

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST



Dec. 13, 2012
Vol. 177, No. 49

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State Bible Drill consultant passionate about helping children learn Scripture

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Healing & hope

Photo courtesy of Dana Crow

Pastor Gene Thomas speaks during the dedication service of Emmanuel Baptist Church's new building Nov. 11. The church was destroyed by an April 27, 2011, tornado.

Hackleburg church builds back debt-free following April 2011 tornado destruction

By Neisha Fuson
The Alabama Baptist

Emmanuel Baptist Church, Hackleburg, has much to be thankful for this season.

After the church building was wiped away in an April 27, 2011, tornado, volunteers from 11 states and donations from places as far-flung as Arizona and Pennsylvania helped complete a new debt-free building and a paved parking lot, in addition to securing a new church van.

Pastor Gene Thomas, who survived the storm in the church's basement along with eight others (see the May 26, 2011, article "Hackleburg pastor home from hospital after tornado-related injuries" at www.thealabamabaptist.org), said he heard a lot of, "Oh, this is so beautiful" at the building's Nov. 11 dedication.

Dave Tidwell, project chairman for the Carpenters for Christ (C4C) volunteer group based out of Cherry Street Baptist Church, Attalla, at-

tended the celebration and recalled some of the rebuilding process.

The C4C group was able to do "more [on Emmanuel Baptist's building] than almost any other building the group has worked on," Tidwell said, because the site was close enough and "the Lord put in place the contacts that [were] needed at the time they [were] needed."

But C4C was not the only group that volunteered their time and effort toward rebuilding Emmanuel, a Marion Baptist Association church. The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM) provided two mobile chapel units to host Emmanuel's congregation and funds to help rebuild. Several churches from

around the association, state and nation worked in every stage of the rebuild process. Volunteers bulldozed the property, broke ground, laid the foundation, framed the building,

laid brick, put up siding and paved the parking lot, among other tasks. Several volunteers also attended the dedication day, which Thomas (See "Emmanuel," page 6)



Photo courtesy of Crawford Baptist Church

Volunteers worked throughout the summer to rebuild Emmanuel Baptist Church, Hackleburg, including a team from Crawford Baptist Church, Mobile. Another team arrived the week after to lay brick.



Photo courtesy of Dana Crow

Family members of Gene Thomas, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church, Hackleburg, in Marion Baptist Association look at the site where he and other family members rode out the April 27, 2011, tornado. They took shelter in the church's basement and all nine survived.

COMMENT

Looking for Christmas

It is almost impossible to drive the seven short miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem without looking for scenes of Christmas. From the ridge along which the road has wound for thousands of years one looks eastward across the deep valleys where shepherds grazed their flocks that eventful night. Today one sees concrete structures — apartment buildings, a snaking security wall dividing Israel from the West Bank and tall towers holding electric lines.

It takes a vivid imagination to see well-worn paths made by sheep and goats as they crisscrossed the hillsides 2,000 years ago searching for new-grown grass. But if you try really hard you can almost see the flocks along the steep ridges that fall off toward the Jordan River Valley.

This time of year the animals move at a leisurely pace. The dry season has passed. October's rains caused the land to sprout with small yellow and blue flowers and nourishing green grass. The sheep don't have to worry about getting enough to eat until April, when the six-month dry season begins all over again.

Protecting their flock

Rock outcroppings are everywhere. The land is honeycombed with caves. Once these caves served as homes for Israelites as well as for their animals. Shepherds drove their flocks into



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

these sheep pens at night to keep them safe from predators. Remember the story of the good shepherd in Luke 15?

Across the mouth of the cave a shepherd dragged a makeshift fence plaited together from branches from thorn trees. These were the same kind of thorns made into the crown placed on Jesus' head the day He died. But this night, the night He is to be born, the thorns help guard the shepherds' flocks.

Once the fires died out the shepherd would join his flock in the cave. He slept in the mouth of the cave between the thorn fence and the sheep. Anything that went after the sheep would have to go through him first.

It was like that in the typical peasant home of that day, too. Most family members slept in the same room. The father, the strong man of the house, slept by the door as a way of protecting his family. Remember Jesus' words about first having to bind the strong man before being able to break into a home in Mark 3:27?

Good shepherds protected their sheep the same way fathers protected their families.

More than one church claims to be the actual place where the shepherds of Christmas watched over their flocks, but no one knows for sure. At the site preserved by Roman Catholics one can step inside a rather large cave carved out of blackish rock. The cave could have held more than a hundred sheep easily. The small entrance is just the type shepherds would have wanted, and thorn trees still grow nearby. Stopping here to reflect on the shepherds, it is easy to be transported across time and almost see the shepherds tending their animals or sitting around a campfire enjoying a night like a thousand others. But this night, Christmas night, would be eternally different.

In Bethlehem the cave where the innkeeper

kept the animals is almost gone. A Greek Orthodox church has stood atop the site almost continuously for 1,700 years. Pictures of the wise men from the East painted above the door of the first church confused the Persians when they captured Bethlehem in 614 AD, so they did not destroy the edifice.

The cave where many believe Jesus was born sits under the altar of the church. One descends a few steps from the right side, if facing the altar, only to find oneself surrounded by marble, fine tapestries, gold inlay and other precious stones. Most who come to this site kneel before a hollowed-out stone that once served as a feeding trough for animals. It is the manger where the Bible says Mary and Joseph laid their newborn Son the night He was born. If it is not the same manger, it is like the one that served as baby Jesus' first bed.

Amid the flash of tourists' cameras and a line of people waiting to get in, people kneel and pray and thank God for redemption. It is Christmas. In the place where God took on human form, one remembers and gives thanks.

Prayers have to be quick, however, because a priest tries to keep the line moving and will soon point one toward

the stairs exiting to the left of the altar.

For some the aroma of incense, the burning candles and all the royal finery make it difficult to find spiritual satisfaction in the Church of the Nativity. They would prefer an earthen floor, a chipped trough and even the smell of animals.

Many want time to stand still, for hillsides to be dotted with sheep instead of apartments, to see shepherds rather than soldiers, to witness the brightness of a never-before-seen star instead of the burst of an exploding rocket. We would like to travel in time and look in on the holy family in that cave and see Jesus lying in a manger.

Christmas of the past

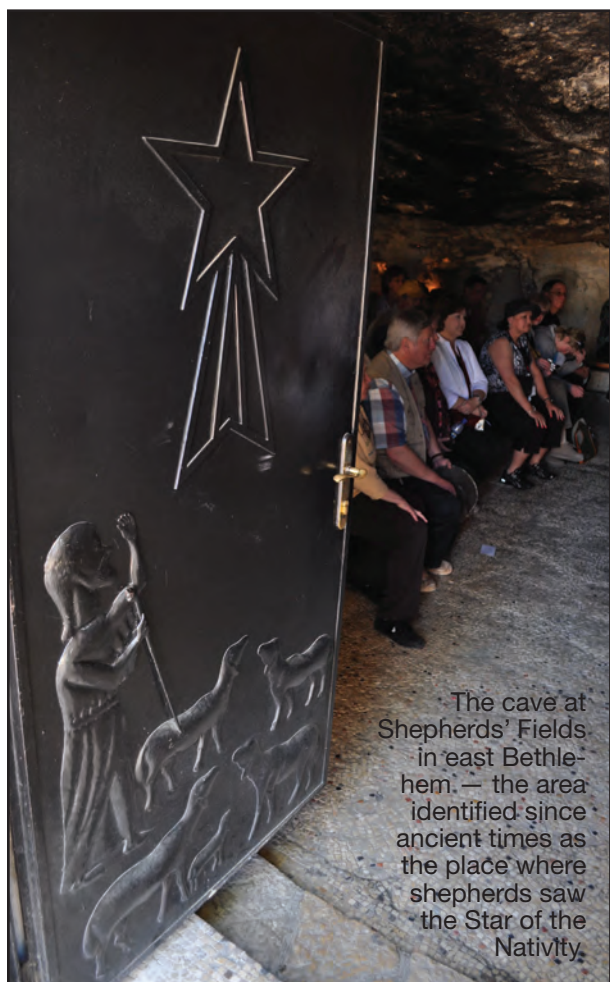
But Christmas is not seen in romanticized snapshots of the past. Christmas is seen today. It does not matter if baby Jesus is lying in a hollowed-out rock or a wooden trough or in the bed of a Radio Flyer wagon; Christmas is seen in the miraculous moment when one recognizes the love of God reaching toward humankind in the birth of Jesus.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." This time of the year, look for Christmas. Look for God's love.



The spot where it is believed Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Photo by Grace Thornton



The cave at Shepherds' Fields in east Bethlehem — the area identified since ancient times as the place where shepherds saw the Star of the Nativity.

Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash



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

(ISSN 0738-7741;
USPS 011-080)

© The Alabama Baptist, Inc.
is published weekly except for
one week in July and December
by The Alabama Baptist, Inc.,
at 3310 Independence Drive,
Birmingham, AL 35209. Phone:
205-870-4720. Statewide
phone: 1-800-803-5201. Fax:
205-870-8957. **Website:** www.
thealabamabaptist.org. **Email:**
news@thealabamabaptist.org or
circulation@thealabamabaptist.
org. Periodicals postage paid
at Birmingham, Ala., and
other locations.

PRINT
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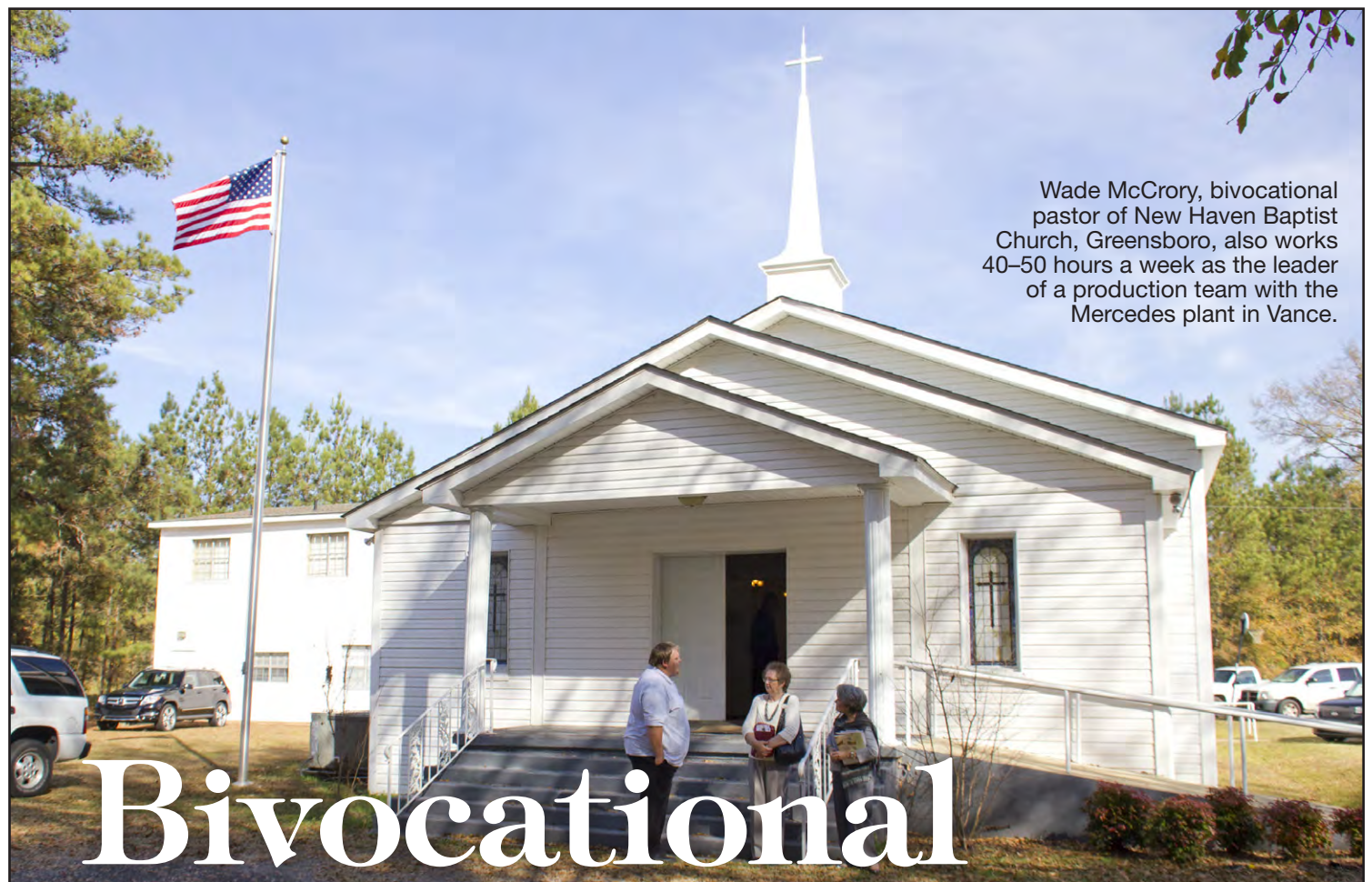
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Photos by Neisha Fuson

Bivocational pastorate

New Haven Baptist pastor balances ministry, family, work

By Joseph Rhea
The Alabama Baptist

Wade McCrory knows what it's like to get to church after a full week of work: to sacrifice a precious morning of sleep to make it to church before the work week starts all over again.

But it's a little different for McCrory: he's the pastor of his church.

McCrory is the bivocational pastor of New Haven Baptist Church, Greensboro, a position he has held since April 2011.

"They asked me to start helping preach one Sunday a month (in 2010)," McCrory said. They asked him to help lighten the preaching load of Burton Christian, then-interim pastor of the Hale Baptist Association church. After Christian retired, the church asked McCrory to step into the position.

"It was a lot easier than most pastors' processes," he laughed.

God's calling

McCrory first felt God calling him to preach when he and his wife were attending Englewood Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa.

"I didn't want to (do it) because it's my biggest fear in the world to be in front of people," McCrory said. "I was wrestling with Him, saying I'd do anything but that. But when it's the Lord's will for your life He won't give you any rest or peace until you surrender."

McCrory said he "did not enjoy [preaching] at all" at the beginning, but he remained confident that it was God's will that he pursue it.

"I just have to use 2 Timothy 1:7 every time before I get up and preach," he said. The verse asserts that God has not given believers a spirit of fear, but one of power.

McCrory did pulp supply work over the years and taught Sunday School at Englewood Baptist. New Haven Baptist was actually the first church in which he preached, years before they called him to pastor.

The church had 12 to 15 members when McCrory took over as its pastor. Now, after a year and a half, between 60 and 70 people

attend New Haven Baptist on Sunday mornings. The church baptized 27 people in 2011, when all of Hale Association usually averages 30 baptisms per year.

"God has really used him," said Bill Wallace, director of missions for Hale Association. "He is a special young man."

Wallace shared the story of how, after the April 2011 tornadoes ravaged the Hale County area, he saw McCrory several times assessing the area and using his own equipment to help people as he was able. "That's always shown me his character," Wallace said.

While McCrory feels certain he is called to preach and to serve as pastor of New Haven, he regrets that the church does not have a large enough budget to pay him a full salary.

He works as the leader of a production team with the Mercedes plant in Vance, working 40-50 hours a week. The full-time commitment, plus his responsibilities to his family, means McCrory has far less time to serve pastoral functions or prepare sermons than he would like.

"More study time would definitely be what I'd want," he said. "And I'd love to have more time visiting with my people, as well as ... more time with the Lord."

He also said he cannot be a pastor in the fullest sense; the bivocational pastor is a preacher and little more.

Wallace described the difficulties of bivocational pastors; 10 of the 13 churches in Hale Association have bivocational pastors.

"[These pastors] are under ... pressure," he said. "They'd love to ... have enough financial support to be able to do God's work all the time; I think that bothers all of them."

McCrory said a bivocational friend of his proposed an idea for Baptist associations to help move pastors from having to be bivocational. If associations could pay half of a pastor's salary for three or four years, a church could promise to match the other half for that

time while it grows toward fully supporting the pastor.

"If [the pastor is] doing his job, within four years the church should be able to handle itself," McCrory said.

Wallace said he is researching the idea and talking with the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions about it. Hale is "a strong association" despite not being economically well off, he said, and he hopes to see its pastors more freed to minister to their people. ■



McCrory

'Serving those who serve'

McLemore becomes 'tremendous asset' to Benefit Society

By Julie Payne
The Alabama Baptist

When Paul Moore stepped in 13 years ago to serve the Alabama Baptist Benefit Society as executive secretary-treasurer, the first thing he and his wife, Barbara, did was transfer the society's paper records onto the computer. That way everything was easily accessible with the touch of a computer key, he said.

It was just the first of many ways the Moores would serve the society, with Paul Moore at the helm and Barbara Moore managing a variety of roles: bookkeeping, handling financial records and fielding telephone calls from its members.

The society was initially established in 1904 by a group of ministers. Its purpose "is to provide financial aid to the families of its members in the event of death," according to the society's literature.

Requirements to enroll include being 60 or younger and in good health. Membership is open "to all ministers and/or staff persons (pastors, education, music, youth, church secretaries, chaplains) and their spouses, living in Alabama and serving in some capacity at the time of enrollment in a church, an employee of the Alabama Baptist State Convention or employed by an entity of the Convention," according to the literature.

Portable membership

Paul Moore explained that because membership is portable (members can maintain their membership wherever they serve in the world as long as they continue to pay assessments and membership dues), it is not uncommon to have members of the society in foreign countries.



MCLEMORE

After many years of service, Paul Moore decided it was time for someone else to take over and in late 2011 announced that he planned to transition into retiring from his position. In the spring of 2012 the society's board began to search for a new executive secretary-treasurer.

After the subsequent search and with a new leader not yet secured, Mike McLemore, executive director for Birmingham Baptist Association and a society board member the last couple of years, volunteered himself and his wife, Wanda, to take the reins.

"I feel real encouraged that [Mike] was willing to step in and take this over," said Paul Moore, who serves as the associate pastor in charge of senior adults at First Baptist Church, Pelham. "I think he will be a tremendous asset in the ... society and [I] have great confidence that he will help the ministry ... and the program along."

Reflecting on his former tenure with the society, Paul Moore said that he considered the ministry a blessing as he and his wife

had opportunities to help widows and widowers who were experiencing grief. In fact, some of the telephone calls the couple fielded became a ministry in and of themselves, as it was not unusual for members to call the Moores and share about their loss. "They just needed someone to talk to," Paul Moore said. "That was a ministry for us" to encourage and assure them, he added.

Mike McLemore, who joined the society in the late 1980s, reported that membership now stands at more than 1,400 when factoring in those who registered at the Alabama Baptist State Convention in November.

With the average funeral today costing \$10,000, he noted, the money the society is able to send to its members "can be a big help."

For several years the average death benefit has been about \$1,300 to \$1,400 per death claim, depending on the number of members, according to the society's literature. Each member contributes \$1 per member for each death claim. The larger the membership, the more the death benefit to be paid.

Following the Moores' transition this summer, Wanda McLemore now handles the duties that Barbara Moore had. Mike McLemore explained that a significant portion of his role as the executive secretary-treasurer is serving as an ambassador for the society — speaking at churches, associations and other events about its work and mission.

"Our motto ... [is] 'Serving those who serve others,'" he noted. "That says in a short sentence what this ministry is about."

For more information about the society and how to join, visit alabamabaptistbenefits.org.

Baptist News Briefs

Compiled from Wire Services

Tucker named Arkansas executive director

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — J.D. "Sonny" Tucker was elected executive director-treasurer of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention (ABSC) at the Dec. 4 meeting of the ABSC executive board. He officially begins his duties Jan. 1.

Tucker, 53, replaces Emil Turner, who announced Aug. 2 his intention to retire in 2013. Tucker has served as team leader of the convention's evangelism and church growth team since 1997. Turner has served as executive director since 1996.

Don Blackmore, discipleship pastor at Central Baptist Church, Jonesboro, Ark., who serves as chairman of the ABSC operating committee, said Tucker possesses qualities the committee was looking for in a new executive director.

Tucker said following his election he wants to continue "the great foundation that Dr. Turner has laid" working with Arkansas Baptist churches.

He said he wants to see Arkansas Baptists make "big strides" in evangelism, missions and church planting.

"Arkansans know Arkansas Baptist convention churches are kind, gracious and caring. I want [them] to know that we stand for Jesus and the Word of God and that we really, really love folks," Tucker said. "We want to stay focused on Arkansas, with a strong sense of family and a strong sense of partnership with the churches."

Tucker said he believes Arkansas Baptists must develop personal evangelism skills and reach out through event evangelism to effectively reach people in the 21st century with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He and his wife are members of First Baptist Church, Benton, Ark., and have two grown children.

CP contributions up from same time last year

NASHVILLE — Year-to-date contributions to Southern Baptist national and international missions and ministries received by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee are 7.59 percent over the same period last year, according to a news release from SBC Executive Committee President Frank Page.

The total includes receipts from state conventions and fellowships, churches and individuals for distribution according to the 2012-13 SBC Cooperative Program (CP) Allocation Budget.

As of Nov. 30, gifts received by the Executive Committee for distribution through the CP totaled \$30,586,021.68, or \$2,158,294.66 above the \$28,427,727.02 received through November 2011.

A CP survey conducted by LifeWay Research showed that 7 percent of pastors accepted the "1% CP Challenge" in their churches' current budget year, with another 8 percent of pastors planning to lead their churches to accept the challenge in the next budget year. For the month, a total of \$16,983,721.04 was received for distribution through the CP.

Meanwhile, year-to-date designated giving of \$6,765,332.93 is 6.79 percent, or \$492,938.20, below gifts of \$7,258,271.13 received at this point last year. This total includes only those gifts received and distributed by the Executive Committee and does not reflect designated gifts contributed directly to SBC entities.

For the SBC CP, the year-to-date total of \$30,586,021.68 is 97.61 percent of the \$31,333,333.33 budgeted to support Southern Baptist ministries globally and across North America.



Photo courtesy of Alberta Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa

TUSCALOOSA'S ALBERTA BAPTIST HOLDS GROUND-BREAKING CEREMONY

On Nov. 18, Alberta Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, held a ground-breaking ceremony for a new sanctuary set to be completed in winter 2013. The church was damaged by an April 27, 2011, tornado. Pictured here is the long-range planning committee (left to right): John Matthews, Bart Tingle, Pat Davis, Jennifer Mills, Carol Barnette, Pastor Larry Corder, Colby Mouchette and David Turner.

Alabama Cooperative Program Gifts

Alabama Baptist Giving

Year to Date through November 30, 2012

NOVEMBER

CP Challenge Budget Goal	\$3,641,666
CP Challenge Budget Gifts	\$3,227,071
Under Goal for Month	\$414,595

YEAR TO DATE

CP Challenge Budget Goal	\$40,058,326
CP Challenge Budget Gifts	\$37,500,180
Under Goal for Year	\$2,558,146



Photo by Carmela Keeton

Now a senior in high school, Austin Foster said his goals include attending the University of Mobile and majoring in vocal performance.

"I would say don't let age get in the way of what you want to do — [your] hopes and dreams."

Austin Foster

'Sold out to the Lord'

By Julie Payne
The Alabama Baptist

South Shelby Baptist teen uses musical talents to glorify God

It's not every day — or most any day, really — that you see a 12-year-old serving as a church's assistant pianist. But then again, Austin Foster, now 17, isn't your typical teen.

At 12 years old, Foster wasn't just playing the piano at his church, South Shelby Baptist Church, Shelby. By that time he had picked up several other instruments as well.

In fact he can play the drums, bass guitar and acoustic guitar — and then there's the trombone he plays in the school band at Shelby County High School in Columbiana.

While this would be considered an exhausting list of musical accomplishments for almost anyone, there is yet one more instrument to add: his voice.

Foster sang his first solo when he was just 4 years old and has been singing ever since. "I love gospel music — gospel music is really my life," he said.

Foster comes from a musical family. His grandfather Roland Foster, who served as a pastor and now serves as a supply preacher, and his parents, Ron and Kim Foster, have each been influential in his musical upbringing, he said. Ron Foster, who once served as the minister of music at South Shelby Baptist, hosts a Sunday morning radio show on 104.7 WZZK known as the "Sunday Morning Gospel Jubilee."

Foster was saved at 8 years old during Vacation Bible School at New Bethesda Baptist Church, Chelsea, which was the first church his grandfather served as pastor, he said.

"What [Austin] sings about, what he plays about, he lives," said Tom Minor, pastor of South Shelby Baptist. "This kid is sold out to the Lord and he has but one purpose — [and] that is to glorify Jesus."

Foster has served as the primary pianist for South Shelby Baptist since he was 15. In all his years as a

pastor, Minor can't recall having ever seen someone like Foster. "I've never seen a young man who had [the] courage to stand up and do that kind of thing, but Austin does," he noted.

And Minor isn't the only one who has taken notice of Foster's musicality. He said that several visitors

at South Shelby Baptist have approached him over time and said they haven't seen anything like it, either. "Austin is a music prodigy," Minor added.

So far Foster has recorded CDs and just recently signed with Serenity Records. He is currently working on a single, "I Agree With the Blood," which should be released to radio sometime in early February 2013.

"I am super excited," Foster shared. "And you know, God works in mysterious ways. I never imagined I'd be singing with a record label at 17 years old."

One of Foster's musical highlights thus far was singing with his "favorite singer," Michael English. The opportunity happened a year and a half ago during a concert at Bethel Baptist Church, Columbiana — the same church where Foster sang his

first solo years ago. The two sang "I Bowd On My Knees and Cried 'Holy.'"

It was that same evening that Foster had an epiphany — that he could "be himself" musically. Before, he had tried to emulate other singers, he said, but that night he came to the realization that he could have his own style and worship God in his own way with the music he sang.

When asked what he would say to his peers who are interested in pursuing a path similar to his, Foster's message is one of encouragement.

"I would say don't let age get in the way of what you want to do — [your] hopes and dreams," he said. "With God all things are possible ... no matter how old you are." ❧



FOSTER

Photo by Rachel Morris

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Across Alabama's Associations

ALABAMA-CRENSHAW

► Each year at **Alabama-Crenshaw Association**, the "Travis Hitt Stay in the Game Award" is presented to a pastor. The award is named after a well-known pastor from the area. This year's award recipient was Hugh Sikes, pastor of Rock Hill Church, Honoraville. Dan Yancey is director of missions.

BIRMINGHAM

► **Bobby Earls** has resigned as pastor of **First Church, Center Point**, to become the pastor of Northgate Church in Florence, S.C. His last Sunday at First, Center Point, will be Dec. 23. ► **Ron Ethridge** has resigned as the pastor of **Huffman Church, Birmingham**. ► The Woman's Missionary Union of **South Ruebuck Church, Birmingham**, will host Laurita Miller in a dramatic monologue of Lottie Moon on Dec. 16 during the 11 a.m. worship service. Chris Crain is pastor.

DALE

► **Chalkhead Church, Ozark**,

will hold a gospel-sharing musical "Santa Bowed at Christmas" on Dec. 14-15. Tommy West is pastor. ► **Southside Church, Ozark**, will hold a Christmas cantata, "I Saw the Light" on Dec. 16, 6 p.m. Danny Bynum is pastor. ► **Ridgecrest Church, Ozark**, will hold a candlelight Lord's Supper on Dec. 24, 6:30 p.m. Jim Hill is pastor.

MARION

► **Cameron Jungels** is the new pastor of **Eastside Church, Winfield**. He previously served as pastor of New Hope Church in Springfield, Ky. He holds a bachelor of arts degree from Pensacola Christian College in Pensacola, Fla., a master of divinity degree from Detroit Seminary in Allen Park, Mich., and a master of theology degree from Southern Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He and his wife, Carolyn, have four children.

NORTH JEFFERSON

► **Doyle Creel** is the new pastor of **Mineral Springs Church**,

Mount Olive. He is a graduate of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He previously served as pastor for 15 years at Labuco Church, Quinton, and five years as pastor of Williamsburg Church, Adamsville. He also previously served as a school teacher at Bradford Elementary in Pinson and Kermit Johnson Elementary in Pinson, and as assistant principal of West Jefferson High School and principal of West Jefferson Elementary in Quinton. He and his wife, Cyndi, have two children and five grandchildren.

TUSCALOOSA

► **Skyland Boulevard Church, Tuscaloosa**, will hold an open house for a tour of its newly upgraded facilities including adult education, worship center, themed preschool area, themed children's classes and more. Refreshments will be available as well as door prizes for adults and children. For information call 205-553-7412. Jimmy Garner is pastor.

Emmanuel looks to touch lives with gospel

(continued from page 1)
described as a "joyful, very cordial event."

Jimmy Closterman, of Kentucky, shared a message on "being the church" and "being a place for healing and hope." Sonja Scales and Jerry Jackson, a head carpenter with C4C, shared special music during the service.

"This is a special church," said Mark Gallups, director of missions for Marion Association.

"[The Thomases] reach out and give hope to those who have no hope. ... They are in the places of utter poverty. ... That's who God has called them to."

Emmanuel's first service in the new building was Oct. 28, and the church has already begun to discuss different options for new ministries, such as a Wednesday night supper or a children's ministry.

"[Emmanuel] is not looking for anything except for the opportunity to touch people's lives with the gospel and give them hope," Gallups said.

Thomas expressed his deep gratitude for all the volunteers, assistance from the SBOM and publicity through articles in *The Alabama Baptist* newspaper and other outlets.

"Thank you for everything you've done," he said. "We're excited. It's just so good to walk into a new church and it be ready to go."



Lineville's New Fellowship marks 50 years

New Fellowship Baptist Church, Lineville, celebrated its half-century mark with a two-hour worship service Oct. 14.

The church celebrated with the theme "Through the Years He Has Led," which also was its 25th anniversary theme.

After an invocation led by one of the deacons and a welcome by Pastor Roger Griffith, a church member sang, "Remember Me."

A church deacon shared a time of remembrance. The service also featured congregational singing, and Griffith presented the church history.

Former New Fellowship Baptist pastors also gave remarks and memories of their time spent at the church, and New Fellowship's first pastor, James Owens, delivered the message.

In addition, Devan Griffith was featured on flute and Bruce Willis, director of missions for Carey Baptist Association, made a presentation.

A representative from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission also presented a plaque.

Griffith said the church bulletin listed all the charter members and the pastors through the years. The Carey Association church initially began with 29 charter members, and two of the original church members still worship there, he said.

When speaking of the vision for New Fellowship, Griffith highlighted the importance of Jesus' command in the Great Commission to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Griffith noted that he has seen the congregation carry the vision of people who reach out to others.

"It's great to see a church that is missions-minded and wants to see people come to Christ," he said of New Fellowship. "I see a church that takes the message and lessons [the] teachers teach" and strives to apply them, he said. (Julie Payne)

New Bethel Baptist celebrates 100 years

New Bethel Baptist Church, Elkmont, celebrated its centennial anniversary Oct. 7.

During the Sunday morning service four former pastors and two former music leaders for the church were able to attend, said Mitch McCormick, pastor of New Bethel Baptist. The Hogan Family provided special music during the service.

Brent Hawkins, a former pastor of New Bethel and current pastor of First Union Baptist Church, Athens, shared the morning's sermon. Alabama Baptist Historical Commission representative Nancy Beasley presented the Limestone Baptist Association church with a plaque.

After the service, the church held a special covered-dish celebration dinner.

"I was really pleased with all the people that came to that special service," McCormick said. "We had one of the largest crowds we've ever had on that Sunday morning."

Looking forward, McCormick said he hopes the church will remain faithful to sharing the gospel.

"All churches have to ... stay focused on the gospel and to be open to new ways of sharing that in our changing society," he said. Doing so is necessary for "reaching people for the Kingdom."

New Bethel is currently reaching people very well, McCormick said; he expects they will continue to do so in the future. (Joseph Rhea)



Photo by Jim Rooks

Lamar Baptist Association hosts disaster relief training

Lamar Baptist Association hosts Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief training at Fellowship Baptist Church, Vernon, on Nov. 15-17. The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions provided sessions in chaplaincy, chain saw safety and clean up/recovery. Ralph Harrison is Lamar Association Disaster Relief coordinator. Scott Stokes is director of missions.

Want to see your news in The Alabama Baptist?

Email your information to news@thealabamabaptist.org; fax it to 205-870-8957 or call 1-800-803-5201. Church announcements should arrive three weeks prior to the event.



Members of Valley Creek Baptist Church, Hueytown, grill hot dogs and hang out with residents of a low-income trailer park a few miles from the church. Areas like this are 'where people are hurting, and we know the Healer,' Pastor Kevin Blackwell said.

Catching the vision

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist



Photo courtesy of Valley Creek Baptist Church

Hueytown Baptists reach out to downtrodden trailer park riddled with gangs, drugs, poverty

Mike Gordon drove around the mobile home park for a year before he ever took one step out of his big red truck.

There was poverty. Drugs. Gangs. Prostitutes.

But that wasn't why he never stopped.

"I was just waiting for something to happen," said Gordon, minister of outreach and evangelism for Valley Creek Baptist Church, Hueytown. "About three years ago, God put this community on my heart. And about a year ago, I started driving through it and praying over each home in there."

Then one day, something happened — Alabama heat.

"It was really hot, and there were some people outside," he said. "I had a cooler of soft drinks in the back of my truck."

He decided to stop and offer a drink to some kids and their parents. The kids were happy about the drinks, and the adults were happy to get to ask the big question.

"They said, 'We've seen your truck ride through here — What are you doing?' I told them, 'I've been praying for y'all,'" Gordon said. "That opened doors for people to let God work a little bit."

He kept riding around and talking to people, and the next thing Gordon knew, people began to let them into their homes and lives, to pray for them and to talk about God. One day he found himself at the hospital supporting a family whose daughter had overdosed on heroin. Another time a family alerted him to the needs of two boys who didn't have enough clothes.

"I began to share with our church family some of the things God was doing, and they said, 'Wow, He's doing that there?' I felt confirmation to go forward and start doing more with this community, and so I just started asking God what we could do," he said.

And God put hot dogs on his heart.

"I felt like we should go out there and cook some hot dogs. I didn't even have a grill, so I put it out there to the

church family and got a huge response," Gordon said.

A group from Valley Creek Baptist went out, grilled hot dogs and served chips, sodas and sweet tea. The church's youth played with the kids and wrote Bible verses on the roads with sidewalk chalk. And still more people from the neighborhood asked why they were all there.

Planting seeds

"We continue to tell them we just want to love them, and we've been praying for them," Gordon said. "They open up, and we can plant seeds a little further into their hearts."

The church started grilling out there every third Saturday of the month.

But it didn't stop there.

For Thanksgiving, a different family from Valley Creek adopted each of the 117 families in the trailer park neighborhood and surprised them by delivering food for a Thanksgiving meal to their door. A few of the families, when they opened the door and received the groceries, broke down in tears.

The members of Valley Creek were amazed at the response, Gordon said.

"We are growing a lot as a church and realizing that Christ isn't for us to keep — He's to share and give away," he said. "This has been exciting and wonderful for us."

The adults in the park also signed up 85 children for Valley Creek's shoebox Christmas, their own local version of Operation Christmas Child just for that community.

"It has nothing to do with us — it's all God doing it,"

Gordon said. "Jesus asks us to be His hands and feet. We should be compelled to act, but sometimes we refuse because of the type of neighborhood it is. This isn't something spectacular we are doing — it is simply us trying to allow Christ to use us in the way He asks us to."

And as a result, three people have come to know Christ as Savior, he said. Several are coming to the church regularly. One was baptized Dec. 2.

"We looked at our community and said, 'Where would Jesus be?' We felt like this neighborhood is where Jesus would be," said Kevin Blackwell, pastor of Valley Creek.

The area is downtrodden and diverse and faces a whole lot of problems, but God is moving there, Blackwell said — and He's impacting the church in the process.

"We don't want to just minister to people like us — we are asked to minister to the least of these," he said. "We don't want to be one who talks about it — we want to be doing it. I would encourage other churches to look at these types of areas around them and catch a vision. That's where people are hurting, and we know the Healer." ❧

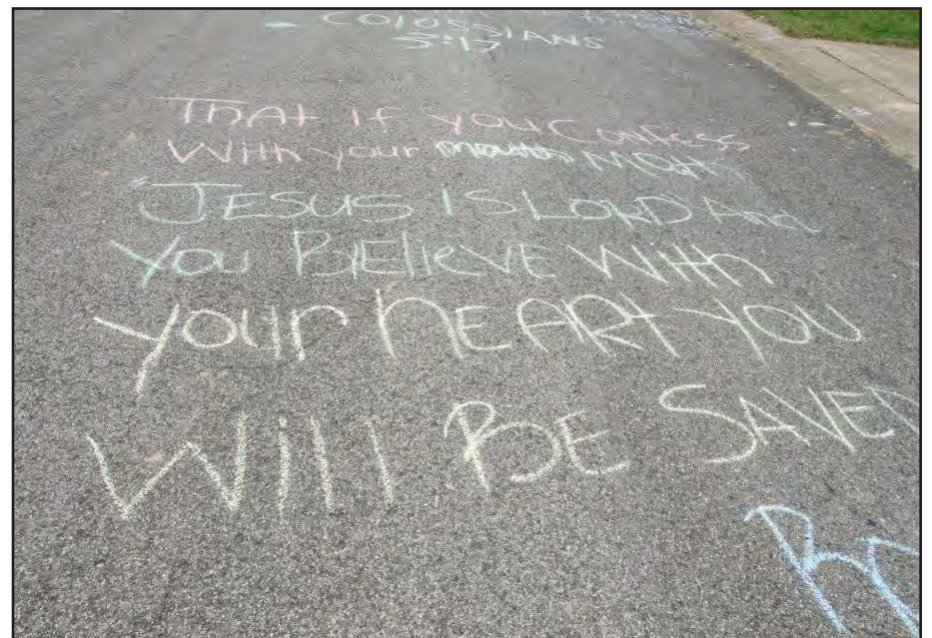


Photo courtesy of Valley Creek Baptist Church

The youth of Valley Creek Baptist Church chalked Bible verses and encouraging messages on the roads for residents of the trailer park to read. Investing in their lives has opened doors for Valley Creek to share the gospel there.

"We don't want to just minister to people like us — we are asked to minister to the least of these."

**Pastor Kevin Blackwell
Valley Creek Baptist Church, Hueytown**

Alabama updates

People, churches making news across the state

Butler churches hold joint missions conference

Two Butler Baptist Association churches were on a mission. Ebenezer East Baptist Church and Spring Hill Baptist Church, both in Greenville, wanted to “provide a missions emphasis for smaller churches in the association,” so they decided to host the first Halso Mill Missions Conference the morning of Dec. 2.

The two churches sponsored the conference held at Ebenezer East Baptist, which included a breakfast fellowship and three sessions about different aspects of missions.

Eugene Elder, a retired International Mission Board (IMB) representative and pastor of Sardis Baptist Church, Greenville, shared a message titled “The Mandate for Missions.” Virgil and Amy Cooper, also retired IMB representatives, and another representative who serves in a secure area of the world hosted a Q&A time where attendees asked questions about each representative’s calling, training and challenges faced on the missions field. Allen Winn, director of missions for Butler Association, closed the conference with a message titled “The Motivation for Missions.”

Members from four Greenville churches attended the conference including Ebenezer East, Spring Hill Baptist, Liberty Baptist Church and Sardis Baptist Church.

Then each participating church escorted a representative back to participate in regular morning worship and to share a report on missions with each congregation.

Nathan Skipper, pastor of Ebenezer East and one of the conference’s organizers, said at least 50 people attended the event and that the conference could become an annual event.

Skipper said many attendees, and the missions representatives, said they were “encouraged” by the conference and “expressed their hope to (have it again).”

“Hearing the stories of [representatives] and their testimonies (of) the Lord’s work in the world confirms that the gospel really is the power of God unto salvation,” Skipper said of the event.

He was pleased with the attendance and hopes the event will “gain steam in the future” and will help Christians in Alabama to not “lose sight of the essential calling to make disciples of all nations.”

The conference intentionally coincided with the Week of Prayer for International Missions and served as a reminder of the upcoming Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. (Neisha Fuson)

Baptists use mugs to share gospel at county fair

During one of Ernie Carroll’s trips to Guatemala, the director of missions for Friendship Baptist Association took notice of the positive reception evangelistic soccer balls with the colors of salvation garnered from children and adults alike. That observation would later help to spark an idea to implement the colors of salvation idea back home.

Instead of soccer fields in Guatemala, the site for the outreach was an evangelism booth set up by Friendship Association at the Blount County Fair in Oneonta this fall. And instead of the colors of salvation soccer balls, coffee mugs with the colors of salvation were handed out to the booth’s visitors. To accompany the mugs, 1,000 2-ounce sample bags of donated coffee were handed out as well.

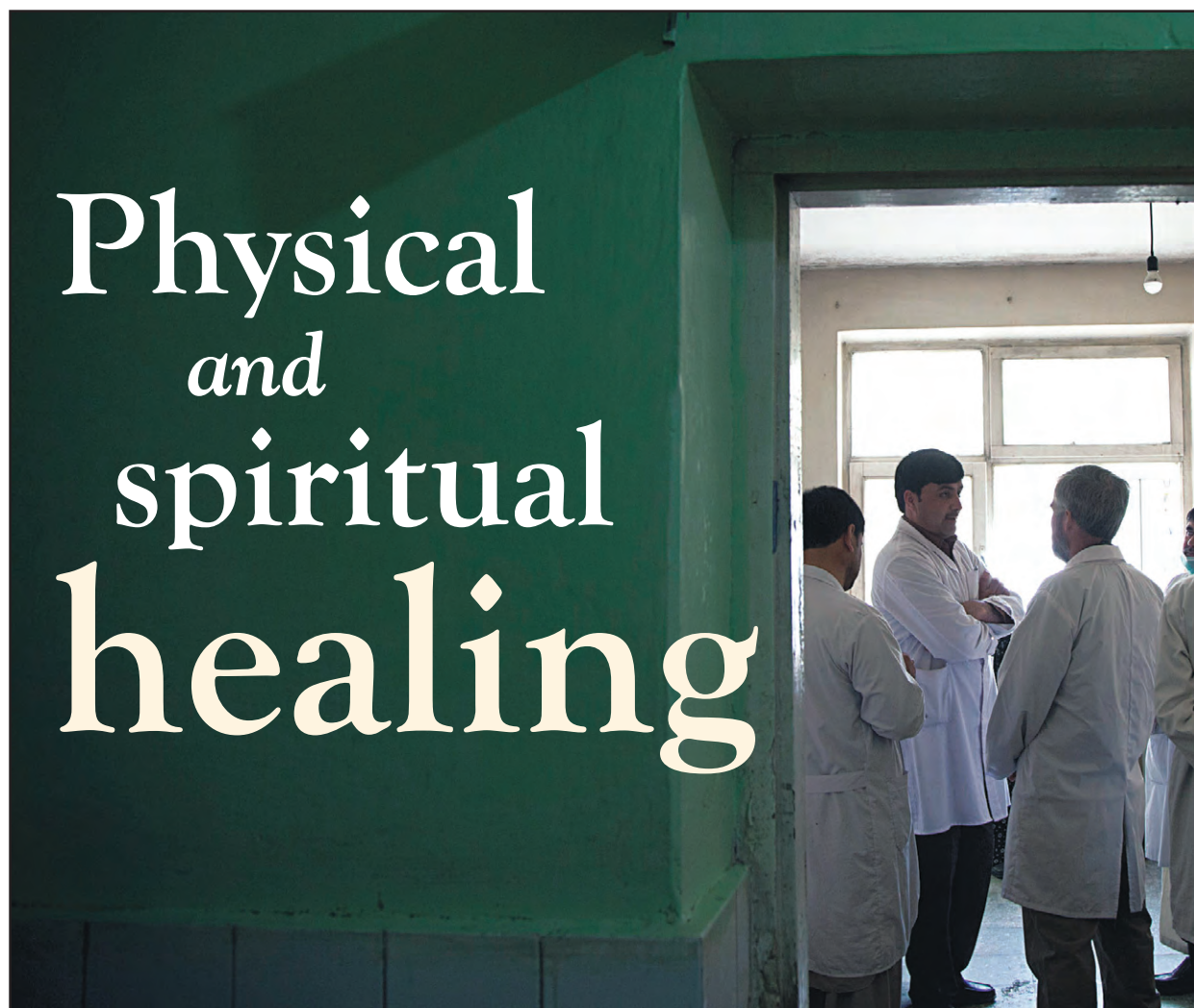
Carroll noted that when adults visited the booth with children, children’s activities and items including sand art and colors of salvation bracelets were available for the kids.

In all, he said that booth volunteers from churches within the association witnessed to 2,500 people. Carroll added that the association’s evangelism team also was instrumental in helping with aspects of the booth.

He reported that eight people were saved and there were three rededications. Churches within the association had the opportunity to follow up with the booth’s visitors.

Carroll also noted the impact of other recent events within the association, including former University of Alabama football player Siran Stacy’s speaking visits at area churches in November. (TAB)

Physical and spiritual healing



Doug Page, a Southern Baptist doctor serving in Central Asia, discusses his role as that of a mentor and top physicians. Page sees his role as that of a mentor and

Southern Baptist brings healing, hope to shepherd

Flies circle the sparsely equipped operating room in the middle-of-nowhere Central Asia hospital. One lands on an instrument tray, strutting the length of a scalpel just seconds before the previously sterile instrument plunges beneath Jalal Hossein’s skin.

“Allah!” the 28-year-old mullah (Islamic teacher) moans through a haze of local anesthesia that obviously has failed to kill the pain. The lead surgeon calls for more light, but three of the four bulbs in the operating room’s lamp are burned out.

Cutting-edge medicine it’s not. But for the moment, the hospital — and Hossein — have at least one ace up their collective sleeves: the man behind the scalpel is Doug Page, one of the finest thoracic surgeons in the country.

“Put that bad boy in there,” Page coaches a national colleague who is attempting to insert a catheter into the protective sac surrounding Hossein’s heart. These are teachable moments for Page, 56, a soft-spoken Southern Baptist doctor who came to this rugged corner of Central Asia with his wife, Alice, to be Jesus’ heart, hands and voice among a people in desperate need of physical and spiritual healing. It’s a brutal place to practice medicine, let alone share the gospel.

“There are so many walls here,” Page said. “There are walls around every house and there are barriers between families. ... There’s fighting between villages and tribes. This isn’t just fisticuffs fighting — this is blowing up homes, setting booby-trapped mines, children being maimed, crops being burned, livestock stolen. It’s ruthless.”

During the past several years, Page has scrubbed in for hundreds of surgeries at the hospital. The 60-plus-bed facility is dirty and poorly equipped. But as the largest of only three hospitals in an area more than twice the size of the state of Georgia, it’s also the best chance of good health care for the more than 350,000 people who call this province home. That’s roughly one doctor for every 15,000 individuals.

Though those numbers are staggering, Page believes the need for the gospel is even greater.

Islam dominates the religious landscape. Estimates place the number of Christians here at fewer than 2,000, and most national believers are forced to keep their faith a secret.

Obedience to God’s call hasn’t come without sacrifice. By 7 a.m. the next day, Page is eager to begin morning rounds at the hospital. But first he swings by the office to check email.

“Just another day in paradise,” he jokes with his driver, Farooq, as their SUV bounces violently across a series of Hula-Hoop-sized potholes — a minor inconvenience compared with the overwhelming hardship of daily life here.

The Pages live in a mud home with spotty electricity. Winters are especially harsh, with temperatures dropping below minus 20 F — cold enough to coat the walls inside their house with ice. At the hospital, Page regularly treats patients for diseases rarely encountered in the U.S. like typhoid fever, tuberculosis and dysentery.

He has amputated limbs from landmine victims, removed handfuls of worms from patients’ intestines and helped nurse malnourished children back from the brink of death — all while patiently and persistently seeking

WEEK OF PRAYER
for International Missions and
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IMB photo

discusses a patient's treatment with one of the hospital's player-coach, working alongside the hospital's staff.

s, farmers in Central Asia

God-given opportunities to bear witness for Christ.

But open cultural and political animosity toward the gospel also means those who share Jesus do so at great personal risk, including prison, kidnapping — even murder. Vehicles must be checked for explosives; razor wire lines the walls around the Pages' home.

"They're locked into a system of righteousness based on works. ... They have no hope of salvation. They have no understanding or sense of grace or forgiveness," Page said. "Famine, disease, injustice, abuse of women and children, human trafficking — all of these things relate to that darkness. ... And they've been enslaved for hundreds and thousands of years like this.

"It's a kingdom of darkness. I think Satan is very powerful here."

Most of the town's few thousand residents survive as farmers or shepherds, but years of drought and conflict have withered harvests, dwindled herds and decimated

livelihoods. Less than 25 percent of the area's households have access to safe drinking water and fewer than 10 percent have adequate toilet facilities. More than 30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line; one-third of all pre-school children are underweight.

Mohammed is one of them. Just 18 months old and severely malnourished, he was brought to the hospital suffering from pneumonia and an infection in his right thigh. He winces in pain at the slightest touch, his squeaky cries broken only by a thick, wet cough. "I'm sorry," Page says softly as he listens to the boy's breathing. "Poor little guy's struggling. ... He may not make it."

The tone in Page's voice reveals a tender heart. He admits dealing with the hardness of life here takes its toll. But worse than a patient's death, he said, is witnessing their suffering — especially that of women and children.

"It's a culture of men," he explained. "The women are basically property."

But even in the midst of overwhelming need, lives are being changed. Page regularly treats patients outside the hospital, many who simply show up at his front gate — all free of charge. Alice works closely with a group of women she's befriended and runs a handicraft program to help them earn extra income.

"This is what Jesus did when He was on earth. He healed people. He went out of his way to touch people, to feed people," Page said. "And He says that when we do these things, it's like we're doing them to Him."

Page also has seen one person place his faith in Christ, a local nicknamed "Paul." Like his biblical namesake, Paul once verbally abused believers. Through months of heart-to-heart conversation, he eventually gave his life to Jesus.

But those sorts of triumphs are few and far between. Given the stakes involved in becoming a believer, receptivity usually starts in small ways — with a prayer.

After lunch, Page strolls through the hospital's courtyard and passes little Mohammed, the malnourished 18-month-old, waiting in the sunshine with his grandmother for an X-ray. He stops and talks with the grandmother about Mohammed's condition, explaining the importance of the formula they've prescribed to fight his malnutrition. Then he seeks the grandmother's permission to ask for some extra "help."

Page kneels in the dirt, holds Mohammed's tiny hand and prays aloud for the child in Jesus' name. Despite Page's prayers and the best care the hospital staff could offer, Mohammed died within a few days.

"We're not indispensable to His plan," Page said, "but at least today if this little team that's here wasn't here, there wouldn't be any evangelical witness here. This place would be totally, totally dark. It's very dark, but there's one little, little, little candlelight burning here. I feel very responsible to stay here and keep that burning for now."

Southern Baptists' gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and through the Cooperative Program help Southern Baptist workers around the world share the gospel. Give to the offering through your local Southern Baptist church or online at imb.org/offering, where there are resources for church leaders to promote the offering. Download related videos at imb.org/lmcovideo.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Names have been changed for security reasons. (IMB)

'How am I going to explain this to my wife?'

The first time Doug Page (see story, page 8) set foot in the remote Central Asian town where he was sent to serve Christ, a single question echoed through his mind: "How on earth am I going to explain this to my wife?"

The Southern Baptist doctor scanned the dozens of small, sand-colored boxes that littered the surrounding hills. The boxes were people's homes — mud homes. And very soon Page and his wife would be living in one.

"I remember getting off the little plane on a little dirt airstrip and being met by some locals in a pickup truck and driven up a hill. No paved roads, just one hole in the ground after another ... weaving our way around donkeys and goats and sheep ... and thinking, 'Wow, this is a pretty rough place.' I felt I could probably survive here, maybe live in a sleeping bag in a hole somewhere," he said with a laugh. "But I wanted her to be comfortable and happy and be able to minister and live."

Central Asia's 'certain wildness'

"Her" is the love of his life, Alice, his wife of nearly 30 years. They started dating during his freshman year in college, and though Alice swore she'd never marry a doctor or a preacher, she found herself with both.

Page was glad he'd come alone for this first introduction to the couple's new home. It was a far cry from the simple but comfortable lifestyle they enjoyed back home in Mississippi. But despite his initial shock, Page said there was a "certain wildness" about this part of Central Asia that drew him in.

The town lies in a shallow valley locked deep within the country's rugged interior. Like most of their neighbors, the Pages live in a simple mud house, which the couple has outfitted with a Western toilet, shower and kitchen sink. These "luxuries" aren't available during the region's glacial winters, however, as nighttime temperatures dip below minus 20 F and threaten to burst pipes. Electricity is spotty, available for only a few hours each night.

Frozen toothpaste

Staying warm is especially difficult. Kerosene heaters provide a little respite from the cold, but some nights are so bitter sheets of ice form on the walls inside the Pages' home. "I put toothpaste and shampoo bottles in our bathroom and they just turned to ice. ... I didn't know toothpaste could freeze," Page said with a laugh.

The couple has learned to stockpile food, fuel and firewood; they also constantly sweep snow from the home's mud roof to avoid leaks or collapse. Even driving is a chore. Besides the challenge of navigating icy roads, the SUV's brakes freeze; a blowtorch is used to thaw them each morning. Survival techniques came by watching their neighbors. Alice learned to dry apples and tomatoes on the roof in the sun and preserve onions and potatoes by burying them in the yard. Doug stored up barrels of kerosene and salted slabs of beef.

Despite difficulties, the Pages have maintained a positive attitude. But the cold weather and poor infrastructure are only half the challenge. Security is always on his mind.

Sunlight glints off coils of silver razor wire snaking its way around the mud walls of the Pages' home. The protective barrier is a constant reminder of the risks Doug and Alice face simply by being here — to say nothing of sharing the gospel. Deportation, prison, kidnapping and murder are very real threats for Christian workers in Central Asia and even more so for the nationals with whom they partner. Bars cover the Pages' windows and a guard stands watch at their home 24/7.

It's not foolishness or arrogance, he said. Just a genuine trust in God's calling on their lives and the understanding that obedience to the Great Commission doesn't come with any guarantee of personal safety — or without sacrifice and pain.

Page's commitment to follow Christ goes beyond simple obedience. It's about a sense of urgency — and love. "We honestly feel that we are not sacrificing much; that God has given us so much that we're thankful for. And that we're obligated, compelled because of our love for Him," he said.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Names have been changed for security reasons. (IMB)



IMB photo

Mud homes dot the hills of the Central Asian town where Doug and Alice Page serve as Jesus' hands and feet. The absence of green alludes to the harshness of life here.

True leadership is listening, then leading

For the past year and a half, it has been my pleasure to share my thoughts on leadership with you. I have tried to provide words of encouragement for women in the workplace, in the church and in the home. Our many missions fields!

I was quite overwhelmed when *The Alabama Baptist* initially approached me about writing this column.

My first thought was that I had nothing special to offer, no special insights that would add to another person's life. I hope I was wrong.

Growing experience

Writing this column has been a growing experience for me. It forced me to reflect on myself and my experience and unearth some areas where I really struggle as a leader.

But is that not how it is for all of us in leadership? As we try to lead others or as we try to teach others, we become increasingly aware of our own challenges and struggles.

Truly leadership, in all its

A Thought for Women

By Jean Roberson
jroberson@wmu.org



forms, is an exercise in humility because none of us become leaders as a result of perfection.

Someone once said that the more you step out in leadership, the more visible you become. The more visible you are, the more others see your strengths and weaknesses clearly. As a result, the more vulnerable you are. Then, we have to live with that vulnerability.

Some of us handle this vulnerability well.

We embrace our weaknesses, and we try to stay real and approachable even though we know someone can say something that hurts us.

Some of us react to this vulner-

ability and become increasingly defensive. We become rigid in our observations and ideas, and we unknowingly create a distance between us and those we are trying to lead. But what good is it if we are leading and no one is following?

My prayer for all of us is that we stay as real as we can, understanding why Paul chose to boast in his weakness and was so quick to remind everyone that he was the chief of sinners.

My prayer is that, as leaders and as women leaders, we draw near to those we influence, listening, ever mindful of the fact that we have as much to learn as we have to offer.

Truthfully, any one of us could

have been writing these columns over the past several months. We all have insights and experiences to share.

I am so thankful that I have had the opportunity to share mine with you, and I look forward to hearing your experiences.

A Takeaway Value . . .
Listen and then lead.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Jean Roberson, MSW, LCSW, is a ministry consultant for national Woman's Missionary Union. She serves as team leader for the adult team and director of Christian Women's Job Corps/Christian Men's Job Corps and International Initiatives.

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CHURCH POSITIONS

PASTOR: FBC Gurley, Ala., is seeking a full-time pastor. Send resumés to: ATTN: Pastor Search Team, 111 Hillsdale Drive, Gurley, AL 35748. normanduffell@gmail.com. www.fbcgurley.org. Respond by Jan. 31, 2013.

FULL-TIME SENIOR PASTOR: Beech Haven Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., is seeking an ordained Baptist pastor. If you meet the criteria stated at www.beechhaven.org/srpastor and wish to apply, send a resumé and cover letter by Jan. 11, 2013, describing why you want to be considered as a candidate (bhbcpsc@gmail.com).

MUSIC MINISTER: Small, rural, traditional SBC church located south of Tuscaloosa seeking part-time music person. Send resumés to: Search Committee, Duncanville Baptist Church, 12103 Hwy. 82 East, Duncanville, AL 35456.

HUNTSVILLE/DECATUR AREA INTERIM ADULT CHOIR DIRECTOR: No worship leadership required. Someone needed to prepare and direct adult choir on Sundays. Rehearsal on Sunday evenings, so only Sunday AM service and PM rehearsal are required. Praise team leads congregational worship. Adult choir sings everything from southern gospel to mild contemporary. Contact DrCharlesOwens@aol.com, Shiloh Baptist Church, Somerville, Ala.

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PART-TIME MUSIC/YOUTH DIRECTOR: Rock Mountain Lakes Baptist Church, a growing church in western Jefferson County, is seeking to fill a part-time music/youth director position. Check us out at rmlbc.org. If in-

terested, mail resumés to: RMLBC, c/o Joni Holt, P.O. Box 1305, Bessemer, AL 35021, or email them to: joniholt@bham.rr.com.

FULL-TIME STUDENT PASTOR: Edwards Road Baptist Church, an SBC church in Greenville, S.C., is seeking a student pastor. Ministry focused on 6th-12th grades. Seminary degree preferred. Email resumé and cover letter to: arayburn@erbc-sc.org.

STUDENT PASTOR: First Baptist Church of Moody is accepting resumés for the full-time student pastor position. Email resumés to: pastor@fbcmoody.org or mail to: FBC Moody, ATTN: SPP, 902 Church Street, Moody, AL 35004.

BIVOCATIONAL STUDENT MINISTER: Northwood Hills Baptist Church in Northport is prayerfully receiving resumés for a bivocational student minister through Jan. 4. If you have any additional questions about the position, responsibilities or church, contact our pastor, Rusty Selman, 205-339-3196. Please direct resumés to: NHBC, 3463 Highway 69 North, Northport, AL 35473 or email: office@northwoodhillschurch.com.

PART-TIME CHILDREN'S MINISTRY DIRECTOR: Spring Valley Baptist seeks part-time children's ministry director with a heart to see children come to know and grow in Christ. Send resumés to: P.O. Box 978, Springville, AL 35146 or churchoffice@springvalley-baptistchurch.org.

OTHER POSITIONS

ASSOCIATIONAL MISSIONARY: Baldwin Baptist Association is seeking a new associational missionary. Please submit resumés to: Baldwin Baptist Association, P.O. Box 459, Silverhill, AL 36576, or email to: bbaoffice@gulf-tel.com no later than Dec. 31.

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DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS: Bessemer Baptist Association is prayerfully seeking God's man for our director of missions. We are looking for someone with ministry experience, strong leadership skills and a vision for the future of our association. We will be receiving resumés through Feb. 15, 2013. Resumés may be submitted to: Bessemer Baptist Association, 1331 Fairfax Avenue, Bessemer, AL 35020, or admin@bessemerbaptist.org.

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Want to know God?

By Pastor Daven Watkins
First Baptist Church, Pleasant Grove

There are many things in this world that we simply do not know. We do not know a definitive cure for cancer. We do not know how to solve the problem of world hunger, the AIDS epidemic or the fragile global economy. We wonder if social security will be around for our children and we question whether or not gasoline prices will ever significantly decline. We do not even know which team will win the BCS national title. But even in the midst of enormous uncertainty, there is one thing we do know.

In Romans 8:28 we read a familiar sentence: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." The most important phrase in that verse is the two-word phrase "God works." One thing we know is that our God works. The God who created the heavens and the earth in six days works. The God who preserved Noah and his family in the worldwide flood works. The God who stepped out of heaven and stepped into earth works. The God who died on a cross, was buried in a borrowed tomb and rose from the dead on the third day works.

This God works in all things, which means that our God works in the pleasant things and the painful things. He works in the comfortable things and the catastrophic things. There is no experience in life that is beyond our God's ability to work for His glory. He works in the terrific things and even the terrible things.

This great verse goes on to say we know that God works in all things for the good of His people. This sweet promise of Scripture is not given to just anyone. This is a promise given to God's people. Here God's people are described as "those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose."

Do you love the Lord? I am not asking if you like Him or occasionally call upon Him, but do you love Him and cling to Him? Do you know that you are here on purpose? You are not an accident and you are loved by the Lord, so know that our God works.

Rewarding tool

By Anna Keller
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

State Bible Drill consultant passionate about helping children learn Scripture

Bible Drill and Speakers Tournament have been part of Belinda Stroud's life for just about as long as she can remember. She grew up participating in both activities in her hometown of Gadsden and is now active on the organizational side. Not only does she act as the Bible Drill leader for her home church, Meadow Brook Baptist, Birmingham, but for the past five years Stroud also has held the title of statewide Bible Drill consultant and director of the state Bible Drill retreat.

"Belinda's passion for knowing and using God's Word, her love for teaching children and youth the truths of God, and her experience and skill for coordination and promotion blend together to make her such a wonderful asset to our state Bible Drill ministry," said Sonya Tucker, an associate in the office of Sunday School and discipleship for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. "We are so grateful to have her coordinate Bible Drill and Speak-



Photo courtesy of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions

Belinda Stroud serves as caller for the National Invitational Youth Bible Drill and Speakers Tournament at Meadow Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, in 2011.

ers Tournament regional and state events and the Alabama Bible Drill retreat."

For Stroud, helping children learn Scripture is something that has given her a sense of joy and fulfillment. She's been excited to see participation grow in recent years as well, attributing the increase to leadership across the state.

Growing program

"In Alabama we have lots of leaders with Bible Drill strong in their hearts," she said. "They have worked to create different Bible drill events in their areas, and so the program grows year after year as more and more leaders feel called by God to be a part of it."

Carole Trimble, who works with the Bible Drill group at her church, First Baptist, Pelham, said she loves being a part of this journey with the participants and watching them learn more about the Bible and make links between different Scriptures.

"Sometimes learning verses in Sunday School can be disjointed, and Bible Drill can be a way to bridge the gap and hook everything together," Trimble said. "They piece it together, especially the fourth- and fifth-graders, and my favorite thing is watching the kids' faces light up when they realize that a verse they've known for years is actually a part of a larger story."

When it comes time for association-wide competitions and for the Bible Drill retreat, Trimble's and Stroud's paths cross. Trimble said she's grateful for the coordination that Stroud brings to the events.

"Belinda is the ultimate organizer, which really speaks to my heart," Trimble said. "She's been involved in [Bible Drill] as long as I have, and since we usually have the associational drill at our church she and I work together to get things set up. I know when Belinda is behind it, everything will be in place."

Stroud enjoys the planning process, and especially likes when it's time to reconnect with Bible drillers from around the state at the retreat. Each year the retreat is given a theme, and this year's retreat — to be held Jan. 25–26 — has a theme of "Under the Big Top with God's Word." Stroud said they expect around 400 participants to attend the event, held at Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center in Talladega — which will be transformed into a circus, complete with a Christian magic show.

"It's always fun to see drillers from around the state at the retreat," Stroud said. "They've become good friends in the past few years. We have a national winner from the year before last and we have a second place winner who will be in attendance this year. Those youth come back to help lead the retreat and teach others. They're a great group of kids."

For more information about the Bible Drill retreat, visit www.alsbom.org/upcoming-events/bible-drill-retreat.

Belinda Stroud (third from the right) was a runner-up in the 1983 Church Training Youth Speakers Tournament in Montgomery. This photo was featured in the May 5, 1983, issue of *The Alabama Baptist*.



Winners All

Rodney Culpepper (second from right) of Prattmont Church in the Autauga Association, won first place in the 1983 Church Training Youth Speakers Tournament in Montgomery recently. Pictured with winner Culpepper are (left to right) John Sawyer, director of Alabama Church Training Department; and runners-up Brenna Casey of Lafitte Church in the Mobile

Association; Cathy Powell of Mt. Pleasant Church in the Butler Association; Belinda Kircus of Graysville Church in the Birmingham Association; Culpepper; and Gene Eudy of First Church, Athens. Bonnie Casey of Lafitte Baptist Church in Saraland (pictured in last week's *THE ALABAMA BAPTIST*) won the 1983 Youth Bible Drill.

Shocco hosts Bible Drill retreat

Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center in Talladega will host Alabama's Bible Drill retreat Jan. 25–26. The theme will be "Under the Big Top with God's Word" and will feature Christian magician and musician David Garrard. Activities for children and youth will be provided.

For lodging registration, costs and other information call Shocco Springs at 1-800-280-1105. For additional information and to complete registration visit www.alsbom.org/bibledrills or call Shari Holley at 1-800-264-1225, ext. 313. (TAB)

Limiting charitable deductions would be 'catastrophic'

A proposal to limit charitable deductions would be devastating for churches, religious organizations and other nonprofits if adopted by the federal government, says a Southern Baptist church-state expert.

Leaders in both political parties have suggested further restricting charitable deductions for at least some Americans who itemize on their tax returns as a way of helping avert the "fiscal cliff" facing the country Jan. 1. Without congressional action, the tax cuts implemented under President George W. Bush will expire on that date, producing about \$7 trillion in tax increases. At the same time, inaction will result in sequestration — automatic cuts to defense and nondefense spending of \$55 billion each.

The idea of capping the charitable deduction "is as serious a

threat to religious organizations as anything the federal government has done in recent decades," said Richard Land, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC).

Catastrophic impact

"This would be catastrophic in its impact, particularly on those large gifts that many religious organizations, colleges, universities and ministries, as well as churches, depend upon for continuing operations," Land told Baptist Press on Nov. 29. "Everything we know from past experience tells us if they cap deductions it will seriously erode charitable giving."

In a Nov. 28 email alert, Land urged Southern Baptists and others to ask their members of Congress to oppose further limits on charitable deductions.

Enacting such restrictions

would not only reduce giving to churches and charities but would harm services such organizations provide to the needy, said Land and other foes of capping deductions.

"At a time of severe economic dislocation, when the people's demand for the services of charitable institutions is particularly high, it would be extremely counterproductive and illogical to implement tax policies which would result in crippling cuts to the budgets of charitable institutions, rendering them far less able to help the most vulnerable in our society," Land said in a Nov. 29 Baptist Press column.

A coalition of nonprofit organizations included the following in a Nov. 14 letter asking President Obama to maintain the current charitable deduction cap:

► The American public gains

about \$3 in benefit for each dollar a donor receives in tax relief for a contribution.

► Americans gave nearly \$300 billion to charities in 2011, according to Giving USA, with much of that total deducted from taxes.

► Taxpayers who had an adjusted gross income of at least \$100,000 in 2008 contributed about 58 percent of all charitable donations, the Congressional Budget Office recently reported.

► One-third of donors surveyed would reduce their giving without the charitable deduction, according to a 2012 study.

► Nonprofit organizations produce \$1.1 trillion a year in jobs and services and provide 13.5 million jobs, about 10 percent of the United States workforce.

The 32-member Charitable Giving Coalition, which sent the letter, includes the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, Association of Gospel Rescue Missions, The Salvation

Army and American Red Cross.

In his budgets, Obama has proposed capping the itemized deduction at 28 percent for couples whose incomes are at least \$250,000 and individuals who make at least \$200,000 a year. High-income earners now can deduct at least 33 percent in charitable gifts.

'Dagger at the heart'

The proposal could reduce charitable donations by as much as \$7 billion a year, according to an estimate cited by Independent Sector, which leads a network of about 600 nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

The federal tax system needs an overhaul, but the suggestion to limit charitable deductions further "is a threat aimed like a dagger at the heart of America's charitable nonprofit entities, secular and religious," Land said in his column. "It will weaken most, kill many, and harm all." (BP)

Commission calls for closer eye on lavish ministries

A special commission created by the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) has called for clearer Internal Revenue Service (IRS) guidance and greater involvement among donors to address "outliers" among congregations and other nonprofits that are not being financially accountable.

Its 91-page report was a response to a request for recommendations from Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, after he concluded a three-year investigation into alleged lavish spending by six prominent broadcast ministries in 2011.

Among the dozens of suggestions of the interfaith commission:

► compensation for leaders of nonprofits should be "reasonable," and nonprofits should make such information available to donors who request it.

► the IRS should clarify forms related to the income tax exclusion for clergy housing — which is being challenged in court by atheists who consider it unconstitutional.

► the IRS should not create a specific advisory committee for religious organizations, but should allow the religious community to give input as it creates more guidance on tax law.

► the tax agency should give more advice about "love offerings" — monetary gifts sometimes given to clergy outside of regular congregational offerings — to avoid the "mistaken impression that there is 100 percent correlation between deductibility by the giver and taxability to the receiver."

► The IRS should modify forms to permit organizations, such as operators of shelters from domestic violence, to redact sensitive information from public disclosure if it would put people at risk.

In an introduction to the report, commission president Michael

Batts said a comparatively small number of organizations are involved in "egregious financial misconduct" and "excessive legislation" is not necessary.

"We cannot allow the behavior of a few outliers in the religious and nonprofit sector to threaten the freedoms of those who ... are doing the good work," said Batts, a former ECFA chairman, in an introduction to the report.

Grassley's probe concluded that Benny Hinn, of Texas, and Joyce Meyer, of Missouri, had made "significant reforms" to their op-

erations. The final report said Texas-based Kenneth Copeland Ministries, Georgia pastors Creflo Dollar and Eddie Long and Florida megachurch pastor Paula White had provided incomplete or no responses.

Grassley encouraged both donors and the IRS to heed the commission's recommendations.

The full report is available at religiouspolicycommission.org.

The commission plans to release a report in 2013 with recommendations about political expression of churches and other charities. (RNS)

Reverse Mortgage News

By Jimmy Dixon

Tomorrow we are all set to close a reverse mortgage for a lady who lives in Sylacauga. Her sons had approached me about helping their mom stay in her home for the rest of her life. She has to have around the clock sitters, and even though they often stay with her, they couldn't be there 24/7. The reverse mortgage will provide funds to help her stay there for a long time to come.



Jimmy Dixon

This Thursday we plan to close a reverse just north of Andalusia in a small town called Dozier. We will be helping this couple get rid of their mortgage payments forever. They will also receive some cash. At the husband's request, I had stopped by their home this past winter and shared information and answered questions. I simply left material with them and after months of thinking about it,

they called me to come down and take their application. They owe over \$100,000, but three days after we close they won't owe a dime. All they have to do is pay homeowners insurance, property taxes (unless they are exempt) and maintain the home.

If you, or anyone you know, needs help like these folks just mentioned, please give me a call and let's explore your possibilities with a reverse mortgage.

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. You may call him direct at 205-567-4800 or email jdxon@mcgowinking.com. Contact him today for a free brochure or free quote.



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Mike James, co-author of **V.E.L.C.R.O. Church**, will lead this conference for all pastors, church staff and church leaders.

For more information, please contact Ministry Assistant Shari Holley at 1-800-264-1225, ext. 313, or (334) 613-2313, sholley@alsbom.org.



Mike James



This event is sponsored by the Offices of Sunday School & Discipleship and Evangelism and is made possible by gifts of Alabama Baptists through the Cooperative Program.



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Guest Performer and Speaker:
David Garrard



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Majority of Americans support mandatory contraception coverage

The majority of adults in America believe businesses and organizations, even those with conflicting religious principles, should be required to provide coverage of contraception and birth control for their employees, according to a recent survey by LifeWay Research.

At issue is a mandate under the Health and Human Services' (HHS) Affordable Care Act (also known as "ObamaCare"), which requires the coverage, even if it violates the employer's religious convictions.

Dozens of organizations — predominately faith-based hospitals and charities, as well as business owners with religious objections — have filed suit claiming the HHS mandate violates the Constitution under the First Amendment Free Exercise of Religion Clause and the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA).

Research survey

According to the LifeWay Research survey, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of American adults agree businesses should be required to provide their employees with free contraception and birth control, even if it runs counter to the owners' religious principles. Twenty-eight percent disagree and 10 percent selected "Don't Know."

The opinions change somewhat when taking into consideration religious affiliation of the organization.

Fifty-three percent agree Catholic and other religious schools, hospitals and charities should be required to provide the coverage, while 33 percent disagree.

In considering whether nonprofits should be required to provide the coverage, 56 percent of adults agree and 32 percent disagree they should be required to follow the mandate even if it goes against their religious beliefs.

Demographically, responses to the LifeWay Research poll show Americans who never attend religious services are more likely to "Strongly Agree" (45 percent) nonprofits, Catholic and other religious schools, charities and hospitals should be forced to follow the mandate.

The percentage rises to 55 percent when considering businesses in general.

The survey shows women are more likely than men to "Strongly Agree" that all three organizational categories: businesses (48 percent vs. 37 percent); nonprofits (37 percent vs. 29 percent); Catholic and religious schools, hospitals and charities (36 percent vs. 26 percent) should provide the coverage.

Younger Americans are the least likely (less than 10 percent) to "Strongly Disagree" with businesses and organizations being required to follow the mandate.

"The religious freedom that the United States pioneered is not a freedom of belief, but a freedom to practice that faith," said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research. "The American public appears unaware or unconcerned that some religious organizations and family businesses indicate fear of losing the freedom to practice their faith under the new health-care regulations." (LifeWay)

"The religious freedom that the United States pioneered is not a freedom of belief, but a freedom to practice that faith."

Ed Stetzer
president, LifeWay Research

Contraceptive mandate rulings seem contradictory

A federal court has handed a leading Bible publisher a major victory over the Obama administration's abortion/contraceptive mandate, but Hobby Lobby and Mardel stores were not given such a victory.

A federal district court issued a temporary injunction Nov. 16 preventing the administration from requiring Tyndale House Publishers to cover contraceptives that can cause chemical abortions such as Plan B and ella.

On Nov. 19 a federal judge ruled the opposite with Hobby Lobby and Mardel stores, stating that they must cover the same abortion-causing drugs for their employees because the companies — despite having faith as a central element of their operations — are not religious enough to warrant a court intervention.

Judge Reggie B. Walton, who defended Tyndale House, wrote, "The contraceptive coverage mandate ... places the plaintiffs in the untenable position of choosing either to violate their religious beliefs ... or to subject their business to the continual risk of the imposition of enormous penalties for its noncompliance."

A handful of courts have passed

rulings against the mandate, which was implemented by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Judge Joe Heaton, who handled the Hobby Lobby/Mardel case, said the health care law was not unconstitutional and that "Hobby

Lobby and Mardel are not religious organizations."

With more than 500 stores, Hobby Lobby's owners always have made their faith a central part of their business. Their stores play Christian music and are closed on Sundays. (BP)



Photo courtesy of Coffee Baptist Association

COFFEE ASSOCIATION CONTINUES 'COFFEE CAKE' MINISTRY
Riley Green (left), Mike Pickle (center) and Kaye Clark help load 560 donated goodies from Coffee Association churches as part of the association's 'Coffee Cake' ministry. The items were delivered to area Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries sites.

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For December 16

Explore the Bible

By Robert Olsen

Assistant Professor of Christian Ministries, University of Mobile

DECIDING ON DISCIPLINE
Hosea 8:1-3, 7-10; 9:7-8; 10:10-12

Check Your Relationship (8:1-3)
In the next few chapters, Hosea is declaring that God is going to discipline the Israelites. Often people confuse discipline with anger or wrath, but discipline is redemptive. God disciplines the Israelites to bring them back to Him. The Israelites were guilty of claiming to know God because they looked at their heritage and believed that, since they were God's chosen people, they were free from condemnation. However, God always looks at the heart, and the Israelites were guilty of idolatry. They created idols and practiced pagan rituals in clear disobedience to God's commands. The fact that they were Israelites did not stop God from disciplining them by sending opposing armies against them in order to turn the hearts of the Israelites back to Him.

In the same way when we live in disobedience to God, He often brings about discipline to turn us back to Him. Hebrews 12:7 says, "Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline?" We need to realize that God loves us and wants what is best for us. What is always best for us is to obey God. If we choose to disobey Him, we should not be surprised if God uses circumstances to try to bring us back to Him. Instead of blaming God for our circumstances, our job as Christians is to be obedient regardless of our circumstances.

You Reap What You Sow (8:7-10)
The people of Israel demonstrated their disobedience to God by seeking out alliances with ungodly countries instead of allowing God to be their protector. Instead of trusting in God, they trusted in men. When we look at our circumstances and try to solve our own dilemmas by relying on the world's wisdom, we deny God and His power. What does it say about our faith when we believe we know better than God? This is no different than what the Israelites did. Instead of trusting in God their Creator

and Provider, they turned to others who in turn proved worthless to save them.

Heed a Warning When You Hear It (9:7-8)

In these verses Hosea mocks the Israelites, who have declared, "The prophet is a fool, and the inspired man is insane." The Israelites were so steeped in sin that they considered men of God to be crazy. Often when we resist God's truth and correction, the things of God seem wrong to us. If we live apart from God, His truth is often seen as false and we are no longer able to judge properly. This is why God disciplines us — so that we are shaken from our spiritual stupor and resistance and turn to God.

Hosea brought the message from God — God was going to punish them for their disobedience, yet the people refused to listen. When we hear a call to repentance from our pastors and friends, and when we are confronted with sin, how do we respond? Do we respond like the Israelites and ignore God's chastisement, or do we turn from our sin and turn toward a loving and forgiving God?

Realize What Time It Is (10:10-12)
God says that He will judge Israel in His time. Just because we see evil go unpunished for a time does not mean that it will go unjudged. The Psalms are replete with a call for God to bring justice. But just because evil prospers for a while, this does not mean that God is unjust, that He is not aware of the sin or that He approves of it. God judges sin in His timing, and as Christians we can be certain that God will judge wickedness and sin.

Even if it appears that evil will triumph, we can trust that God will bring about judgment. We should be thankful when God disciplines us because this shows that He loves us. God disciplines His children for their best interests because God is a loving Father and knows what is best for His children.

Bible Studies for Life

By Michael Wilson

Director, Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence, Samford University

YAHWEH OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS
Jeremiah 23:5-6; Romans 3:21-26; 10:1-4, 9-10

This week's lesson connects the Old Testament's revelation of salvation according to the righteous activity of God, based on compassion and love, with the New Testament's focus on salvation based on the righteousness modeled by Christ in the ultimate expression of God's love for us.

A struggle shared by all humans is the daily challenge of defining and doing what is right. More often than not, we choose to set our own standards for what is right. We may do this to justify questionable choices and decisions. This lesson reminds us that God's standard of righteousness is fully developed and revealed in Jesus. When we apply this standard in daily living, we can experience righteousness before God.

As we draw closer to Christmas and the celebration of Christ's birth, we remember that Jesus fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy of the one to come who would make it possible for unrighteous folk like you and me to live with a right standing before God.

God Promises Righteousness (Jer. 23:5-6)

The prophet's message was not received with gladness among the people of his day. Jeremiah's call was to announce the coming destruction of Judah. All that God had done for the Hebrew people since they were delivered from Egypt would be undone. Jeremiah declared the hard reality of coming judgment. Is it any wonder he had only one close friend, his scribe Baruch?

Yet as painful as the message was, the prophet's words included words of hope. What was soon to come to the people would not be the end of their story. The day would come when a righteous "branch," or messianic king, would come to Israel. Zedekiah, Judah's king at the time of Jeremiah's prophecy, did not live up to his name, "The Lord is My Righteousness." Unlike him, the messiah to come would do what

was just and righteous. When this messianic king arrived, the fabric of a people torn by painful, devastating judgment would be restored.

Jesus Reveals Righteousness (Rom. 3:21-26)

Righteousness is doing the right things, in the right ways, for the right reasons. God alone is fully capable of righteousness. Try as we may and even with the help of the Spirit, we regularly fall short of the call to this kind of living. We deserve God's judgment for failure to live by God's standard of righteousness. However, God's compassion, love and mercy for broken, sinful humanity are fully revealed in Jesus' sacrifice. Because of Christ, the "Righteous Branch" of whom Jeremiah prophesied, we can know forgiveness of sin and a path to righteousness before God.

Christ Alone Gives Us Righteousness (Rom. 10:1-4, 9-10)

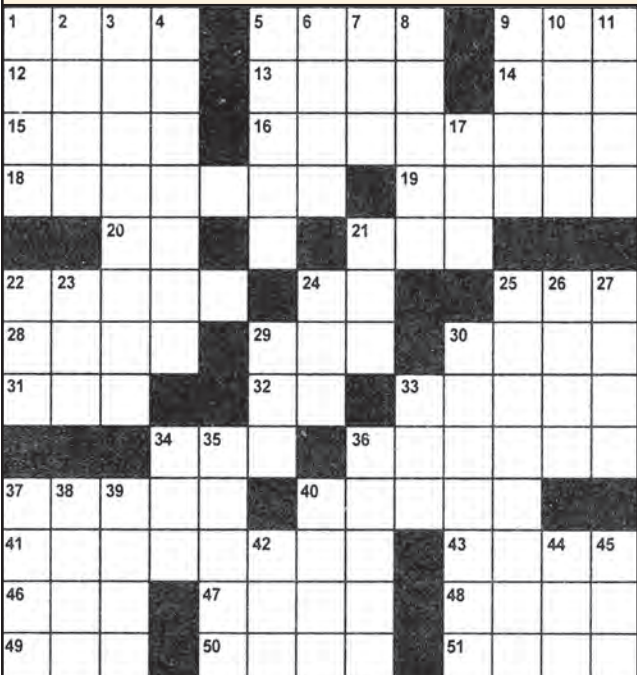
What was present in Paul's day can be seen today: well-intentioned religious zeal and energetic good deeds are often considered pathways to righteousness before God.

However, righteousness before God comes only through faith in Christ and His extravagant sacrifice of love. Any and all other attempts to gain a right standing before God are not sufficient or necessary. In the life, death and resurrection of Christ we can have redemption of sins and be made right with God.

The earliest known confession of faith in the Church is "Jesus is Lord." Paul pairs this outward, spoken confession with an inward conviction and affirmation of God's redemptive, renewing activity in Christ. For Paul, these inward and outward expressions are inseparable. Genuine heart-belief of this kind cannot be contained. It is given outward expression in our words and deeds. Righteous living is the anticipated result. Christ is our model for doing the right things, in the right ways, for the right reasons.

Christian Crossword

By Janet W. Adkins Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.



Across

- 1. Indian tribe of Peru.
- 5. Turned to the land of _____. (1 Sam. 13:17)
- 9. Fuel.
- 12. Fly away like a _____. (Hos. 9:11)
- 13. Unwanted plant.
- 14. Form of to be.
- 15. A bright thought.
- 16. "Praise Jehovah."
- 18. The sin of Judah is written with ... the point of a _____. (Jer. 17:1)
- 19. Form of medicine.
- 20. Symbol for tantulum.
- 21. Lawyer. (abbr.)
- 22. Travel chest.
- 24. And their coast was from ... all the kingdom of _____. (Josh. 13:30)
- 25. Women's patriotic organization.
- 28. Against me do they devise my _____. (Ps. 41:7)
- 29. Uncle. (Spanish)
- 30. Soccer great.
- 31. Shoe width.
- 32. "Strength." (Heb.)
- 33. Christmas song.

- 34. Thou ____ the man. (2 Sam. 12:7)
- 36. Unusual occurrence.
- 37. Amasa was a man's son, whose name was _____. (2 Sam. 17:25)
- 40. Belonging to Ali.
- 41. The Lord is my _____. (Ps. 23:1)
- 43. And he came and touched the _____. (Luke 7:14)
- 46. Meadow.
- 47. Opera solo.
- 48. Company insignia.
- 49. Ever. (poetic)
- 50. Malt beverage.
- 51. And Seth lived 105 years, and begat _____. (Gen. 5:6)
- 7. Of the sons of Bani ... Maadi, Amram, and _____. (Ezra 10:34)
- 8. Skilled.
- 9. Early France.
- 10. Seed covering.
- 11. For he hath founded it upon the _____. (Ps. 24:2)
- 17. Put flame to the candle.
- 21. The house that was builded these many years _____. (Ezra 5:11)
- 22. Article.
- 23. Ye tithe mint and ____ and herbs. (Luke 11:42)
- 24. He shall pour ____ upon it. (Lev. 2:1)
- 25. I am in ____ daily, everyone mocketh me. (Jer. 20:7)
- 26. Great amount. (2 words)
- 27. Because thou didst ____ on the Lord. (2 Chron. 16:8)
- 29. Asian holiday.
- 30. Lord, speakest thou this ____ unto us. (Luke 12:41)
- 33. The fourth part of a ____ of dove's dung. (2 Kings 6:25)
- 34. Arpeggio. (abbr.)
- 35. I will make mention of ____ and Babylon. (Ps. 87:4)
- 36. Detection advice.
- 37. When they had gone through the ____ unto Paphos. (Acts 13:6)
- 38. Give his angels charge over _____. (Ps. 91:11)
- 39. ____, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. (Deut. 6:4)
- 40. Type of cheese.
- 42. Before.
- 44. The self.
- 45. Mrs. Jimmy Carter.



PERSECUTED CHURCH

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Court drops blasphemy case against Pakistani teen

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — The case against Rimsha Masih, a teenage Pakistani Christian girl, has been dropped by the court in the capital, Islamabad. Rimsha, who was arrested in August on suspicion of desecrating Islamic texts, was originally charged in an adult court with blasphemy; there the penalty was life imprisonment. The girl's case was subsequently transferred to the juvenile court after her age was certified and medical evidence emerged that her mental capacity was impaired. During this time she spent three weeks in protective custody in a maximum security prison.

Akmal Bhatti, Rimsha's lawyer, said her case had been a misuse of law. "The court has quashed the case, declaring Rimsha innocent," he said.

Khalid Jadoon, imam of a mosque close to Rimsha's former family home in the Mehrabad sector of Islamabad, now faces the charge of making a false accusation.

So far there has been no response from Rimsha or her family, who remain in hiding at an undisclosed location. Rimsha's attorneys said she and her family can never return to their home. Earlier reports that the family had been secreted away to Norway were denied by the Norwegian embassy in Pakistan and Pakistan's minister of national harmony, Paul Bhatti, who said in November, "Mizrek Masih's family is in Pakistan and in our protection."

Naveed Chaudry, another of Rimsha's lawyers, said, "This is the first case of its kind when a person charged under the strict blasphemy laws is exonerated from the accusation."

Coptic Christians continue to be harassed in Egypt

CAIRO — It was a quick skirmish and no one was hurt, but it was typical of what Egypt's Coptic leaders say are increasing attempts to harass Christians since the country's 2011 revolution.

The latest incident occurred Nov. 5 in northern Cairo, where a Coptic Orthodox Church service center is under construction. A group of Salafi Muslims occupied the construction site. They hung a sign: Masjed El Rahman, or "Mosque of the Merciful."

The Maspero Youth Union, a Copt activist group, said on its Facebook page that the intruders insisted the church did not have the necessary permits to build. Government officials later determined the church had all the required permissions in place.

For about 24 hours, however, members of the Coptic church had to reckon with a group of Salafis who insisted Christians had no right to the land.

In the early-morning hours of Nov. 6, several members of the Maspero Youth Union made their way to the building site and began asking questions of the occupiers.

According to Middle East Concern, a Britain-based Christian human-rights association, the church's construction project has the support of the governor for that region of Egypt.

Egypt ranks No. 15 on the World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Suicide bombers hit church in northern Nigeria

JAJI, Nigeria — Two seminary students serving as pastors at a church bombed Nov. 25 in Jaji, in northern Nigeria's Kaduna state, were among 11 Christians killed in a recent suicide attack, the school's president Rueben Ishaya Chuga said.

Titus Sambo and Israel Olaleye, students at Baptist Theological Seminary in Kaduna, died in the dual bomb blasts at a military barracks church serving military personnel, their families and civilians in Jaji.

The bombers were suspected members of the Islamic extremist Boko Haram group, also suspected of bombing another Kaduna church Oct. 28 and killing seven Christians.

The Nov. 25 attack came as the congregation was leaving the morning service. Officials said the perpetrators parked a car loaded with explosives on church grounds. The car bomb detonated 10 minutes after a bomb-laden bus crashed into the church building and exploded.

Brig. Gen. Bola Kolesho, spokesman of the military staff college, said in a press statement that 11 worshippers were killed and 30 others were injured, though Nigerian news portal *Leadership* reported sources as saying as many as 20 died in the 1,200-member church.

Staff conflict consistent challenge for 'all' churches

By Bill Wilson
Center for Congregational Health

There is a consistent theme in the conversations I have with clergy and laity alike about what frustrates or challenges them most. Without a doubt it is staff.

Every pastor's gathering in which we ask for issues that need attention inevitably leads to a conversation about some aspect of staff. Nearly every layperson who calls ends up needing help with a staff situation.

This epidemic of conflict and frustration holds true regardless of denominational affiliation, theological orientation, worship style, size and location.

I recently conversed with a leadership team from a very large church (staff in the dozens), and their primary concern was staff communication and conflict. Later that week the pastor of a small church pulled me aside at a meeting to voice concern about an issue with his only other staff member, who was part-time and his wife.

Dozens of books, workshops, coaching, degree programs and the like are devoted to this specific area of congregational life. Why then is it this part of congregational life that seems to be chronically ill?

As with any complex issue, there are no simple answers. Flawed human beings attempting to do divine work in an increasingly secular culture with limited resources is a start.

Mirroring culture

Congregational models that seem imported from another era without adapting to a changing landscape don't help. Too often our staff cultures mirror the disharmony and dysfunction of our culture rather than transform it with a vibrant alternative.

So where do we start with a healthy alternative for congregational staff?

At the Center for Congregational Health, we base our conversations in this realm on our conviction that healthy congregations, staffs and Christians engage in at least four consistent practices. We call them the Four C's:

They constantly *clarify* identity and mission.

They manage *conflict* in a proactive and redemptive fashion.

They *communicate* clearly, regularly and honestly.

They build authentic *community* intentionally.

When a staff practices these four habits they produce higher levels of satisfaction, effectiveness and genuine leadership.

The first of the four is the most indispensable. It is the easiest to skip. It is the one we are tempted to assume is self-evident. Without it you invite confusion and frustration into your life, your staff and the life of your congregation.

Clarity of mission and vision for a staff member starts with a sense of personal and individual divine calling. If working at a church is simply a job, a way to make money, a tool to work out your unmet needs, a means to impress your grandmother or anything other than your response to God's personal and profound call upon your life, you will find ministry to be a source of constant frustration.

Even then the life of a divinely called minister is by definition a challenging journey to bring hope and life into the hard and difficult places of life. Along with bringing deep joy and satisfaction, it will cause you to doubt your sanity, your calling and your faith. Without clarity around his or her personal call, any minister is a candidate for a host of missteps.

The same is true for a staff team.

Being clear about why you are on the journey, where your congregation is headed and what the objective of your congregation actually is will prove indispensable. When the mission and vision are fuzzy or unfocused, staff discord is imminent. When the mission and vision are lacking, others will supply it, and it will usually be self-serving rather than Kingdom-serving.

When mission and vision are incongruent with a church's DNA or the biblical witness, conflict will erupt.

Clarity of purpose

Before a staff worries about programs, strategies or creative ideas for being relevant, they need to get clear about the deeper question of clarity of purpose. Healthy staffs spend concentrated and regular time clarifying not only the broad mission of the Church, but also the specific call of their church in their time and place of service. While it is easy to trot out the Great Commandments and Great Commission, what we are talking about is a deeper understanding and articulation of what those mean in your ZIP code.

Healthy staffs quickly learn that such conversations must include the congregation if they are to be sustainable and truly shared. Once substantial clarity is reached in the larger community, staff members can assume their roles and goals based upon this shared vision of the future.

Let's start with this antidote for the epidemic of staff conflict: clarify your mission and vision.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Bill Wilson is a former Baptist pastor and president of the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, N.C. (ABP)



UNIVERSITY OF MOBILE

► **New University of Mobile Athletic Logo Reflects Rams' Competitive Edge:** The

University of Mobile (UMobile) has unveiled a new athletic logo for the NAIA powerhouse Rams that reflects the program's competitive edge.

The charging ram's head logo was selected by the UMobile Athletic Department and designed by



Jay Adcock with JWA Creative under the direction of the UMobile marketing and public relations department.

The image is in keeping with the Rams winning program, which is home of eight NAIA national championships with 107 All-Time NAIA Scholar-Athletes and 61 conference championships. The Rams program also is a recognized Champions of Character program emphasizing five core values of integrity, respect, responsibility, sportsmanship and servant leadership.

For more information about UMobile, visit the website at www.

umobile.edu or call enrollment services at 1-800-WIN-RAMS or 251-442-2222.

JUDSON COLLEGE

► **Judson College Senior Art Major Presents Exhibition:** Judson College senior art major Katlin Bailey, a member of Cross Roads Baptist Church, Hartselle, presented her senior exhibition at the college Dec. 4-12. The show, titled "23," is a "celebration of the birth of an artist and her work." Bailey has worked with many mediums throughout her artistic career.



Photos courtesy of Provident Label Group

Singer/songwriter Brandon Heath uses stories about fictional characters living in an Appalachian setting to drive home messages about God's unfailing love, forgiveness and grace.

Firmly grounded

By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Singer/songwriter Brandon Heath focuses on changing lives

With his newest album "Blue Mountain," singer/songwriter Brandon Heath uses stories about fictional characters living in an Appalachian setting to drive home messages about God's unfailing love, forgiveness and grace.

By taking a creative approach to share the gospel, Heath hopes these songs spark conversations and pose questions with non-Christians. For example, the song "Jesus in Disguise" is a reminder of the unexpected ways that Christ works in the midst of surroundings and struggles.

Heath came up with the theme for this project after a friend mentioned an interesting comparison found in the C.S. Lewis book, "Letters to an American Lady."

"My friend was talking about how he read that some people are like blue mountains," Heath said. "That's kind of a funny thing, but if you look at mountains in the distance, they are kind of blue and hazy. He reminded me that some people are like that because you're always from a distance to them. Once you get up close, you will see they're just like

everyone else. I love that thought, and the inspiration started flowing from there."

During concerts, Heath challenges audiences to step out of their comfort zone, reach out and make a difference to those in need. His concerts have helped raise awareness for a variety of missions organizations such as Food for the Hungry, International Justice Mission, Young Life, Blood:Water Mission, Restore International and other human rights groups.

Since 2008, Heath has hosted an annual benefit concert, "Love Your Neighbor," which gathers musicians for a night of music and supports needs within the Nashville community. This event has raised more than \$140,000 for community needs.

With music reflecting life-changing truth, Heath remains grounded on a firm foundation and focused on delivering music with a powerful message that changes lives for God's glory.

"I love hearing stories about how the songs have impacted people in unexpected ways and how they have responded by finding redemption and restoration through a relationship with Christ." ❧



Religion In America

Compiled from Wire Services

Nevada marriage amendment upheld in court

WASHINGTON — A federal judge has upheld Nevada's constitutional amendment that defines marriage as between one man and one woman.

In his Nov. 26 opinion, Judge Robert C. Jones ruled that Nevada had a constitutional right to pass the amendment, which was approved twice by voters — once in 2000 with 70 percent of the vote and a second time in 2002 with 67 percent. The lawsuit was brought by Lambda Legal, which advocates for gay issues.

Within the past year appeals courts have ruled against the federal Defense of Marriage Act and California Proposition 8, each of which could be considered by the U.S. Supreme Court in coming months.

Jones, nominated by President George W. Bush, said Supreme Court action in a 1972 case confirmed Nevada's ability to define marriage as it wishes. That case, *Baker v. Nelson*, came to the court on appeal from the Minnesota Supreme Court, which had upheld Minnesota's traditional marriage law in a case that was seeking to legalize gay "marriage."

The Supreme Court dismissed the appeal "for want of a substantial federal question" — that is, the court believed Minnesota had the right under the U.S. Constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman because there was no relevant federal issue.

But Jones went further in his ruling, saying Nevada had a legitimate state interest in defining marriage as it did.

"The perpetuation of the human race depends upon traditional procreation between men and women," Jones wrote.

Jones added, "Because the family is the basic societal unit, the state could have validly reasoned that the consequences of altering the traditional definition of civil marriage could be severe."

Court upholds ban on secular wedding officiants

INDIANAPOLIS — A federal court in Indiana has rejected atheists' requests to preside at wedding ceremonies, saying only clergy or public officials are licensed to solemnize marriages.

A lawsuit filed by the Indiana chapter of the Center for Inquiry (CFI) argued that an Indiana law that requires marriages to be "solemnized" — made official by signing a marriage license — only by clergy, judges, mayors or local government clerks violates the Constitution.

But Judge Sarah Evans Barker of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana ruled Nov. 30 that marriage has religious roots.

Therefore, government regulation of marriage is an act of religious accommodation — not endorsement — and protected by the Constitution.

CFI, a 24,000-member secular humanist organization based in New York, had argued that barring "secular celebrants" from solemnizing marriages provides preferential treatment to religious celebrants.

Indiana Attorney General Greg Zoeller described the current law as a "very reasonable requirement."

"The court found that couples who wish to marry without involving clergy have many alternatives for doing so," he said. "My office will continue to defend the statute if necessary."

Legal abortion takes lives of more than 400 women

WASHINGTON — More than 400 women have died from legal abortions since 1973, according to new data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that also shows the number of abortions fell by 5 percent in 2009.

The CDC reported Nov. 21 there were 403 deaths related to legal abortions through 2008, the most recent year for which statistics are available, and the number of abortions in 2009 fell from 825,564 to 784,507, marking the biggest one-year decrease in at least a decade.

The Supreme Court legalized abortion effectively for any reason throughout pregnancy Jan. 22, 1973. The deaths related to legal abortions dwarfed those from illegal abortions during the same time period. A total of 56 women died from illegal abortions, according to the CDC.

The new report also showed 12 women died from legal abortions in 2008.

That total doubled the number of deaths from legal abortion reported in 2007 and was the most since 1989, when 12 also were reported.