

THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

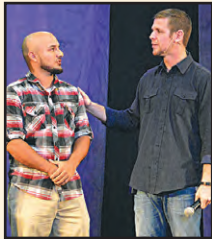


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MINISTRY

Alabama Baptist deaf ministries expanding to reach important people group

By Carrie Brown McWhorter
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

In space provided by a local church, members of the Birmingham Community Deaf Church (BCDC) meet regularly to study the Bible, plan their next missions trip and worship together in their heart language, American Sign Language (ASL).

Though many churches throughout the state offer some kind of ministry for deaf congregants, there is something special about deaf-led worship and Bible study, which is why the North American Mission Board (NAMB) has set a goal to establish 100 new deaf congregations by 2022 as part of Send North America, NAMB's church-planting strategy.

Starting churches

"An important part of our strategy is to be sure we are starting churches where people feel at home," NAMB President Kevin Ezell wrote in a 2013 blog post. "Sometimes that might be a little different for others than it is for you and me. Again there is no changing or compromising of the gospel message but a recognition that God created all of us uniquely."

Currently there are four Alabama Baptist deaf churches in the state: Faith Baptist Deaf Mission, Oxford, hosted by First Baptist Church, Oxford; Deaf Church Bethel, Dothan, hosted by Bethel Baptist Church, Dothan; New Deaf Church, Hoover,

hosted by Green Valley Baptist Church, Hoover; and BCDC, previously hosted by The Church at Brook Hills but now meeting at Briarwood Presbyterian Church.

Throughout the state Alabama Baptists are looking for ways to increase their ministry to this small but important people group. Ministry to the deaf brings its own special challenges, however.

One of the primary challenges is cultural, according to Stan Albright, pastor of First, Oxford, in Calhoun Baptist Association. The deaf often feel isolated from others even in the faith community, Albright said.

"The deaf are a silent people

group, and it's more than that they cannot hear," Albright said. "They often feel like outsiders and feel misunderstood, which is why it is so important to help them find identity and hope in Christ."

Some studies estimate that as many as 98 percent of deaf people have never heard the gospel, making them one of the most unreached people groups in the world, according to

Kristy Kennedy, an associate in the office of associational missions and church planting at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM) who works with deaf ministries.

Alabama Baptists are expanding outreach efforts to the deaf by partnering with deaf believers in several ways, Kennedy said. Two major

events are the annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist Conference of the Deaf (ABCD), held each year in early March at Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center in Talladega, and Camp Shocco for the Deaf, held each year in July.

Specific focus

Camp Shocco is an especially exciting event because it focuses on young people, Kennedy said.

"At Camp Shocco for the Deaf, we seek to encourage and disciple deaf children and youth as they grow in their faith," she said.

Kennedy also works with Ricky Milford, a former pastor who is now a missionary with the Coosa River Baptist Association serving the state in deaf ministry. Together they assist with a deaf task force consisting of lay people from across the state

(See 'Unique,' page 7)

For more information about Camp Shocco for the Deaf, visit www.campshocco.org.



Children and students participate at Camp Shocco for the Deaf at Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center in Talladega. The camp seeks 'to encourage and disciple deaf children and youth as they grow in their faith.'

Photo courtesy of Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center

COMMENT

Ministering Amid New Realities

Evangelism may be the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions' (SBOM) best known area of work. Through the years state evangelism leaders like Harper Shannon, Otis Williams and now Sammy Gilbreath have embodied the heart and soul of Alabama Baptists — sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

For decades the annual Alabama Baptist State Evangelism Conference has rivaled the state convention annual meeting as the best attended Baptist event of the year and no one is in more churches each year than the state evangelism director.

Yet when Gilbreath officially retires June 30 of this year, SBOM will not have a full-time evangelism director. Gilbreath will work on a part-time basis in the northern third of the state.

Two other Alabama pastors will continue to work part-time for the evangelism department. Phil Winningham will cover the central portion of Alabama while Billy Harris will handle the southern most part of the state.

SBOM Executive Director Rick Lance will temporarily add state evangelism director responsibilities to his already full plate.

Instead of three full-time state missionaries working with Alabama Baptist churches to inspire, equip and model evangelism, there will be three part-time workers in this vital area.

This is just one of many adjustments made by SBOM to ensure that Alabama Baptists live within their financial means. Doing so has been a difficult task during a time when financial resources have declined.

Shifting responsibilities

In 1998, when Lance was elected executive director, SBOM employed 121 people. Today that number is 73. When Gilbreath retires, along with two others who have announced



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

retirement plans in the coming months that number will drop to 70.

Dale Huff and Reggie Quimby are the other two who have announced retirement plans. Huff heads the leadership development team. Quimby leads the missions mobilization team. Neither will be replaced and responsibilities of both will be shifted to others in their areas.

Scaling back

In 2000 there were 49 state missionaries. Today there are 28, soon to be 25. Support staff has been reduced from 54 to 29. Campus ministry positions have been scaled back from 18 to 16.

Neither Lance nor other state leaders have called attention to the 40 percent drop in SBOM staff. Instead the focus has been on what continues to be accomplished. For example, the 28 remaining state missionaries participated in more than 3,000 conferences/consultations with Alabama pastors and churches last year. The result of the training and other help provided is incalculable.

The staff reductions were not made in “meat cleaver” style. Instead a ministry audit was done on every full-time position. Strategic decisions were made to get the most ministry out of every dollar. That is why Lance could share with SBOM members in January plans for reductions that are months away.

Like many Alabama Baptist churches, reductions in personnel were not enough to balance the books. Four times since 2009 there were no funds for salary adjustments. During the three years funds were available the increase was 2 percent each time.

According to a study of comparable state conventions done by an Atlanta-based firm, SBOM employee salaries were in the lower middle to begin with and have dropped since the study.

Additionally what was termed “aggressive adjustments” in personnel benefits were made to save premium dollars and some, like campus ministries, now seek more program support from nearby churches and associations.

Part of the cause for these changes was a desire for increased efficiency and effectiveness.

Part of the cause has been the declining financial support provided by the Cooperative Program (CP). Since 2009, the Alabama Baptist State Convention CP budget has dropped about \$5.5 million or nearly 12 percent.

State Board missionaries do not complain about the new realities in Baptist life. Instead they spend their time determining the best ways to serve the churches. For example Gilbreath initiated the plan to divide the state into thirds with a part-time evangelism consultant in each area. In his typical optimistic fashion Gilbreath assures all comers that he, Winningham and Harris will be able to fulfill the invitations coming from the churches.

Lance called the new arrangement with evangelism an “experiment” when presenting the concept to SBOM. It will be tried for a year and re-evaluated. The goal, he reminded SBOM trustees, is to serve the churches as effectively as possible while living within the means available.

During the past seven financially lean years Baptists have focused on the troubles experienced in work beyond Alabama. As a convention our goal is to do more to share the gospel with people in underserved areas of the United States and to the ends of the earth.

Attention also has been given to the needs of local churches. Church members have less money. Fewer dollars are given in local offering plates. Many local church pastors are hurting financially and local ministries go wanting even though the percentage of undesignated dollars given to causes beyond the local congregation continues to shrink.

Sometimes overlooked is Alabama Baptist needs. Lance is fond of pointing out that Alabama Baptists have three missions boards: the International Mission Board, the North American Mission Board and SBOM. Lance and the other state missionaries, together with members of the board, are doing their best to respond to the needs of Alabama Baptist churches large and small. They certainly deserve our prayers.

Determining priorities

The new reality is SBOM can no longer be all things to all people. Priorities have to be determined. Some things get done as always. Some things get done in new ways. Some things receive less attention.

The change in evangelism, for example, shows no less commitment to the gospel than last year. What it does show is the creativity and commitment of SBOM and state missionaries to do the work in light of the new realities faced by Baptists everywhere.

Make sure Alabama missions is on your prayer list in the days ahead. 🙏

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"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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Growing partnership

Gadsden's Twelfth Street Baptist helps Miami church reach community

Christ Centered Church, Miami, Fla., celebrated its first birthday Feb. 8 by giving presents rather than receiving them.

"It's our birthday, but you get the gift," said Pastor Derek Allen, a former Alabama Baptist minister.

During the week the church passed out free doughnuts to local businesses with the help of a missions group from Twelfth Street Baptist Church, Gadsden. The team of seven travelled down to Miami and spent a week (Feb. 2-8) doing community outreach in preparation for the birthday celebration.

Phillip Swindall, part of the missions team, said, "We went out and talked to people at bus stops and park benches and passed out doughnuts."

Ben Graham, former associate pastor of ministry and missions for Twelfth Street Baptist who also was on the trip, said the church is partnering with Christ Centered and "we want that partnership to grow even beyond missions trips — maybe in various ways through our Sunday School classes and church as a whole."

"We want to go in when they really need someone but no one else is going," Graham said.

On Feb. 8, Allen presented a \$500 check to Principal Bernie Osborne of David Lawrence Jr. K-8 Center.

The center is across the street from Florida International University, where Christ Centered Church meets twice each Sunday, and has been a community partner for the church. Some staff members at David Lawrence also attend Christ Centered.

Spirit of giving

On behalf of the church, Allen also presented a \$2,500 check to Pastor Alex Pecina of Summit Church, Homestead, Fla. Summit held its launch service later in February and the gift was to help them prepare and buy what they needed.

Many different things have to come together for a church launch, Allen said, and

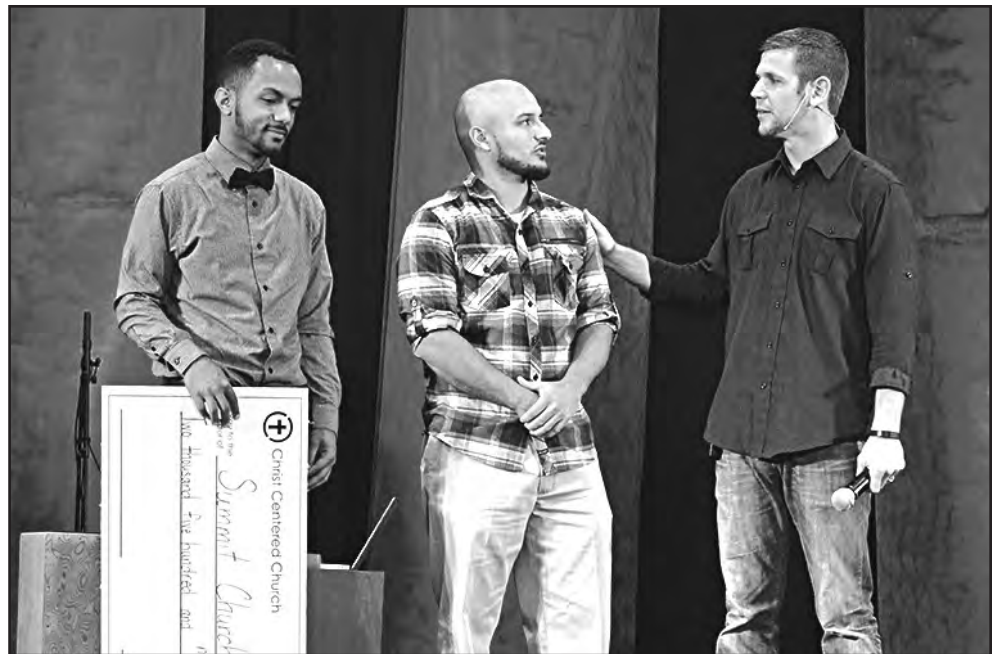


Photo courtesy of Florida Baptist Witness

Former Alabama Baptist minister Derek Allen (right), pastor of Christ Centered Church, Miami, Fla., presents a check to Alex Pecina, pastor of Summit Church, Homestead, Fla., to help the church plant prepare its upcoming launch service.

"we want to come along and say, 'Hey guys, here's some money.'"

Before diving into the message, Allen gave away study Bibles to anyone who picked up one of the regular Bibles provided at the door with John 3:16 highlighted.

In his sermon Allen told the church that the vision is to reach 1,000 people by 2017 by continuing to use Christ Centered's discipleship process: connect, grow, serve.

"We count people because people count," Allen said.

In 2014, Christ Centered averaged 110 people during its Sunday services, something Allen and his wife, Lindsay, did not anticipate but are extremely thankful for.

"2014 was our come-and-see year," Allen said. "2015 is the year to take your next step." (*Florida Baptist Witness, TAB*)

To read the 2014 feature on former Alabamian Derek Allen's Miami church plant, visit http://www.thealabamabaptist.org/print-edition-article-detail.php?id_art=31402.



Madison Association disfellowships Weatherly Heights BC

In a 74-5 vote, Madison Baptist Association's (MBA) executive board elected to withdraw fellowship from Weatherly Heights Baptist Church, Huntsville, on March 16 for its position on same-sex "marriage."

The executive board consists of two representatives — the pastor and one church-elected layperson — from each of MBA's 86 churches. While 79 secret-ballot votes were cast, 93 members opted out of voting by not attending the meeting. But MBA Director of Missions Charlie Howell said the attendance was consistent with

associational functions in recent years.

Weatherly Heights Baptist Pastor David Freeman has repeatedly expressed his support of "adult, loving, monogamous same-sex relationships," a viewpoint that has "caused a lot of tension" in the church.

Executive board vote

While not all church members share Freeman's belief, Ellin Jimmerson — the church's unpaid minister to the community — expressed her agreement when she officiated Huntsville's first

same-sex wedding Feb. 9. This action brought the church's views on the issue to MBA leadership's attention.

After two separate meetings with Freeman and representatives of the congregation, MBA's associational officers recommended a withdrawal of fellowship from Weatherly Heights, which led to the March 16 vote by the executive board.

"It is truly a sad evening for Southern Baptists and [MBA]," Howell said in a written statement following the vote. "But our executive board ... has deemed it

necessary that we remain true to the biblical definition of marriage in belief and practice. The culture in which we live may change, but we must stand firm upon the Word of God which remains constant.

"We truly strive to love all people regardless of what sin might entangle them, knowing that Jesus died on the cross for all of our sins. If anyone repents of their sin and embraces Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, then they receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ. This is the best news we can share with you tonight." (*TAB*)

BAPTIST CAMPUS MINISTRY

College students can experience ministry callings, affirmation through BCM

By Amy Jackson

Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

For many students, the Baptist Campus Ministry (BCM) on their campus might be the place where they meet future roommates, spouses and lifelong friends. For others BCM is the place where they first found faith or where they first were discipled and equipped in that faith. And then there are those who experienced callings into ministry and affirmations of that call through BCM such as University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) senior Stephen Long.

Long first felt a calling into ministry near the end of his sophomore year through his involvement with BCM. By sitting down and “talking it out” with campus minister Bill Morrison, Long was able to process the calling and think through next steps.

BCM also gives some students, like Clint Knight, a place where he could meet older students who would mentor him. He said the impact of having “senior guys, faithful to be a part of the campus ministry throughout their college years” make the effort to disciple younger students and “give advice on things from practical stuff [from] studying to hanging out, to fellowship and comfort” made a big difference in realizing his calling to church planting.

A secular university can be a hard environment for students who want to pursue a vocational call to ministry. BCM can serve as a haven in the face of criticism, a place of affirmation, encouragement and networking.

Importance of networking

Morrison recognized the importance of networking for such students, which prompted the creation of the Vocational Minister’s Roundtable. The Vocational Minister’s Roundtable provides opportunities for students called into ministry to regularly meet and share a meal. The fellowship is important but it’s the opportunity to dialogue with a guest minister that really pulls students in.

Long describes the discussions as “a window into the life of someone who has been in the ministry ... who can really answer those questions for us, tell us what to expect, what we should be doing — it’s been more than helpful.”

Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama State Board of Missions, was a recent guest at the roundtable. The students met with Lance for a few hours and were able to ask him a host of questions.

Knight said it was helpful to hear Lance talk about the stress that ministry can put on “family, friendships and all relationships.”



Photo courtesy of Chris Mills

Students lead in worship at the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s weekly Baptist Campus Ministries service.

Knight explained, “[Lance] wasn’t trying to paint a perfect picture or pat us all on the backs and tell us we’re awesome. He was there to talk through the hard stuff with us. Just him being humble, honest and truthful with us was awesome.”

The roundtable includes current seminary students like Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School student Wesley Douglas. Douglas remains actively involved in UAB’s BCM and provides additional insight at the meetings as a seminary student preparing for ministry through talking with students about their future steps and seminary decisions.

Douglas has found much encouragement at

the roundtable in the midst of ministering to other students.

“Seminary can be very daunting,” he said. “[I could] spend a lot of my days wondering if it’s really worth it. I need people like Dr. Lance and Bill Morrison — to hear their knowledge and wisdom and years of successful ministry. That really puts three and a half years of seminary into perspective.

“It’s always a luxury to get to sit around and talk about ministry practically ... and openly admit your shortcomings or that you don’t understand some things ... to receive encouragement from peers and [have] opportunities to meet people like Rick Lance and

share years of wisdom that we can only dream of having.”

The roundtable would not be possible without Morrison. Actively involved in mentoring students who feel called to vocational ministry, Morrison has led and mentored 60 people involved in vocational ministry who were rooted in UAB’s BCM.

Adam Marsch, a freshman involved in the roundtable, shared about the impact Morrison has had on his own calling.

Faithfully preach the Word

“He’s shown me the importance of doing faithful ministry ... (of) being called to be faithful and to faithfully preach the Word,” he said.

Marsch said he made a decision to invest in BCM after seeing Morrison’s care for and involvement with the local church, which was very important to Marsch. “I saw in [Morrison] that he cared about the church and I thought, ‘If I am going to be involved in ... campus ministry, I want to be involved in a place that cares about the global and local church at the same time,’” Marsch said.

The Vocational Minister’s Roundtable is a sign of the good work God is doing in the lives of students through organizations like BCM and campus ministers like Morrison. ☞

“It’s always a luxury to get to ... talk about ministry practically ... and openly admit your shortcomings or that you don’t understand some things ... or to receive encouragement from peers.”

Wesley Douglas
Student, Beeson Divinity School



MINISTRIES

continue to make an impact across the state

UAB campus minister Morrison helps students prepare for vocational ministry

By Bill Morrison
State missionary and University of Alabama at Birmingham campus minister

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12).

Baptist Campus Ministries (BCM) has as its distinguishing characteristic the equipping of college and university students. BCM is set apart from some other evangelical ministries in that we equip and funnel our leaders back into the local church. This equipping takes place through hands-on ministry on local campuses encompassing outreach, evangelism, missions and leadership development — or in other words, discipleship.

I began my service as a campus minister at the University of South Alabama in Mobile as a campus minister intern, moving in June 1989 to be the associate campus minister at the University of Alabama. During my first few years in campus ministry, two colleagues distinguished themselves as ministers who produced countless students who were serving with distinction in churches and missions sites throughout the world. Bob Ford and Clete Sipes were as different as night and day in almost every regard, but they both had a focused determination to prepare students for a lifetime of service to Christ. I desired to have that kind of influence through my ministry and began to observe and learn how they, along with others, interacted with students.

Have you prayed?

I began to ask students a very direct question: Have you ever prayed or thought about a call to vocational ministry? This simple question has given students — who may not have otherwise thought about vocational ministry — permission or a blessing to do so. Some consider that question and determine that God is not calling them

to vocational ministry but with others it begins a journey that ushers in a confirmation of a call to ministry.

In the 26-plus years I have been a campus minister these students who are called to vocational ministry have received special attention. Most of them have been in my home, hosted by my wife and family. They are in places of service throughout the world in roles such as pastor, student minister, campus minister, professor, missionary and church planter. I help students prepare for that call by encouraging and helping them find a part-time ministry position in a church, enlisting them to serve on BCM leadership, meeting with them in one-on-one discipleship, giving counsel as to which seminary to attend and allowing them to preach occasionally at our weekly worship meetings. A little more than

a year ago I realized something was missing from my model of preparation and that was influence from ministers who have spent most of their life serving a local church. The Vocational Minister's Roundtable was formed to address this missing element of preparation.

I enlist ministers who have spent 25-plus years in ministry so they can give counsel to the students as they prepare to enter vocational ministry. Presently I have 12 students who are called to vocational ministry involved in BCM at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Some are called to be a pastor, some will do student ministry. One is called to open an orphanage on the missions field; one will begin ministry as a church planter. Recently Rick Lance spoke about his calling as pastor and his service as the executive director of the State Board of Missions.

We will have our last meeting for the semester in April with Pastor Gary Fenton of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham. We will resume in September with Pastor Jay Wolf of First Baptist Church, Montgomery. It has been my distinct honor to be used by God in this role. I never dreamed I could be used in this way. 🙏



MORRISON



Photo courtesy of Jacob Pierce

(L to r) Michael Ulmer, Drew Balch, Antonio Foles, Jacob Pierce and Tyler Peppers participate in a BCM missions trip to Long Island, N.Y.

UAB student follows God's calling to ministry

By Jacob Pierce
Student, University of Alabama at Birmingham

As an incoming freshman I knew without a doubt that I had been led to the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). I was following a call to vocational ministry but felt that a business degree from a state school would best equip me. The direction from God was clear but His explanation for sending me was yet to be determined. I hoped to make an impact for Christ on the campus, but I completely underestimated how God was preparing the campus to impact me.

I got the first glimpse as I came across the Baptist Campus Ministries (BCM) table at freshman orientation and met campus minister Bill Morrison. We immediately hit it off as we talked baseball, Greek life and ministry. Little did I know that we'd spend countless hours over the next four years continuing that conversation in the student center, over lunch, on the missions field and in his home.

My involvement in BCM was solidified when I joined the freshman leadership team in Fall 2011. Bill and his wife, Sheri, hosted the first meeting over dinner at their house. I don't remember much of what was said, but I recall Mrs. Sheri's cooking was out of this world. Bill and I later agreed to exchanging free dinner for pitching lessons for his son's baseball team in the backyard. As our friendship grew it was evident to me that God had placed me under Bill's leadership to mold me into an effective witness to my peers as well as a dedicated future minister. Bill

gave me opportunities over the next year to lead a large group freshman Bible study and fill in at his interim preaching gig at Cahaba Heights Baptist Church, Birmingham.

Around the end of my sophomore year, Bill approached me about starting a group of future vocational ministers within BCM who would meet in a roundtable format with local pastors around twice a semester. He pitched the idea to three others and myself over Sunday lunch at his house. At our first meeting

we had four students and Pastor Gary Fenton of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham. Dr. Fenton shared many years of pastoral ministry wisdom with us. Several months later, Bill Johnston, also from Dawson Memorial Baptist, gave us the perspective of an associate pastor. I later interned in the student ministry at Dawson and benefitted greatly from their godly leadership.

Our group has doubled in size and we recently met with Rick Lance, executive director of the State Board of Missions. He gave us keen insights into engaging the culture around us as well as unconventional ministry wisdom that serves us now and will in the future. He challenged us to pursue and teach truth that resonates with the hearts of those God has entrusted to us.

I expressed my thanks to Dr. Lance for the Cooperative Program's support of BCM and campus ministers like Bill. Without it, students like myself would lack a crucial mentor and ministry in their life to develop them into capable shepherds and future church leaders. 🙏



PIERCE



Across ALABAMA'S Associations

To submit news items, email news@thealabamabaptist.org or call 205-870-4720, ext. 100, at least three weeks prior to the event.

BETHEL

► **Nanafalia Church** will celebrate homecoming April 12, 10:30 a.m. Tyrone Parten will speak. Lunch will follow. Craig Gavin is pastor.

BETHLEHEM

► **Mineola Church, Uria**, will hold revival services March 30–April 1 at 7 nightly. Henry Wilson will speak. Also Tammy Sullivan will perform a concert April 3, 7 p.m. Everyone is welcome. For more information call Lisa McLaughlin at 251-459-2753. Sidney Aaron is pastor.

ST. CLAIR

► **Jeremy Williams** is the new pastor of **Greensport Church, Ashville**, as of March 1. Williams holds a bachelor of arts and economics degree from Jacksonville State University and a master of divinity from New Orleans Seminary. He previously served as pastor of Brierwood Hills Church, Hokes Bluff. He is married to Jennifer. ► **Trei King** is the new pastor of **Pine Forest Church,**



WILLIAMS

Ashville. He holds a bachelor of arts in biblical ministries degree from Southeastern Bible College in Birmingham. He previously served as pastor of Prescott Church, Pell City. He and his wife, Melody, have one child.



KING

BIRMINGHAM

► The former **Westend Church, Birmingham**, will have a reunion at Shades Crest Church, Hoover, on April 17, 6 p.m. For more information contact Kay Forrester Barnes at 205-824-5344 or purplekbarnes@gmail.com. ► **Shades Crest Church, Hoover**, will hold its 14th annual High Country 5K race and 1-Mile Fun Run on April 11. T-shirts are guaranteed for the first 300 runners. A pasta dinner will be available April 10 for registered runners and their families and a pancake breakfast will follow the race. To register visit www.active.com or download the form at www.shadescrest.org and return it by mail. Deadline to register for a discounted fee is March 27 but registration is open through April 11. Brian Lee is pastor. ► **Westmont**

Church, Birmingham, will host a spring arts and crafts fair April 18, 9 a.m.–1 p.m. The fair will help raise funding for a youth missions trip in July. For more information call the church at 205-788-6811. Nathan Daniels is pastor.

CLARKE

► **First Church, Jackson**, will host the Beautifully Rooted Women's Conference on April 18, 8 a.m.–4 p.m. Karen Alexander-Doyel will speak. CHOSEN will perform special music. For registration information call the church at 251-246-4491. The deadline to register for a discounted fee is April 15 but registration is open through April 18.

COFFEE

► **Goodman Church, Enterprise**, will hold a sunrise service April 5, 6:30 a.m. Breakfast will follow. Sunday School will begin at 8 a.m. and a worship service will follow at 9 a.m. There will be no evening services. Bruce Williams is pastor.

LIMESTONE

► **Mays Memorial Church, Toney**, will hold Easter services April 5 beginning with a sunrise service, 6 a.m. Breakfast will follow. Sunday School will begin at 8:30 a.m. and a worship service will follow at 9:30 a.m. Steve Hargrove will speak. Musical guests will be The Servants. Anthony Perry is pastor.

LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN

► **Pleasant Valley #1 Church, Gaylesville**, will hold a Red Book Singing on March 29, 6 p.m. Ronald Berry is pastor. ► **Pleasant Valley #2 Church, Collinsville**, will hold a dedication service of its 1,600-square-foot fellowship hall March 28, 4 p.m. Jerry Darnell is pastor.

MUD CREEK

► **Sparks Gap Church, Bessemer**, will hold a Fifth Sunday Singing on March 29, 1:30 p.m. The Reno Quartet will perform special music. Johnny Thacker is pastor.

SAND MOUNTAIN

► **Stamp Missionary Church, Fort Payne**, will celebrate its centennial April 19, 10 a.m. to noon and again at 1:30 p.m.–3 p.m. Lunch will be provided at noon. David Patty, Sand Mountain director of missions, will speak. Kenneth Moses is pastor.

SARDIS

► **Mount Carmel Church, Coffee Springs**, will hold the Easter cantata "His Grace Still Amazes Me" on April 5, 11 a.m. James Preachers is pastor. ☞

ALABAMA UPDATES

PEOPLE, CHURCHES MAKING NEWS ACROSS THE STATE

Longtime minister of music Willis resigns

After directing more than 20 Easter pageants, 1,700 choir practices and 6,500 pieces of music, Rick Willis, longtime minister of music at Bellevue Baptist Church, Gadsden, has resigned.

A graduate of Mississippi College in Clinton and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Willis holds a bachelor's degree in music and a master's degree in church music.

He served at two Florida churches before moving to Gadsden to serve as minister of music and youth at Bellevue Baptist in 1984. Since that time, his title has shifted to minister of music and then to associate pastor and minister of music and education.

Willis also has performed more than 35 wedding ceremonies, several of which were former students he led as youth minister.

He and his wife of 40 years, Judy, will move to Georgia to be closer to their daughter and grandchildren, but Willis will not be immediately starting a new position.

"We just felt a strong moving in the Lord that it was time for us to move in another direction," Willis said, noting that he is too young to retire just yet.

His last Sunday at Bellevue was Feb. 22 and the church honored the couple with a reception. (Maggie Walsh)



WILLIS

Northport minister of education Brown retires

Northport Baptist Church recently celebrated the retirement of Stephen Brown, who served as the Tuscaloosa Baptist Association church's minister of education for seven years.

Brown earned a master of religious education degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He served a church in Tennessee before becoming minister of education and youth for South Roebuck Baptist Church, Birmingham. He served as minister of education and administration for First Baptist Church, Andalusia; associate pastor of growth and outreach for the former Roebuck Park Baptist Church, Trussville; and then as minister of education for Taylor Road Baptist Church, Montgomery, before serving at Northport Baptist.

Brown wrote adult literature for LifeWay Christian Resources and was an Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions Sunday School consultant. He also served as president of the Alabama Baptist Religious Education Association. The church held a celebration Feb. 22 to honor his years of service.

He and his wife, Carol, have two children and six grandchildren. (Neisha Roberts)

FBC Athens Pastor Edwin Jenkins to retire

Edwin Jenkins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Athens, and founding director of the Alabama Baptist Center for Leadership Development for the State Board of Missions (SBOM), will retire April 12.

Jenkins received his undergraduate education at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa and Samford University in Birmingham before earning a master of divinity and doctor of ministry from Southwestern Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. During his time in seminary, Jenkins served churches in Texas.

In Alabama, Jenkins served at First Baptist Church, Trussville, and Hilldale Baptist Church, Birmingham, before moving to his role at SBOM in 1996. He left SBOM to become pastor of First, Athens, in 2006.

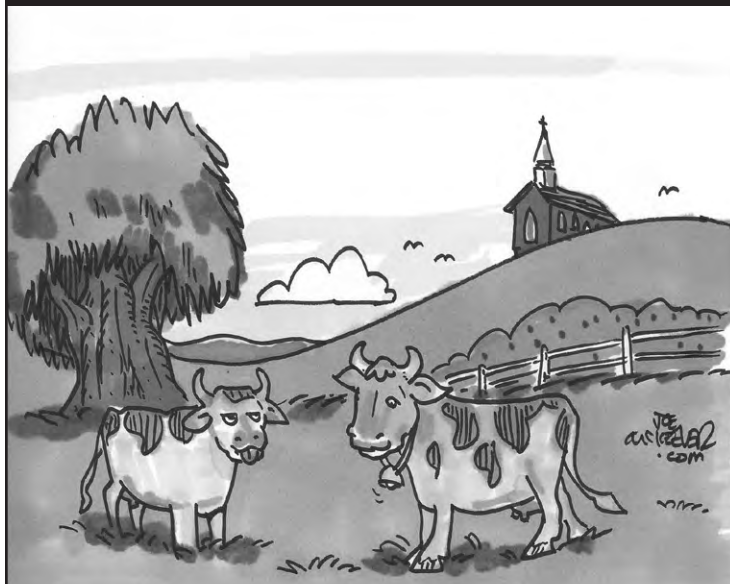
Although he is retiring from full-time ministry, Jenkins will continue to live in Athens and be available for pulpit supply, spiritual renewal retreats and revival preaching. He can be reached at 256-777-5074 or 256-206-1260.

Jenkins and his wife of 45 years, Joan, have three children and 13 grandchildren. (Maggie Walsh)



JENKINS

REFLECTIONS



"THE WAY I SEE IT, SOME WERE CALLED TO PREACH AND OTHERS CALLED TO PASTURE."

Unique outreach

Deaf ministries bring challenges, opportunities

(continued from page 1)

and are planning a church planting basics conference for the deaf.

Financial support for deaf churches can be another obstacle to effective ministry which is why state and national partnerships are so important, said Albright, who is currently working with NAMB to find a person to lead the deaf congregation in Oxford.

A third challenge is identifying deaf people in the community who might be reached or engaged in service.

"In a lot of communities we don't even know how many people are deaf," Albright said.

Estimates on the number of deaf people in America vary widely. According to statistics compiled by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), the incidence of babies born with a detectable level of hearing loss in one or both ears is small — 2 or 3 babies in every 1,000 births. One in 8 people in the United States age 12 years or older has hearing loss in both ears, though hearing loss does not necessarily mean deafness. In Alabama, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 2.8 percent of people ages 18 to 64 and 10 to 15 percent of children live with some hearing loss.

In terms of deaf ministry the focus is primarily on those who are deaf from birth or a very young age and whose primary language is ASL. As a result, deaf churches, which are defined as a separate entity led and run by the deaf members, tend to be in metropolitan areas like Birmingham or in areas where a large deaf population exists like Oxford, which is near the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind in Talladega.

Most often, as is the case with the four Alabama Baptist deaf churches, a mother church supports or provides a place for the deaf to conduct church and ministry separate from the hearing church, said Jennifer

Eggers, assistant secretary of the Alabama Baptist Conference of the Deaf, and a member of First Baptist Church, Fairhope, in Baldwin Baptist Association.

Throughout Alabama, however, many churches have some kind of ministry for the deaf working to meet the needs of specific members of their congregations, Eggers said. The most common type of ministry is an interpreting ministry where the worship service and possibly a Bible study class are

interpreted for one or more deaf members. Sometimes a church might have a deaf ministry in which a deaf teacher leads service or a Bible study.

While interpreting ministries fill a need, deaf churches provide a unique opportunity for deaf pastors and teachers to lead, said Carmen Stewart, a leader in the Deaf Church at Bethel Baptist. Deaf churches also provide a more comfortable worship environment for reaching the lost in the deaf community, she said.

"As with any language, one's depth of understanding (in worship) increases when it is through one's native language," Stewart said.

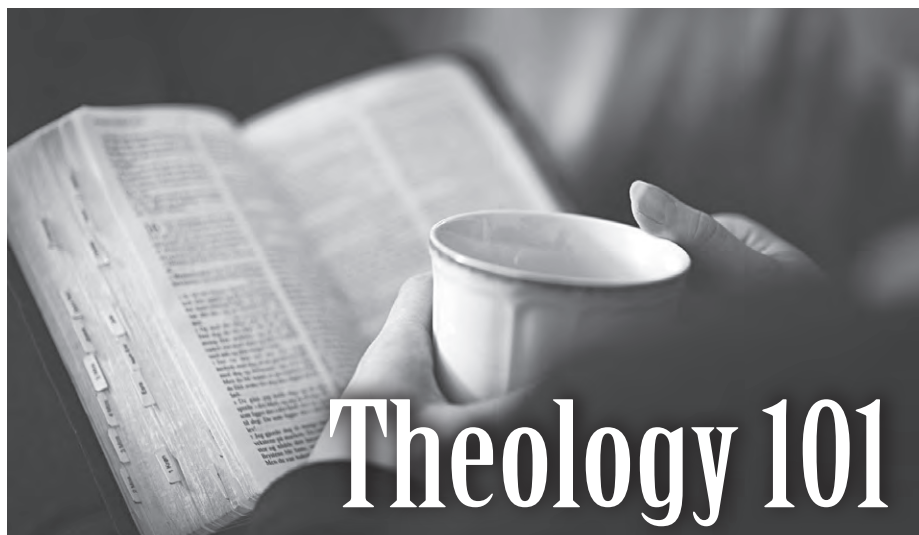
Stewart said one unique characteristic of many deaf churches is the ability of members to ask questions and clarify information received during the preaching.

To enhance the teaching skills of deaf ministry leaders, BCDC holds workshops for Bible study teachers. Church members also mentor

new interpreters, said Cherybe Thornton, a member of BCDC and co-founder of Deaf Online University, a faith-based learning community.

Though deaf ministry brings many challenges Kennedy said the opportunities for outreach are growing.

"We know there is still much to be done, but these are exciting days as we see God's hand at work bringing the deaf to know Him." ❏



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Images of the Church

The Church as Bride

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
Special to The Alabama Baptist

The marriage metaphor for the relationship between God and His people has roots in the Old Testament. One major passage is Hosea chapters 1-4. With Hosea's marriage as the background, God's message to Israel was, "In that day, declares the Lord, you will be My husband. ... And I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness" (Hos. 2:16, 19-20). In the lengthy 16th chapter of Ezekiel, God called Israel an "adulterous wife who receives strangers instead of her husband" (Ezek. 16:32).

The marriage imagery carries over into the New Testament where it is used to view the Church as the bride of Christ. The marital image is developed at length in Ephesians 5:22-33 in speaking to the relationship between Christian husbands and wives, simultaneously elevating the image to speak of the present relationship between Christ and the Church. The final chapters of Revelation use the image of marriage to speak about the eternal relationship of Christ and the Church. For example a call for rejoicing declares, "Let us rejoice and exult and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7). Additionally John heard an invitation addressed to him, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9).

Mutual covenant commitment

What truths about the Church come to us through the image of the Church as the bride of Christ? Basic to the imagery is the fact that the relationship between Christ and the Church is one of mutual covenant commitment. Christ's total commitment to the Church has been, and is, evidenced in His saving death (Eph. 5:25). Furthermore, in Ephesians 5:29, His care of the Church includes cherishing it (protecting and taking care of) and nourishing it (feeding). The term we read as "nourishes" also conveyed

the idea of heating or keeping warm. Sometimes we hear a local congregation described as cold, while another is termed a warm fellowship. What is the difference? It has nothing to do with the heating or cooling system; neither does it rest solely with human friendliness, although such can be a major factor in a warm church. The real issue is Christ's presence being experienced through the Holy Spirit being active and free in the members' lives. Christ is the warming factor in a warmhearted fellowship. He makes the difference between spiritual coldness and spiritual warmth.

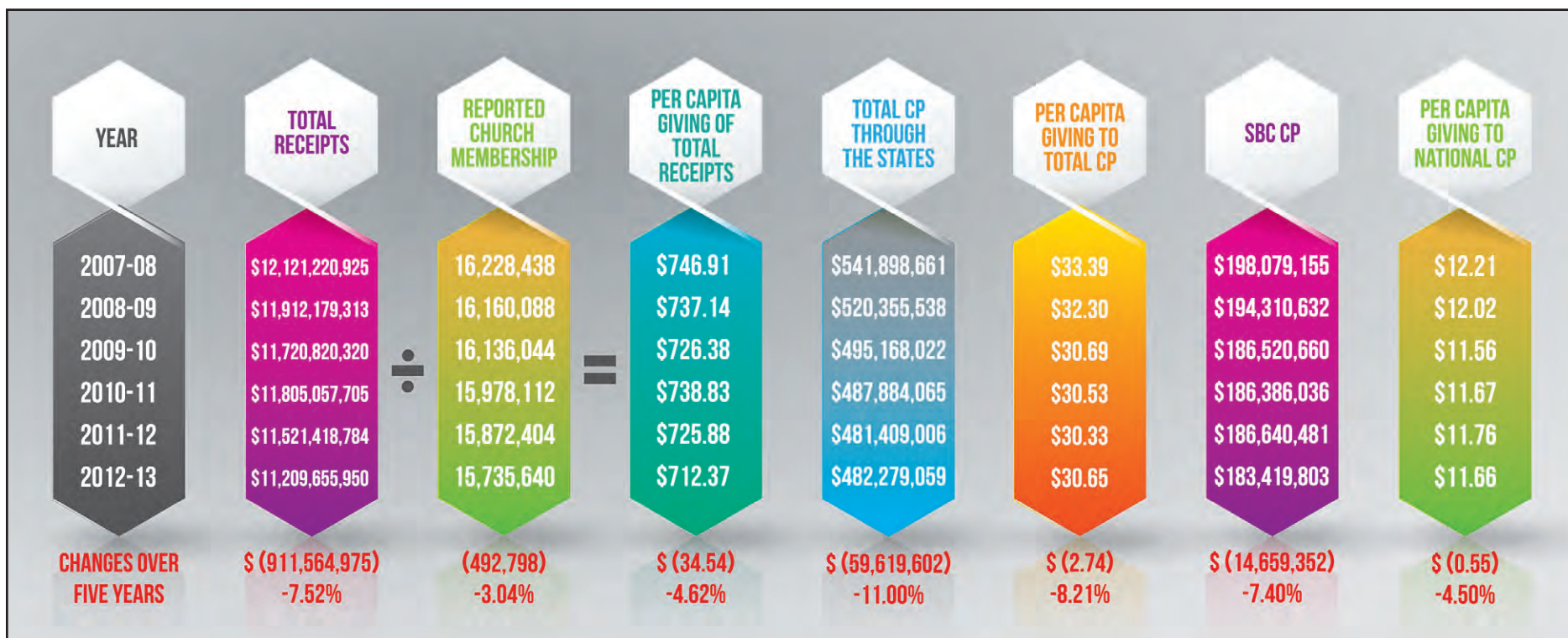
The Church's response

In return for Christ's ministry to His bride, the Church's response should be one of faithful commitment. This commitment receives various expressions in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 11:1-3, the Church as betrothed to Christ must always aspire to offer Him its "sincere and pure devotion" in order to be a pure bride. Like a wife faithful to her husband, the Church should seek always to give to Christ its full subjection and devotion even as He has given His ultimate love and sacrifice to the Church (Eph. 5:22-23). The desire of the Church should be to aspire to become "holy and without blemish" since that is Christ's ultimate goal for His bride.

The Church presently is a bride in the making, making herself ready for a wonderful future. The present reality of church life should be increasingly making its ambition to reflect something of the future glory that awaits it as the bride of Christ. ❏

Jerry Batson, retired associate dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University and professor at several schools of religion, is pastor of First Baptist Church, McCalla.





BP graphic

Signs of rebounding

Year-to-date gifts through Cooperative Program total highest since January 2012

Despite a five-year decline in church membership and a corresponding decrease in per capita giving, the national portion of the Cooperative Program (CP) shows signs of rebounding through the first five months of fiscal 2014–2015.

Year-to-date contributions to

the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Cooperative Program (CP) Allocation Budget through Jan. 31 totaled \$64,702,035.77, the highest amount since the Jan. 31, 2012, report. Though lower than the \$67.8 million received through January 2010, the \$65.6 million in 2011 and the \$65.1 million in 2012, this marks the first increase through the first four months of

the fiscal year since 2012 and may be a harbinger that local churches are recovering from the lingering effects of the Great Recession.

As of Feb. 28 receipts totaled \$82,098,104.34, or 104.81 percent of the \$78,333,333.33 year-to-date budgeted amount to support SBC ministries globally and nationally. The total is \$2,371,418.56 more than the \$79,726,685.78 received through February 2014.

The two SBC seasonal missions offerings — Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions (LMCO) and Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American Missions (AAEO) — also have shown positive signs of rebound. After plummeting from \$150 million in 2007 to \$141 million in 2008, offerings to LMCO slowly edged upward through 2012. LMCO offerings

then surpassed 2007's previous high in 2013, topping \$154 million for a new record though still short of the \$175 million goal.

Similarly gifts to AAEO declined from its record \$59 million in 2007 before beginning to recover in 2011 and reaching \$58 million in 2014, the third highest amount in history.

Positive report

Monthly CP Allocation Budget reports often show significant swings based on the number of Sundays in a given month, the day of the month churches forward their CP contributions to their state conventions and the timing of when state conventions forward the national portion of their CP contributions to the Executive Committee. This recent increase through five months, coupled with strengthening support for LMCO

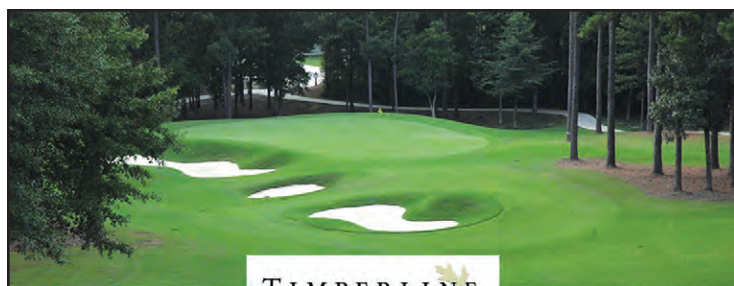
and AAEO, show signs that the long-term impact of the global economic crisis may be past.

This positive report stands against the stark reality that giving to Southern Baptist churches for all causes — general budget gifts, missions offerings, missions trips and other church ministry needs — declined by more than \$911 million from 2008 to 2013, a decline of 7.52 percent, according to the Annual Church Profile submitted by cooperating Southern Baptist churches.

Total membership declined by 3.04 percent during the same period of time, from 16,228,438 to 15,735,640, a decline of almost one-half million people (492,748).

Per capita giving also declined over the same period, from \$746.91 per member in 2008 to \$712.37 in 2013. The combination of declining membership and declining per capita giving impacted the ability of local churches to do ministry in their communities and beyond and has been felt by both state Baptist conventions and SBC (see graphic, this page).

For example even though churches increased the percentage of their undesignated receipts forwarded through CP from 5.407 percent in 2011 to 5.414 percent in 2012 and to 5.50 percent in 2013, the actual dollar amount of CP continued to decline, hover-



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ing at a 14-year low the past two years.

The CP was established in 1925 as a collaborative effort between the SBC and state Baptist conventions to assist churches. Prior to that time ministry leaders from scores of state and national ministries routinely asked churches for time in their worship services to promote their ministries and to receive designated offerings from the church members.

The churches being asked to fund SBC ministries were, by and large, the same churches being asked to support the ministries of individual state Baptist conventions. Inundated with so many requests from so many legitimate ministries, pastors and churches alike grew weary.

Recognizing the drain these requests made on churches, pastors and convention leaders hammered out a plan that sought to address the problem of so many special offerings. The plan was remarkably simple:

1. Individuals give their tithes and offerings to their local churches;

2. The churches would forward a percentage of their contributions to their state Baptist convention for ministry in the state;

3. The state convention would then forward a percentage of its funds to provide support for SBC missions and ministries.

Through a unified, cooperative program of giving both sets of ministries could be funded — state ministry needs and SBC ministry endeavors. In 1925 this cooperative venture between SBC, churches and state conventions was given the name Cooperative Program.

When CP was formed, a 50–50 division between SBC and the state conventions (after shared ministry costs associated with promoting CP were deducted) was lifted up as an ideal goal. This target has been re-emphasized at SBC annual meetings several times over the years, most recently in 2010 with the adoption of the Great Commission Task Force report.

The actual division, however, has never reached that suggested ideal.

During CP's first five years, the division languished at the 80–20 rate (or lower) — 80 percent remaining in the state, 20 percent forwarded to SBC causes. The division finally surpassed 70–30 in the opening years of the 1930s before falling back to a more or less steady 74–26 rate during the remainder of the Great Depression.

During the World War II years and for the majority of CP's 90-year history, the division forwarded by the states to SBC fluctuated between 33 percent and 37 percent per year with three notable exceptions.

All-time high in 1951

During the post-World War II growth spurt in Southern Baptist church attendance and baptisms (1946–1952), the division of CP funds forwarded by the state conventions to SBC causes exceeded 38 percent for the first time, reaching an all-time high of 40.5 percent in 1951.

During the first decade of the SBC Bold Mission Thrust initiative, which corresponded with the height of SBC Conservative Resurgence — both of which began in 1979 — the division of CP funds forwarded by the state conventions again reached and exceeded 38 percent (1985–1991), reaching a high of 39.1 percent in 1988.

The third era in which the percentage of CP gifts exceeded 38 percent is in the current post-Great Commission Resurgence time frame (2011–2013), reaching 38.8 percent in 2012 before falling back slightly last year. Figures for 2014 were not available at press time.

Each of the first two periods when CP percentage exceeded 38 percent came at times of unprecedented economic prosperity, denominational optimism and corresponding growth in church

Churches continue to believe in the ministry objectives their messengers have assigned to the convention's entities. Cooperating churches forwarded, on average, 5.5 percent of their undesignated receipts through CP in the most recent year of record (2013).

membership. The current era stands in marked contrast.

The current economic realities faced by cooperating churches have been challenging. The amount of CP funds contributed by churches to the state Baptist conventions has fallen from a high of \$542 million in 2008 to 2014's \$482 million, a decline of 11 percent, putting significant strain on state convention budgets.

Despite the drastic drop in CP gifts to the state conventions, states have increased the amount they forward to SBC from 36.55

percent in 2008 to more than 38 percent each of the past three budget years. In order to meet these demanding goals states began streamlining ministries and reducing staff by hundreds of ministry specialists and support staff

(from 1,750 to 1,350 in 33 state conventions that responded to an Executive Committee survey in 2013).

State conventions continued forward progress in sacrificial giving during their fall 2014 annual meetings. Messengers in Iowa and Nevada increased support for SBC causes by adopting 50–50 percentage splits between their respective state conventions and SBC with no shared ministry deductions. The Baptist Convention of Iowa moved from 20 to 50 percent, while the Nevada Baptist Convention voted to raise

its percentage of CP gifts to SBC causes from 35 to 50 percent.

These two joined the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, which has forwarded 50 percent or more of its CP gifts to SBC causes since its founding and are the only three that have met the ideal suggested in 1925 — without deducting shared ministry items.

Five state conventions increased the percentage they forward to SBC causes by more than 1 percent while messengers to an additional 15 state conventions voted to increase the SBC portion in amounts ranging from 0.02 to 1 percent.

The Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia is in the process of phasing out its shared ministries category with a goal of forwarding 51 percent for SBC missions and ministries.

Churches continue to believe in the ministry objectives their messengers have assigned to SBC entities. Cooperating churches forwarded, on average, 5.5 percent of their undesignated receipts through CP in the most recent year of record (2013). While the increase is modest, the 5.5 percent figure marks the second year of growth in average gifts through CP, reversing more than 20 years of decline.

'1% CP Challenge'

This growth parallels the findings of a 2012 CP survey that asked pastors about the "1% CP Challenge" issued by Executive Committee President Frank S. Page in 2011. More than 7 percent of pastors reported their churches had accepted the "1% CP Challenge," increasing their CP contributions by 1 percent or more of the church's undesig-

nated receipts in their churches' 2012 annual budget. A 2014 CP survey found that an additional 3,500 churches reported a similar commitment for their 2014 budgets.

Ministry assignments

At the national level, SBC messengers have assigned a specific set of ministry responsibilities to each SBC entity. These ministry assignments are listed in the convention's organization manual and published in each year's SBC book of reports and SBC annual and are posted online at www.sbc.net.

The following highlights come from the 2014 SBC book of reports:

► The International Mission Board reported supporting more than 4,800 fully funded overseas missionaries who, in conjunction with their work with national partners, reported nearly 6,200 new churches and more than 114,000 baptisms.

► The North American Mission Board reported more than 2,600 fully funded, jointly funded and student missionaries; 3,514 endorsed chaplains; 169 church planting catalysts; and 936 new churches planted.

► The seminary presidents reported 15,993 Southern Baptist students among its 18,259 non-duplicating head count enrolled for ministerial training through SBC's six seminaries.

► The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission actively engaged hundreds of pastors, churches, elected officials and the courts and had more than 1,200 "strategic media contacts" on numerous issues of biblical ethics, public policy and religious liberty. (BP)



Ministry Tips



REACHING INTERNATIONALS IN THE COMMUNITY

By Chris Mills

Associate in the office of collegiate and student ministries, Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions

I was recently asked by a friend about a practical way to connect with and reach internationals in their community. My friend went on to say they knew they should invite

internationals into their home, but they didn't want it to be awkward.

My quick response was, "When we open our home, we open our heart." I've been challenged about my own lack of Christian hospitality and the great yearning for hospitality from those around us. So how do you open your home and it

not be awkward? Well there is no sure-fire way but look for ways to connect with someone and then open your home to them. This isn't inviting someone in before you even know his or her name. Have a conversation and get to know them. Then invite them over. Open your home for a holiday or birthday or special

sporting event on television. Find something you can help center that initial visit around to really create a relationship with that new international friend. Then you will see that as you have opened your home, your heart has opened to the community around you. 🙏

Historical HIGHLIGHTS

FROM PREVIOUS ISSUES OF THE ALABAMA BAPTIST



50 Years Ago March 1965

Mighty outpouring: A week of revival services brought a mighty outpouring of the Spirit to Si-loam Baptist Church, Marion, according to Pastor Ian H.C. Walker. More than 100 decisions were made, many by students at Judson College and Marion Institute.

New Missionaries: Pastor and Mrs. Hal K. Jacks of Wedowee Baptist were among the 28 missionaries appointed by the Foreign Mission Board in March. They will serve in Indonesia.

40 Years Ago March 1975

Return to Alabama: Forrest Hicks has assumed the pastorate of Fourmile Baptist Church in Wilsonville, coming from Hannibal-LaGrange College in Hannibal, Mo., where he was dean of admissions. His previous pastorates include Centerville Baptist Church; Goode Street Church, Montgomery; Vinesville

Church, Birmingham; and First Baptist, Arab.

Alabamians Appointed: Alabama natives Dewey and Phyllis Mayfield were among those appointed by the Home Mission Board. They will serve in Huntsville where he will be the director of Christian social ministries.

30 Years Ago March 1985

Man of the Year: Tommy Karn, director of missions in Chilton-Unity Association for 16 years, was named Man of the Year at the Chilton County Chamber of Commerce annual banquet.

Law School Dean: Parham H. Williams Jr. has been named dean of Cumberland Law School of Samford University. His parents were 1925 graduates of Cumberland School of Law.

20 Years Ago March 1995

Humanitarian of the Year: Jane Ferguson, director of community ministries at First Baptist

Church, Montgomery, has been awarded the humanitarian of the year award by *The Montgomery Advertiser*. Ferguson was recognized for her work on behalf of the disadvantaged and needy in Montgomery. Jay Wolf, pastor of First Baptist, called her "the Mother Teresa of Montgomery, one of God's choice people and one of Montgomery's greatest assets."

Return to Alabama: Allan Murphy will be installed as pastor of North Shelby Baptist Church March 26. Murphy is returning from Curacao Netherlands Antilles where he served as a church

planter with the Foreign Mission Board for the past eight years.

10 Years Ago March 2005

Jack Wright ends 37 years as Clarke Association DOM: Upon his retirement March 4, Wright was the longest-tenured DOM currently serving in the state and probably one of the longest serving in the history of the state. Wright will serve as interim DOM until a new DOM is selected and has been called as pastor of Gosport Baptist Church, Whatley, where he will lead the church's bimonthly services. ☞

Want to know GOD?

Pastor Ron Griffin
First Baptist Church, Irvington

The title of this column is "Want to know God?" The question is important and deserves careful consideration. First the question assumes there is a God. Paul dismisses the futility of idols by pointing to the one true living God in 1 Corinthians 8:6, "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him." Belief in the one true living God of Scripture is a matter of faith in the Scriptural testimony.

Secondly the question assumes the one true living God can be known. God is not a distant unknowable deity shrouded in mystery. He is not a God who desires to be known from a distance.

Thirdly the question assumes a certain kind of knowledge of God is possible. Jesus told the religious leaders of His day that they did not know God. I'm sure they knew more about God than anyone else in the first century, but they didn't know God. Listen to Jesus' words, "It is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God' and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him ... and keep His Word" (John 8:54-55).

Knowing God requires understanding who He is, what He has done to make a relationship with Him possible, what He requires of us and a personal response to these things. Paul succinctly tells us, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

Finally the question assumes a person may have some desire to know God. After Peter had preached the gospel on the Day of Pentecost the Scripture says the crowd was "pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37).

Do you want to know God? You must believe there is a God who can be known and demands a personal response to His offer of salvation. This must be something you desire for yourself. ☞

'Be a blessing'

Alabama Baptist blesses others

During the 2014 annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, *The Alabama Baptist* handed out dollar bills at its display booth. Messengers were challenged to "Be a Blessing" — to take a dollar and touch a life. The results continue to surface. Below is a personal story of how the dollar was used to bless someone's life.

I waited for February (to use my dollar). Our church is a big supporter of Disaster Relief (DR) ministries in Morgan County and Alabama, and Feb.

22 [was] our annual Disaster Relief offering. We encouraged our membership to each give \$2 on this Sunday (\$1 to support DR work in Alabama and \$1 to support DR work in Decatur and Morgan County). So I gave my dollar (along with another) on this Sunday to support the great work of DR ministries in Alabama. These faithful volunteers are the hands and feet of Christ during crucial moments of ministry and a tremendous blessing to many in our community and state.

Chason Farris ☞

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CHURCH POSITIONS

PASTOR: Southside Baptist Church is seeking a full-time pastor. Send resumés to: Pastor Search Committee, Southside Baptist Church, 1213 West Bypass, Andalusia, AL 36420, or email resumés to: southside@sbcandalusia.com. Resumés should be received by May 15.

PART-TIME MUSIC MINISTER:

First Baptist Church of Vina, Ala., is seeking a part-time music minister. Send resumé to: First Baptist Church of Vina, P.O. Box 857, Red Bay, AL 35582.

MINISTER OF MUSIC & YOUTH:

Greensboro Baptist Church is accepting resumés for the position of full-time minister of music and youth. Interested parties should mail resumés to: Greensboro Baptist Church, c/o Search Committee, 908 Main Street, Greensboro, AL 36744 or email resumés to: greensboro@bellsouth.net.

DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S MINISTRY:

First Baptist Church of Ashville is accepting resumés for the position of full-time director of children's ministry. Resumés are accepted at

P.O. Box 579, Ashville, AL 35953.

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY DIRECTOR:

First Baptist Church of Birmingham is seeking a part-time director for our children's ministry program. This person should be a committed believer, gifted in organization and leadership, and most of all committed to loving children and their families. Resumés can be sent to: cjames@fbcbbm.org or mailed to: Children's Search Committee, 2209 Lakeshore Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209.

OTHER POSITIONS

CLERICAL SECRETARY: M-TH, 8-4. Paid vacation, sick time and holidays. Please mail resumés to: Grandview Baptist Church, 2400 Forrester Road, Dothan, AL 36301.

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Rashional thoughts

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

Executive editor • jrash@thealabamabaptist.org

Pure and simple at the core

Basketball, anyone? It's that time of year when many of us are glued to the TV watching game after game and studying our brackets with each sound of the buzzer.

I enjoy keeping up with basketball and watching games here and there. And I always have fun attending the games live, but my casual appreciation for the sport doesn't come close to my hubby's sold-out true love for every aspect of the game.

In fact, I still haven't determined — after almost 18 years — whether basketball is a close second to me or I'm a close second to basketball.

But I do know that we have watched a lot of basketball since mid-March. As I'm writing this column, the conversations all around me are focused on the first big upset of the NCAA tournament — good press for the state of Alabama indeed. Go UAB Blazers!

While I only assisted my hubby in his bracket selections rather than filling out my own, I did pick UAB to win over Iowa State — and wow what a win. Don't ask me how well I did on some of the other selections though.

Coaching the best

As the Elite Eight are about to become the Final Four, I plan to learn from the best of the best in basketball and pay attention to more than the fast-paced moments on the court.

It is interesting to hear the coaches' philosophies on growing a solid team that knows how to win with humility and how to lose with grace. I'm also intrigued with how the coaches teach and develop the players as individuals and as a team.

One coach urged his team to "play simple basketball" while another echoed the sentiment with "stick to the fundamentals."

And then another coach said "don't be afraid to take a risk but make the risks count."

I wish I could tell you which coach said what but I was

catching these comments while watching four different games at the same time, so I have no idea who said what.

But the "play simple basketball" and "stick to the fundamentals" reminded me of the time I attempted to camouflage an English paper in school with a fancy cover sheet, binder and fonts. I don't remember how weak the writing of the paper was but for some reason I felt compelled to decorate it, likely in an attempt to earn points for presentation.

Standing on its own

My English teacher saw right through me and called me out on it. She said I needed to spend more effort developing the fundamentals of the paper and less time trying to make it look good — that if the paper were solid in and of itself, then the rest wouldn't matter. It would stand on its own.

You can tell I never forgot what she said. In fact, her coaching in that moment has guided me in a lot of areas in life well beyond writing English papers, news articles and first-person columns.

And her words come to mind every time I see an organization, team or even church trying too hard to "decorate" themselves to earn points with those considering joining them.

Why do we sometimes think a polished image and glossy appearance is more important than securing the core of the structure?

Think about your favorite restaurant or food truck that you would describe as "not much to look at" or "a hole in the wall" but you would be crushed if it went out of business. Your mouth is watering just thinking about it, isn't it?

Think about some of the most precious experiences in your life. The surroundings might have been truly beautiful or they might not have been special at all, but most likely whatever was happening was because it was simply what it was meant to be — with no extra, unnecessary decorations. 🙏

Rashional Extras...

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Making the Most of Your Time ... Every Day

By Teri Lynne Underwood
Excerpts from blog post on terilynneunderwood.com and notquiteamishliving.com

Do you ever end the day with the sense you didn't do anything, even though your checked-off to-do list suggests otherwise?

Earlier this month I was reading Psalm 90 during my quiet time. This prayer of Moses is rich with praise and insight. One of my favorite verses is 12: "Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom" (NLT).

God calls us to more than management. He calls us to time maximization. While the world around us beckons with instruction about how to do more with the hours we have, His call is much different. His concern isn't so much what we do — it's who we are.

While I don't believe there is always a one-size-fits-all approach for our discipleship, I have learned there are general principles which can be applied in multiple manners depending on one's personality and season of life.

1. Prioritize time in the Word.

There is no such thing as a perfect quiet time [but] there is an absolute urgency to prioritizing time in the Word every day. Psalm 119 is rich with admonition about the value of Scripture. Verses 9 through 11 read:

"How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Your Word. With my whole heart I seek You, let me not wander from Your commandments. I have stored up Your Word in my heart, that I might not sin against You."

As a child, I recall Bloody Sunday as if it were yesterday & I thank God for the impatient patriots & their sacrifice that day. #Selma50
Condoleezza Rice
@CondoleezzaRice

Does my fear of others' perception of me get in the way of sharing with and loving people like Jesus tells me to?

I can go ahead and tell you that it does. Only recently have I started accepting that I'm going to look like an awkward fool when He tells me to pray with someone in the middle of a workday or at the end of a phone call.

And what's so crazy is sometimes I feel like I did the exact right thing and other times I walk away feeling like such an idiot. Dear Consistency, I'm ready for a visit!

All of these thoughts boil down to the issue of being real with people. Everyone messes up. Everyone feels *insert negative adjective here* at some point. Everyone struggles with judging others. So why don't we talk about it? Why don't we make each other stronger by sharing burdens?

Maggie Walsh
News writer, *The Alabama Baptist*

When we prioritize daily time reading Scripture, we find the guidance we need to keep our eyes focused on Him.

2. Plan with purpose.

I like to plan out my days, noting what tasks must be done and how I can move forward toward my goals and dreams. But I have learned to hold my plans and to-do lists loosely. Proverbs 16:9 reminds us, "The heart of a man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."

One of the most practical ways I apply this verse is by looking over my calendar during my quiet time. As I read over the list and tasks for the day, I ask for wisdom to do what must be done and for grace to accept any interruptions and detours. I remember that people are always more important than plans.

3. Pray constantly.

First Thessalonians 5:17 is familiar to most of us, "Pray without ceasing." But learning to live in this attitude of ongoing conversation with the Lord may not be as simple as memorizing those three words. I've learned how to maintain a prayerful attitude throughout the day by applying the verses before and after this verse:

I seek opportunities to do good for others (v. 15), chase joy (v. 16) and make sure to give thanks for the gifts big and small in my days (v. 18).

Learning to maximize our days will lead us into greater wisdom ... and more intimacy with the Lord as we lean into Him.

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CAMPUS News



JUDSON COLLEGE

► **Judson College Signs 3 Senior Athletes:** Judson College has signed three high school senior standouts who will participate in intercollegiate athletics in the 2015–2016 academic year. The Judson Eagles Softball team welcomed Jessica Leslie, of Ozark (Carroll High School); Victoria Caballero, of Helena (Evangel Christian School); and Kacie Adams, of Clanton (Isabella High School).

► **Judson College Awards Alabama Horse Council Scholarship:** Judson College student Sheila Palmer, of Chelsea, was awarded an Alabama Horse Council Scholarship at the recent Alabama Horse Fair. Palmer, a sophomore, is majoring in equine science with a minor in business. Palmer is a member of Judson College's Intercollegiate Horse Show Association Hunt Seat team.

► **Judson College Equestrian Team Wins Reserve Champion Title:** The Judson College Equestrian Team won the title for reserve champion team at the Inter-

collegiate Horse Show Association Zone 5, Region 2 show March 1.

Senior Mary Kilpatrick, of Dothan, placed third in class 15 and 16. Sophomore Alex Huber, of Mechanicsburg, Pa., placed third in class 14. Senior Katie McQuaig, of Cumming, Ga., placed fourth in class 13. Senior Rylee Parnell, of Tibbee, placed sixth in class 12B.

SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

► **Samford To Host Science and Religion Scholar:** Samford University's Center for Science and Religion in Birmingham will host scholar Peter Harrison for "The Religious Origins of Modern Science" on March 30. The minister's workshop and public lecture are funded by a John Templeton Foundation grant.

The minister's workshop will be 12–2:30 p.m. and the lecture will be 7 p.m. in Reid Chapel.

Harrison, former Andreas Idreos professor of science and religion at the University of Oxford, currently is an Australian laureate fellow and director of the center for the history of European discourses at the University of Queensland.

For more information, email Josh Reeves at jareeves@samford.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF MOBILE

► **University of Mobile Vocal Students Honored:** University of Mobile (UMobile) vocal students earned honors in classical voice and musical theatre categories at the Alabama National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) competition.

The students represented the university's Center for Performing Arts/School of Music and School of Worship Leadership in the statewide competition held Feb. 20–21 in Tuscaloosa.

Freshman Nathanael Hicks, of Orlando, Fla., took first place in both the classical voice and musical theatre categories for freshmen men. Sophomore Blake Thompson, of Fairhope, took second place in musical theatre for sophomore men. Senior Ryan Stewart, of Nashville, placed fourth in musical theatre for senior men. Freshman Brydon Fox, of Newton, was a semifinalist in the freshmen women classical voice category. 🎵

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For March 29

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

THE PROMISED MESSIAH ZECHARIAH 8:1-8; 9:10-12

Zechariah was a post-exilic prophet, which means he was a prophet after the Israelites returned from the Babylonian captivity. When the Medes and Persians defeated the Babylonians, they allowed the captives to go back home. Many of the Israelites went back to Judah to begin to rebuild their country.

Zechariah is the longest of the minor prophet books and is quoted more than any other prophetic book other than Isaiah in the New Testament. The book of Zechariah points toward the coming Messiah which is Christ and points to His second coming.

Faithful (8:1-8)

Jerusalem was in shambles as the people of Israel returned from exile. A city without a wall indicated a city that was not safe. From this time period up until the present, Israel (when it existed as a country) has never been safe. The threat of foreign nations invading was ever present. Even today, Israel is constantly under threat of attack. However, in this passage God shows His love for His people. He mentions how He will return to dwell in Jerusalem and that this era will be represented by safety and peace. The fact that women and men will live to an old age and sit in the streets of Jerusalem while children play indicates safety and peace. This will only come about when Christ returns.

Of course the idea of the second coming of Christ should fill us with hope and joy. Even in the midst of our current trials and struggles we can have a joy knowing that there will be a day when Christ will return and bring justice to the earth. Christians are not to live in fear and depression because we have an eternal hope. Christians should face trials — death, sickness, financial hardship, etc. — differently than the rest of the world. Christians, above all people, ought to live in victory. This is one of the ways Christians can bear witness to Christ (9:9).

This is a famous verse because we hear it in Matthew 21:5 when we read about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Sometimes prophecies have a dual purpose; they are fulfilled during the time of the prophet, but they also are pointing toward a future event. The Holy Spirit guided the writers of the New Testament to be able to discern these fulfillments. There are many prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled regarding the second coming of Christ. Since we have seen hundreds of fulfilled prophecies, we ought to have a confidence that God will be true to fulfill the ones that have yet to be fulfilled.

Creator of Peace (9:10)

The following verse shows God's promise to bring a reign of peace by destroying all of the weapons of war. Without a doubt the continual news stories of wars, terrorists, droughts, famine, earthquakes, etc. are frustrating and depressing. If we focus on these things we are bound to lose hope. But since we know Christ will return, it instead should give us hope and a sense of urgency to tell others about His second coming when He will bring peace and destroy the wicked.

Victor (9:11-12)

Throughout the Old Testament, God promises to bring forgiveness to those who turn to Him with all of their hearts. God forgives us because of our faith in Christ and His death on the cross, burial and resurrection. Death has been defeated by Christ's resurrection, and now death has no hold over us. Though we die once we do not face an eternal separation from God because Christ has paid for our sins by His atoning work on the Cross. This is why Christians have hope. We cannot save ourselves and so we must depend upon one stronger than death to save us, and the only one stronger than death is God who is Christ. In spite of what our culture tells us — that all religions are the same or that all religions bring people to God — Christ is the only way and we need to be sure to let this message ring loud a clear to a lost and dying world (Acts 4:12; John 14:6). 🙏

Bible Studies for Life By Michael K. Wilson, M.R.E. Director, Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence, Samford University

DEATH LIKE NO OTHER Matthew 27:28-31, 45-50, 54

My mother passed away Dec. 10, 2014, at 87 years of age. She was a faithful wife, loving mother, friend of many and active in her church until she was no longer able. We were surprised how suddenly her death came. She had a heart attack in her sleep. I arrived at the emergency room not long after she did. She was conscious and knew I was with her. The doctor and attendants did what they could but her heart was just too weak. They turned off all the noise making monitors, pulled the curtain around her bed and left us alone. Within minutes after they left she passed from this life to the next — peacefully, quietly and without pain.

This Sunday's lesson invites us to think about Jesus' death. His was anything but peaceful, quiet and pain free. What meaning can be found in this horrible death?

Jesus was mocked by the people (28-31)

Public rejection by His own people who chose a criminal over Him was humiliating enough. Jesus endured even greater humiliation from mocking soldiers and jeering bystanders. He was given a scarlet robe, a crown of thorns, a scrawny length of reed as a scepter and a scribbled placard declaring Him "King of the Jews." A peasant had to carry His cross because He was so physically weak.

Jesus was abandoned by God (45-50)

Jesus took upon Himself the brokenness and lost condition of humanity as the ultimate demonstration of God's love. It seems inconceivable that the God of love would abandon His Son at the time of His greatest suffering and anguish. Such an understanding is because holiness and sin are incompatible. Yet how could a loving Father do such a thing? Many thoughtful Christians find it difficult to accept this understanding even in light of Jesus' anguished words,

"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (v. 46).

Jesus' cry was from a psalm of lament (Ps. 22:1). Many Jews who heard Him likely made the connection. Lament psalms describe a sense of peril or desperation felt by an individual or community. They usually include a progression from thoughts of peril and feeling that God is absent to awareness of God's presence and activity on behalf of the individual or community. Lament psalms are about more than pleas for help in desperate times. They include a message of trust and hope in God who delivers and makes things right (Ps. 22:4-5, 24, 26, 30-31). Even as Jesus felt overwhelming vulnerability and pain during His final redemptive activity, He continued to trust God as He knew His death was near.

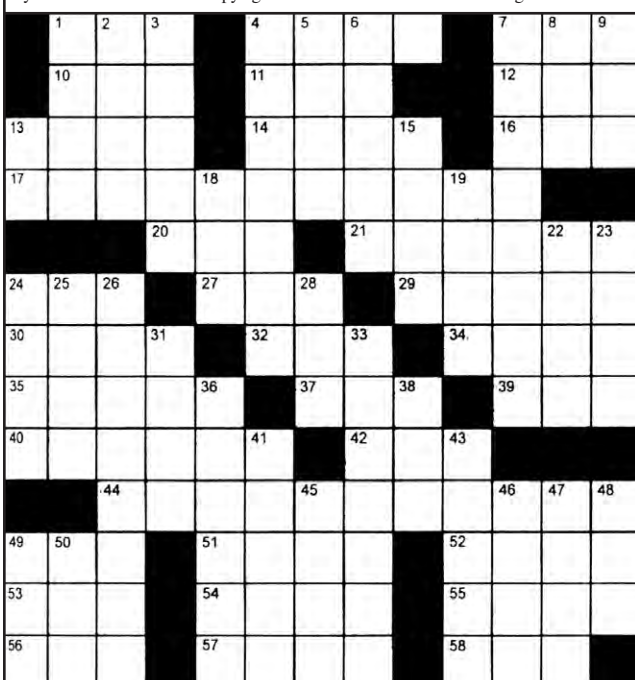
Did God abandon Jesus? We understand "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Could it be the darkness (v. 45) represents the condition of all who reject God's Messenger and His message of redemption and hope? Or rather than the usual understanding of the darkness indicating God's abandonment, might the all-encompassing darkness represent God's all-encompassing nearness during the time of Jesus' despair? Even in our darkest times, when all hope seems lost, we trust that God is a "very present help in times of trouble" (Ps. 46:1). Our best understandings need room for the mystery and wonder of God's activity.

Jesus was acknowledged as God's Son (54)

Those present observed the "King of the Jews" as a naked, bleeding, outcast receiving the ultimate humiliation. Matthew includes apocalyptic details of an earthquake, opened tombs and raised saints walking the streets. Matthew wants all to know this was no ordinary death. Skeptics on the scene that day pondered what they experienced and were changed. Even now skeptics who ponder Jesus' death and its meaning can experience a change of heart and life. 🙏

Christian Crossword

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



Across

- Monthly literature.
- Delicate network fabric.
- Of ____, the family of the Punites.
- Past.
- Building wing.
- __ your affection on things above. (Col. 3:2)
- Molding.
- Among.
- Tavern brew.
- _____ tells the story of King Saul.
- A language of Southeast Asia.
- That he may ____ upon you a blessing this day. (Ex. 32:29)
- Radiation measure.
- The sons of Elpaah ... who built _____. (1 Chron. 8:12)
- Prefix meaning "solid."
- City of Judah. (Josh. 15:29)
- Ye have not gone up into the _____. (Ezek. 13:5)
- Ireland.
- ____ and Juliet.

Down

- Three.
- Still.
- Tie the score.
- Now ____ was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto Israel. (1 Sam. 2:22)
- A charmer ... a wizard ... a _____. All are an abomination. (Deut. 18:11-12)
- And the stork ... the lapwing, and the _____. (Lev. 11:19)
- Arizona Indian.
- Therefore, hence.
- Mother of all living.
- Belonging to Mrs. Peron.
- Stick for jumping.
- Young man.
- ____ died without children. (1 Chron. 2:30)
- Troops. (abbr.)
- that speak _____. (Ps. 5:6)
- Woman's name.
- They shall ____ up upon the houses. (Joel 2:9)
- Praise Him with the ____ and harp. (Ps. 150:3)
- Sons of Bani. (Ezra 10:34)
- Did eat.
- About.
- Render therefore to all their _____. (Rom. 13:7)
- A Chinese religion.
- Italian family; patrons of the Renaissance.
- Nickname of Oriel.
- Past tense of "go."
- It is a ____ thing that the king requireth. (Dan. 2:11)
- Black Sea arm.
- Insane.
- Grain.
- Handwriting on the wall. (Dan. 5:25)
- Basic proposition for an argument.
- Settings of precious stones.
- Longshoremen's union.
- ____ me now ... if I will not open you the windows of heaven. (Mal. 3:10)

43. Clumsy, unskilled.

- Iridescent stone.
- Farmer's produce.
- Ova.
- Kanga's child.
- ____ boweth down. (Isa. 46:1)
- And the king of Assyria brought men ... from _____. (2 Kings 17:24)



'Engaging and intense'

TV series 'A.D.' dives into Acts

Actress and producer Roma Downey and reality TV show producer Mark Burnett shared with media professionals about the making of "A.D.: The Bible Continues," their follow-up project to the popular TV series "The Bible."

The newest series is a 12-part continuation of "The Bible" that portrays the history of the early church according to the first 10 chapters of Acts. The series will air on NBC beginning April 5. Filmed

in Morocco, "A.D." will delve into the book of Acts in an effort to show the humanity and true character of the apostles, as well as their devotion to take the gospel to the world no matter the cost. The persecution of the early church and its growth also are highlighted.

"We pulled from history and Acts using scholars from both areas and wove it together into a cool, relatable, true and compelling story so people can see what the early church was like," said Downey during the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) convention in Nashville, Feb. 23-26.

Efforts commended

Jerry Johnson, NRB president, commended the married couple for their research and efforts to capture an accurate portrayal of the historical and political setting. Burnett noted the characters in "A.D." look much like people in today's society. Acknowledging the Roman Empire was a melting pot in its day, Burnett said this cast is more diverse.

Burnett credited the opportunity for this latest series to the success of "The Bible," which drew 100 million viewers. "In Canada, 'The Bible' series even beat out hockey," he said, hoping it will continue to open the door for more projects like the "A.D." series.

Southern Baptist Convention President Ronnie Floyd endorsed the new TV series in a statement. "'A.D.' is biblically based, historically supported and creatively integrated as an epic story that will captivate generations globally. This drama

is powerful, engaging and intense," he said.

'Unified voice'

Devon Franklin, a Hollywood producer who just formed his own company to make God-honoring films, said, "The power of our unified voices (as believers) is important," he said. "The biggest way we vote is when you turn on your TV and pay for your movies at the box office. So choose those that honor God."

The series begins with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and then chronicles an intense time in history. Downey refers to it as, "A time filled with enormous faith ... when history would be changed forever."

Downey said she hopes God will use the new series for His glory. She said Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, Calif., and author of "The Purpose Driven Life," warned her, "The most dangerous prayer you can pray is, 'Lord, use me' — because He might just answer you." (BP)



Fireflight

Photo courtesy of Hoganson Media Relations

'Impact through relationships'

Christian rock band creates community at concerts

By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

For the past 15 years, the Christian rock band Fireflight has been on a mission to equip, encourage and engage hard-to-reach youth with the gospel.

The group is made up of lead singer Dawn Michele, drummer Adam McMillion, bass player Wendy Drennen and her husband, guitarist Glenn Drennen.

With their musical success the group has soared to new heights with a Grammy nomination, being featured on the promotional soundtrack for NBC's "Bionic Woman" television series and winning Taco Bell's "Feed the Beat" campaign which catapulted the band onto a performance at the Winter X Games.

These unique opportunities have increased their platform and ability to connect audiences to Christ.

While performing concerts and touring across the country, the group desires to reach audiences with messages about hope, identity and acceptance found through a relationship with Christ.

"Being on tour gives us the opportunity to be in front of larger audiences and share our message," Michele said. "We're a very relational band and we really believe that the biggest impact on someone's life is made through relationships.

"Our concerts are a very unique experience for many people in the sense that it's a feeling of community. We want to seek God, speak openly with the people that He puts in front of us and share with them that God loves us so much that He gave Himself for us so He could have a relationship with us."

"It's God who breaks through the confusion and stills the destructive forces in our lives. He comes at our weakest moments and breathes new life into us."

Dawn Michele
lead singer, Fireflight

On May 5 the group celebrates their 15th year as a band with the release of their fifth album, "INNOVA." The album's lead single, "Resuscitate," debuted at No. 19 and quickly rose to No. 1 on Billboard's Christian Rock chart, becoming Fireflight's eighth No. 1 radio hit.

The group looks toward the future with great hope and believes the best is yet to come.

"We may not understand why God has put us on the path that we're on, but He always has a purpose," Michele said.

"There's always a purpose and a time of waiting. We've always asked God to speak through our music and put messages in there that people can relate to and take

something away from. We try to take the experiences that we've gone through and write about how God has helped us through those times to encourage others who are facing similar situations.

"It's God who breaks through the confusion and stills the destructive forces in our lives. He comes at our weakest moment and breathes new life into us." ☪



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NAMB photo by Gibbs Frazier

Austin Coleman (standing, far right), a 2015 Week of Prayer missionary for Send North America, interviews student Anthony Shervington during a youth food-eating contest at Second Baptist Church, Clinton, Tenn., where Coleman serves as youth pastor.

Come as you are

'God is changing the world from New York,' Coleman says

Austin Coleman has spent each of the last two summers in New York City looking for intersections. If ever there was a city where success would seem inevitable, America's largest city would be that place with its blur of 24-hour activity. New York City is a seemingly endless maze of intersections populated by yellow taxicabs, limousines, delivery trucks and personal vehicles.

Coleman's assignment in 2014 as a Generation Send (GenSend) mobilizer was to walk the streets of District 2 in Brooklyn, N.Y., and intersect with every person possible. GenSend is the North American Mission Board's (NAMB) collegiate summer missions initiative tied to the Send North America church planting objective and is part of the NAMB Farm System, aimed at assisting churches in discovering, developing and deploying the next generations of missionaries.

Coleman now has a love for New York City and a desire to eventually return there to live and plant churches. There are no church plants currently in District 2 of Brooklyn.

"It's like a dot on the map where they want to plant a church," Coleman said of a NAMB map with dots covering the major metropolitan areas, indicating communities needing new churches. Through "gospel conversations" Coleman and his team were able to gain a greater understanding of the people inhabiting District 2. This will help inform future church planters.

Coleman discovered people were more willing to talk than he imagined. As with most inner cities, Coleman has not found hostility toward the gospel as much as ambivalence or self-determined spirituality.

Coleman said, "People in cities are very open to talking about what they believe, their spirituality and why they believe what they do.

"You come to Jesus as you are. It's okay to be messed up but not to stay that way. Once you come to Jesus, that's the Holy Spirit's job. He will change your mind on things."

One such example is a young man from Belize, who regularly joined the team for their Thursday night cookouts. While walking back to Long Island University where the team lodged, Coleman learned the young man had been raised in the faith. But he had walked away from God when both his mother and grandmother died.

"I steered the conversation back to Jesus as the only hope," Coleman said. "We can have spiritual beliefs, but if they aren't pointed back to a true hope, they mean nothing."

It's these kinds of "gospel conversations" Coleman looks for.

"If you are listening well and being intentional, people bring up things that parallel who Jesus is and what the gospel means," he said. "It looks different every single time. I've never had a gospel conversation in New York that looked the same as the next."

Now with a master's degree in church planting and evangelism from Liberty University, Coleman foresees returning to New York City someday to start a church with his wife, Sara.

"One of my greatest prayers for this summer is that God would make both of us fall in love with New York," Coleman said. "If God called us back to New York to be part of a church plant, than we'd both have that urge and that urgency.

"I do believe God is changing the world from New York." (NAMB)

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San Francisco church changes policy on LGBT

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — A prominent evangelical Christian church has announced it will no longer ask members who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) to remain celibate.

"We will no longer discriminate based on sexual orientation and demand lifelong celibacy as a precondition for joining," wrote Pastor Fred Harrell Sr. and six board members of City Church, San Francisco, one of the largest members of the Reformed Church in America denomination, in a letter emailed to members March 13.

The church has about 1,000 members and meets at two San Francisco locations. It has long welcomed LGBT persons to attend but has required lifelong celibacy of those LGBT persons seeking membership.

The letter stated, "Imagine feeling this from your family or religious community, 'If you stay, you must accept celibacy with no hope that you too might one day enjoy the fullness of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical companionship. If you pursue a lifelong partnership, you are rejected.' This is simply not working and people are being hurt. We must listen and respond."

In January GracePointe Church, Nashville, and EastLake Community Church, Seattle, Wash., reversed their celibacy policies.

Laura Turner, communications coordinator for City Church, said City Church's leadership spent nine months debating the new policy as well as reading the gospel, books by evangelical theologians and social science research.

"Churches are slowly coming to recognize that if God is bringing people to them who are LGBT they have to meet them where they are and not demand that they change," Turner said. "Telling LGBT people they have to change before they can become Christians is leading to depression, suicide and addiction and we won't do that anymore." (RNS)

Abortion advocates prevent anti-trafficking proposal

WASHINGTON — Legislation to bolster efforts to combat human trafficking has fallen victim to abortion rights advocates in the U.S. Senate.

The Democratic minority defeated an effort to bring an anti-trafficking bill to the Senate floor March 17 because of its opposition to language barring federal funds for abortion. The Senate twice voted 55-43 to invoke cloture which would directly open debate on the floor for action on the legislation.

The vote came on legislation that would enhance penalties for such crimes as slavery and trafficking, as well as sexual exploitation of children. The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, S. 178, also would increase restitution for trafficking victims and fund services for child pornography victims.

"Stopping human trafficking is too important a priority to be held hostage by the abortion lobby's culture-warring," Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said in a written statement. "I urge the Senate to think about vulnerable women and children in peril, rather than about the political maneuvers of the abortion-industrial complex." (BP)

Atlanta megachurch pastor requests money for jet

ATLANTA — An Atlanta megachurch pastor's request of his followers to pay for a new private jet while thousands around him struggle economically received heavy criticisms on social media, prompting the online campaign site to be taken down.

Creflo Dollar, the multimillionaire pastor of World Changers Church International, Atlanta, started Project G650 to raise \$65 million to buy himself a new Gulfstream G650 jet in the name of spreading the gospel around the world.

According to an Atlanta blog site, Dollar is worth \$27 million — which is more than 200 times that of the community in which his World Changers Church International is located. It was proposed that each follower donate \$300 to replace Dollar's previous plane that had been damaged in an accident. (BNG)