

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST



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INSIDE



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Photo courtesy of The Birmingham News

(L to r) N.H. Smith, pastor of New Pilgrim Baptist Church; John Porter, pastor of Sixth Avenue Baptist Church and A.D. King, pastor of First Baptist Church, Ensley, march from St. Paul Methodist Church along Sixth Avenue before being arrested en route to City Hall on Palm Sunday in 1963. They were arrested, police said, for marching without a permit.

'THE MOVEMENT'

Racism presents 'different set of challenges' today, pastor says

Let me preface this article by stating that I am not an expert on race relations in Birmingham or America for that matter. Neither am I someone who has the authority or who has done the research to speak for all African-Americans. I think that would be both presumptuous and misleading to the readers of this article. I am simply a pastor of one of the historic black churches in Birmingham, Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, where I formerly served as an associate under Dr. John T. Porter, who was my pastor and mentor. It was Dr. Porter, along with Dr. Harold Carter who now resides in Baltimore, who served as an assistant minister in the pulpit to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he was the pastor of Dexter Avenue

By Pastor John L. Cantelow III

Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, Birmingham



Baptist Church, Montgomery. It was Dr. Porter who was installed by Dr. King as pastor of Sixth Avenue Baptist Church in 1962. And it was Dr. Porter who marched and was taken to jail along with Dr. Nelson Smith of New Pilgrim Baptist Church and Rev. A.D. King, Dr. Martin Luther King's brother, during the Civil Rights struggle in Birmingham.

I am a beneficiary of that centuries-long struggle for equal rights in this city and country, for which many people of different ethnic groups and Christian denominations suffered, fought, bled and died. The stories of my grandparents, parents, neighbors and church

members who lived during that time — my maternal grandmother (now deceased) was born in 1902 — and the lessons they learned were passed on to me as a means of survival and wisdom. I say that because racism and its effects don't cease when a law is passed, but it is an organic thing that lives on in the minds, the bodies and the souls of the people who experienced it. They, in turn, share those memories and lessons to the succeeding generation. I was born in 1969, and though the struggle continues, I believe my generation is faced with a different set of challenges.

Although my mindset was shaped by my grandparents, parents and community, which includes the church, I never experienced the sting of racial inequality like they did. My children, I hope, will experience it even less than I have. Only a couple of times in my life has a white man or group of white men yelled out the "n" word to me and that was more than two decades ago. To date, my children have never experienced that. Also, as it relates to the term race, even though we commonly understand its meaning, I believe our

use of it is outdated. In Acts 17:26 (NKJV) Paul said, "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings." This indicates that all of us are a part of the human "race" which is made up of different ethnic groups and nationalities. Africans, Europeans, Asians and mixtures of the same are all part of the human race. This acknowledgment may help us in how we view our cosmetic differences.

Shortly after I returned to Birmingham 16 months ago, I witnessed something that still stands out to me. I was driving through a neighborhood in Hoover and saw a large group of children of just about every ethnic group playing football in someone's front yard. Honestly, I had never seen that before. I saw blacks, whites, Indians and maybe Hispanics and Asians just doing what kids do — having a good time. Admittedly I was shocked because I grew up in an all-black neighborhood in the city of Birmingham. It is not that I had never seen children of

(See 'Church,' page 8)

COMMENT

Church Members or Christian Disciples?

More people are attending church but they are attending less often.

That was the response of a pastor friend when asked if attendance at the church he serves was growing or declining. The pastor explained that faithful church members used to attend services eight or nine times over a 10-week period. Now faithful members may attend five or six times over a similar time frame.

The result is that a church may have more people involved in worship and ministry and still have the same number of people (or fewer) at any given service than it did a year or two earlier.

This pastor's experience is not unique. In most churches there is a sizable difference between members and participants.

That not all church members attend church services is a fact Baptists have known for a long time. Alabama Baptists, for example, report 1,135,606 total members of cooperating churches according to statistics provided by the Alabama Baptist State Convention. That number is impressive. It is about 23 percent of the state's 4,822,023 residents as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Unfortunately, about 30 percent of that number cannot be found. They are "nonresident members" meaning they no longer live in the ministry area of the church they joined. Resident membership of the state's 3,238 cooperating churches was last reported as 792,630. That is still about one out of every six Alabamians.

Actual worship attendance declines even further. Any given Sunday, the average attendance for cooperating churches will be 380,000–390,000 according to convention records. That is less than half the resident members and about 8 percent of the state's population.

For Baptists, the discrepancies between the number of people who are members of a local church and the number of people who regularly live out that commitment through worship and service in a local church creates a theological problem. What does church membership mean?

Does membership mean the right to vote in a business meeting? Does it mean the right to hold an office? Does membership mean one can use the church facilities for a wedding without having to pay a maintenance fee? Is church membership a status symbol in the community or a good business decision? Is mem-



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

bership in a church assurance of salvation?

The influence of Baptists and Anabaptists in the Reformation helped change the theological underpinnings of church membership. Formerly churches operated on a parish system where a local church served a geographical community and all who lived in that geographical area were considered members of the parish church.

Baptist emphasis on a Believer's Church resulted in voluntary membership. Only people who made a personal profession of faith in Christ and asked to be a member of a local church could be a member. Children of Baptist families may be reared in a church but they are not members until they make a personal profession of faith and ask to be members.

Most Baptists understand a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as the door to membership in the universal body of Christ. But most people experience the body of Christ locally. Christians gather in local communities to worship, praise, pray, study, minister and serve. This is the same pattern found throughout the New Testament (Acts 2:46, 1 Cor. 14:26, Eph. 4:16).

In Ephesians 4:11–12, the apostle Paul writes about equipping believers "so the body of Christ may be built up." In Hebrews 10:24–25 the apos-

tle urges believers not to give up meeting together in order to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

Membership in the body of Christ and in the local church, then, is to build up the body as a whole and to build up individual parts (members) of that body according to these two scriptures. The obvious observation is that it is impossible to do either if one does not participate with other Christians in the body of Christ.

Equally valid is the observation that when a church calls someone a "member in good standing" who has not participated in the life of the body of Christ for some time, that designation does not benefit the body as a whole or the individual in question.

Members are supposed to be Christian disciples. After all, Jesus called disciples, not members. As one author described it, membership in the body of Christ is an organic relationship, not an organizational relationship. Participation in the body of Christ is intended to help believers reaffirm their faith commitments and grow in the faith in order to become disciples. Believers are to contribute to the body of Christ, not just take from it.

In the early history of the Believer's Church one finds records of churches expecting members to participate in worship, evidence a growing faith, support the church financially, participate in missions and service and share their faith with others.

More recently churches have shied away from requiring anything of members. Most churches do not even have a class for new members to assimilate them into congregational life.

In some places that is beginning to change. A small but growing number of churches are asking believers and other candidates for membership to demonstrate they want to be Christian disciples before being accepted as church members. This is done through such things as participating in hands-on missions, being involved in some form of ministry and working with others in accountability groups.

Whether this new development will grow into a trend is yet to be known. But in a world where membership of most voluntary organizations is falling, where individual decisions are made for value-added benefits, it will be worth watching to see if local churches can focus on making Christian disciples and not get trapped in growing the organizational roll.

Letters to the Editor

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

May I say thank you *Alabama Baptist* and your thoughts each week.

Our church has bought a subscription of *The Alabama Baptist* for each family that desires to have it each week. My wife and I look forward to our copy each week.

The article in the Jan. 10 issue about human trafficking is heart-breaking but needed to be published. You pointed out some very troubling sins in our society. Thank you for making this evil known. We probably will not see this on the TV news nor in the daily newspapers.

Thanks and keep up the good work.

May I also challenge you on your article in the Dec. 20, 2012, issue. You wrote, "Certainly the treasures left on the stable floor are not nearly as important to God as the believing hearts of the Magi, who knelt before (See 'Letters,' page 11)



THE
ALABAMA
BAPTIST

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

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By Neisha Fuson
The Alabama Baptist



Photos by Neisha Fuson

Members of North Clay Baptist Church, Clay, celebrate and pray over the first Sunday service in a new facility Jan. 27.

'Long-awaited' Transition

North Clay Baptist finds new home for merged congregation

North Clay Baptist Church, Clay, knows a feeling few churches experience — what it's like to be bursting at the seams from day one.

The church, formed when two congregations joined together in 2010, had its first service in its new building Jan. 27. Members called it a "great day."

And to fit everyone in — all 200 plus — they had to bring in three extra rows of chairs.

"This is the start of something great," Pastor Tim Evans said, referring to the church's new location and future ministry.

Before North Clay Baptist was formed, Evans was pastor of Centercrest Baptist Church, Center Point. As the community around Centercrest began to change, a large majority of its members started to move to Clay and surrounding areas.

Church leadership began to pray about where the congregation could be most effective in reaching the lost. That's when Barry Wood, pastor of Eagle Ridge Baptist Church, Clay, called Evans and started talking with him about merging the two congregations to reach the Clay area together.

At the time, Eagle Ridge, a church plant, was meeting in two mobile units provided by the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM).

Both pastors sensed God leading them to come together and recognized they had "sim-

ilar goals and mutual interests," Evans said.

In 2010, Eagle Ridge Baptist and Centercrest joined to form North Clay Baptist with Evans as pastor and Wood as associate pastor. They met at Centercrest's facility while looking for a place to meet in Clay.

A planning team chaired by Joey Breighner, a Centercrest member for more than 30 years, decided that selling Centercrest's building was the first thing to do.

The way the details strategically fell in place was "a God thing," Breighner said.

A new and partially unfinished building previously used by Bridgepoint Baptist Church, Clay, became available for purchase in early 2012. The North Clay

Baptist congregation set its sights on it as a possibility.

Then early this January, an African-American church, Tabernacle of Praise Apostolic Church, purchased the former Centercrest building, allowing North Clay to move for-

ward with purchasing the Bridgepoint facility.

"We did not meet much resistance (from the North Clay congregation) when we decided we wanted to move (and purchase the new building)," Evans said.

Members were poised and ready to reach a new area and start fresh in a new building, he said. The church's new facility has a lobby, small sanctuary and at least 10 Sunday School rooms already completed. It has a large sanctuary that will seat about 700 people, an upstairs area and several classrooms that are partially unfinished. Evans estimated the building will be completed by 2014, but he said the church wants to focus first on settling into the community.

'Be strong and courageous'

He shared from Joshua 1:1-19 at the Jan. 27 service and urged church members to "be strong and courageous" in the midst of change.

Evans and Wood agree that North Clay is now in a good location to best reach its community with the gospel.

"We want to stay on task and stay simple," Evans said. "We're about more and better disciples and want people's roots to sink more deeply into Scripture." ❏

"We want to stay on task and stay simple. We're about more and better disciples and want people's roots to sink more deeply into Scripture."

Tim Evans, pastor
North Clay Baptist Church



EVANS

Alabama updates

People, churches making news across the state

Caudle spends 40 years ministering across US

William (Bill) Caudle's call to the ministry happened while he was sitting around a campfire as a high school student during a youth retreat Bible study at Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center in Talladega.

Following that call, Caudle went on to serve in Baptist churches spanning Oklahoma, Florida, Kansas, Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee and Alabama.

After more than 40 years in the ministry — youth work, educational ministry and pastoral ministry — Caudle retired Dec. 31, 2012, from full-time service after more than seven years as pastor of West Side Baptist Church, Jacksonville.

Caudle earned his bachelor of arts degree from Jacksonville State University and his master's degree in religious education from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. He was licensed and ordained at First Baptist Church, Huntsville.



CAUDLE

Reflecting on his years of ministry, Caudle said he and his wife, Linda, both recognize they have had the privilege of meeting "a lot of different people in a lot of different places" and that many of those people have continued to be "great friends and prayer partners through the years."

He added that during his years at West Side, the church built a new facility and "we had the privilege of celebrating ... their 90th anniversary [with them]. It was just a good church, and we enjoyed it very much," he said.

Tom Holland, West Side's minister of music, said Caudle is a good friend.

"He was ... one of the best I ever saw of comforting the bereaved," Holland said. "He had a real gift at that."

West Side held a retirement tea for the Caudles on Dec. 30. Holland said many people were in attendance for the event to bring cards and well wishes.

Caudle said he is available for fill-in preaching and serving as an interim, bivocational or part-time pastor. Caudle can be reached at 256-435-1888 or mined@juno.com. (Julie Payne)

Ballew retires after more than 54 years in ministry

First Baptist Church, Winfield, saw the end of an era in 2012 with the retirement of Pastor Charles Ballew.

Ballew served 25 of his more than 54 years in full-time ministry service at the Marion Baptist Association church.

Ballew was called to preach in 1958 just three months after his marriage to the former Joyce Morrow. He was licensed by Oakland Baptist Church, Birmingham, where he and Joyce were members at the time. He was ordained in 1967 by Five Points Baptist Church, Northport.

Ballew has served several churches in north Alabama, including Sipsey Baptist Association's Philadelphia Baptist Church, Samantha; Lamar Baptist Association's First Baptist Church, Beaverton; and Fellowship Baptist Church, Vernon. He also served Oakland Church, Birmingham, as well as Forrest Hills Baptist Church, Fairfield, and First Baptist Church, Shady Grove, in Birmingham Baptist Association.

Ballew's education includes a bachelor's degree from the University of Alabama and a master of divinity and doctorate in ministry from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Retirement does not mean the end of ministry for the Ballews. They plan on doing missions work in the western United States in the future.

Ballew learned many things throughout his years of ministry, but one lesson remains clear.

"If I should even attempt to offer the greatest or most profound lesson I have learned through the providence of God, it would have to be this: All churches are not the same, but the needs of people are the same wherever one serves," he said. "People are lost. Folks are hurting and need a pastor who understands this and who is willing to invest his life and energy in their lives. Our God does all things well and wants those of us in ministry to serve rather than be served." (Darla Brantley)



BALLEW



Photo courtesy of Susan West

More than 200 students from 45 countries attend Montgomery Baptist Association's Conversational English classes. The relationships have opened doors for volunteers to share the gospel.

'Ecumenical effort'

By Carrie Brown McWhorter
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Conversational English reaches internationals in Montgomery area

Colloquialisms like "goodie bag" or "meat-and-three" often baffle the international students who attend Montgomery Baptist Association's Conversational English (CE) classes, but explanations come naturally to CE volunteers and offer a glimpse into the longevity of the successful language ministry.

"The goal of CE is to help our students practice and improve their English skills, but so much more happens each week," said Susan West, director of CE and a member of First Baptist Church, Montgomery, where the classes are held each Thursday. For students, the classes offer a time of fellowship and language study. For volunteers, CE offers a weekly opportunity to carry out the directive of Leviticus 19:34 to show God's love to both short- and long-term international residents in their area.

Montgomery Baptist Association began CE more than 30 years ago as an outreach to the wives of international officers training at Maxwell Air Force Base. Approximately 120 military officers from 80 countries come to Montgomery each year to attend classes at Maxwell and many of the officers bring their spouses and families, according to base spokesperson Phil Berube. Businesses like Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama and the area's many colleges and universities bring a large number of interna-

tional visitors to Montgomery as well, so CE attracts a broad audience seeking to improve their English skills.

This year, more than 200 students representing 45 countries attend the free language classes, bringing with them 40-50 infants and preschoolers, West said. More than 70 volunteers, ranging in age from homeschooled teenagers to 90-year-old senior adults and representing 24 churches, help each Thursday. Some drive church vans around the city picking up students who need transportation. Others take care of the children or prepare refreshments. The teachers are volunteers as well, trained in English as a Second Language ministry by the International Mission Board.

Students come from many countries and various religious backgrounds, and the primary focus has always been language skills. Still, West said, the friendships formed between students and volunteers sometimes open the door for sharing the gospel, and the ministry's longevity shows what can be accomplished when churches work together toward one goal without worrying about who gets the credit.

"It's an ecumenical effort," West said. "The church lines are blurred, and it's a beautiful example of people being the hands and feet of Jesus."

Martha Durham, a member of Capitol Heights Baptist Church, Montgomery, has taught CE classes since the

"The church lines are blurred, and it's a beautiful example of people being the hands and feet of Jesus."

**Susan West
director, Conversational English
Montgomery Baptist Association**

school was organized. For her, the joy of teaching is twofold.

"It is a thrill to see students making progress in learning to speak English, but we also see them grow to appreciate each other's food, customs and beliefs," she said.

Jessica Bedient, a member of Pike Road Baptist Church, Montgomery, began teaching in 2011, and she, too, recognizes the value of the relationships formed through the program.

"I had no idea there were so many international Montgomery residents until I came to class and saw their smiling, eager faces," Bedient said. "They are all very grateful to have volunteers take the time to help them experience the American culture and learn English."

Growing relationships

Sujin An, a CE student from South Korea, expressed her gratitude to the volunteers.

"They are all so nice and kind, and I believe God knows all the work that they did (for) us," she said. "I have made so many good friends (from) all over the world through CE."

The holiday celebrations have been An's favorite times, and she especially enjoyed Christmas.

"We learned Christmas carols, we sang together and we learned about the great birth of Jesus Christ," she said.

Another student, Haryuo Powell, has been a student at CE for more than 10 years. A native of Japan, Powell said she is making gradual progress in her English, but she said she has probably attended for so long because she likes to be around the Christian teachers and volunteers at CE.

"They make me feel so comfortable," Powell said. "I learned what Christianity is, and I even started going to church because I wanted to know more about (the) Bible."

West said Powell has even invited other CE students to Sunday School.

"She told them, 'If you want to study English on Sunday, you can come and bring your family. They teach English, but the Bible is the textbook.'"

As a result, several CE students and their families have started attending the International Sunday School class at First, Montgomery, where West and her husband are teachers. West said the class includes a Mongolian officer and his family, a family from India and students from Korea, China, Peru, Ecuador and Laos. Some, but not all, are CE students, but West said regardless of how they get there, their effort shows they are open to hearing the gospel. One woman told West that her husband was reading the Bible every night. After a Bible study about the birth of Christ on another occasion, a woman closed her Bible and asked: "Why am I 32 years old and have never heard this story?"

West said she encourages those students to keep reading their Bibles and to keep coming to Sunday School and CE, where their relationships, and their knowledge of Jesus, can continue to grow. She knows that many students will pass in and out of the classes over the course of the year, but the time they do spend with CE is never wasted.

"Some students are with us for one year, some less than a year. But what an opportunity to have a relationship with someone from another country for even a year and to show them the love of God while they are here." ❧

Meeting needs

Volunteers go beyond classroom to help students

Volunteers at Conversational English (CE) often go beyond the classroom to help their international students navigate American life. Volunteers invest in the lives of students in usual ways, like meeting students for coffee, assisting them with doctor's appointments and attending programs together at local churches.

But they also get involved in unusual ways.

"One of our volunteers walked a student down the aisle at her wedding in Brazil," said Susan West, CE director. "We've had volunteers attend parent-teacher conferences, schedule lunches to practice ordering from a restaurant menu and shop for greeting cards, all of which can be very confusing when your English skills are weak."

West said the volunteers' efforts focus on a central goal: "When someone asks, we meet their needs."

Often the needs go beyond language. Several years ago, West taught a student to drive. The woman, a native of India, was taking a city bus to class each week but was being bothered on the bus. West helped her get her learner's permit and then taught her to drive the one route the woman wanted to learn — how to get from her house to church and back again.

"Her husband let us use their car and told me, 'I trust you with my car and my wife,'" West recalled. Later, the woman's husband wrote West to thank her for what she had done. Only then did West learn that the couple's marriage, arranged by their parents, had been very unhappy.

"His letter said, 'She wanted to go back to India, but then she found CE, you taught her to drive, and now I have a happy wife and a good marriage.' Every single volunteer could tell you a story like that though, and they all say they get more blessings than they can give," West said.



Photo courtesy of Susan West

The relationships formed between CE volunteers and students go beyond the classroom. The CE goal is, 'When someone asks, we meet their needs,' whether that be through shopping or teaching someone to drive.

Sometimes the story includes someone choosing to follow Christ as well. Many students throughout the years have attended First, Montgomery, West said, where she and her husband serve as Sunday School teachers of a class especially for internationals. At Christmas and Thanksgiving, CE hosts holiday programs where volunteers share their faith. West said there are many other opportunities to talk about Jesus as well, including the graduation ceremony held each May.

Sharing experiences

At graduation, each student is given a Bible in his or her native language and students get an opportunity to share their experiences at CE. West said students share what is on their hearts, and often they talk about their newfound knowledge of Christianity and

American life. Once a student thanked West for her Bible and said, "You have shown me that America is not like 'Desperate Housewives.'" Another said the only time she left her house each week was when the church van came to her house. A few years ago, a Muslim woman touched the hearts of the volunteers when she shared that "while she doesn't believe in our God, she knows He is real because she has seen Him in the faces of the volunteers, drivers, teachers and child-care teachers each Thursday."

For many students, volunteerism is a new concept, but CE shows them what it truly means.

"Students will often say, 'I never knew the word volunteer, but I will go back home and be a volunteer — I will do something for others with no pay,'" West said. (TAB)

Citizenship class to complement English classes

Each year, thousands of immigrants become naturalized U.S. citizens. The naturalization process brings all the benefits of U.S. citizenship, but the process is both challenging and time-consuming.

To help eligible students move forward in their quest to become naturalized U.S. citizens, Conversational English (CE), a ministry of Montgomery Baptist Association, began offering citizenship classes in January.

"This is the first time we've done it, so we're playing it a bit by ear," said Bill Lambert, a member of First Baptist Church, Montgomery, who teaches the citizenship class. "We have a broad group of people with various backgrounds, and the objective is to get these students ready to take the citizenship test."

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) website states that the most common path to citizenship is for an individual who has been a permanent

resident of the U.S. for at least five years and who meets all other requirements to be eligible for naturalization. Alternate paths to citizenship are available for spouses and children of U.S. citizens and for individuals who have served in the U.S. armed forces. In order to be eligible for naturalization, applicants must hold a "green card" that allows them to live and work in the United States, must be at least 18 years old and of good moral character.

A starting point

Perhaps the most challenging part of the naturalization process is the language requirement. Applicants must be able to read, write and speak English, and they must demonstrate that knowledge in a 100-question civics exam. The questions and answers are available through the USCIS website, but learning the answers is only part of the test, according to Lambert.

"The test is an oral test, given one-on-

one with an officer from USCIS," he said. "The student has to understand the officer and be able to respond to the questions in English."

Susan West, CE director, said the inaugural citizenship class has averaged 8–10 students, including a woman from Bangladesh who had already applied for citizenship and will take her test in February. Another student, a Chinese woman in her 70s who has been in the United States more than 20 years, will soon be eligible as well.

Though not all of those attending are immediately eligible for naturalization, Lambert said the class provides a good starting point for them.

She said the current plan is for the citizenship class to meet for eight sessions and then repeat, but those plans are flexible depending on the needs of the students. For more information, contact Montgomery Association at 334-271-6794 or West at 334-312-7057. (TAB)

Across Alabama's Associations

AUTAUGA

► **First Church, Posey Crossroads**, will hold a Valentine banquet at Vida Community Center on Feb. 15, 6:30 p.m. Bro. Billy Bob Bohannon will provide the program. Tommy Roy is pastor.

BETHEL

► **Pine Hill Church** will hold a new Women's Mission Group on Thursdays beginning Feb. 7, 5:30 p.m. Chris Kynard is pastor.

BIBB

► **Four Points Church, Centerville**, will hold revival Feb. 25-27, 7 p.m. nightly featuring Scott Dawson of Scott Dawson Ministries on Feb. 25; Pastor Kevin Hamm, Gardendale First Church, Feb. 26; and Rich Wingo, former University of Alabama and Green Bay Packer football player, Feb. 27. Roy Lowery is pastor.

BLOUNT

► **Pleasant View Church, Holly Pond**, will hold a third Sunday night singing Feb. 17, 6 p.m. with Kingsland Quartet from Arab. For information call 256-796-5986. Randy Burtram is pastor.

CHEROKEE

► **Eddie Nation** is the new pastor of **First Church, Centre**. He holds a bachelor of science degree from Campbellsville University in Campbellsville, Ky., and a master of divinity degree and doctor of ministry degree from Southern Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He previously served as pastor of First Church, Mount Vernon, in Kentucky. He and his wife, Anita, have two children.



NATION

DALE

► **Ridgecrest Church, Ozark**, will host the Miracle of Marriage Conference. The conference begins Feb. 8, 7-9 p.m. There will be coffee and doughnuts Feb. 9, 8:15 a.m., and the conference will be 8:30 a.m.-noon. For registration information call the church office at 334-774-5610. Jim Hill is pastor.

EAST CULLMAN

► **Mana Joyner**, retired longtime secretary for East Cullman Association and wife of former Director of Missions Jack Joyner, died Jan. 12. She served as Woman's Missionary Union director in churches and in the association. She earned a degree in religious education at New Orleans Seminary, where she also met Jack. She

is survived by her husband, two children and two grandchildren.

ELMORE

► **Anthony Rhodes** is the new pastor of **Calvary Church, Wetumpka**. He is a graduate of Jacksonville State University and Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He previously served as pastor of worship and education at Life Line Church, Little Rock, Ark. He also has served Fairview Heights Northside Church, Anniston, and churches in Mississippi. He and his wife, Marcia, have two children.



RHODES

FRANKLIN

► **First Church, Vina**, will hold its 7th annual Ladies Banquet on March 9 in the church fellowship hall. Pictures will be at 5 p.m. and the program will be at 6 p.m. Kathy Branzell will speak and a meal will be provided. To register, call Wanda Simsalek at 256-356-2191. Ray Kirk is pastor.



BRANZELL

MONTGOMERY

► **First Church, Montgomery**, and **First Church, Prattville**, will co-sponsor the Among Friends Women's Conference. The event will be Feb. 15, 7-9 p.m., and Feb. 16, 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

The conference will be hosted by First, Montgomery, and will feature host Kathy Troccoli, speaker and author Patsy Clairmont and speaker, author and dramatist Donna VanLiere. For ticket information visit amongfriendsconference.com or call 334-365-0606 or 334-264-6921. Jay Wolf is pastor of First, Montgomery.

NORTH JEFFERSON

► **Rodney Bouchet** is the new minister of music for Union Chapel Church, Remlap. He is a graduate of Southeastern Bible College in Birmingham and holds a bachelor of science degree in music and a bachelor's degree in religious education. He previously served as minister of music for Cook Springs Church, Pell City. He and his wife, Ann Marie, have four children.

ST. CLAIR

► **Gary Leopard** is the new pastor of **Corinth Church, Trussville**. He previously served as pastor of St. Clair Springs Church, Springville. He also has served as pastor of Acmar Church and as youth director of Argo Church in Birmingham Baptist Association. He is a graduate of the Samford University Extension program. He and his wife, Betty, have three children, seven grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

TUSCALOOSA

► **Hilltop Church, Northport**, will hold a Valentine concert and dinner Feb. 10. The service begins at 10:30 a.m. and will feature guest singers Debra Perry and Jaidyn's Call. Dinner will be at noon and an hour of singing will follow from 1-2 p.m. For information call 205-242-1679. Bill Reeves is pastor.

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Obamacare contraceptive opt-out proposal expanded

The Obama administration proposed a rule change Feb. 1 it says will appease the concerns religious organizations have about the contraceptive mandate.

Some groups had hoped the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) would announce that all religious organizations are exempt from the mandate, which requires employers to carry health insurance plans covering contraceptives and drugs that can cause chemical abortions. Churches, for example, are exempt from the mandate. Instead, HHS issued a rule that allows for employees to obtain contraceptives without the religious employer taking part in the process. Opponents say employers still will be involved.

The proposal also does nothing to help businesses such as Bible publisher Tyndale House or Christian-owned Hobby Lobby or any other for-profit whose owners have religious objections to contraceptives and/or abortion-causing drugs.

"Having reviewed this proposed rule, we ... have to say we're extremely disappointed," Kyle Duncan, general counsel of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, said in a conference call with reporters. Becket Fund has helped lead the legal charge against the mandate. More than 40 lawsuits have

been filed against the mandate. Duncan called the proposal "radically inadequate."

However, Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty reacted with a favorable first impression.

"The proposed rules signal an ongoing effort by the administration to provide for the preventive health care needs of women employees while seeking to honor the conscience objections of religious employers and their affiliates," Walker said.

Still working

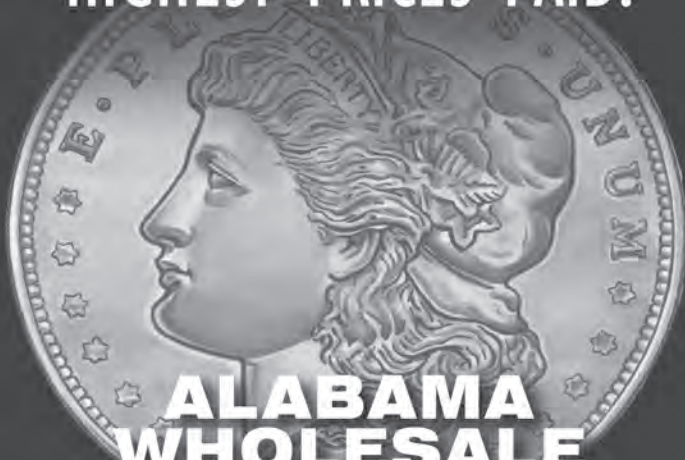
According to an HHS website, under the proposal, the religious employer "would not have to contract, arrange, pay or refer for any contraceptive coverage to which they object on religious grounds." Employees "would receive contraceptive coverage through separate individual health insurance policies, without cost sharing or additional premiums."

The administration said it is still working out how to handle self-insured group health plans like those offered by the Southern Baptist Convention's GuideStone Financial Resources, so that workers receive contraceptive coverage at no cost but eligible organizations do not have to contract, arrange, pay or refer for such coverage. (BP, ABP)

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Billy Austin (right) spent 22 years serving as president of Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers and ministering to the age group he values deeply. He demonstrated his care during the 2008 Alabama Baptist State Convention by having convention messengers celebrate with a resident turning 100.



Photo by Brittany N. Ragon

'A PASTOR'S heart

By Julie Payne
The Alabama Baptist

Austin retires as president of Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers after more than 2 decades of service

Following more than two decades of service at Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers (ABRC), Billy Austin retired from his role as president Jan. 31. Austin originally planned to retire in July 2013, but those plans changed after an unexpected phone call he received while preparing to return to work after Christmas break.

Austin, who had experienced kidney failure for two years, said the news on the other line was that an organ was available for him in Mississippi.

After his successful kidney transplant, causing him "to be in better health [than] in many years," he said doctors recommended that he not return to work for approximately two months during his recuperation period. Because of this extended duration away, he decided to move forward with his retirement plans.

Austin received a bachelor of arts degree in religion from Samford University in Birmingham and a master of divinity degree in theology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Prior to beginning his managerial role at Clara Verner Tower in Tuscaloosa — an Alabama Baptist facility until 2007 — Austin served as pastor of several churches including First Baptist Church, Tuscumbia; Hopewell Baptist

Church, Tuscaloosa; East Tallassee Baptist Church, Tallassee; and First Baptist Church, Bowling Green, Fla.

He later served as manager of Clara Verner Tower in 1988 and remained there until becoming president of ABRC in 1991.



AUSTIN

Austin said one reason he believes he was led to work with the elderly is that for many years, he and his family lived in the same home as his maternal grandparents. "I became very close to my grandparents and became deeply appreciative of the elderly," he noted. "I valued my grandparents greatly and looked up to them."

Later while serving as a pastor, Austin said he worked with the elderly and would even plan his vacations around the senior adult group trips in order to attend and fellowship with them. So when he had the opportunity to come to work at Clara Verner Tower and later as president of

ABRC, he said "it just made sense" that he would continue to minister to the people he had loved so much through the years.

Austin also served two terms on the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM), one term on the SBOM Executive Committee and 30 years as registration secretary for the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

Austin's retirement plans include moving to Tuscaloosa to be near his son. "I have a lot of roots there," he said, adding he is welcoming the opportunity to spend more time with his family. He also looks forward to the fellowship with other ministers in the area as well as opportunities "as the Lord opens up" for supply preaching and serving as interim pastor.

"I join the Alabama Baptist family of faith in congratulating Billy and Linda Austin for their service to the Lord," said Rick Lance, SBOM executive director.

"Years ago, when President George H.W. Bush left the White House, he made the comment that he was now going full-time into the grandfather business. I think that would be the sentiment of Billy Austin as well. He is a devoted father and grandfather and I know he will enjoy being back in Tuscaloosa where his family lives," Lance said, adding that throughout Austin's ministry, Austin "has exemplified a pastor's heart."

And Austin added, "I have told ... people that I feel like one of the most fortunate people in the world to work with (ABRC) and work with them for this amount of time."

He and his wife, Linda, have one son and one grandchild. ❧

"I have told ... people that I feel like one of the most fortunate people in the world to work with (ABRC)."

Billy Austin
retired president, Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers

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Church should be 'first to recognize, celebrate tearing down of strongholds'

(continued from page 1)
different ethnic groups playing together — I had seen that at school. But I had not witnessed it on that level in the neighborhoods of our city or in the metropolitan areas. How long the neighborhood will stay that way is anyone's guess. But that stood out to me as a sign of progress and inclusion.

► The fact that people of different skin tones are no longer forcibly segregated by law is a sign of progress.

► The fact that an environment of apartheid is a thing of the past is a sign of progress.

► The fact that a particular group of people no longer has to live in fear of being robbed of their human dignity at a moment's notice by the capriciousness of a member or members of the majority is a sign of progress.

► The fact that blacks and whites play on the same athletic teams and attend the same universities is a sign of progress. In some cases, they sit on the same boards and attend the same educational, political and corporate functions.

To my ancestors this would be nothing short of a miracle. It is a miracle that most of them would attribute to the grace and mercy of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

Many of them prayed for and sang songs of deliverance.

Many of them by faith looked forward to the day when the lash of the whip and the chains of iron and the tearing apart of their family units would be a distant memory.

Many of them believed that God was with them and their suffering would come to an end for their children's sake.

Like Hebrews 11:13 (NKJV) says, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on

the earth." Now I am fully aware that this verse of Scripture is referring to the Old Testament patriarchs and elders of the Hebrew faith, but the quality of faith that this verse speaks of refers to what some of my ancestors — to what some of our ancestors — also possessed.

Checked history

With such a checkered history of how blacks and other ethnic groups have been treated in this country, should we not all, at some point, applaud the election of President Barack Obama?

Regardless of political affiliation should we not all recognize and celebrate that such a moment

has become a reality in American history?

It is now a fact that someone other than a white male can be elected to lead our country. This is not a slight to those who have previously served this country as president with dignity, courage and wisdom, but I honestly thought I would never see such a thing in my lifetime. It was not something to which I believed my son could have aspired.

But beyond a shadow of a doubt what happened in 2008 and 2012 also speaks of progress and inclusion. I believe the church of the Lord Jesus Christ should always be the first to recognize and celebrate the tearing down of strongholds that have devalued people.

But along with the presidential election, Southern Baptists and Christians of all denominations should applaud and celebrate the election of Dr. Fred Luter Jr., who is the first black president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

I only wish the people of God who are Baptists could have achieved this before it happened on the secular level. I firmly believe that those things that make for peace and reconciliation and demonstrate the goodness and the inclusiveness and the power of God should be exhibited first by believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are still quite a few areas where separation exists among the people of God as well as the culture and country in which we live. Most churches are still segregated along the color line. The same can be said of many neighborhoods and schools, although economics play a role in this as well. The city of Birmingham is a prime example of this.

And the segregation of which I now speak is not a forced segregation, but it is one that has occurred by choice. Even the way we vote has a tendency to be divided along the color line.

This very human drama is possibly something that will be played out until the Lord returns. Only He can change minds and hearts. Only the Lord can bring about the unity among His people that so many — black, white, red, yellow and brown — long to see and experience.

Nevertheless I believe Christians need to lead the way in proclaiming and living out the gospel. I believe it is imperative for us to be prudent in how we

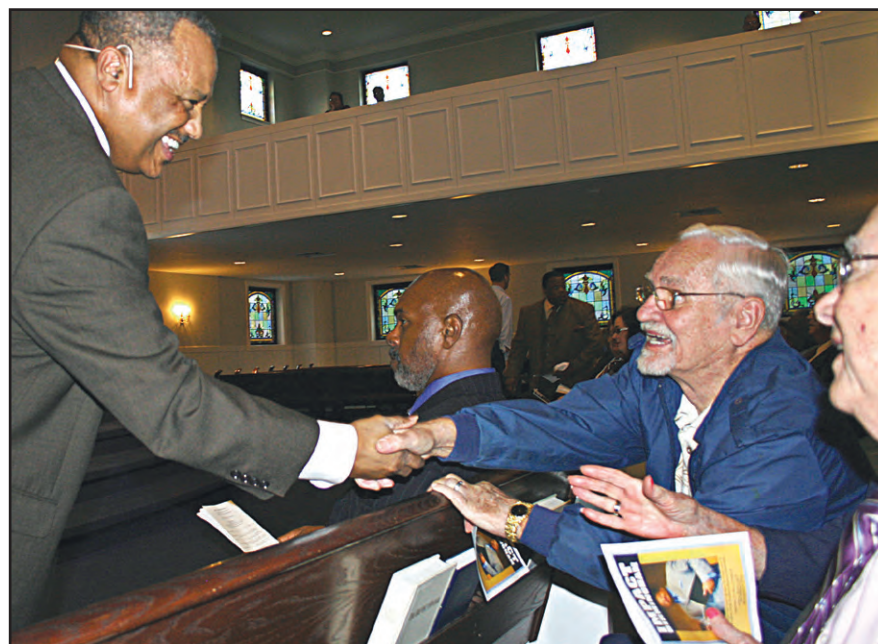


Photo by Toni Wall

SBC President Fred Luter Jr., pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans, participates in a Birmingham event in September 2012.



respond to the issues our country faces. Jesus once said to His disciples in Matthew 10:16 (NKJV), "Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

We are not here to condemn as Jesus said in John 3:17, but we are here to teach and help and pray for the people around us. There is a better way of living that has yet to be fully tried and tapped into. That way is the Lord Jesus Christ. Once we drink fully from the fountain that flows from His throne, and once others taste and see that He is good, then what once appealed to them and us will no longer hold our attention or allegiance.

Let us challenge our church and our culture to seek a better way. Let us lead the way

in building bridges that bring people together. Isn't that what the Lord did for us? Let us take advantage of social media and talk about family and community and forgiveness and courage and tolerance and truth. I don't believe anyone can speak to the issues this country faces like the church can.

Treating others

Whether the issue is equality and justice among people or whether it is how each person, regardless of skin tone, should treat one another, the church is uniquely suited by the grace and power of God to speak the truth in such a way that people are drawn to the gospel and not away from it. ☩

Samford to hold events for Black History Month, Civil Rights focus

Lift Every Voice and Sing: Connecting the Past with the Future" programs will be in Reid Chapel at 10 a.m. unless otherwise noted. The speakers will include:

► **Feb. 7** — Timotheus Miller, senior, Wenonah High School, Birmingham.

► **Feb. 12** — Raphael Warnock, senior pastor, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta.

► **Feb. 18** — Andrew Gerow Hodges Lectures in Ethics and Leadership, panel discussion, "'God's Institution' or Gross Injustice: Slavery Before the Civil War," Boldring Studio, 6 p.m.

► **Feb. 19** — Andrew Gerow Hodges Lectures in Eth-

ics and Leadership, and Richard Carwardine, "Abraham Lincoln and the Challenge of Emancipation."

► **Feb. 21** — Mayor William Bell, City of Birmingham.

► **Feb. 26** — Elizabeth Sloan-Ragland, director, WJAB Public Radio, Huntsville.

► **Feb. 28** — Cedric Sparks, executive director, Division of Youth Services, City of Birmingham. Thursday Marshall Symposium, Cumberland School of Law, "Confronting Modern Barriers to Civil Rights Advocacy in America," Fordham Robinson Hall, 11 a.m. (Samford)

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FEBRUARY 2013

By Bob Dewhurst,
ABCHVP, Ministry Development

GOOD will



A People of goodwill tend to be easy to like. They are positive, generous and enjoyable to be around. They are cheerful and optimistic. People of goodwill make life more pleasurable and satisfying for others.

The term "goodwill" also applies to businesses and ministries. This intangible asset adds value to the more measurable aspects of facilities, programs and personnel. A ministry with goodwill enjoys a positive presence in their community.

"Goodwill" can also apply to estate planning. We express our goodwill through a "Good Will." And a good will is a whole lot better than a careless or faulty will; or worse yet, no will at all!

Here is a list of items a good will can accomplish. Does your will do these things?

- Name your personal representative
- Reduce or eliminate taxes
- Establish children's trusts and name trustees
- Name guardian(s) for minor children
- Designate who will receive personal items
- Make charitable gifts to ministries of your choice
- Reduce stress for grieving loved ones

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(Memorialized & Honored person's name is bolded.)

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Estelle Benson, Georgiana: Brushy Creek BC
Doris Smith Bice, Mountain Brook: Mary Ann K. Short
Peggy Bracken, Brewton: Lydia SSC, Brewton FBC
Dorothy Brooks, Frisco City: Senior Ladies SSC, Goodway BC
Paul Brown, Decatur: Mr. & Mrs. J. Wray Pearce
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Bim Burgin, Birmingham: Marjorie Kay Nix
Dean Byrd, Vestavia: Marjorie Kay Nix
John Mark Campbell, Bay Minette: Velma House
James "Sonny" Carroll, Trussville: Patricia Mink, Higgins Cousins
Bill Cash, Birmingham: Marjorie Kay Nix
James Daniel "J.D." Chastang, Bay Minette: Durant Chapel
Cathy Coleman, Bay Minette: Faye Salter Parker
Otis H. Corbitt, Jr., Salem: Pleasant Grove BC
Martha Covin, Beatrice: Eastwood BC, Monroeville
Lura Curtis, Shelby: Centreville BC
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Sara Jordan, Headland: John & Betty Mies
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Want to know God?

By Billy Reinhardt
Minister of youth

Mountain View Baptist Church, Wetumpka

In Jerry Bridges' book "The Discipline of Grace" he states, "Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace."

Have you ever thought that your sins were too great for God to forgive you? Maybe you have difficulty forgiving yourself, but God is able to forgive: "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save" (Isa. 59:1a). Hebrews 7:25 says, "Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." The word "uttermost" may also be translated "completely" or "at all times." It doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done. God is able to save "at all times," no matter how far you've strayed from Him.

Maybe you don't fall into the first category, but maybe you think your sins are so small in God's sight you can do enough good to "outweigh" the wrong you've done. Consider Isaiah 64:6a: "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment." According to this passage all our "righteous deeds" are like a "filthy garment" in the eyes of God. How could this be?

One reason for this is given in Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" God knows our hearts as "deceitful" and "wicked" even though we would think better of ourselves.

The fact that we think our good deeds are "good enough" for God on their own is evidence of the deceitfulness of our hearts and is a manifestation of pride. It would be wise for us not to "follow our heart" since it is "wicked" and "deceitful" and to instead follow God and His Word, which is all truth and cannot lie. We must come to a place of realizing that no matter how "good" or how "bad" we are, we are in need of God's grace every day and it is only by trusting in Jesus Christ that we may be rescued from Hell.

Letters

(continued from page 2)

Jesus." The thought was well taken, however according to Matthew 2:11 when the Magi reach Bethlehem in Judea Mary and the Child were in a house. This was probably days or weeks after the birth of the Christ Child. Thank you anyway.

Edward Harrison
Lincoln, Ala.

MISSIONARIES' IMPACT

I was very interested to read your article about missionary William Hugo Parkman in the Loving Memory section of this

week's paper. I remember seeing the announcement of his and Doris' appointment by the Foreign Mission Board in 1957, but I had no idea at that time I'd ever meet them.

Then a few months later God called us to Thailand and we began our long voyage across the Pacific Ocean.

Our ship, the President Cleveland, made a two-day stopover in Manila in late October 1958 and we had the privilege of being at the Parkmans' home for a Saturday afternoon cookout. Their warm southern hospitality

was a very welcome treat after a three-week ocean voyage, and it introduced us to the special bond among our SBC missionary family — which we came to experience more and more during our 36 years in Thailand.

Bob Stewart
Retired Southern Baptist missionary

SHARING JESUS

I was thrilled with your cover story in the Jan. 24 issue, "Sharing Jesus with Jews," plus two more full pages of valuable information that included figures on the Jewish population in Alabama, tips for sharing Jesus (Yeshua) with Jews, getting evangelism training and resources from the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship and the discrimination Messianic Jews face in Israel.

The Baptist worker in Israel from Alabama was quoted extensively in the articles, and I wholeheartedly agree with everything he said. I will be praying for him regularly in his work among the Jews.

After all, the apostle Paul, our model Jewish evangelist, said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Messiah, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Gentile)" (Rom. 1:16).

Thank you, Grace Thornton, for these excellent articles, and thank you, Bob Terry, for giving a prominent place to them. This equips Christians in fulfilling Jesus' ministry first to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5-6).

Nancy Petrey
Luverne, Ala.



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Philippians 2:13

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CHURCH POSITIONS

FULL-TIME STUDENT/ED PASTOR: First Baptist Church of Hokes Bluff, near Gadsden, Ala., is prayerfully receiving resumés. Please send resumés or questions to: fbchb@att.net.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR OF MUSIC & WORSHIP: Bon Air Baptist Church, a large, suburban, multi-site church in Richmond, Va., seeks experienced associate pastor of music and worship. Please send resumés to: worshipleader@bonairbaptist.org.

BIVOCATIONAL (PART-TIME) WORSHIP LEADER: Shiloh Baptist Church of Hartford, Ala., is seeking a bivocational (part-time) worship leader. If interested, please submit resumés by mail to: Worship Leader Search Committee, Shiloh Baptist Church, 873 N Shiloh Road, Hartford, AL 36344.

PART-TIME MINISTER OF MUSIC: Rangeline Baptist Church of Demopolis, Ala., is seeking a part-time minister of music. We enjoy a blended mix of worship music. Mail resumés to: Rangeline Baptist Church, ATTN: Music Committee, 5809 County Road 19, Linden, AL 36748.

BIVOCATIONAL OR PART-TIME MUSIC DIRECTOR: If interested, send resumés to: Union Grove Baptist Church, 1498 Butler Road, New Market, AL 35761.

FULL-TIME YOUTH MINISTER: FBC Enterprise in Enterprise, Ala., is prayerfully receiving resumés until Feb. 28. Please send to: fbcenterprise@hotmail.com, ATTN: Personnel Committee Chair.

YOUTH MINISTER: Central Heights Baptist, near Florence, Ala., is seeking a youth minister for grades 7-12. Please mail resumés to: randall.

huckaba.ctr@mda.mil or huckabar@saic.com. Mail: 10090 County Road 15, Florence, AL 35633, ATTN: Randy Huckaba.

OTHER POSITIONS

OFFICE MANAGER: Grace Life Baptist Church is seeking someone that is self-directed, detail-oriented and highly organized to fulfill the role of office manager. Candidates need to demonstrate excellent oral/written communication skills, problem-solving capabilities and flexibility/adaptability. Proficiency in Microsoft Office is required and experience with church database software (ACS) is preferred. We are looking for 2 years or more related experience and would prefer a candidate with an associate degree or higher, but the minimum education required is a high school diploma. If qualified and interested, send your resumés to: 6200 Lou George Loop, Bessemer, AL 35022, ATTN: Sharon Holland or email to: sharonh@yourgracelife.com.

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.

INDEPENDENT SALES ASSOCIATE CONTRACTOR: The 170-year-old *Alabama Baptist* is an award-winning statewide weekly newspaper with more than 200,000 readers. Baptists comprise the largest Christian denomination in Alabama with membership of more than a million. *The Alabama Baptist* is seeking contract sales people with the ability to develop advertising

partnerships with businesses and organizations interested in reaching the key demographics of our readers and growing their business. As an independent sales associate contractor, you would work from your home office with no territory restrictions. *The Alabama Baptist*, Inc. provides a unique working environment. We are partners with the churches of the Alabama Baptist State Convention working together for the advancement of the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Each employee is expected to manage his/her personal and professional life in accordance with this relationship and consistent with the traditions of *The Alabama Baptist*. Send resumés and inquiries to: bgilmore@thealabamabaptist.org.

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RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

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

Invest in a thorough understanding

The printer/copier in our office can do amazing things. It's the Mercedes of printer/copiers. Problem is, none of us actually know how to work it beyond the few obvious uses.

I'm not sure why we don't. A thorough user's manual with crisp, clean pages waiting for its first true read sits neatly on top of the machine. The sales rep and other tech assistants have visited our office several times during the past three to four years the machine has lived in our building. A training session is merely a phone call away.

I guess we are too busy to take the time to master the complete operation of our printer/copier.

Sadly, this also is true for some of our computer programs. We know enough to do what we need to do, but it is the rare staff member who truly knows every function of every program we use.

Should I even go into our mobile devices?

How about you? Do you have a smartphone? Have you truly learned to use it to the max? Do you know all that it is capable of doing?

I remember when I was about to get my first smartphone. An editor from another state Baptist newspaper was showing me his new BlackBerry (they were actually cool back then) and teaching me the basics on how to use it.

And while I don't really remember any of the items he taught me about the phone, I do remember clearly a life lesson he taught me in that moment. He said the best advice he could give me would be for me to take the time to truly learn it.

"Take your phone and the instruction manual and tuck away from the world. Don't come back until you understand everything about it," he told me. "Investing a few quality hours into understanding the phone and learning all that it has to offer and how to use all the options will save you lots of time in the long run."

He was right, and not just about the phone. His advice is something I've tried to use with every new device I've acquired, each new task I've been assigned, all new phases of life and pretty much anytime I need to learn something new.

I don't actually get to hide away for a few hours like I would prefer, but I always start with that as the plan and dive into the immersed educational process as far as time and other responsibilities will allow.

I've even started realizing it's not too late to actually engage at this level with devices, programs, etc., that I use every day and really should already know better than I do. Yes, I admit I got pretty excited when I finally learned how all the remotes in our household worked, and now I'm as fluent as anyone who goes up against me.

Where I'm still falling short, however, comes in a complete understanding of God. His ways, our lives as believers, the complexity of one's faith journey and exactly where I fit into all of it. He's working on and in me, and I'm watching with anticipation to see what He's up to. In the meantime, I'm attempting to go for complete immersion into all things related to Him so I can one day have as complete an understanding as humanly possible. The educational resources are vast. The instruction manual is rich. The fellow believers are available. And life itself provides constant moments in which to learn.

All I need to do is make sure I'm focusing on Him with intensity and purpose, taking the time to truly understand.

The question is: Am I strong enough to protect my heart, my mind, my time from anything — even when they are good things — that infringes on the opportunity to grow deeper?



Rashional EXTRAS ...

What topics are
on your mind?

Email jrash@
thealabamabaptist.org

What am I hiding?

Excerpts from life coach and Bible study teacher Terry Newberry's "An Art of the Question" blog at www.terrynewberry.com ...

The heart is a powerful thing. Things that we allow in affect us. They surface in our life as something that strengthens us or perhaps as something that weakens or even hurts us.

For instance, there is emotion. Some of us have deep-seated hurt or anger hidden inside. This is one of the most dangerous areas of a hidden heart. Study after study has shown the ill effects of suppressed anger and hurt.

Then there is talent. Some of us are reluctant to let our true selves be seen. Perhaps we are fearful of rejection or being laughed at. Maybe we don't want others to feel as though we are hogging the spotlight or trying to show off or take their position. Maybe we lack confidence or are just plain discouraged. But each of us has been given a talent of some sort. It may be fundamental or maybe quirky, but it is a part of who we are.

Don't hide your talent. Let it out and share it with the world.

And then there is wisdom. A wise man once wrote, "As you think in your heart, so you are." What do you think in your heart? What are you feeding your heart and your spirit? What do you read? What do you watch or listen to? What are the seeds that you plant in your mind and heart, and what harvest will they bring?

The world is filled with plenty of fear and friction. It has dread and disaster to spare. We live in the middle of a never-ending barrage of negativity, sensationalism, fear and "what-if" scenarios. How do you counter all that noise?

Hide some good things in your heart.

Find some good things to plant there. Positive things, worthwhile things. Make sure that you read something every day that will help you grow. Scripture, personal growth books, inspirational articles. Search for the keys, the secrets, the treasures that you alone know will feed your spirit.

Make sure to filter what you choose to listen to. I don't mean that you should stick your head in the sand, but don't allow negative, fear-laced rhetoric to be planted in your spirit.

One of my favorite writers dealt with physical limitations, depression and rejection. He was beaten and even jailed unfairly. But he never lost his focus. He summed up his secret in a letter he wrote to some friends. Here is what he said:

"Finally, friends, whatever is true, whatever brings honor, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, whatever is excellent and is worthy of praise — think about and meditate on these things."

What are you hiding in your heart?

"Being open to the wisdom and experience of others is the hallmark of a leader. People who are willing to listen spend more time doing what works the first time, rather than having to experience every mistake."

Dan Miller

"48 Days to the Work You Love"

"Beware of anything that competes with loyalty to Jesus Christ. The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Him. It is easier to serve than to be drunk to the dregs. The one aim of the call of God is the satisfaction of God, not a call to do something for Him. We are not sent to battle for God, but to be used by God in His battles. Are we being more devoted to service than to Jesus Christ?"

Oswald Chambers
"My Utmost For His Highest"

Thank you for the article about Belle Belle in the Oct. 4, 2012, issue of *The Alabama Baptist*. The family does not know me but I, a cancer survivor myself, have been in Belle's corner as a prayer warrior and contributor since first hearing about her cancer. You did a beautiful job of capturing the essence of how the Father has used the worst of circumstances in Belle's life to glorify Himself.

Jeff Brendle
Kings Mountain, N.C.

'Hope Discovered'

Excerpt from *hopediscovered.com* blog by writer and retired Alabama Baptist pastor Gary Hardin ...

Problems and difficulties are common to all people. Someone has said that all of us occupy three positions in life: Getting ready to encounter a problem, being in the middle of a problem or just coming out of a problem. And if we are just coming out of a problem, we can be sure that before long we will be going into another one. The blog *hopediscovered.com* will help you discover some hope for the problem you are dealing with now.

I love people and I love the Bible. In this blog I bring together both typical problems and Bible verses that give hope for coping with those problems. Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." Most people can work through their problems if they know they have some hope. To have no hope leaves us feeling sick (depressed, downcast).

Hope anchors our spirit as we persevere through life's problems (Heb. 6:19). Visit this blog to find practical, real-life insights about hope.

UPCOMING TOPICS

include ministering to families who are grieving. Send us your experiences with this topic. Email jrash@thealabamabaptist.org or comment on our blog at thealabamabaptist.wordpress.com.



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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For February 10

Explore the Bible By Robert Olsen Assistant Professor of Christian Ministries, University of Mobile

LET THE VERDICT BE READ! Amos 8:11-12; 9:8-15

Trust Comes by Hearing (8:11-12)

Chapter 8 of Amos begins with a vision of a basket of ripe summer fruit. But instead of celebrating the summer harvest, God was going to punish Israel because of their sin. The merchants in Israel were guilty of wicked business practices. They overcharged for their products, used phony scales to trick the buyers and mixed their grain with dust and chaff to further trick the buyer. The merchants were so concerned with making a profit that they mistreated the poor, disobeying God's command to love neighbor and to help the poor and the widow. On top of this, the sellers could not wait for the Sabbath and other festivals to be over so that they could open up their businesses. For these people, the Sabbath was a hindrance, keeping them from earning money instead of a day to rest and commune with God.

This has practical application for us today. When work becomes our primary motivator and supersedes our relationship with Christ, we are as guilty as these merchants. When we go to church only for the sake of getting it over with instead of allowing this time to be a time of spiritual renewal and conviction, we are no different than these Israelites. And because of their actions, God told the Israelites that there would be a time when they would seek out the Lord and desire to hear a word from Him, but to no avail. If the Holy Spirit tries to speak to us and we resist, over time it makes it difficult for God to reach us because we have chosen our own way over God's. When we listen to Satan long enough, his lies seem like the truth. This should serve as a warning to us to be seeking to hear from God continually by meditating on His Word and by being involved in a local church where we can hear the Word of God preached.

Sovereignty Cuts Two Ways (9:8-10)

Chapter 9 begins with a vision of the Lord standing beside the altar — a strange

sight since the presence of the Lord was usually within the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the Temple. However, God's presence at the altar was not to show His pleasure at the sacrifices but rather to declare inescapable judgment. God declared that no matter where the people tried to hide He would hunt them down and destroy the "sinful kingdom." This would usually be good news for the Israelites because all of the kingdoms surrounding Israel were sinful; however, this time the sinful nation referred to Israel herself, not exactly what the people wanted to hear. The people of Israel thought that they would be safe because they were still performing the required sacrifices and observing the Sabbath, but this was only external worship. The attitudes of the worshippers were far from God. God desires true worship — a worship of the heart that manifests itself in our desire to follow God's laws and commands. Just blindly following the commands of God in the hopes that God will in some way reward us is not true worship.

But, in spite of God's judgment, God would allow a remnant to remain. God's love is so great that even though we all deserve to be punished, He is longsuffering and patient and does not give us what we deserve for our trespasses.

True Hope Rests in God (9:11-15)

The last section of Amos ends on a positive note, because God promises to restore Israel. God is holy and just and must punish sin — He did this on a grand scale when He took Israel into exile, but He is also loving and merciful and promised He would eventually restore Israel. God worked with Israel in this fashion, and He also works with us in a similar way. Our sin must be punished, but because of God's love for us demonstrated in Christ's dying on our behalf, we are able to have eternal life if we confess our sins and follow Christ. The holy God who created the world desires that we have a relationship with Him. Our response should be to repent of our sins and humbly and joyfully follow Christ. ❏

Bible Studies for Life By Michael Wilson Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence, Samford University

THE CHARACTER OF LEADERSHIP 1 Timothy 3:1-15

Our nation lost a respected former military leader a few weeks ago. General Norman Schwarzkopf was renowned for his effective, decisive leadership in several armed conflicts involving the United States in recent decades. He will be remembered primarily for his tactical thinking and strategic planning in the Persian Gulf War. Among his many memorable statements about leadership is this: "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without strategy."

This week's lesson invites us to consider another of Paul's "trustworthy statements" to his young apprentice Timothy. In Paul's thinking, one who aspires to be an effective leader in the church must possess a particular kind of character.

Above Reproach (1-7)

Not too many years ago, people in positions of leadership in government, corporations, social service organizations and churches typically enjoyed "built in" respect that came as a result of their positions. Regrettably far too many of these leaders' actions caused a breakdown in respect and trust as they engaged in dishonest, deceptive and downright evil practices for purposes of their own personal gain. Our society has lost its innocence. Now we are much less likely to trust leaders and more likely to hold them in suspicion even as they prove themselves. Once lost, trust is rarely restored free of at least a measure of suspicion. Like the saying goes, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." Paul reminds Timothy that leaders in the church must possess character that is consistently above reproach. The honorable, noble, life-changing work of ministry — both lay and clergy — deserves nothing less. Those outside the church are watching and their skepticism and cynicism make it easy for them to have low expectations.

Worthy of Respect (8-13)

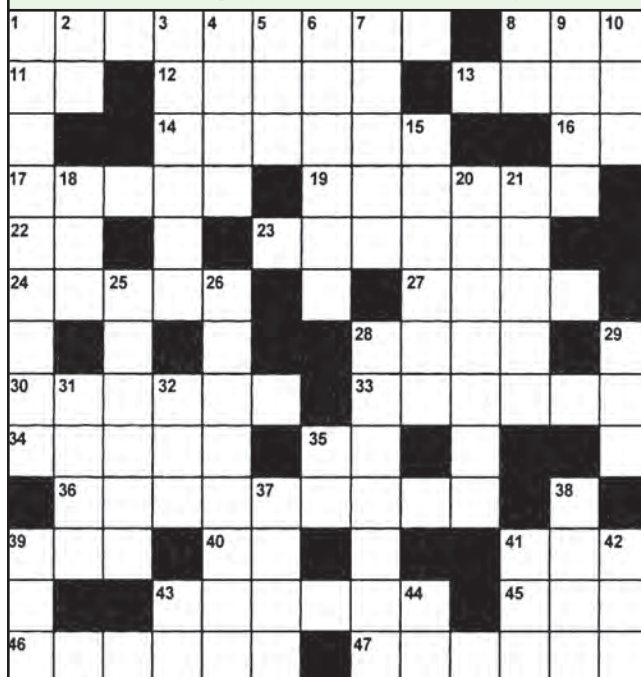
After all, they have been fooled before. Next Paul affirms a desirable character trait in another group of congregational leaders: deacons. He counsels Timothy that these servant leaders should be people whose conscientious stewardship of life earns them the respect of those they serve. These persons are respected because they unselfishly and willingly give of themselves to help others in the community of faith. Sadly the ministry potential of deacons is not fully realized in many congregations. Their role may be misunderstood or may lack credibility due to the loss of a sense of value and purpose within the community of faith. Paul challenges Timothy to hold deacons to a high standard of Christ-like behavior. This manner of behavior is focused on care and compassion, healing and wholeness in the lives of those being served.

And Not Just the Leaders (14-15)

Though Paul identified desirable character traits for persons in roles of pastoral leadership and deacon ministry, in reality these traits are desirable in all disciples of Christ. Baptists have historically emphasized the priesthood of every believer. In other words, all who profess Christ as Lord are called to be ministers of the gospel. While some fulfill a sense of call to a vocational ministry role such as pastor or missionary, all Christians have a ministry calling to fulfill. Paul encouraged Timothy by giving him a clear description of how folks in the church should behave as they live out their call to minister to one another. Character traits of sincerity, generosity, service, self-control, gentleness and honesty are but a few he names. With these words of counsel in Paul's letter to Timothy and other scriptural resources, we have ample knowledge of how we should act as we share life together in our churches. What was true for Timothy and his community of faith is true today for us: our ongoing challenge is moving from knowledge to practice. ❏

Christian Crossword

By Connie Holman Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.



Across

1. Thou shalt plant _____. (Deut. 28:39)
8. Standeth in ____ of thy word. (Ps. 119:161)
11. House ____ God. (Gen. 28:17)
12. More recent.
13. Once more; in a different way.
14. Scottish language.
16. Let your communication _____, Yea, yea. (Matt. 5:37)
17. Opposite of over.
19. Bays or coves.
22. Have ____ other gods before me. (Ex. 20:3)
23. Give to him that _____. (Matt. 5:42)
24. Characteristic.
27. Thou are ____ great. (Ps. 104:1)
28. Nothing more than.
30. Gather the ____ of Israel. (Ex. 3:16)
33. Stubborn.
34. More uncommon.

Down

1. One who works freely.
2. ____ my people, which are called by my name. (2 Chron. 7:14)
3. In the wilderness of _____. (1 Sam. 24:1)
4. ____ of jubilee. (Lev. 27:17)
5. Stand in _____, and sin not. (Ps. 4:4)
6. Take pleasure in.
7. Neither eat nor _____. (Esther 4:16)
8. ____ angel of the Lord. (Luke 1:11)
9. Spider homes.
10. Save one little ____ lamb. (2 Sam. 12:3)
15. Cunning.
18. Thou, _____, thy son. (Ex. 20:10)
20. But the righteous into life _____. (Matt. 25:46)
21. Number of Noah's sons. (Gen. 6:10)
25. Brother of Simon Peter.
26. Raging floods.
28. Small amount.
29. Breach for breach, _____ for _____. (Lev. 24:20)
31. Put it on a blue _____. (Ex. 28:37)
32. Snakelike fish.
35. ____ home in the body. (2 Cor. 5:6)
37. Every bird of every _____. (Gen. 7:14)
38. Eat of the ____ of life. (Rev. 2:7)
39. Resort area; gym.
41. Quantity. (abbr.)
42. The ____ of all things is

- at hand. (1 Pet. 4:7)
43. In the year of our Lord.
44. As for ____ and my house. (Josh. 24:15)



PERSECUTED CHURCH

Compiled from Wire Services



Vietnam's religion decree seen as step backward

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — Protestant Christians and leaders of other faiths in Vietnam are criticizing a new decree on religion that went into effect this year as a significant step backward, with one Christian activist saying it could put an end to the house-church movement.

The Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship called for fasting and prayer the last three days of January over threats posed by the new decree, which require a minimum of 23 years for unregistered congregations to obtain legal recognition.

The purpose of Decree 92 ostensibly was to clear up ambiguities in the former decree, Decree 22, but critics from all faiths agreed that Decree 92 is much more restrictive than what it replaced. They also concurred that it gives the government more legal tools for control and even repression of religion.

Chapter III of the decree introduces a new distinction between "religious meetings" and "religious activities" or operations; both must be registered before an organization is eligible to apply for full legal recognition. Religious meetings appear to be confined to communal worship and prayer. Only at the religious activities stage, according to Article 3 of the ordinance, is a congregation allowed to be involved in "the preaching and practice of tenets, principles and rites, and organizational management."

Once registered, church organizations must comply with onerous requirements. The decree requires that a full annual plan must be submitted to commune-level officials by every congregation each October; no deviation is allowed without a long, cumbersome appeals process that is unreasonable, church leaders said.

Iran sentences US pastor to 8 years in prison

ISTANBUL — Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini was sentenced to eight years in Iran's most notorious prison Jan. 27 for allegedly threatening "national security" by planting house churches years ago.

The verdict came after a week of false promises of being granted bail and fear for his safety in Tehran's infamous Evin Prison. Iran's official news agency reported that the state regime had told the pastor he could be released if he posted bail. When his family in Tehran attempted to free him, however, the bail officer turned them away, according to the American Center for Liberty and Justice.

During his incarceration, Abedini faced periods of solitary confinement, repeated physical assaults and intense interrogations, "all while being denied access to legal counsel," according to a letter members of U.S. Congress sent to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Jan 15.

The pastor's wife, Nagmeh Abedini, released a statement after his sentencing. "The promise of his release was a lie," she said. "These false hopes amount to psychological torture. You don't want to trust them, but they build a glimmer of hope before the crushing blow."

She and their two children, a 6-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son, reside in Idaho.

South Sudanese Christians ordered to leave country

NAIROBI, Kenya — A South Sudanese couple, Anthony and Cecilia Jamu, and Ismail Bashir, a pastor from South Sudan, were ordered to leave Sudan on Jan. 28 because of their Christian activities, sources in the area reported.

Accused of aiding Sudanese churches, Cecilia Jamu was arrested when she was linked with an associate from Germany, Jasmin Neuman, who was deported Jan. 7.

The Jamus and Bashir left the country on a Jan. 30 flight. The orders to leave came from Sudan's Ministry of Interior, in conjunction with the National Intelligence and Security Services.

Uzbek charged for 'illegally' storing religious literature

URGENCH, Uzbekistan — After two raids on her home in Urgench in northwest Uzbekistan in January and being detained for 11 hours, Sharofat Allamova is facing criminal prosecution for "illegally" storing religious literature. The criminal charges carry a fine up to 100 times the minimum monthly wage or a prison term of up to three years.

CAMPUS News



JUDSON COLLEGE

► **Judson College to Sponsor 'Gala':** Judson College in Marion will sponsor a "Gala" talent show Feb. 7. Local talent acts are requested to contact professor of music Betty Campbell at 334-683-5189 to offer assistance for this event. "Gala" will be in the Alumnae Auditorium at 7 p.m.

SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

► **Samford Art Gallery Exhibit Features Pickens Prints:** The Visiting Visual Artists at Samford University's School of the Arts presents "Prints and Process: Recent Works by James Joshua Pickens" in Samford Art Gallery through Feb. 28, with a public reception for the artist Feb. 18, 4-6 p.m.

Pickens is adjunct instructor at The Arts Center of the Capital Region in Troy, New York. In addition to his artwork and exhibitions, Pickens teaches introduction to furniture making, chair making, relief printmaking and art foundations.

The exhibit is open 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Monday through Friday.

► **Samford University Offers Journalism Scholarships:** Samford University's department of Journalism and Mass Communication (JMC) will award six to eight partial scholarships to freshmen who enroll in the fall of 2013. The application deadline has been extended to March 1 for the scholarships, worth \$1,800 per year.

The scholarships will be awarded based on ACT scores, high school grades, volunteer work and participation in media-related clubs. They can be renewed each year that the student maintains a 3.5 or better GPA and is involved with Samford student media.

For more information and a scholarship application, call Samford JMC Chair Bernie Ankey at 205-726-2948 or email at rnankey@samford.edu. Applications also are available at howard.samford.edu/jmc/content.aspx?id=2147490241.

UNIVERSITY OF MOBILE

► **Kadisha Onalbayeva of University of Mobile Joins Steinway Artist Roster:** Steinway & Sons announced Jan. 15 that University of Mobile (UMobile) Artist-in-Residence Kadisha Onalbayeva has been named as a Steinway Artist. She joins a distinguished international roster of Steinway Artists including Billy Joel, Diana Krall, Harry Connick Jr., Lang Lang, Robert Holm of Mobile, and past music greats such as Irving Berlin, Cole Porter and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

Onalbayeva is the first Steinway Artist selected from her home country of Kazakhstan.

The announcement coincides with a concert held at Broussard's Piano Gallery in Mobile, at which this incredible accomplishment was celebrated.

Born in Kazakhstan, Onalbayeva began her musical training at the age of 5. She attended the Jubanov Special School for tal-

ented children and the Kurman-gazy National Conservatory of Music in Kazakhstan where she studied piano and composition, gave recitals and was involved in both piano and composition festivals and competitions all over the world. She continued her performances as a recitalist, chamber musician, composer and as an orchestral soloist. She earned two master of music degrees at the University of New Orleans and then received her doctorate at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, La.

Over her career, she has given more than 60 solo concerts and has participated in more than 200 concerts as an accompanist and chamber soloist.

Onalbayeva is on the faculties of UMobile and Pensacola State College where she teaches piano and composition.

► **University of Mobile to Host Ram Run in Mobile:** The University of Mobile (UMobile) will hold Ram Run: The Big Muddy, a 5K and 10K race April 27 on the UMobile campus.

The Ram Run will start at 8 a.m. and end in front of the main building, Weaver Hall.

Registration for the race can be submitted online at www.umobile.edu or at www.active.com. To guarantee a T-shirt on race day, applicants must submit their entry online or by mail by April 12. Breakfast will be held and awards given after the race. Proceeds from the event will benefit the UMobile cross-country team.

For more information, contact Tonya Gomien in the UMobile development office at 251-442-2212 or tgomien@umobile.edu.

Chick-fil-A sales up 14 percent even after 'uproars' against Cathy

Last summer's uproar over Chick-fil-A head Dan Cathy's defense of the company's support for organizations opposed to gay "marriage" didn't hurt the company's bottom line.

According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the fast-food giant took in \$4.6 billion in sales in 2012 — up 14 percent from the previous year — and opened 96 new stores, four more than in 2011.

Chick-fil-A, a family-owned

company based in the Atlanta suburb of College Park, Ga., does not have to publicize its earnings but made the information available at the newspaper's request.

Comments last year by Cathy in an interview with a Baptist state newspaper — later picked up in the Southern Baptist Convention news service, Baptist Press — sparked protests and talk of a boycott by pro-gay activists already at odds with the Southern Baptist layman for

donating millions of dollars to groups like the Family Research Council and Exodus International that are on record as opposing same-sex "marriage."

Alan Blum, the *Biblical Recorder* editor who conducted the interview originally published July 2, faulted the mainstream media for construing as a political statement Cathy's plea of "guilty as charged" to criticism of Chick-fil-A's past support for pro-family causes. (ABP)

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By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Photos courtesy of Provident Label Group

The Rhett Walker Band will appear on the 2013 Rock & Worship Roadshow at Von Braun Center Arena in Huntsville on Feb. 11 and the Civic Center in Mobile on Feb. 16.

Transformed

Musician shares life stories, struggles through songs

As singer/songwriter Rhett Walker performs concerts around the country, he desires to connect audiences with the gospel by sharing powerful messages about how God has transformed and redeemed his life.

"There's just nothing we can do without God's grace," Walker said. "When we try to do things our own way, the plans fail or cause trouble. We've all messed up plenty of times in our lives and need a Savior. Because of God's grace, we find His love and mercy waiting for us when we surrender to Him."

During his teenage years, Walker followed the wrong crowd, which took him down a rebellious path.

"When I was 16, we moved away from my hometown and I was trying to find my way around a new place," Walker said. "The loudest crowd was the easiest crowd to join, but it wasn't the smartest choice. I started getting in trouble with the law and expelled from school. My girlfriend became pregnant when I was only 17 years old. This was the moment when I realized that I needed to give up living for myself."

As Walker's life was interrupted with a dose of reality, he decided to step up and changed the direction of his life by returning to the Lord.

"Growing up in the church, I knew all the right answers," Walker said. "I knew how I was supposed to be living and acting, but I still chose to live selfishly. It was a pivotal moment when I realized that I needed to turn back to the Lord."

"I sat down with my girlfriend, April, who is now my wife, and said: 'We've done everything wrong. Let's do things right from here on out and give everything to Christ.'"

Soon after the birth of their daughter, Raleigh, the young couple became involved in a local church, where Walker began leading worship.

"I started out playing the drums, but one day, they asked me to sing 'Grace Like Rain' by Todd Agnew. I didn't think I was a good singer, but my wife kept encouraging me. I remember thinking, 'Lord, I don't know why I'm being asked to sing, but I will this one time.' After that song, they never let me go back to drums. From there, opportunities started opening up for me to lead worship at other churches. With these opportunities, I knew that I wanted to share my testimony and help other people who were struggling to find their way in life."



Last year, Walker released his debut album, "Come to the River," which has garnered a Grammy nomination for the hit single, "When Mercy Found Me."

"This record is full of personal stories — encouraging people to live each day to the fullest and to stand up for what you believe in," Walker said. "It's been amazing to hear so many stories about how people are attaching themselves to these songs and how God is using the lyrics to speak truth into their lives. I recently received a message from a lady who said this album and my story opened up a door to share the gospel with a coworker."

Desiring to further help audiences connect with the message behind the music, Walker maintains a busy touring schedule and will appear on the 2013 Rock & Worship Roadshow at Von Braun Center Arena in Huntsville on Feb. 11 and the Civic Center in Mobile on Feb. 16.

"It's such an incredible experience to look over a crowd of people and to hear them singing about where I've been and how God has redeemed," he said. "My life drastically changed when I was willing to surrender my life to Christ. We can't make it through this life on our own strength. Sometimes it takes us coming to the end of our rope when we're broken and on our knees to realize that we must give our lives over to the Lord." ❧

World of Religion

Compiled from Wire Services

European Court issues 2 religious liberty rulings

STRASBOURG, France — Religious freedom is a right, but not without limits, Europe's top human rights court said in mid-January after issuing two religious liberty rulings.

In the first case, the court ruled Jan. 15 that British Airways (BA) discriminated against a Christian employee by making her remove her crucifix. But in the second case, the court stood behind a U.K. charity that fired a marriage counselor who refused to provide sex therapy to same-sex couples.

In judgments applauded by civil liberties groups but condemned by advocates for religious freedom, the European Court of Human Rights said freedom of religion is "an essential part of the identity of believers and one of the foundations of pluralistic, democratic societies." But religious freedom has limits, the court said: "However, where an individual's religious observance impinges on the rights of others, some restrictions can be made."

The court's judges, by a 5-to-2 margin, backed a claim by BA check-in clerk Nadia Eweida, who sparked a national debate in Britain over religion when supervisors sent her home in November 2006 for refusing to remove the small silver cross from around her neck. The company has rules banning employees from wearing visible religious symbols.

BA eventually changed its policy, and Eweida went back to work. But she continued to pursue a claim of religious discrimination, seeking damages and compensation for lost income.

In both cases, the court said employers were entitled to strike a balance between claimants' rights to live out their religious beliefs and the rights of others not to suffer discrimination.

But according to religious groups, the rulings make it clear sexual orientation trumps religion when it comes to rights. Europeans now live within a hierarchy of rights, said Dave Landrum, director of advocacy for the Evangelical Alliance.

"If we want to create a society that is diverse and can live with its deepest differences, there needs to be a fuller protection for religious beliefs, convictions and actions," he said.

Lutherans, Vatican argue over 'ordinariate'

VATICAN CITY — Lutheran leaders have warned the Vatican that the creation of a structure to welcome conservative Lutherans into the Catholic Church would harm dialogue and damage ecumenical relations.

In 2009, Pope Benedict created a special church structure, called an ordinariate, to allow disgruntled Anglicans to convert to Catholicism while maintaining bits of their traditions and culture.

In recent weeks, senior Vatican officials publicly suggested the creation of a similar structure for disaffected Lutherans; the idea was first floated last October by Cardinal Kurt Koch, the Vatican chief ecumenist.

According to Catholic media reports, Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Mueller, who heads the Vatican's doctrinal office, said Jan. 11 that if Lutherans asked for the creation of an ordinariate, the Vatican would consider their request.

Mueller's words were swiftly rebuked by Martin Junge, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. "The creation of such a special structure would have deep ecumenical repercussions," he warned Jan. 18.

According to Junge, a Vatican move would "send wrong signals" to Lutheran churches around the world as they prepare to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 2017 "in a spirit of ecumenical understanding and cooperation."

The Catholic Church in Germany has been invited to take part in the Reformation commemorations, but Catholic leaders have cautioned against triumphalist celebrations of what the Vatican still considers a painful split among Christians. ❧

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OPINION

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