the hungry in Jesus' name.

"We minister to people in crisis two times a week," he said. "I wish we could do more, but it is so important that we are here to do that." ❧

Alabama's goal for the
World Hunger Fund
Offering: \$800,000

World Hunger Sunday

is Oct. 14.

For resources, visit www.worldhungerfund.com.

Cohabitation before marriage 'doesn't work,' statistics show

Cohabiting couples are 30 to 50 percent less likely to have successful marriages, statistics show.

"We now know unequivocally that cohabitation doesn't work. Churches — the gatekeepers of weddings — can delay no longer. They must educate, equip and elevate marriage to the position it deserves," Mike McManus wrote in his book "Living Together: Myths, Risks and Answers."

From 1960 to 2011, the number of cohabiting couples jumped from 430,000 to 7.6 million, according to statistics McManus cited at an event hosted by the Family Research Council (FRC).

As a rising social norm, cohabitation has become prevalent across all generations in Christian and secular realms and often results in divorce, McManus said. The divorce rate could be reduced if churches would take a higher interest in preparing couples for marriage, he added.

McManus co-founded Marriage Savers in 1996 with his wife, Harriet, to help churches reduce divorce rates in their cities. Marriage Savers collaborates with churches in 229 cities to work on reducing the rate of cohabitation and divorce while raising the marriage rate. Participating churches sign a public marriage policy to work with other churches to reduce the number of divorces in their city.

"Our goal is to reduce the divorce rate, reduce the cohabitation rate and raise the marriage rate," McManus said at the Aug. 30 FRC lecture.

Through the Marriage Savers program, the average divorce rate has fallen 17.5 percent in cities with marriage policies while dropping only 9.4 percent in other cities, according to McManus.

Cohabitation not only is prevalent among younger couples but among adults more than 50 years of age as well. The number of older couples living together has doubled from 1.2 million in 2000 to 2.75 million in 2010, according to researchers at the National

Center for Family and Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green University in Ohio.

Many older, previously married couples say a wedding is too much of a hassle and are content simply to live together. Among couples between ages 50 and 64, 12 percent were cohabiting in 2010. That is up from 7 percent 10 years prior, according to NCFMR researchers in a *HealthDay* article.

Young couples cohabit for much different reasons. Some say it is a trial period before marriage while others blame it on finances. McManus has found through counseling couples with his wife that men and women have competing

reasons for cohabiting. Women see it as preparation for marriage, but men cohabit to avoid marriage, McManus said. This difference is the cause of many divorces in young couples.

"We want to help men and women have marriages that last," McManus said in his lecture. "This is important for them; it's particularly important for their children, of course."

The effect of cohabitation and divorce on children is vast. Children in cohabiting homes are 20 times more likely to be abused and are 22 times more likely to be incarcerated as an adult than a child from an intact home, McManus said. Children harmed by the divorce of their parents shy away from marriage and are more likely to cohabit when they grow up.

To help couples have successful marriages, McManus encourages them to live separately before their wedding and abstain from sexual activity. This enables both the man and woman to remain chaste and increases the pleasure of sex after marriage, he said. The majority of couples who abstain from sexual activity before marriage will not be as prone to divorce, he said.

McManus's goal with Marriage Savers is to reduce the divorce rate 15 to 50 percent in each city. Some cities have seen a 70 percent drop in divorce already, he said. (BP)

"Churches ... can delay no longer. They must educate, equip and elevate marriage to the position it deserves."

**Mike McManus
Marriage Savers
co-founder**

Nominees announced for state convention officer positions

With less than six weeks before the annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, *The Alabama Baptist* has learned of six Alabama Baptist pastors who have agreed to be nominated for one of the top three officer slots.

Being nominated for president are John Killian, current first vice president of the state convention and pastor of Maytown Baptist Church, and Roy Hill, pastor of First Baptist Church, Satsuma. It has been 10 years since Alabama Baptists had a contested election for the office of state convention president.

Chris Crain, pastor of South Roebuck Baptist Church, Birmingham, announced his plans to nominate Killian on Facebook in September. "John has devoted his entire ministry to investing in young pastors and to building up the body of Christ. He has served Alabama Baptists selflessly in numerous ways — formally and informally."

Crain later shared with *The Alabama Baptist* that Killian "is a Christlike man who is not afraid to stand on the Bible. ... I admire the fact that Dr. Killian has put in the hard work of getting to know the work of Alabama Baptists in our state. He genuinely loves and supports the entities of our state."

Hill will be nominated by Ed Litton, pastor of First Baptist Church, North Mobile, in Saraland.

"With excitement and anticipation I intend to nominate Roy Hill ... to serve as the next president of the Alabama Baptist



KILLIAN



HILL

Convention," Litton wrote in a September press release. "We need a leader who bridges the generations with a solid commitment to what has gone before and a clear eye for what comes next — a leader who will invite the next generation to discover and engage what is best about Alabama Baptists. Roy Hill is a sacrificial and courageous leader who has a vision for the future of Alabama Baptists."

Three names have been announced for the position of second vice president — Jim Cooley, pastor of First Baptist Church, Haleyville; Dusty McLemore, pastor of Lindsay Lane Baptist Church, Athens; and Lawrence Phipps, pastor of Vaughn Forest Baptist Church, Montgomery.

John Nicholson, pastor of Siloam Baptist Church, Marion, will nominate Cooley.

"It has been my pleasure to personally know, observe and benefit from his genuine leadership in Alabama Baptist life for the past quarter century," Nicholson said. "In these unsettled and changeable times Jim's sane, sagacious and sound leadership are rare and needed commodities. Combine these traits with his thorough knowledge of, and love for, Alabama Baptist life and the obvious conclusion is that Alabama Baptists need a man just like Jim."

Options for VP roles

McLemore confirmed he had been asked to allow his name to be put in for nomination but said at press time that he had not worked out the final details for who would be nominating him.

John Brock, pastor of Highland Baptist Church, Florence, plans to nominate Phipps.

"Lawrence has a proven track record of leadership that is faithful and visionary," Brock said. "God has prepared Lawrence, as much as anyone I know, to provide balanced leadership in this season of Alabama Baptist life. His love for the Alabama Baptist Convention, his passion for evangelism and missions, and his faithfulness as pastor of Vaughn Forest all commend him for this position." (TAB)

The position of first vice president has only one announced nominee, Travis Coleman Jr., current second vice president of the state convention and pastor of First Baptist Church, Prattville.

Rick Marshall, pastor of Eastern Hills Baptist Church, Montgomery, will nominate Coleman.

"Travis has distinguished himself as a trusted leader both as a pastor and in our convention," Marshall said. "Travis knows our convention well and is well known across our state for his leadership."

"Travis is a strong leader with a pastor's heart, someone who will keep us focused on missions priorities and together as a convention," Marshall said.



Photo by Barbara Bowden

HUEYTOWN'S CONCORD HIGHLAND SEES STEEL FRAMING IN PLACE

Concord Highland Baptist Church, Hueytown, in Bessemer Baptist Association, broke ground on a new building May 6 after its sanctuary and fellowship buildings were destroyed in the April 27, 2011, tornadoes. Steel framing was erected Sept. 19 for the new one-level facility that will include the sanctuary, offices, Sunday School rooms, a kitchen and fellowship center. Estimated completion is early spring 2013.

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What are we paying our pastors?

<i>Full-time senior pastor position in Alabama</i>							
Attendance	Number of Responses	Compensation			Pay Package		
		Average	High	Low	Average	High	Low
1-24	0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
25-49	1	\$26,080	\$26,080	\$26,080	\$42,632	\$42,632	\$42,632
50-74	19	\$41,765	\$64,000	\$22,600	\$47,666	\$83,000	\$22,600
75-99	22	\$47,081	\$72,000	\$26,100	\$52,721	\$77,200	\$31,944
100-149	46	\$48,747	\$93,000	\$25,494	\$58,213	\$100,000	\$29,600
150-199	46	\$55,280	\$77,000	\$34,000	\$64,023	\$111,857	\$34,000
200-299	46	\$64,502	\$87,311	\$40,020	\$74,604	\$109,014	\$46,520
300-499	51	\$80,017	\$223,000	\$51,250	\$95,507	\$223,000	\$52,000
500-999	28	\$94,900	\$184,030	\$56,818	\$108,222	\$196,257	\$62,224
1,000 and up	9	\$132,194	\$186,108	\$96,160	\$159,570	\$223,058	\$96,160

compstudy.lifeway.com/rangedreport/attendance.do

Compensation for pastors keeps pace with inflation, LifeWay Research shows

Compensation for full-time Southern Baptist pastors is increasing at a rate slightly faster than the rate of inflation nationally, but many churches continue to struggle in providing their pastors with adequate medical insurance.

These findings are part of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Church Compensation Study, an in-depth survey of 12,168 staff members in Southern Baptist churches. Baptist state conventions along with LifeWay Research and GuideStone Financial Resources conduct this survey every two years. All the data acquired by the study has been compiled into an online tool (LifeWay.com/CompensationSurvey) to help churches plan staff compensation packages.

Adjusting for church size, the average full-time Southern Baptist senior pastor's compensation (salary and housing) rose 5.5 percent between 2010 and 2012. That rate of change was only slightly higher than the 5.1 percent inflation rate for the same two-year period, according to figures supplied by the U.S. Department of Labor's Consumer Price Index.

According to Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research, "Other surveys by our team among Protestant pastors have shown that a majority of churches have not experienced growth in giving that would keep pace with these same inflation measures. In these churches, providing the cost of living pay increases and covering the rising cost of benefits has required cuts in other budget areas."

Overall, the value of the entire pay package for the average full-time senior pastor rose by 6.4 percent.

With no adjustments for church size, compensation for other full-time staff ministers decreased 0.7 percent between 2010 and 2012, while compensation for full-time office per-

sonnel increased 2.8 percent.

When it came to determining pastors' compensation rates, education level, tenure at current church and higher weekly attendance resulted in more compensation.

In fact, each additional educational degree level adds \$2,878 of compensation. Seminary graduates have a separate bump of \$7,012 in total compensation and receive more vacation time.

Larger churches tend to pay their pastors more. In fact, the study showed that for each additional attendee, compensation for full-time senior pastors increases by \$44.73.

Medical insurance

The survey also revealed that slightly more full-time senior pastors receive medical insurance from their churches today than in 2010, yet this rate matches results from the 2008 study.

Sixty-four percent of churches partially or fully pay medical insurance for their full-time senior pastors, compared to 61 percent in 2010. The U.S. Department of Labor indicates the cost of medical care rose 7 percent between June 2010 and 2012.

Twelve percent of SBC churches provide at least partial medical-insurance funding for the full-time pastor alone, while 19 percent fund coverage for the pastor and his wife and 34 percent supply coverage for the pastor and his family.

For full-time senior pastors, churches fully or partially pay for the following benefits:

- ▶ Life and/or accident insurance — 37 percent
- ▶ Disability insurance — 30 percent
- ▶ Dental insurance — 28 percent

▶ Vision insurance — 12 percent

"When it comes to benefits for senior pastors, it appears churches are doing the best they can. On average, the more people a church has attending worship, the more insurance benefits they provide for the pastor," McConnell said.

More than half of churches with weekly attendances above 250 people provide insurance for the pastor and his family. Nearly half (47 percent) of churches that average 50-99 people in weekly attendance do not provide any medical coverage.

"Southern Baptist churches have defied recent trends among American workers in which Gallup polls have shown declining percentages of non-government workers receiving employer-based health insurance," he said.

Tim Head, executive officer for denominational and public relations services at GuideStone, said the online compensation tool is a starting place for churches to see how they compare to other Southern Baptist congregations.

"This tool was designed to provide a snapshot of how Southern Baptist churches provide compensation packages for their workers," Head said.

The survey also obtained compensation data for bivocational pastors and part-time custodial and office personnel. In 2012 for the first time, this data is standardized by the median number of hours worked to allow churches to more easily compare their part-time employees with these averages.

"In this troubled economy, it is encouraging to note that pay and benefits are generally headed in the right direction for those who choose to serve the body of Christ as a full-time profession," Head said. (LifeWay)

Choctaw Association's men's ministry provides running water to needy couple

By Grace Thornton
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Imagine what it would be like for your faucets to run dry for four and a half years — to drink only bottled water, to bathe at a neighbor's, to lack bathroom facilities.

Billy May could not fathom it when he heard it, either.

"The lady came into the food bank in Gilbertown, and she wanted to help out every week before she took her food home. She got to talking to my wife while she helped, and that's when we found out that she and her husband hadn't had running water in more than four years," said May, director of Choctaw Baptist Association's men's ministry. "Their well had caved in, and they couldn't afford to drill a new one."

A new well would cost \$10,000, he said, and the lady's husband is disabled.

"Someone nearby was letting them come over and bathe, and someone else was hauling water to feed their farm animals," May said. "They didn't have access to water at their own house."

'We had to help them'

That just would not do, May said. "We knew we had to help them out," he said.

Franklin McLelland, director of missions for Choctaw Association, said he and May started the association's men's ministry a decade ago with the goal of helping the elderly and needy in the county.

"Our focus is to help senior adults who can't afford to pay for things," McLelland

said. "We have a fund set up for that, and we buy the materials out of that fund and the men donate their time."

And it did take some time.

"It took three months of talking to people in charge in their area to convince them to put a water meter in, but they still didn't want to run a water line to her house," May said.

The house was half a mile from the end of the nearest water line.

"More time elapsed before I could get someone to bury the water line for us," he said.

But when the plans finally came together, he and seven other men got the water line down in two days.

"The lady is happy. She's been happy now for about two months. And she still

helps in the food bank, so we see her often," said May, a member of Chappell Hill Baptist Church, Gilbertown.

He and the other men of Choctaw Association's men's ministry have gotten to see many people a little happier and a little closer to knowing God's love personally over the past decade, he said.

"We've spent a lot of money and done a lot of work and enjoyed every bit of it," May said. "It's a poor county, and we've got a lot of people who are elderly and in need."

The men have done repair work and countless other projects, as well as disaster relief. And every two weeks the food bank gives away a ton of food.

"The aim is to try to help people in need, no matter the age, and whatever that means," McLelland said.

Across Alabama's Associations

BESSEMER

► **Fairfield Highlands Church, Midfield**, will hold fall revival Oct. 14–17. The morning service Oct. 14 will be at 11 a.m. and the evening services will be at 7 p.m. Bill Hatley will speak. Dale Jones will direct music. For information visit www.fairfield-highlandsbaptist.org. Ed Cruce is pastor.

BIRMINGHAM

► Southern Baptist Convention President **Fred Luter**, pastor of Franklin Avenue Church, New Orleans, was the featured speaker for the **Birmingham Association** weekly ministers conference Sept. 24. Mike McLemore is executive director. ► **First Church, Trussville**, will hold a fall women's event Oct. 15. A cider reception will be at 5:30 p.m. Author, humorist and storyteller Cathy Lee Phillips will speak and Kristy White will sing. A full meal prepared by The Chocolate Biscuit staff will include pork tenderloin with apple butter gravy, loaded mashed potatoes, spinach salad and dessert. For ticket information call 205-655-2403. ► **Thomas Church** will celebrate homecoming Oct. 7, 11 a.m. Lunch and a singing with The Dotson Family will follow. Bud Thomason is pastor.

CENTRAL

► **Weogufka Second Church** will celebrate homecoming Oct. 14, 10 a.m. Billy Paul Williams will speak. Gerald and Tammy Smitherman, Roger and Laurie Vines and Joe and Jennifer Whitman will sing. Lunch will follow. Brandon Baird is pastor.

COFFEE

► **Whitewater Church, Elba**, will celebrate homecoming Oct. 14, 10:30 a.m. Former pastor Randall Pearson will speak. Lunch will follow. For information call 334-897-2452. Richard Collier is pastor.

ESCAMBIA

► **Sardis Church, Atmore**, will celebrate homecoming Oct. 14. The Master's Men will sing at 10 a.m. Jesse Wood will speak. A covered-dish lunch will follow. Earle Greene is interim pastor.

FRANKLIN

► **Rockwood Church, Russellville**, has called **Kris Green** as pastor. He and his wife, Diana, have three children.

GENEVA

► **Maple Avenue Church, Geneva**, will host The 39er's C.L.U.B. (Christians Living Under the Blood!) nondenominational luncheon Oct. 9, 11 a.m. Christie Lynn and Chad Mock will present a gospel music program. For information call 334-684-9617. Mike Shirah is pastor.

MADISON

► **Steve Grissom** celebrated his one-year anniversary as pastor of **Haven Church** on Sept. 11. The church held a reception for Grissom and his family Sept. 16.

MONTGOMERY

► **Snowdown Church, Montgomery**, will celebrate homecoming Oct. 14, 11 a.m. A covered-dish lunch will follow. A singing by Called Out with Tim Stough will be at 5:30 p.m. Revival with Danny Crosby will follow at 6:30 p.m. and continue nightly through

Wednesday. Steve Campbell is pastor.

SHELBY

► **Shelby Association** will hold the Holiday Thrift Store in the old Winn Dixie, Columbiana, selling donated new and used Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas items, clothing, books and more. Sale will be held weekly through the holidays, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 8 a.m.–5 p.m.; Tuesday, 8 a.m.–8 p.m.; and Saturday, 8 a.m.–3 p.m. All proceeds go to area ministries. For information or to volunteer call 205-669-7858. Hugh Richardson is director of missions.

SIPSEY

► **Arbor Springs Church, Northport**, and **New Hope Church, Berry**, along with other area churches, will sponsor Community Tent Revival Oct. 14–15 on U.S. 43 at milepost 220.6. Sunday services will be at 10 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. and Monday, 7 p.m. Gil McKee will speak. Ted Sessoms is pastor of Arbor Springs. Ed Steelman is pastor of New Hope.

TALLAPOOSA

► **Comer Memorial Church, Alexander City**, will celebrate homecoming and 90th anniversary Oct. 7, 10:30 a.m. Former pastor Bruce Willis will speak. Lunch will follow. Tim Harris is pastor.

WASHINGTON

► **Spring Hill Church, Milry**, will celebrate homecoming Oct. 14, 11 a.m. Kenneth Henson will speak and Bruce Hoven will direct music. Dinner will follow at noon. James O'Neal is pastor.

Alabama updates

People, churches making news across the state

Mims receives Alabama National Guard award

William Mims, a member of Billingsley Baptist Church for 19 years, was elected the Alabama National Guard warrant officer of the year.

Mims, who has served as Billingsley Baptist's treasurer since 2006, is chief warrant officer 3 and works as a human resources specialist in the National Guard.

Nominated in March 2012 by Col. Christopher J. Morgan, deputy chief of staff of personnel of the Alabama National Guard, Mims received the award in late spring of 2012 in Huntsville.

He traveled to Reno, Nev., on Sept. 10 to attend the National Guard of the United States General Conference and to represent Alabama and bring forward Alabama National Guard issues.

Mims, who went through basic training as a self-described 35-year-old "old man," earned the rank of warrant officer after five years and three months. At age 40, Mims became chief warrant officer 3, his current position. He also served a one-year tour in Iraq in 2004.

"[William] is a tremendous guy," Billingsley Pastor Tom Taylor said. "He's a solid Christian; he lives his faith. ... He looks at his job as more of a ministry. ... He's very humble and modest."

Taylor recognized Mims' achievement in front of the congregation and plans to honor him further in the future.

Mims and his wife, Lora, have two children. (Neisha Fuson)



MIMS

Samford's Randy Todd receives teaching award

Randy Todd, Samford University classics professor, received the John H. Buchanan Award for excellence in classroom teaching during the university's fall semester opening convocation Aug. 28.

Todd, founding chair of the Samford classics department, was cited for his leadership in building a thriving classics program that is the envy of many schools throughout the nation, Provost J. Brad Creed said.

"He has built a robust major, attracted outstanding students and faculty, and played an integral role in developing a classically-oriented core curriculum," Creed said, adding that Todd "conveys a contagious enthusiasm for the literary and cultural achievements of the past."

The annual award includes a lapel pin and a \$1,000 cash prize. Members of the 2012 graduating class nominated finalists for the award.

A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Furman University in Greenville, S.C., Todd holds a doctorate from Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He and his wife, Candy, who teaches in the Samford mathematics department, have four children. (Samford)



TODD

Second Baptist Boaz Pastor Harrison retires

James E. (Jimmy) Harrison, former pastor of Second Baptist Church, Boaz, in Marshall Baptist Association, retired from the pastorate in August after 45 years in the ministry.

Harrison answered the call to ministry at his home church in Gurley and graduated from Baptist Bible Institute (now Baptist College of Florida in Graceville, Fla.) in 1970.

His ministry began in 1967 at New Hope Baptist Church, Marianna, Fla., and he served as pastor of churches in Florida, Alabama, Louisiana and Tennessee. At the time of his retirement Harrison had served as pastor for 14 and a half years at Second Baptist, Boaz.

The church held a luncheon in Harrison's honor Aug. 12. Attendees wished him well, offered prayers and presented him with gifts.

"We had a wonderful day," he said of the luncheon. "I'm very appreciative of the people of Second Baptist ... and I enjoyed being their pastor for that length of time."

Harrison said that in his retirement he will continue to support missions and is interested in interim preaching, supply work and filling in at revivals. Harrison and his wife, Faye, have two children and three grandchildren. (TAB)



HARRISON



Photo courtesy of Brent Baptist Church

BRENT BAPTIST CHURCH HONORS MUSICIANS FOR LONGTIME SERVICE

Brent Baptist Church in Bibb Baptist Association honors Margaret Dowdle (second from right) for 45 years of service as organist and Molly Meigs (second from left) for 30 years of service as pianist Aug. 26. Pictured with them are Pastor Greg Hyche (left) and Minister of Music Benny Russell.

Voting by the Book



By Jay T. Robertson
Special to The Alabama Baptist

Christians challenged to vote in way that glorifies God, does good to fellow man

Walking into the voting booth, you thought you were clear on how to vote. But as you look over the ballot, some of the initiatives appear “more complicated” than you had thought. With a perplexed look on your face and uncertain thoughts flooding your mind, you begin to wonder why you need to vote. You are not alone. Many Americans are perplexed about the significance of their vote.

As election day draws nearer, many Christians interpret their civic responsibility differently. Some believe they should withdraw completely from the affairs of this earthly kingdom and only involve themselves in the affairs of the spiritual Kingdom. Christians should have nothing to do with petitions, protests and ballots. Instead believers must take up the weapons of the Spirit such as prayer meetings, gospel tracts and revival services. Others seem to believe that revival can be ushered in on Air Force One if the right person is elected president. If the political institutions can be “Christianized,” a golden age will result. But what about the majority of Christians who fall somewhere in between these two extreme positions? Should a Christian vote? Do Christians have an obligation to vote? What does voting have to do with a Christian worldview? What impact does voting have on the glory of God?

Salt and light

As Christians grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and are transformed by the renewing of their minds, they are enabled to see life through the eyes of Christ. Spiritual maturity occurs as one acquires a biblical lens through which he or she sees the big picture of God’s plan. This big picture consists of four frames: creation, the fall, redemption and restoration. God created the universe and everything and everyone in it. It was very good. The tempter came sowing seeds of doubt and making statements of denial concerning God and His truth. Adam and Eve believed Satan’s lie rather than God’s truth, resulting in a cursed universe. But God had a plan to redeem a people for Himself, so He sent Jesus into the world to die for sinners (and we all qualify). Jesus absorbed God’s wrath that should fall on us and paid the penalty for our sins. Salvation is now available to all who will call on the name of the Lord. Believers are created in Jesus Christ for good works. By God’s grace Christians are to shape and transform culture. Your light is to shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to God. Believers are to be transformers of society. God does not save people to sit, soak and sour on a church pew. Christians are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

So how does the voting booth relate to the glory of God? If you believe that all of life belongs to God and you have been saved to glorify God in all you do by making a difference in people’s lives, you cannot neglect involvement in politics. Christians often hesitate because politics can be a

dirty business, but business will not improve unless believers participate by voting on the basis of biblical convictions and, for some, by serving in various elected positions. Christians should bring a different style and content to political life.

William Wilberforce serves as a great example. He was deeply Christian, vibrantly evangelical and passionately political. He served in the British House of Commons and fought to end the African slave trade. On Oct. 28, 1787, Wilberforce wrote in his diary: “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of morals.” In battle after battle in Parliament he was defeated because “the Trade” was so woven into the financial interests of the nation. But he never gave up the two great objects God laid on his heart. Twenty years later, at 4 a.m. on Feb. 24, 1807, the decisive vote was cast and the slave trade was declared illegal in the British Empire. Members of the House of Commons rose and turned toward Wilberforce in a burst of parliamentary cheers while the little man sat, head bowed, tears streaming down his face.

As citizens of earth as well as of heaven, we cannot complain about the political leaders we have or the decisions they make unless we are willing to elect men and women of integrity who support policies that restrain evil and reinforce goodness. For Christians to make a difference in this world as salt and light they need to be involved in the political process, both by voting and by encouraging qualified men and women to enter the vocation of politics.

We simply cannot escape by pointing out the imperfections of leaders. That is the only kind of leaders there ever will be until the Leader returns to rule the cosmos. Our calling in this world is not to wait for the perfect candidate to be placed on the ticket, but to pick our way through the thicket of flaws we find in a Genesis 3 world by walking in wisdom and voting for imperfect candidates who best reflect a biblical worldview.

The Lord Jesus does not offer us the luxury of disengagement from the political process. Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). Even secular Caesar has his claim on our lives because God made human governments His way of running the world. The apostle Paul wrote, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). In a democratic republic like the one we are blessed to live in that at least means we should vote.

There are many ambiguities and complexities when it comes to voting for a particular kind of person as our political representative or for or against a party with a platform we endorse or reject. Political decisions affect every aspect of our lives, from taxation to issues such as stem cell research, abortion, marriage, the family, war and economic policies. God has commanded us to “seek the wel-

fare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). The apostle Paul wrote, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Praying for the welfare of our city and for our leaders is being involved in politics. If Christians would spend more time praying to our Father in heaven with broken hearts rather than murmuring and criticizing our political leaders while failing to pray for them, we could see God transform this nation. Christians are to be a positive, godly influence in their communities.

Citizens of heaven

Believers are citizens of both this world and the world to come, but a Christian’s heavenly citizenship must come first. The Christian’s dual citizenship leads to a tension which requires wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to perceive Christ-magnifying, gospel-fashioned, people-helping, community-transforming ways to live with the knowledge that God supplies us. Wisdom is needed because so many of the decisions we have to make are not explicitly regulated by specific Scriptures. Wisdom is needed as you think about having your citizenship preeminently in heaven, not in America. How do you live on the earth when your life is hidden with Christ in God, when you are an alien and exile on this earth, and yet are commanded to submit to the powers that be, to love your neighbor and to make a living and subdue the earth? How are we to be in the world and not of the world? Although we must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, we can never forget that we are exiles wherever we find ourselves, and thus there are limitations on Christian allegiance to any political structure, political ideology or even nation or king.

In addition to wisdom, Christians need courage to vote against injustices in our political systems. God’s passion for justice is clearly seen in the Bible. Amos declares, “Take away from the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:23–24). Since God is passionate for justice and righteousness, we must have the courage to take a stand and vote in a manner consistent with His desires. We must look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.

When you walk into the voting booth Nov. 6, the kingdom of God will not be on the ballot. However, there will be electoral choices that significantly impact the common good. And your choices are important. May you enter the voting booth and make your selections for the glory of God and the good of your fellow man.

EDITOR’S NOTE — Jay T. Robertson, Ph.D., is assistant professor of Christian ministries at the University of Mobile. ☞



BEARD

An 'inside job'

By Michael J. Brooks
Judson College

Ex-con Mary Kay Beard shares how she found God in jail

She's been described as looking like a sweet grandmother, so it's shocking to hear Mary Kay Beard talk about having been on the FBI's most wanted list.

Beard, who lives in Birmingham, made her seventh visit to Judson College in Marion on Sept. 25 to speak to students, faculty and staff.

Raised in Missouri, Beard never missed church as a child and teenager.

"I guess I never questioned this," she said. "I hear parents talking about giving their children options as far as church attendance, but I never thought to ask if we had an option. Mama told us we would go every time the doors were open."

Beard memorized Scripture and taught Sunday School as a young adult.

Because she didn't get along with her alcoholic father, Beard left home to attend nursing school as a teenager. But her life took a new turn when she agreed to a blind date. She married less than two weeks later, not knowing her new husband, an entertainment promoter, was an ex-con, bank

robber and gambler.

"I had nice things and plenty of money," Beard said. "But as the Bible says, 'we deceive ourselves.' I knew what I was doing was wrong." Later her husband abandoned her and Beard continued her life of lawlessness.

After her arrest, Beard faced the possibility of spending the rest of her life in jail.

"I was wanted in four states and had 35 warrants," she said.

Through the influence of a number of Christians who taught Sunday School in the Jefferson County jail in Birmingham, Beard gave her life to Christ.

"I was so hardened due to my lifestyle, I knew that any changes would have to be an 'inside job,'" she said. "And that's what the Bible promises. God said He would take away our 'stony heart' and put His spirit in us." She was sentenced to 21 years in prison and sent to the Julia Tutwiler Prison

for Women in Wetumpka. There she took courses at Auburn University and was paroled after serving five and a half years. She said her release was a miracle since the law specified inmates had to serve seven years before being considered for parole and because she'd never met with the parole board.

Beard went to work for Prison Fellowship in 1982 and that same year founded the Angel Tree program, which provides gifts for children of inmates at Christmas. Angel Tree operates in all 50 states and in 45 countries. Beard published her autobiography, "Rogue Angel," in 2005.

"I knew all the answers but didn't really know the way to God until I was in jail," she said. "Now I have the privilege of traveling the nation and talking about how God changes our hearts." She is the founder of Encourager Ministries in Birmingham. The website is marykaybeard.com.



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Reverse Mortgage News

By Jimmy Dixon

The most recent change I've seen with the reverse mortgage has to do with the origination fee. Or shall I say, the lack of it. For years we charged an origination fee that was equal to 2 percent of the home's value. Then, for the recent past, we have not charged an origination fee on a fixed rate reverse mortgage if the interest rate was on the higher end. The new deal is that lenders will now actually give you a lender credit on a fixed rate that is on the higher end. That means most of my clients will receive \$500 to \$2,500 more for doing business with certain lenders.

Since there is no personal liability to repay the reverse mortgage and the great majority of homeowners do not repay it, why not take a higher rate and put

more money in your pocket?

Now at present, there are no lender credits for variable rate plans, but for those who opt for the growing line of credit, you could very well overcome the initial origination fee in a short period of time if you leave a good bit of money in your account.

If you have questions or if you would like a free brochure, DVD or quote, please call me. My direct phone number is 205-567-4800 and my email is jdixon@mcmgownking.com.

Remember, like *The Alabama Baptist*, Jimmy covers our great state helping seniors improve the quality of their lives. He is Bible study director and an active deacon at Valley Creek Baptist Church, Hueytown. Contact him today.



Jimmy Dixon



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Jasper's Edgil Grove Baptist Church marks 75 years

Edgil Grove Baptist Church, Jasper, celebrated its 75th anniversary Sept. 9 with "maxed out crowds," deacon John Maddox said.

According to Maddox, who served on the anniversary's planning committee, about 400 people attended the day's festivities at the Walker Baptist Association church.

The history of the church was compiled in a spiral-bound book for attendees to pick up at the door when they arrived. "We worked on it (the book) for about three months," Maddox noted.

The Page Trio kicked off the service at 10:45 a.m. with special music.

Bill Mathews, a representative from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission (ABHC), presented a certificate commemorating the anniversary, and Lucky Teague, director of missions for Walker Association, presented Edgil Grove Baptist with a commemorative plaque. Pastor David Miller spoke to the congregation, and after the worship service Lee Taylor spoke about his memories as former pastor of the church.

Lunch followed in the fellowship hall and Debbie and Matthew Wilson put on a mini-concert at 1 p.m.

"Jesus definitely showed up," Maddox remarked of the day, adding there was a "tremendous spirit" of the Lord there.

Miller said a special element of the celebration was when the ABHC presentation was made to Hancel Cox. Cox has served as associate pastor of Edgil Grove for the past 32 years.

Miller, who is now in his seventh year as pastor, said his vision for Edgil Grove's future is to "continue with missions work" both within the local community and abroad. He noted the church has ministered in every state in the South and also in foreign countries. (Julie Payne)

Warrior's Mount Zion celebrates 125th anniversary

Mount Zion Baptist Church, Warrior, celebrated its 125th anniversary Sept. 8-9 with the theme, "Celebrating God's blessings and rejoicing in future promises."

The weekend festivities for the North Jefferson Baptist Association church kicked off Sept. 8 with an afternoon of games, fellowship, a hot dog meal and a bluegrass/gospel concert by Blackrock Station. Sunday's worship service included minister of music Tim Muncher and his family's presentation of "He is Here."

Bill Martin, senior pastor of New Canaan Baptist Church, Jasper, spoke to the congregation.

Mike Jackson, director of the office of leadership and church health for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, was in attendance and Lonette Berg, executive director of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented the church with a certificate commemorating its 125 years.

A video was shown highlighting past activities, previous milestones and interviews with longtime Mount Zion Baptist members.

Pastor Sammie Reid spoke on "The Only Church That Will Last." Steve Loggins, director of missions for North Jefferson Association, prayed the benediction and blessing for the fellowship lunch that followed. Historical items of the church were on display, and a keepsake booklet and bookmarks were given to attendees.

Reid said he told some church members that Mount Zion has "never had a better weekend" than the celebration weekend.

"We believe the best days of the church are still in our future," he noted, adding they are "excited" about its future. (TAB)

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Ancient ^{or} modern forgery?

'Jesus' wife' fragment authenticity doubted

Various news outlets caused a stir over the announcement of a small, newly translated Coptic manuscript fragment indicating that Jesus may have had a wife.

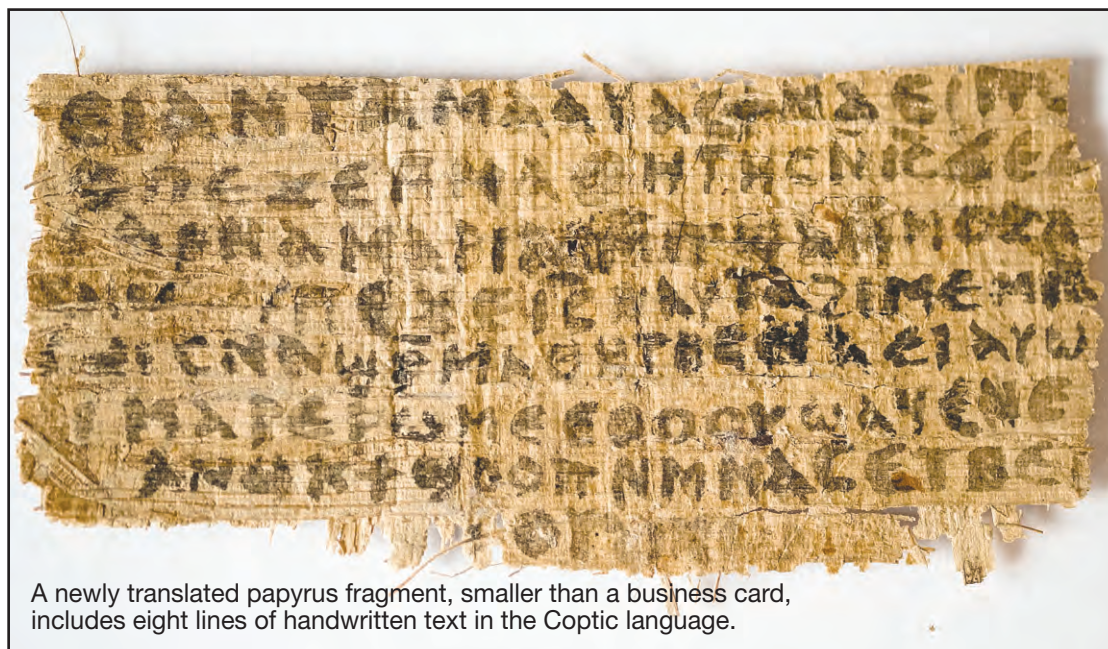
But what should Christians make of the new claim?

Not much, according to scholars at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS). In fact, even the scholar who presented the discovery Sept. 18 at the International Association of Coptic Studies in Rome downplayed any possible link between the Coptic

fragment and the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels.

James Leonard, assistant registrar at NOBTS's Leavell College, studied Coptic texts intensively during his doctoral studies at Cambridge University. And while he has only seen photographs of the recent discovery, he is skeptical about the authenticity of the document.

"We have to start out by deciding whether the fragment is ancient or if it is a modern forgery. If it's a forgery, what do you do, you just throw it out," Leonard said. "If it is indeed ancient — going back



A newly translated papyrus fragment, smaller than a business card, includes eight lines of handwritten text in the Coptic language.

RNS photo

to the fourth century or even to the second century — it still would have no historical value pertinent to Jesus' life, given that its witness is so late."

The papyrus fragment, smaller than a business card, includes eight lines of handwritten text in the Coptic language. Derived from the Greek alphabet, Coptic is essentially the Egyptian language represented with an alphabet rather than hieroglyphics.

Some who have commented about the fragment note a strong resemblance to the noncanonical Gnostic manuscript known as the Gospel of Thomas.

Fragment origins

Karen L. King, the Harvard University scholar who has been studying the manuscript, believes it is a genuine fourth-century copy of a second-century text. However, the owner of the fragment has not been identified and little is known about the document's origins. King has repeatedly issued cautions to the media. The text, she said, does not provide historically reliable data regarding Jesus' marital status.

Key figures in the textual studies discipline are split on whether the document is authentic; that is, whether the document was written in the fourth century. Some scholars, including Roger Bagnall of New York University and AnneMarie Luijendijk of Princeton, have joined King in arguing for the document's authenticity. Other scholars, including Francis Watson of Durham University and Simon Gathercole of Cambridge — professors Leonard worked closely with during his doctoral studies — have pointed out what they believe are telltale signs of forgery. In a paper posted online at www.markgoodacre.org/Watson.pdf, Watson argued that the text appears to be constructed by a modern author rather than an ancient native Coptic speaker.

"Watson shows how the fragment looks as if a forger took snippets of quotations from various Coptic sources — mostly the Gospel of Thomas — and patched them together," Leonard said.

"Indeed, one line of the fragment 'coincidentally' ends at the same place where the text is bro-

ken off in the corresponding line of the only extant manuscript of the Gospel of Thomas," he said.

Inflammatory statement

Gathercole sees another reason for concern: the most inflammatory statement in the manuscript is squarely in the center of the fragment. While the shocking statement is in the middle, key explanatory information is missing because of where the document is torn.

Bill Warren, New Testament professor and director of the Haggard Center for New Testament Textual Studies at NOBTS, has been following the discussion about the new discovery. Warren said the "clean cuts" and careful framing of "my wife" without the surrounding words to provide context creates suspicion about the document's authenticity.

"If we assume that the fragment is authentic, the placement of the main statement being discussed about Jesus saying 'my wife' right in the center of the fragment is at best suspicious, and the lack of a fuller context for knowing what exactly was being said lends itself to speculations that may be far off the mark if only a fuller context was known," Warren said. "For example, was Jesus answering a question about 'my wife' and so us[ing] the wording from the question? We simply don't know the context."

Warren also mentioned the detail most news outlets have apparently missed. The scholars who believe the document dates to the fourth century and those who believe it is a modern forgery agree on one thing: the fragment does not offer credible facts about Jesus.

"This fragment even if authentic does not tell us anything about the historical Jesus, even as Karen King herself admits, but some in the press seem to overlook [that]," Warren said. "Rather it tells us about either a divergent group's deviant beliefs or someone's strange imagination-driven ideas about Jesus." (BP)

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US announces doctrine of religion for foreign policy

President Obama on Sept. 25 gave a forceful speech at the United Nations in which he challenged much of the world's assumptions about free speech and religion.

Here are five points from his address which together add up to as close to an Obama Doctrine on Religion as we have seen:

► Blasphemy must be tolerated, however intolerable

The idea that the U.S. protects even vile speech, so ingrained in American culture, seems counterintuitive to much of the world. Obama argued that restrictions on speech too often become weapons to suppress religion — especially the rights of religious minorities.

“Given the power of faith in our lives and the passions that religious differences can inflame, the strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression; it is more speech,” Obama said.

► Religious respect is a two-way street

Obama went on the offensive: If you are going to denounce in-



RNS photo

'OBAMA DOCTRINE ON RELIGION' — President Barack Obama speaks at Intel's Fab 42 in Chandler, Ariz., on Jan. 25.

tolerance against your own religion, he said, you also must call out those who demean the religion of others.

“The future must not belong to those who slander the prophet of Islam,” the president said. “Yet to be credible, those who condemn that slander must also condemn the hate we see when the image

of Jesus Christ is desecrated, churches are destroyed or the Holocaust is denied.”

► Turn the other cheek

In the wake of riots across the Muslim world sparked by the anti-Muslim film “The Innocence of Muslims,” Obama called violence an illegitimate reaction to offensive speech, religious or otherwise.

“There are no words that excuse the killing of innocents. There is no video that justifies an attack on an embassy.”

► One nation under God

Obama drew on the religious diversity of the U.S. to make his case for tolerance abroad.

“We are a country that has welcomed people of every race and religion. We are home to Muslims who worship across our country,” he said.

► The danger of extremism

The democratic movements sweeping the Arab world could be derailed by intolerance rooted in religious difference, Obama warned. He made the preservation of the Arab Spring a global responsibility.

“It is time to marginalize those who — even when not resorting to violence — use hatred of America or the West or Israel as a central principle of politics,” he said. “For that only gives cover, and sometimes makes excuses, for those who resort to violence.” (RNS)

Samford to host faith, politics lecture

Religion: can it and does it have a role in the political world?

That is the question posed by the Frances Marlin Mann Center for Ethics and Leadership at Samford University in Birmingham, which will host “Faith and Politics: Do we need religion in the public square?” Oct. 11 at 6 p.m. in Memory Leake Robinson Hall.

Christian ethicist and author Mark Douglas will lead the lecture.

According to Azalea Hulbert, Mann Center program manager, this year's lecture is meant to create

conversation among theologians.

“We want to promote a conversation about the role of faith in politics,” Hulbert said in a Samford press release. “Since we're in an election year, it's really important to get the dialogue going about where it fits in.”

And Hulbert said Douglas is the perfect choice to lead such a discussion.

For more information, call Hulbert at 205-726-4634 or visit www.samford.edu/manncenter. (Samford, TAB)

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Want to know God?

By Director of Missions

Bill King

Tuskegee Lee Association

My Uncle Lonzo Lattimer never owned a car in his life. He spent most of his days on his small family farm with his not-so-small family. He had a couple of mules named Daisy and Lazy, a Farm-All tractor and a 1949 Chevrolet “pick-up truck,” as he liked to call it.

Probably the closest he came to having an automatic transmission in any of his vehicles would have been those two old mules.

When I was about 10 years old my daddy bought a used 1962 Buick Electra 225. We called that car a Buick Deuce and a Quarter. I thought it was the grandest car I had ever seen in my life, but I wasn't nearly as impressed with it as my Uncle Lonzo was. It had a 445 cubic inch motor under the hood and would run like a house cat whose tail had been stepped on. It had all the extras too: electric windows, electric movable seats, power steering and an AM/FM radio (of course there weren't any FM radio stations close enough to pick up).

Uncle Lonzo didn't care much for the electric seats. Daddy talked him into sliding in under the wheel. Daddy reached down and moved that seat forward, but it failed to measure up to Uncle Lonzo's movement. He almost jerked the steering wheel out trying to get out of that car.

The feature that fascinated my Uncle Lonzo the most was the brake pedal. He didn't realize that the transmission was an automatic or that you didn't have to change gears. When he looked down to see that big, old power brake pedal, he shook his head in amazement and said, “Boys, I don't believe I've even seen one with the brake and the clutch all put together into one pedal!”

Uncle Lonzo had never seen anything like that car and you and I have never seen anything like heaven. 1 Corinthians 2:9 says “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” If we know God we will see things we've never imagined.

Focus on the divine mission

Church leaders considering change: count the cost, move carefully, expect resistance

By **Bill Wilson**
Columnist, Associated Baptist Press

As part of our work with congregations that are engaging in the process of imagining their future, the Center for Congregational Health invites them to first look back and connect with their past. An effective tool for doing that is creating a timeline that includes significant events from the life of the church, the community and the world.

One church we worked with recently did an exceptional job in noting when significant events occurred in the life of the church. Along with the obvious major events, this group also noted how innovation has been a constant part of their story.

They dutifully recorded, for instance, when indoor plumbing was first installed at the church. Next came the year in the early

20th century when electricity was added.

Other notable advancements included the first time a sound system was put to use. Air conditioning came in the 1950s. The first paid youth minister was in the late 1960s. The first church bus was purchased in the 1970s. The first international missions trip was organized in the 1980s. The first webpage was set up in the 1990s. Screens in the sanctuary arrived in the 2000s. The first live streaming worship broadcast was two years ago.

History of innovation

As we traced their history of innovation we asked: "What was the response to these innovations?"

In every case there was substantial opposition, with multiple stories of bruised feelings and

damage among the fellowship. One elderly member remarked that he had never seen as bitter an argument at a business meeting as the night the church voted to install air conditioning in the building.

That night six families stormed out of the church and never returned over what they regarded the reckless extravagance of air conditioning.

Remember, much of what seems indispensable to us today was at one time considered luxury, waste or folly. We should be reminded of 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's dictum: Every truth passes through three stages before it is recognized. In the first, it is ridiculed. In the second, it is opposed. In the third, it is regarded as self-evident.

We regularly see two change scenarios that inflict great harm among congregations.

The first is when congregational leaders force change or innovation too quickly and without adequate relationship bonds. Armed with good intentions and a surplus of knowledge, these leaders assume that others will take their word for needed change.

Pushing forward without allowing others to come to experience a similar learning curve, such leaders incite havoc among the body with their steamroller tactics.

Nearly always, the resistance organizes and the conflict escalates. Seldom is the end result a good one.

The second is when leaders have the mistaken notion that they can achieve 100 percent agreement with their suggested change. Inevitably they end up paralyzed by the need for unanimity.

In such cases a small minority holds the majority hostage and creates great discord in the body. Even a cursory glance at the literature regarding change reveals that 5 percent of any group will fall into the category of "never adopters."

Jesus does not call us to make everyone happy. He calls us to be faithful to the gospel.

Insights

Rather than fall victim to these two extremes, perhaps we could all agree on some insights into change or innovation as we seek to live out our divine mission.

1. Dramatic change is one of the hardest things for a human being to endure. At the very least, let's approach it with reverence and respect.

2. Resistance and opposition to your suggestions are not to be taken personally, but should be expected, planned for and welcomed.

3. To those who have taken a vow to resist all change, take your cue from the biblical re-

cord. Throughout Scripture, God is constantly doing a "new thing." Jesus threatened tradition with radical notions about worship, discipleship and holiness. Why would you expect any less from your church's leaders? In the end you really do want to side with Jesus, right?

4. While our core message will never change, the methodologies for practicing our faith will be in a constant state of change for the rest of our lives. The changes we will go through in our near future (for a glimpse, read "Physics of the Future" by Michio Kaku) will make our squabbles over, for example, screens and technology look laughable.

5. Let's admit that not every innovation, piece of technology, software or new idea is equally valuable. Remember shuffleboard inlays in the fellowship hall or the dozens of roller skates you purchased for the throngs that were going to come to the gym and skate?

What if we filtered all change or innovation through this question: Does this enable us to more nearly fulfill our mission as God's people? What if that question mattered more to us than air conditioning, indoor plumbing or screens?

EDITOR'S NOTE — Bill Wilson is president of the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, N.C. His "Vital Signs" column appears regularly at ABPnews.com.



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NAMB loses bid for 217-acre campus to former Southern Baptist university

A for-profit, Christian university once owned by Arizona Southern Baptists edged out the North American Mission Board (NAMB) in a contest for a 217-acre campus in Massachusetts offered free to a deserving Christian charity by owners of the Oklahoma-based Hobby Lobby craft store chain.

Phoenix-based Grand Canyon University plans to open an extension campus on the site of the former Northfield Mount Hermon School founded in 1879 by legendary evangelist D.L. Moody. The property was donated by the billionaire Green family, which purchased the property three years ago with plans to launch an evangelical college named after author and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis.

After fundraising for C.S. Lewis

College came up short the family began accepting alternative proposals for the property, which is worth an estimated \$20 million, including \$5 million in upgrades by the Greens.

"We hope this campus will provide a home for students to find their purpose in Christ and realize their full potential in life," Hobby Lobby President Steve Green said in a statement Sept. 21.

Year-round ministry

NAMB, the other finalist, expressed interest in using the campus as a year-round ministry, retreat and missionary training center.

The Arizona Southern Baptist Convention opened Grand Canyon College in 1948 in Prescott, Ariz., and challenged churches to raise money for its support. Three years

later the school moved to Phoenix.

It was renamed Grand Canyon University (GCU) in 1989. GCU trustees severed official ties with the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention in 2000 and, facing \$15 million in debt and on the brink of bankruptcy, sold the school four years later to California-based Significant Education LLC, a for-profit subsidiary led by executives formerly associated with the parent company of the University of Phoenix. It made GCU the first for-profit Christian college in the U.S.

In coming months the Green family will transfer the Massachusetts property to Scholarships for GCU Students, a nonprofit that will then lease it to GCU's holding company, GCU Education, which trades on Nasdaq.

Plans call for initially establishing an extension site and then after three or four years forming an independent university owned by GCU Education.

The campus consists of 43 buildings and includes the gravesite of Moody and his wife.

Moody was born in Northfield, Mass., in 1837 and in the later decades of the 19th century traveled the globe as an evangelist. He started Illinois Street Church, which was renamed the Moody Church after his death, in Chicago. He began a Bible study course that eventually became Moody Bible Institute and later spun off Moody Publishers, Moody Radio and *MOODY* magazine, which published until 2003. (ABP)

Alabama BNF to host retreat at Shocco

The Alabama Baptist Nursing Fellowship (BNF) will hold an Alabama BNF and Parish Nurse Retreat Oct. 19-20 at Shocco Springs Conference Center in Talladega.

The retreat's theme is "Transformed ... Body, Mind and Soul," focusing on caring for oneself spiritually, mentally and physically.

The guest speakers for the event are Lucretia Mobbs, a freelance writer and conference leader who serves on the Ten-

nessee Woman's Missionary Union's Leaders, Educators, Advisors and Developers Team; and Elizabeth "Boo" Archer, a personal trainer and wellness counselor from Montgomery.

The registration fee includes lodging, three meals, all materials and payment for the Continuing Education Units offered.

To register through Shocco Springs, call 1-800-280-1105.

For more information, visit www.alawoman.com/bnf. (TAB)

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RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

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

Small package, big influence

Belle met a new friend during her recent checkup at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Aaron is his name. He and his family had moved into the Memphis Ronald McDonald House "just five hours ago," they shared as Belle introduced herself to Aaron.

Aaron wasn't so sure about Belle despite her best efforts to convince him to play with her. As Aaron debated, I could only notice the weariness and fear in the parents' eyes.

I knew it well. It was the same look I saw in my sister-and brother-in-law's eyes just over three years ago when Belle's cancer diagnosis was announced. Belle was 2 when the tumor was discovered and she and her mommy moved to Memphis temporarily for treatment.

She's 5 now, a kindergartener and living life like any other child — except she is not cancer free. We live life in three-month segments, from one checkup to the next.

Each time Belle "goes in the big machine" as she calls the MRI scan on her brain and spine, our family holds a collective breath until the results are shared.

But even with the compartmentalized fear that has forever tucked itself into our beings, we bounce around the St. Jude campus like it's home, greeting new families and encouraging them like so many did our family three years ago.

And Belle is right there with us — actually she's the one leading us.

Belle has a sincere and loving heart and truly befriends every person she meets.

Among her best friends are her three siblings. She tells others about



them constantly and always gets four stickers from the doctors and nurses so everyone gets a sticker, not just Belle.

She also has close friends she loves dearly in her hometown as well as lifelong friends she has met through St. Jude.

In fact, when she returns for her St. Jude visits, she has a list of friends with whom she expects to have a play date. Belle picks right back up with them as if they were together yesterday no matter how long they've been apart.

Belle also pays close attention to details and will pull out a memory as she walks down the halls of the hospital. "Remember when ..." she says as she outlines the exact toy she was playing with or the funny joke that was said when that particular memory originally happened. She also fondly remembers her St. Jude friends who are no longer with us.

I watch her and I learn. She is a masterful teacher. I sit in amazement at how she truly lives every nanosecond to the fullest and doesn't let the worries of life steal away her time. It frustrates her when a situation prevents any aspect of life from being filled with pure joy — even the moments that make the adults around her cringe.

As I write this column, I watch her sleep and think about all the hopes and dreams she expresses for the future. "When I go to high school ..." and "When I'm 18 ..." and "I'm going to marry ..." — she chatters about her "when I grow up" dreams each time I'm with her, and each time I say a silent prayer that she does indeed get to experience what she has just described.

Her hugs, her sweet words and her smile will easily melt your heart, while her sassiness, spirit and courage boost your strength and motivation almost immediately. And her sincere compassion and love, well, they simply make us better.

So many times, she has been the strongest of all of us.

We don't know the future for Belle, but we have no question that God is using Belle's life to touch the world. I know I am better just because I have the privilege of being her aunt.

Rashional EXTRAS ...

What topics are on your mind?

Email jrash@thealabamabaptist.org

Spending your minutes

Once I was required to keep a time diary for seven days for a class project. At the end of the week we totaled up the minutes and categorized what we did.

It was a real pain to record what I was doing every 15 minutes, but [it was] revealing.

I discovered what was important to me — those things I spent more time doing — and also saw some wasted time that I was able to correct.

I think this is what the Psalm writer referred to in Psalm 90:10, 12: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten ... for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. So teach us to number our days and apply our hearts unto wisdom."

We "number our days" and correct anything that isn't God-honoring in our lives.

We must schedule time for worship.

God Himself rested on the Sabbath after a week of creation and exhorts us to obediently worship every week. In worship we focus on God and thank Him. He, in turn, refocuses our attention on a needy world into which we go as His representatives.

We must schedule time for work.

For the Christian, diligent work is one way we honor God since we're exhorted to do all things for His glory.

We must schedule time for family.

Families today are stressed with so many competing schedules.

And we must schedule time for rest.

An automobile engine will burn out if run 24/7 and if [its] oil and filters aren't changed. Our bodies need rest and repair. Sleep, vacations, hobbies and diversions are significant.

God will give you 1,440 minutes today. How will you spend them?

Michael J. Brooks
Judson College

Rain to wash it all away

Excerpts from University of North Alabama student Elizabeth Brock's blog:
<http://thethingsiwanttosaybutdont.wordpress.com>

Yesterday, running late as usual, I flew out of the front door only to about-face quickly, returning to grab an umbrella. The rain was just starting to drizzle, but I knew I did not want to be without that umbrella all day even if it might make me late. By the time I parked, the rain was pouring. ... An hour later ... a monsoon. ...

By the time I arrived at my last class a few hours later, I was very cold and wet. My shoes and socks were soaked all the way through. ... By the time I began walking to my car, the campus resembled the Ocoee. There were streams of rainwater flowing from one end of campus to the next. ...

I watched as the mini rivers ran past. The current carried leaves and pieces of dirt as passengers. In some places the water had turned tomato soup-red from all the dirt that was being washed away. The earth was being cleaned. The rainwater was washing the summer dirt away, leaving behind a clean space for the autumn leaves to fall.

I have heard it said that rain is good for the soul. I don't know if that's science or a theory, but in that moment, watching the dirt float past my feet, I believed it. I began to see how God cleanses us with His Word, the Living Water, by pouring it over our imperfect lives. Every day He is chiseling away the dirt caked around us, rinsing us with water and making us clean and whole again.

When it comes to God's Word, don't step around the puddles. Don't avoid the rivers of cleansing water. Find the deepest spot and jump in. Splash. Dance. Be soaked all the way through — because it is not enough to have just one drop of His love. Once you have tasted a single drop, you will open wide your mouth to drink in all He is.

"There is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us, who do not pamper us or offer compromises but, instead, describe reality so simply and compellingly that the truth seems inevitable, and we cannot help but recognize it."

"We don't know what people are thinking unless they tell us. And even then, there's no guarantee they're telling us what they really think. Yet if asked, most people avow that they want to hear the truth, even if it is unpalatable."

"Companies and marriages derail because people don't say what they are really thinking."

Susan Scott
"Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time"

*SBC PRES FRED LUTER:
"When you come to God's house, don't come looking for other people. ... Let the Lord speak to your heart and your life. Let all of it become personal. Forget about yourself and concentrate on God."*



BP photo

Katie Crichton, a Chicago-area mother of two, and her husband Jason are members of Crossroads Community Church, which played a key part in answering her questions about faith in Christ.

“And even when some of the doubt starts to creep back in and the questions start to haunt me, all I have to do is open the Bible and I am sure what I am reading is straight from God. It’s been a very slow change, but it’s been a big change.”

Katie Crichton

Blind faith

Stay-at-home mother of 2 emerges with faith despite doubt, questions

God had never been the problem. Growing up in small-town Iowa, Katie Crichton’s family was deeply involved with a local Protestant church. Her mother served as choir director, her father sang in the choir and Crichton and her two brothers sat in the front row every Sunday.

God was everywhere. Religion was everywhere. And throughout Crichton’s young life she was surrounded by people who spoke freely about God. God was always very comfortable.

“It was when people started talking about Jesus that I got uncomfortable,” she said.

While in college, Crichton remembers coming home for winter break and sitting with her family during the Christmas Eve service, listening to the familiar music and taking in the beautiful candlelit atmosphere. Deep inside, however, she felt like a hypocrite.

“I was sitting there enjoying the service, but not really buying the whole Christmas story,” she said.

After graduation Crichton moved to Eau Claire, Wis., to pursue her teaching career. She lived by herself during the first year and moved in the following year with another teacher, Mary.

‘She was real’

“Mary had this personal faith in Jesus,” Crichton said. “She read her Bible and memorized Scripture, but aside from that she was real. I liked her so much. She was fun and to me Christian types were boring, in a box, and very judgmental. But that wasn’t Mary at all.”

In Eau Claire, Crichton also met her future husband, Jason, and the couple eventually relocated to Chicago. Jason’s family, Crichton said, was much more conservative in their beliefs than she was used to. When they talked about Jesus, some of them talked about having a blind faith, a notion that bothered Crichton.

“I was so afraid that Christianity was just too simple and that it was something that people who didn’t know any bet-

ter believed blindly,” she said. “I refused to be one of those people.”

Despite her hesitation, her curiosity about Jesus grew and the couple started going to church in Naperville, Ill., where Crichton said the pastor brought the Bible to life in a way she had never heard before.

“It was the first time the Bible became really interesting to me, and I think a tiny fire started growing inside me,” she said.

But along with the spark, Crichton’s questions mounted. When the couple started attending Crossroads Community Church, Carol Stream, Ill., Scripture again was revealed to Crichton in such an appealing way that she increasingly yearned to understand. Eventually, after being asked multiple times, she joined a small group.

“Oh, my poor small group,” she said. “I feel horrible because I was like the skeptic sitting in every Bible study saying, ‘Well, if that’s true, what about this?’”

Fortunately, Crichton said, God gave her and her husband a small group willing to answer her questions in a loving manner, without frustration or judgment.

After several more months of uncertainty, which included a two-hour meeting with Scott Nichols, pastor of the Southern Baptist congregation, Crichton still had a hard time believing that Jesus is the only way.

“I just fired question after question and he kept responding with, ‘I understand you have these questions, but Jesus Christ is your Savior,’” she said. “And that just frustrated me. How can that be the only answer? I wanted answers.”

That’s when she began to read. She read “The Case for Christ,” “The Case for Faith” and “When Skeptics Ask,” among others. Slowly and steadily, Crichton’s spiritual eyes began to open.

She began to see that other religions put a heavy emphasis on humans working their way to perfection, whereas Christianity is the only religion that takes into account that humans are not perfect and never will be.

Another truth Crichton said was made clear was that not

only was Jesus a wise teacher, but He boldly proclaimed He was the Son of God.

“So I either had to accept everything that He said or believe that He was a crazy man,” Crichton said. “I choose to believe everything He claimed.”

And for the Bible being the infallible Word of God, Crichton said it seemed so simple once she found the answer: because Jesus said it was.

‘It became personal to me’

“But also, when I started reading the Bible and diving into Bible studies, it became very clear that God had used imperfect men from the start to write His Word,” she said. “It became personal to me when verses would come to life right off of the pages and truly affect my choices and life in a way that I could not expect or hope for. It amazed me how intricate details were everywhere in the Bible that tied the New Testament directly to the Old, all of which seems impossible to be accomplished by men.”

When it comes to pinpointing the exact moment of her salvation, Crichton doesn’t know. She said, for her, it just didn’t happen that way.

“I remember one Sunday sitting in the kitchen and I looked to Jason and said, ‘You know ... I don’t know if my family is saved,’” she recounted. “And to say ‘saved’ or ‘born again,’ that was not in my vocabulary. It made me uncomfortable to say such a thing. But saying that to Jason made me realize that I was.”

Now a stay-at-home mom to her two children, Crichton describes her Christian walk as slow, stubborn and constant. She and her husband are active members of Crossroads — a group of believers Crichton now considers part of her family. She said her church has been a crucial ingredient to her ongoing struggle with doubt.

“And even when some of the doubt starts to creep back in and the questions start to haunt me, all I have to do is open the Bible and I am sure what I am reading is straight from God,” she said. “It’s been a very slow change, but it’s been a big change.” (BP)

Human embryonic stem cells are kept frozen in liquid nitrogen in Jeanne Loring's lab at The Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, Calif.



RNS photo

Snowflake adoption

Evangelicals seek future for thousands of frozen embryos

The embryo was frozen in liquid nitrogen when Gabriel and Callie Fluhrer found it. They didn't know whether that embryo would grow to be a boy or a girl, or whether it would even grow at all.

But to the Fluhrers, it was worth the risk. That tiny collection of cells was a baby, they believed. Of the hundreds of thousands of babies just like it, the Fluhrers believe, many will likely die if someone doesn't pluck them from the warehouse where they've been stored after their biological parents decided they didn't need or want them any longer.

"If we're going to stand against abortion, it's not simply picketing a clinic," said Gabriel Fluhrer, a public relations and publishing coordinator for the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. "It's doing the hard work of adopting the orphans around the world, whether embryos or orphans living in China."

Anna Fluhrer was born in December 2010: from a frozen embryo to a healthy baby girl.

Hundreds of thousands of embryos are stored in high-tech storage facilities across the United States. To an increasing number of evangelical Christians, that's hundreds of thousands of babies.

Conservative Christians have long joined hands to oppose abortion, often following the lead of the Roman Catholic Church. But evangelicals are leading the charge in adopting embryos and encouraging people who have stockpiles of frozen embryos to make them available for adoption.

During a decade-long stretch of federal funding to promote embryo adoption, evangelical organizations received most of the \$21 million doled out. That funding was cut in July, but leaders at those organizations say the word is spreading about embryo adoption.

"These families are happy, and they tend to write blogs and [post on] Facebook," said Reg Finger, a doctor affiliated with the National Embryo Donation Center, which relied on federal grants.

Vatican officials have stopped just short of banning embryo adoption, but it's discouraged because of its connection to in vitro fertilization — a practice banned by the church because it often includes disposal of unused embryos.

"It needs to be recognized that the thousands of abandoned embryos represent a situation of injustice that cannot be resolved," Vatican theologians wrote in their 2008 bioethics treatise.

People who choose in vitro fertilization often create multiple embryos and select the healthiest to implant. Some families discard the extras or implant them at a time when they're unlikely to survive. Those who choose to save them pay upward of \$400 per year to keep them frozen.

It's estimated that there are more than 600,000 embryos frozen in storage in the U.S., but it's not clear how many of those are available for adoption.

Embryo donation and adoption organizations, many of them with evangelical religious affiliations, began forming in the 1990s. The practice gained traction in 2006 when former President George W. Bush invited children who were adopted as embryos, known as "snowflakes," to join him at the White House.

"These boys and girls are not spare parts," Bush said, as the children and their parents gathered around him.

At the White House that day was Maria Lancaster and her daughter, Elisha, who was adopted as an embryo through Snowflakes, the embryo adoption division of Nightlight Christian Adoptions. In 2008 Lancaster opened the doors of her own embryo adoption agency, which is a branch of Cedar Park Church, an evangelical congregation near Seattle.

"I wanted to give weight to the idea that it is a responsibility of the church to stand up and defend all human life, including embryos in the freezer," she said.

Federal officials say funding for the embryo adoption awareness campaign was cut because of "limited interest."

In 2004 there were between 1,500 and 1,750 donated and adopted embryos transferred, Finger said. By 2010, the last year for which data is available, about 2,250 embryos were transferred. Finger said his data was provided by the Centers for Disease Control on his special request.

Embryo adoption is not a chief issue for many Christians, said Fluhrer, but that may be changing. He has blogged about embryo adoption on Reformation 21, a theology website he edits, and he encourages his church members to consider the option.

"The earliest Christians were distinguished by their care for those society discarded," he wrote on his blog. "Embryo adoption seems to me a seminal way to do such a thing here in the third millennium." (RNS)

"It is a responsibility of the church to stand up and defend all human life."

Maria Lancaster
embryo adopted parent

Religion In America

Compiled from Wire Services

TV shows' explicit content gives no warning, study finds

WASHINGTON — Parents relying on the television ratings system to block objectionable content from their children might want to reconsider its usefulness, according to a new study that finds TV programs often include explicit content without the proper warning and that TV-PG programming has explicit content every five and a half minutes.

The study by the Parents Television Council (PTC) examined all primetime programming for the four major broadcast networks during the first two weeks of the November 2011 sweeps period.

PTC found that:

- ▶ 44 percent of the instances of explicit content on TV-PG programming did not include the needed descriptor — "L" (language), "D" (suggestive dialogue), "S" (sexual situations) or "V" (violence).

- ▶ primetime programming includes so much explicit content during TV-PG shows that a child would have been exposed to such content every five and a half minutes.

The study examined only TV-PG content.

Tim Winter, president of PTC, said, "As we approach the 15-year anniversary of the ratings system, it is apparent that the system itself is in need of dramatic reform. Broadcast networks produce and rate their own content, leaving parents with a deeply flawed and largely inaccurate ratings system."

With the V-Chip providing only limited help for parents, some companies have tried to fill the void with their own products. One company, TVGuardian, sells a unit that mutes profanity on broadcast television. Another company, ClearPlay, sells a DVD player that mutes bad language and also skips objectionable scenes. While that does not help with broadcast TV, it does offer a solution for those willing to wait until their favorite programs are released on DVD.

National Back to Church Sunday sees 7.5 million invites

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — On Sept. 16, in the largest grassroots movement of its kind, 13,152 congregations of various denominations, styles and theologies united in a single cause to invite an estimated 7.5 million people to attend church on National Back to Church Sunday. Participating churches saw an estimated 38 percent increase in their attendance. Four days prior to the event, 59 churches in Alabama had registered. About 25 of the 59 indicated they were Baptist.

The movement is based on the simple principle that 82 percent of people say they would come to church if invited by a friend, according to Thom Rainer's book, "The Unchurched Next Door." Yet from a recent LifeWay Research study, only 48 percent of church members invited their unchurched friends to church in the last six months.

The number of churches participating doubled from 3,800 churches in 2010 to 7,600 churches in 2011 and skyrocketed to a total of 13,152 churches this year. With a 38 percent increase in average attendance, 97 percent of responding pastors said they will participate in National Back to Church Sunday next year.

The next National Back to Church Sunday is Sept. 15, 2013. Churches are already registering at backtochurch.com/roster. Reports of this year and future plans are being posted at www.facebook.com/backtochurch.

Missouri college sues over contraception mandate

POINT LOOKOUT, Mo. — A small Christian college in Missouri filed suit against the federal government Sept. 17 over the mandate requiring employers to provide health insurance coverage for contraceptive drugs.

The College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Mo., is the 14th Christian school to challenge the mandate in court. The school timed its suit to coincide with the 225th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution, school President Jerry C. Davis said in a prepared statement.

"The so-called Affordable Care Act is government at its worst," he said. "This is not a partisan issue. It is a constitutional issue, and the College wants its rights respected and enforced instead of being trampled upon. The Constitution still matters."

The College of the Ozarks objects to a provision in the 2010 healthcare reform legislation that requires health insurance plans offered by employers to cover elective abortion and abortifacient drugs. Although the College of the Ozarks qualifies for a one-year exemption to the mandate, which went into effect Aug. 1, the delay only postpones the inevitable.