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INSIDE



Nonprofit organization helps spread gospel throughout Amazon River basin

◆ Page 3



Eden Westside ministers to Pell City, Leeds communities through 2 locations

◆ Page 4

SBC leaders on Syrian refugee crisis: 'They are not our enemies; they are victims'

◆ Page 5

NEW year. NEW attitude.

Can your church learn to be more welcoming?

123rf.com

By Carrie Brown McWhorter
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Park in the back, sit in the front” has become a familiar saying around Robertsdale’s Bethel Baptist Church in the past few months as the church adjusts for increasing attendance on Sunday mornings.

However, when Pastor Harvey Earls met 87-year-old Thelma Middleton walking through the gym toward the sanctuary with her walker, he had to laugh.

“She said, ‘I parked in the back,’” Earls recalled.

That willingness to make visitors feel appreciated is a major factor in the growth at Bethel Baptist, Earls said.

“Our folks really welcome people. They are very good at receiving

visitors and showing the love of Christ to the ‘strangers’ who arrive each Sunday,” he said.

In his three years as pastor of Bethel, Earls has not preached or held classes on hospitality. It’s just something the people practice.

Not every church can say that. Talk to anyone who has visited new churches frequently and you will probably hear a story about being asked to move out of someone’s seat or having to take a seat on the front row because the regular worshippers had filled up the back rows.

A welcoming attitude is biblical, however, and it can be cultivated even in those whose spiritual gift may not be hospitality, said Lisa Keane, clinical director at Pathways Professional Counseling.

“Can people learn to be more welcoming? I believe the answer

is ‘yes’ — because of the gospel and because of what Christ did for us. These two motivators can help people learn to exhibit all sorts of behaviors that may not come naturally,” Keane said.

“Hospitality is the key to becoming an uncommon Christian community.”

Henry G. Brinton
author

As a college student Keane worked on staff at a church in Auburn. Though the church welcomed a new group of college students each fall, the congregation was quite closed to allowing new people into the established groups.

A major staff overhaul changed that.

“The church transformed because the new leaders led by example in order to help people learn to be more welcoming,” Keane said. “They put people who were more naturally welcoming in leadership positions across the church landscape. When hospitality became a greater part of the church culture, those that were not

so good at it were more likely to join in welcoming others.”

In his book “Signs of Life: Back to the Basics of Authentic Christianity,” pastor and author David Jeremiah writes that while a believer’s commitment to the Lord is often most obvious in private moments of prayer or Bible study, our public moments have great significance, especially on those who don’t know us well.

‘It’s by our smile’

“They see us from across the street, across the fence, across the hall, across the office, across the miles or across the pews,” he writes. “How do these people recognize that we are God’s ambassadors? It’s by our smile ... our friendliness ... our benevolence.”

Those same attributes appeal to church visitors, especially as economic, religious, ethnic and political differences continue to divide our culture. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord says His house shall be called a “house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:7). But the message of inclusion and hospitality (See ‘Biblical,’ page 9)

COMMENT

Best of Both Worlds

Several Southern Baptist leaders are asking what can be done to attract more people to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) annual meeting. Messenger registration has been less than 5,500 four of the last five years. Only the New Orleans meeting in 2013 topped that number with 7,874 registered messengers. The 2011 annual meeting in Phoenix registered only 4,852.

Those messengers came from 2,300–2,400 churches. Again only the New Orleans annual meeting drew more churches with messengers from 3,288 churches. That is about two people per church on average and surveys indicate most participants are pastors. Also the majority of participants are more than 50 years of age.

Both the number of messengers and churches are tiny fractions of a denomination that boasts of 15.5 million members in 46,499 churches. And the demographics of participants are not encouraging for the future.

Perhaps these leaders should look no further than the recent Send North America conference held in Nashville and sponsored by the North American Mission Board. That event drew more than 13,000 participants who had to pay a registration fee to get in. The SBC annual meeting is a free event.

Groups of people

Officials said 600 churches committed to bring at least 25 people to the Send conference. In all about 1,100 churches participated. That means churches brought groups of people rather than sending one or two representatives as they do to the SBC annual meeting.

Unlike the annual meeting the majority of participants at the Send conference were under 40 — it seemed far under.

The two events were totally different. The annual meeting is a business meeting primarily. In an attempt to shorten the meeting, all but essentials have been pared from the program. The meeting now consists of five sessions — all day on Tuesday and morning and afternoon sessions on Wednesday.



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

Many, probably most, messengers arrive early to participate in the annual Pastors Conference on Sunday and Monday. Planners of the annual meeting believe people are eager to return home after that so the convention is tightly managed.

The Send conference was an inspirational rally featuring popular preachers, famous Christian music groups and workshops to help participants live on mission for our Lord. It too was five sessions beginning Monday afternoon and running through Tuesday evening. Interestingly both evening sessions ran long but people stayed.

If Baptist leaders can find a way to combine the best of both events, they may have a winner.

Thankfully there is a model that does just that. It is the way SBC annual meetings used to be.

They used to be like a family reunion. It was an event eagerly anticipated. It was a family event where people planned their vacations to be a part of the gathering. It was a time of encouragement, a time of inspiration, a highlight of the year.

The first annual meeting I had the privilege of participating in began Monday night with a celebration rally and ended Thursday night with a citywide evangelistic service. In between there was great preaching and testimonies from missionaries serving at home and around the world. Every session featured a number of Christian musicians.

Baptist entity reports were long enough to share information about the great things each was doing. As a young pastor I remember excitement and appreciation swelling inside of me that through the Cooperative Program, I was a part of such an extensive, far-flung enterprise.

The inspiration was the best of its day. W.A. Criswell highlighted the opening celebration. John Bisagno preached the closing sermon at the evangelistic rally. I will never forget one particular evening session devoted to international missions when the powerful way then-Foreign Mission Board President Baker James Cauthen

challenged messengers to plant their lives on foreign fields.

People came. Messenger registration that year was 16,678, three times more than this year. Alabama registered 1,424 messengers. This year 225 Alabamians registered for the annual meeting.

Generally speaking pastors preached in their churches Sunday, then packed up their families and journeyed to the convention city. Lay participation was high. In those days lay people served as convention officers, even as SBC president.

A wise SBC leader once described the annual meeting as being like the old county fair. It was a time to lay aside daily concerns. It was a time to experience something out of the ordinary. It was a time to see friends not seen for a year. It was a time of happiness and joy, a time of encouragement and learning. It was a time of refreshment.

**“Southern Baptists
need their annual
meeting to be an event
people anticipate like
the coming of the old
county fair.”**

The leader warned that if those traits were lost, the annual meeting would cease to be vital and Southern Baptists as a whole would suffer for it. Looking around, that leader may have been a prophet.

Southern Baptists need their annual meeting to be an event people anticipate like the coming of the old county fair. We need it to be an encouraging, uplifting time that draws partic-

ipation from a larger base of the convention. We need it to be a family affair attractive to ordained and lay members alike. We need young people as well as the over-50 group.

The annual meeting will always have its business side. But that does not mean business cannot be interspersed with celebration, worship, promotion and training like that provided at the Send conference. That is the way annual meetings used to be.

Being relevant

Continuing to whittle away at the annual meeting may get Southern Baptists to the point that the meeting fulfills the denomination's legal responsibilities but is irrelevant to the lives of Southern Baptists and Southern Baptist churches. That would be a tragedy.

It may be a time to change directions. Instead of tightly managing the annual meeting perhaps it is time to provide activities attractive to various age groups, to offer issues of interest to lay and ordained alike, to provide quality training options at various times, to sprinkle business times across more sessions and to saturate the whole event with celebration and worship.

Baptists did this in the past. Surely we can do it again. The direction we are going does not bode well for the annual meeting or for SBC. It is time for a change. 🙏

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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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Amazon Hope

Nonprofit organization helps spread gospel throughout Amazon River basin

By Anna Keller
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

When Ty Harris visited the Amazon River for the first time four years ago he immediately fell in love with the region and its people. At the time Harris was a participant in a 10-day missions trip and realized that though the trip was wonderful, it was cost-prohibitive for many people who would likely be interested in going in the future.

Inspired to help reach people in the 30,000-plus villages along the vast river, Harris, a member of Sardis Baptist Church, Boaz, began to raise money to start a nonprofit organization that would allow for more frequent and affordable missions trips to the Amazon River basin. Amazon Hope was the result.

Cost reduction

"With so many villages along the river that haven't heard the gospel, you can send out a team every week and they'll still take years to reach," Harris said. "So we needed to go more often and the price needed to come down. Now we're able to take people on a nine-day trip for \$1,000 plus airfare, so about \$2,000 total on average."

This cost reduction (the trip used to be closer to \$3,300) comes largely from Amazon Hope's purchase of a large boat, which they can use to take 25-30 Americans plus Brazilian translators down the river. According to Harris, there are other missions groups that reach out to villages along the Amazon, but few groups are able to travel as far down the river as Amazon Hope, which travels up to 48 hours down the river to reach some of the more isolated groups. Many of these villages haven't had exposure to the gospel, and the ones who have usually have a Catholic background with more of a works-based interpretation of faith and salvation.

Still a new nonprofit, Amazon Hope recently took a vision trip with a group of 17 pastors.

Once in a village, the missions group went door to door sharing the gospel through translators and leaving Bibles in each home. They were welcomed into schools where they shared God's Word with students. Sometimes they did open-air preaching in villages.

During the vision trip the group saw 283 professions of faith.

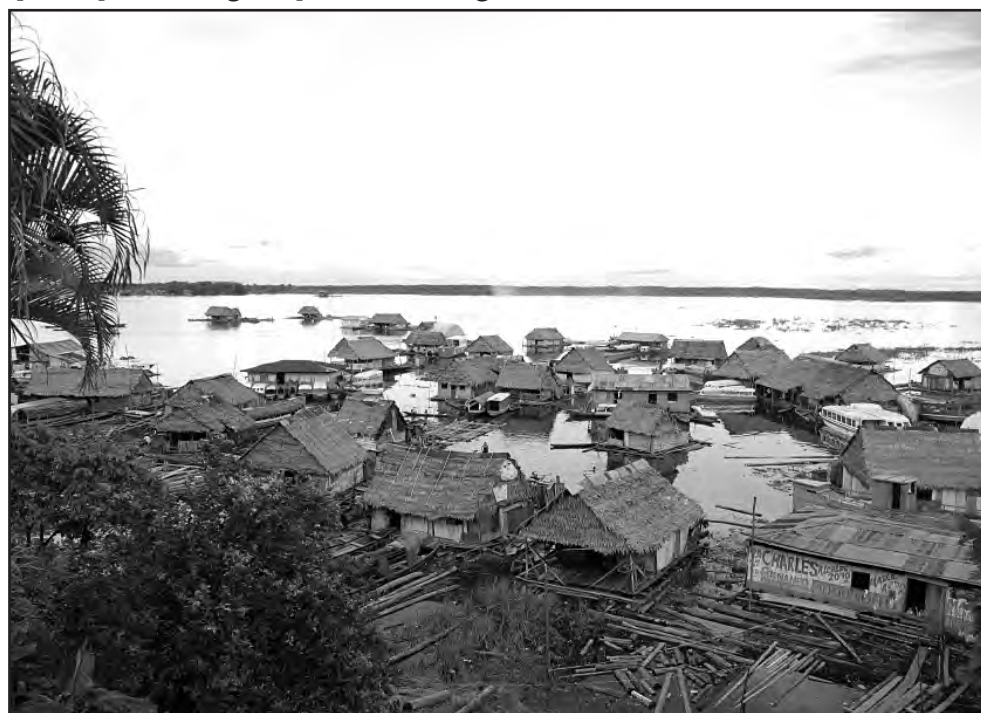


Photo by Sascha Grabow/CC BY

Amazon Hope reaches out to villages along the Amazon River, like the one pictured here. There are more than 30,000 villages along the river, which is 4,000 miles long.

A group of Brazilian church planters plan to follow up to continue the momentum going on in those villages.

"The Amazon people are really loving and caring," Harris said.

"People ask if they're poor. Compared to American standards, they would be very poor, but they're not poor. They're so blessed. They're able to access food from the river or jungle. The only thing they're hungry for is the gospel."

But Harris doesn't do all the work for Amazon Hope alone. He's partnered with Zac Goforth, associate pastor of students and family life at Sardis Baptist. Goforth also serves on

Amazon Hope's board of directors.

Harris said Goforth "organizes people and I organize mechanics. You could say I'm in charge of all boat-related issues and he's in charge of the evangelical stuff."

Involving other churches

Since the vision trip went so well, Amazon Hope is now preparing for their first church-wide missions trips, scheduled for summer 2016.

Goforth said, "Part of our desire is not just to go share the gospel but to involve other churches along the way, because

we know how missions have changed our church."

Through Amazon Hope there are currently trips scheduled with three church groups in June and July 2016.

Union Grove No. 1 Baptist Church, Albertville, is one of those churches. Pastor Jonathan Powell said he is "so excited" about his congregation's enthusiasm for Amazon Hope and for the upcoming trip — the first international missions trip for many participants.

Catching the vision

"This church has caught on to the vision of what God wants us to do," Powell said. "They're very active in home missions and now are delving into international missions as well. When God's people catch the vision of doing God's work, [He] can do amazing things."

Powell said he envisions Amazon Hope trips becoming a tradition for his church — something that isn't restricted to once a year but instead takes place multiple times a year.

Beyond the chance to share the gospel with the unreached, Harris said the trips are like "bucket-list trips."

"Whenever I'm there, I always think, 'I'm on the Amazon River — I never thought I'd be here.'"

"You see sloths and get to hold them. We go out hunting and catch piranha. You try a multitude of fruits you've never seen. There's such beauty, and parrots, monkeys and capybara surround you." ❧

To learn more about Amazon Hope and how your church can schedule a trip with the nonprofit, visit AmazonHope.org.

Eden Westside Baptist Church, Pell City, expanded its ministry reach to a second city by establishing its River Campus in Leeds.

‘God is in this’



Photo by Leigh Pritchett

Eden Westside ministers to Pell City, Leeds communities through 2 locations

By Anna Keller
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Jacky Connell has been the pastor of Eden Westside Baptist Church, Pell City, for 28 years and feels extremely committed to that congregation. So when he was approached in late 2014 to start a new church in Leeds and serve as its pastor, his initial response was, “No.”

When he started learning more about this particular Leeds location, though, his answer began to evolve.

A church had been closed and the building empty for 18 months. The building had been purchased

by a Leeds resident who had no interest in owning a church, but who didn’t want to see the building torn down or used for anything other than what it was intended to be.

This resident was the one who initially reached out to Connell in mid-November 2014. Connell turned them down but talked with some of Eden Westside Baptist’s deacons about the situation, and they all began praying about a solution.

Connell presented other options to the Leeds men to help them get the church going, none of which included Connell serving as pastor or a connection to

Eden Westside. But none of those alternatives felt right.

The group began considering opening the Leeds location as a second campus of Eden Westside, entertaining the option of having Connell simulcast in to the Leeds location via live streaming.

First worship service

The group as a whole felt like this was the right route to take, so after a quick update to the Leeds church building and getting other logistics worked out, the River Campus of Eden Westside had its first worship service Jan. 11, 2015.

“The surprising thing is how so many people pitched in to help in any way they could for the opening to be successful,” Connell said. “People worked hard during the holiday season unselfishly. There is a sweet, sweet spirit at the River Campus.”

The goal was always to make Eden Westside a single church with two locations, but Eden Westside also wanted the River Campus to be self-sustaining as early as possible. The church didn’t have to wait long for that goal to be realized — the River Campus was self-sustaining almost from the beginning.

“Every response I’ve heard [from church members] has been positive,” Connell said. “The members of Eden Westside were excited about the opportunity to open a second campus. The members support and pray for the River Campus.”

Since the River Campus is viewed as an extension of the Pell City location, the church has started introducing some of its Pell City ministries in the

Leeds location. One such example is Breakfast for the Brave, which has been in place in Pell City for more than a decade. The River Campus location will start hosting this outreach (in addition to the Pell City location) in January.

Scotty Pinson, the church’s director of missions, said, “We prepare breakfast once a month for all the first responders in the Pell City area. In January we will start serving all the policemen and firemen in Leeds at our River Campus.”

Missions work

Breakfast for the Brave is just one example of missions work that has extended to the new campus, and Connell said he’s excited about what is to come for Eden Westside.

“God is doing great work at the River Campus,” he said. “The first year was a year of learning and adjusting, and the second year will be one focused on intentional ministry. I’m absolutely convinced God is in this. It’s alive and will grow.”

TAB Talks interviews Rondie Wilks



Photo by Neisha Roberts

During the Alabama Baptist State Convention annual meeting Nov. 17–18, 2015, at Eastern Shore Baptist Church, Daphne, *The Alabama Baptist* debuted its TAB Talks, live-interview conversations with ministry leaders throughout the state and nation. Here, Bob Terry (right), editor of the paper, interviews Rondie Wilks, wife of Pastor Bill Wilks of NorthPark Baptist Church, Trussville. Wilks shares about living a life of discipleship and the D-Life emphasis at the Birmingham Baptist Association church.

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Relief organizations applaud passage of omnibus, tax bills

Several Christian and relief organizations applauded the recent passage of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016 and the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes (PATH) Act of 2015. Bread for the World and other organizations urge President Barack Obama to sign the bills into law.

"The passage of both the ... 2016 omnibus spending bill and the tax bill is a victory for working families and those who are struggling," said David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World. "This legislation will make a real difference in the lives of millions of people, both in the U.S. and around the world."

Permanent improvements

The tax bill makes permanent key improvements to the earned income tax credit (EITC) and the child tax credit (CTC). The EITC and CTC together lift more people out of poverty than any other program in the U.S. besides Social Security. Making the improvements permanent will prevent 16 million people from falling into or deeper into poverty.

The omnibus bill increases funding for children's programs like Head Start and provides alternative access to food during the summer months when school

is not in session. The bill also increases funding for international food aid and maternal and child health and nutrition, as well as continues funding to build long-term agriculture sustainability.

Diana Aviv, CEO of Feeding America, said, "Feeding America applauds Congressional passage of the PATH Act, which expands and makes permanent food donation tax incentives that are vital to our efforts to secure additional food for the 46 million Americans we serve each year. The food donation tax deduction [has] ... a real and profound impact on the ability of food banks nationwide to secure food and monetary donations to continue the critical work they do every day."

The omnibus bill does not include a provision to increase subsidies to the world's largest shipping companies to ship food aid. The provision could have resulted in up to 2 million people losing life-saving U.S. food aid while increasing transportation costs to taxpayers by \$75 million.

Beckmann said, "When lawmakers work together, good things can happen. Making the earned income and child tax credit improvements permanent will (help) 16 million people. ... This is great news." (Bread, *TAB*)

SBC on refugee crisis: 'They are not our enemies; they are victims'

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) leaders helped draft a statement released Dec. 17, 2015, calling on evangelical Christians to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis with compassion rather than fear.

The statement, approved by about 100 denominational, network and nonprofit leaders in a closed-door meeting at Wheaton College in Illinois, committed individuals and their churches "to actively care for and minister to global refugees with mercy and compassion, both here and abroad, based on God's compelling concern for all people in need and especially refugees."

SBC Executive Committee President and CEO Frank S. Page, LifeWay Research Executive Director Ed Stetzer and LifeWay Research vice president Micah Fries were part of a 12-member drafting coalition working together in advance of the GC2 Summit, an initiative co-sponsored by the research division of SBC and Wheaton's Billy Graham Center for Evangelism and Humanitarian Disaster Institute.

The gathering — originally planned for spring but moved up by recent developments including shootings in San Bernardino, California, and well-publicized calls by presidential candidate Donald Trump to temporarily ban Muslims from entering the United States — was convened to lay out an agenda for a Jan. 20, 2016, GC2 summit on the Christian response to the global refugee crisis.

'Love thy neighbor'

GC2, Stetzer explained in a Nov. 18, 2015, blog, refers to concern both for Christ's "Great Commission" to make disciples and "Great Commandment" to "love thy neighbor as thyself."

"Unfortunately refugees are being treated like the new Ebola," Stetzer wrote. "Much like the Ebola panic, many are now terrified of refugees. Is there a response that is more in the way of Jesus?"

Signers of the GC2 statement pledged to "not be motivated by fear but by love for God and others" and to act with "love and compassion for refugees who have been admitted into our nation(s) in refugee status."

"We acknowledge that there are genuine security concerns and encourage governments to be stewards of safety, but we also observe that choosing to come to North America as refugees would be among the

least effective ways for those who intend to do us harm," the statement reads in part.

"We distinguish that the refugees fleeing this violence are not our enemies; they are victims," it continues. "We call for Christians to support ministries showing the love of Jesus to the most vulnerable, those in desperate need, and the hurting. This is what Jesus did; He came to the hurting and brought peace to those in despair."

Key beliefs

The documents also affirm six key beliefs:

- ▶ "Refugees possess the image of God and, as such, are infinitely valuable to God and to us.

- ▶ "We are commanded to love our neighbor and it is our privilege to love refugees.

- ▶ "As Christians, we must care sacrificially for the refugee, the foreigner and the stranger.

- ▶ "We will motivate and prepare our churches and movements to care for refugees.

- ▶ "We will not be motivated by fear but by love for God and others.

- ▶ "Christians are called to grace-filled and humble speech about this issue."

Stetzer, a senior fellow for Wheaton's Billy Graham Center, called the presence of refugees "one of the

more compelling and pressing issues of our day."

"Across spectrums and opinions, all Christians agree that we should show and share the love of Jesus Christ to refugees and their communities," Stetzer said on the GC2 Summit website. "In these gatherings we hope to provide the framework for Christians and churches to do that most winsomely and with fidelity to God's Word."

The GC2 Summit, featuring a number of speakers and collaborators from the evangelical community, will be held at Wheaton College, ironically in the news for its own controversy involving suspension of a political science professor who committed to wearing a "hijab" during Advent to protest discrimination and persecution against Muslims.

Wheaton officials said the discipline had nothing to do with the head-covering but rather a statement the professor posted on Facebook saying Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Administrators said the posting appeared to conflict with the school's doctrinal stance. (BNG, BP)

"Unfortunately refugees are being treated like the new Ebola. Much like the Ebola panic, many are now terrified of refugees. Is there a response that is more in the way of Jesus?"

**Ed Stetzer, executive director
LifeWay Research**

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Photo by Chris McCaghren

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On Mission Celebration makes missions personal for 2 Alabama Baptist associations

By Grace Thornton
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

It's such a massive undertaking that it only happens once every five years, but when it does, it makes an equally massive impact, says Lloyd Borden, director of missions for Lookout Mountain Baptist Association.

The On Mission Celebration, an event in November 2015 that united the churches of Lookout Mountain and Cherokee Baptist associations, gathered more than 30 missionaries for a central rally and then spread them across the two associations' churches for Sunday services.

"We had a great rally on Saturday evening with lots of singing and the presentation of flags," Borden said. "It went quite well. We had a really broad spectrum of missionaries speak."

Terry Burke, pastor of Mount Vernon Baptist Church, Collinsville, in Lookout Mountain Association, said he had two of those missionaries in his church that Sunday — one from due north and one from due South.

"The lady who spoke in the morning was from South America, and the guy who spoke that night was from Minnesota," Burke said.

They were both well received, he said.

"Missionaries excite us — we're a very missions-minded church," Burke said. "I think having missionaries come in enlivens everybody and makes giving to missions easier, because it puts a face and stories with the work both in North America and overseas."

For East Centre Baptist Church, Centre, the im-

pact even went a step further, said Pastor Chip Smith.

The church hosted three missionaries that Sunday — one a church planter from Huntsville, one a missionary in Gulf Shores and one a missionary from Africa.

"During lunch with the missionary from Gulf Shores, we started talking about ways our church could partner with him, and now our youth group is planning to go down and do a weeklong backyard Bible club," Smith said.

Hearing about the three missionaries' work also encouraged the church to give more to missions, he said.

"It put a face with a missionary and I think that speaks loud," Smith said. "We're going above what we were expecting for Lottie Moon (Christmas Offering) this year. It's inspired us as a church to think of other ways we can get involved."

Borden said it was great for all the churches who support missions work to see missionaries and hear testimonies from the field.

And they were able to participate in logistics too, which allowed more involvement and more time with the missionaries, he said.

"A lot of our people served as drivers, taking the missionaries from the central location to the various churches where they would speak," Borden said.

"They also served on the hospitality and publicity committees and in a lot of other ways. It was a great thing for everyone to be involved in and it made a great impact." ❧

"It put a face with a missionary and I think that speaks loud."

**Chip Smith, pastor
East Centre Baptist
Church, Centre**



Iranian pastor Fathi freed from prison

Iranian pastor Farshid Fathi has been freed after five years imprisonment in Tehran because of charges linked to his Christian faith.

Fathi was released Dec. 21, 2015, from Rajai Shahr prison in Gohardasht, Iran, five months after prison authorities informed him he would be due for early release in December, although no reason for the early release has been reported. Previously, he was scheduled for release in December 2017 after authorities arrested him Dec. 26, 2010, for "acting against national security through membership of a Christian organization, collection of funds and propaganda against the Islamic Regime by helping spread Christianity in the country."

Fathi's original sentence of six years was extended by a year in December 2014 on false charges. He had been injured in an attack by Evin prison guards April 17, 2014, and was transferred to the Rajai Shahr prison in August 2014 for unknown reasons. (BP)

Someone You Should Know

By Leigh Pritchett, Correspondent, *The Alabama Baptist*

James Hammack



HAMMACK

*West End Baptist Church, Aliceville
Pickens Baptist Association*

FAVORITE VERSE: Matthew 10:28

FAVORITE HYMN: "Be Thou My Vision"

HOBBIES: Spending time with my family

FAMILY STATUS: Husband of five years to wife, Alicia; son, Jace Hammack; daughter, Ellie Bre Hammack

At age 7, James Hammack planted a seed in his grandfather's heart that grew into faith in Jesus Christ. Now as a 27-year-old, Hammack "replants" churches. His ministry focuses on re-energizing congregations and revitalizing their churches. Currently he is bivocational pastor of West End Baptist, Aliceville, as well as a website designer and developer. He also has started a college Bible study in the Aliceville area. His previous ministry service has been in Autauga Baptist Association and in Louisville, Kentucky. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology from Auburn University in Montgomery and is pursuing a master's degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

A: I knew the Lord was calling me to be a pastor at 16. I refused for a year. I wanted to make money by being a doctor or lawyer. That was my intent but that was not God's intent.

Q: What does your ministry work demand?

A: It is a gracious demand. It's something I love doing. I preach; I lead worship. There's outreach, fellowshiping with other pastors. We spend a lot of time during the week outside the church building meeting people. We live life on mission.

Q: What do you get from your ministry?

A: I get the satisfaction of knowing that what I'm doing is pleasing to God. He is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. I want my Father to be pleased with me.

Q: What influences in your life pointed you to Christ at the beginning of your faith journey?

A: My parents. My dad was pastor. My mom has been everything from a Sunday School teacher to principal (in a church school). They both made sure our lives revolved around church. They believed very strongly in raising a child in the way he should go. The Lord got hold of my little inquisitive heart when I was 6. The Lord saved me as a young boy by myself in my bedroom. I knew the Lord had done a work in my life.

Q: How do family members support you?

A: My wife is a beautiful and wonderful helpmate. ... We are a team reaching out to people with the gospel. My parents help in any way they can, [including] in prayer. And that is necessary.

Q: What difference will this ministry make for you in the future?

A: Like Jesus said in the parable, if we are faithful in small things He will grow us to be faithful in the big things as well. ❧

Q: When and how were you led into your ministry?

If you know of a person who should be featured as "Someone You Should Know," send his or her name, a contact number and the reason you think he or she should be featured to: Someone You Should Know, c/o The Alabama Baptist, 3310 Independence Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209 or news@thealabamabaptist.org.

Religious diversity

Leaders urge military to respect all religions

Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Mormon and Catholic leaders with strong military ties joined together Dec. 18, 2015, in urging the military to give greater respect to the diverse religious practices of service members throughout the armed forces. The brief, filed in the nation's highest military court, criticizes a Navy ruling that allows commanders to censor religious activity on the grounds that religion is too "divisive" and "contentious" a topic for our nation's Marines.

"Even before the Continental Army, the military has always set the tone for the nation by protecting religious diversity," said Daniel Blomberg, counsel at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. "Strength comes from mutual respect for religious differences, not enforced silence."

The lawsuit involves a Marine who was ordered by her commander to remove from her desk three small strips of paper with Scripture verses printed on them. In February 2015 the U.S. Navy-Marine Corps Court of Criminal Appeals upheld the conviction of Lance Corporal Monifa Sterling for refusing to remove them, even though co-workers were permitted to keep nonreligious personal items on their desks, such as career accolades and pictures of family.

The lower court held that posting personal religious messages was not protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). Douglas L. Carver, former U.S. Army chief of chaplains who currently serves as the executive director of chaplaincy for the North American Mission Board, said this ruling could possibly have been "a preemptive decision to avoid a long battle over religious liberty and the freedom of religious expression."

"The increased levels of plurality and diversity within the Armed Forces coupled with the tension of remaining neutral in all matters of religion has become an increasing challenge for military leaders. In the current 'politically correct' environment, I think our military commanders are somewhat uncertain on the left and right limits of what they can do when dealing with religious liberty issues in their organization."

Carver questions if a chaplain was consulted when the issue first came up with Sterling. "[RFRA] is complex and that's what

the chaplains are there for — to help [commanders] walk through the complexity of managing religious diversity," he said. "Chaplains play an important role as the primary staff advisor to military commanders on all matters of religion, including the responsibility to make sure every service member's religious freedom is honored or allowed."

The court also justified allowing commanders to suppress religious speech, claiming that Marines would suffer "detrimental effect" from being "exposed to biblical quotations in the military workplace."

Carver, however, thinks the exposure of biblical influences has the opposite effect.

"If we lose the freedom of religious liberty in the workplace and the public square, it will have a negative effect."

**Douglas L. Carver
executive director of
chaplaincy, NAMB**

"We've ... recognized the importance of religious liberty since our founding. It's affected our ethics, morals and behaviors in every sector of society," he said. "I would argue that the freedom of religion and the freedom of our troops to grow in their personal faith enables them to be courageous, confident and humane in combat while avoiding barbaric practices against the enemy. "I'm concerned about the growing hostility toward religion and people of faith. If we lose the freedom of religious liberty in the workplace and the public square, it will have a negative effect on how we live our lives and treat each other."

Government leaders cannot fear controversy regarding religious issues, he said. "It almost seems that, in this culturally sensitive world where we don't want to offend anyone, religion can ignite so much controversy that we're just not going to talk or allow conversations about it at all — that's censorship," Carver said.

"If we have people in authority who begin to arbitrarily make decisions on religious matters without considering the impact on the First Amendment, we are headed for chaotic and dangerous times."

The religious leaders' brief — whose signatories include high-ranking veterans from every branch of the military who have served in every major U.S. conflict since Vietnam — was filed in support of Sterling's appeal to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces and shows how religious diversity promotes the military's mission.

Blomberg said, "Throughout history, religion has been an essential source of both courage and comfort for those called to defend our freedoms. The least we can do is respect their personal religious beliefs and practices." (Maggie Walsh, Becket Fund)

TAB
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Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Knowing God

God's Eternal Nature

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

As humans we can think about God and wonder what He is like, something other living creatures cannot and do not do. Possessing the ability to articulate our thoughts, we can even speak about God. In the end, however, the most important outcome is to know God — to know Him personally, intimately, reverently, hungrily and increasingly. Thus we open the new year with the theme "Knowing God."

The challenge that we know God takes us to the very root meaning of the term "theology." Theology most properly and literally means "the study of God." "Theos" is the Greek word for "God." "Logos" is the Greek term for "word" or "speaking." How then are we to understand God and speak about Him? When thinking about God, what are we to think? Theology 101 begins the new year with studies about God Himself, the God who knows us and desires us to know Him. Our goal is to know God as He is and as He wants to be known.

God's revealed characteristics

These studies will challenge us to think afresh about God's nature or the essence of His being. Our theme will also call us to think about His revealed characteristics or attributes. In light of God's essential nature and manifest attributes, we will be compelled to consider some of His divine actions. So we will group our venture into "theology" in three broad categories — the essence of God (His nature); His distinctive characteristics (His attributes); and His notable actions in which His nature and attributes have been, and can be, discerned.

As to God's nature, He has revealed Himself as eternal. He is without beginning of days or ending of existence. What can we say when a child asks, "Where did God come from?" The most we can say is that He has always been. Those who delve deeply into the theology of God's existence usually

express His eternity by saying that He is self-existent. Something of this truth was captured in the answer given Moses when he wanted to know how to introduce God to the nation that was about to follow him out of bondage. Moses was told to say that "I am that I am" had spoken to him (Ex. 3:13-14). The very idea of God as having always existed challenges our finite minds. That which challenges our intellect is best received by faith. Such is the message of Hebrews 11:6: "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is."

What can we think about in a practical sense when we ponder God's eternal nature? Some years ago while waiting in a medical consulting room, I was reminded I was in a Christian environment when I saw these words on a poster over the name of the late Helen Mallicoat. God's eternal nature makes the poster's words meaningful for people in all places throughout all time:

I was regretting the past and fearing the future.

*Suddenly my Lord was speaking:
"My name is I AM."*

*He paused. I waited. He continued:
"When you live in the past with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard.*

I am not there. My name is not I WAS.

When you live in the future with its problems and flaws, it is hard.

I am not there. My name is not I WILL BE.

When you live in this moment, it is not hard.

I am here. My name is I AM." ❏

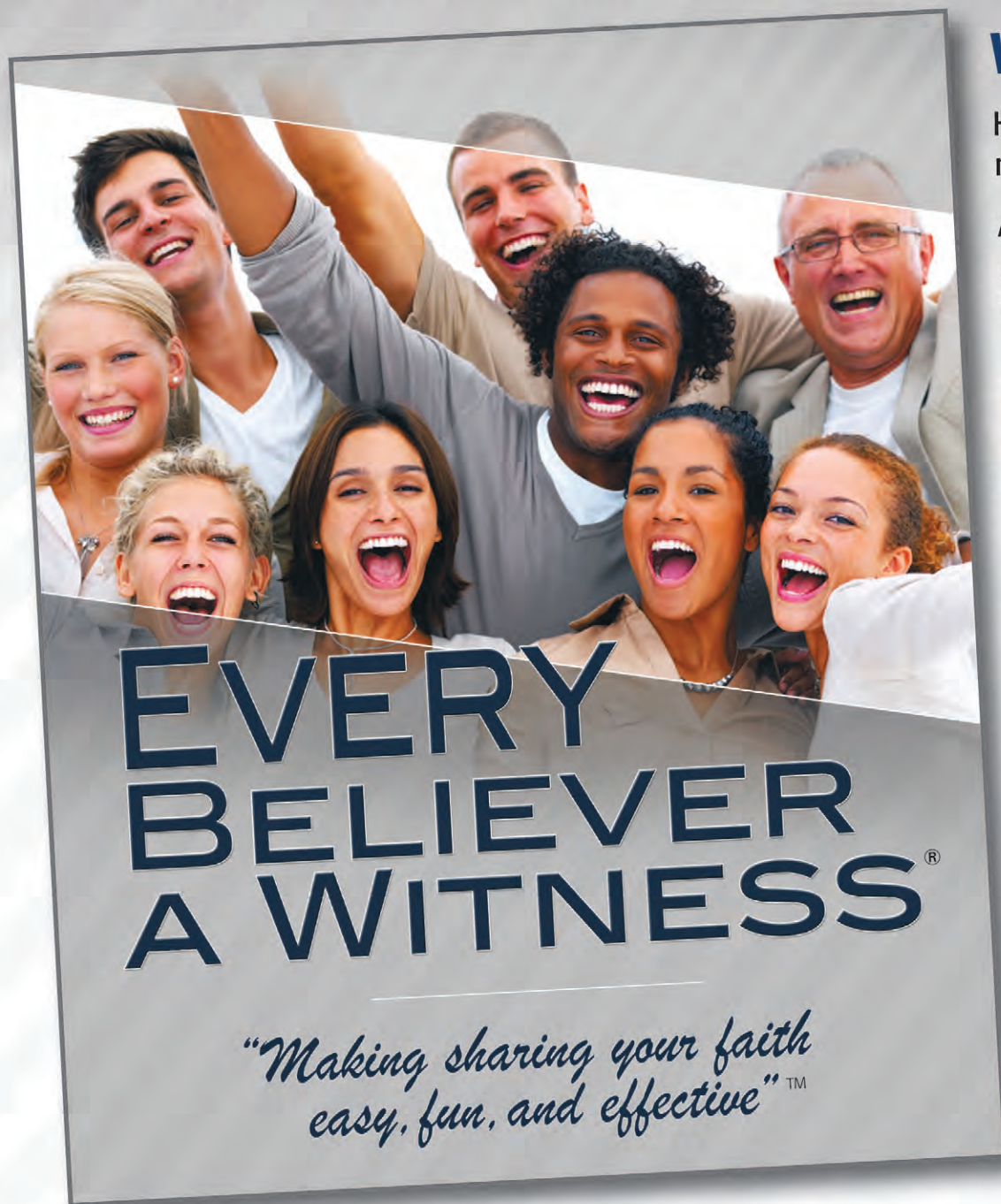
Jerry Batson is a retired Alabama Baptist pastor who also has served as associate dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University and professor of several schools of religion during his career.





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This event is made possible by gifts of Alabama Baptists through the Cooperative Program.

Seminar to help protect children in digital age

There are many benefits to having access to the Internet — it's an unlimited source of knowledge; it makes paying bills and buying presents easier; it helps families separated by distance keep in touch through social media. Along with the benefits, though, come the dangers — and there are many, especially for children.

Undone Redone, a ministry to those affected by sexual sin, will host "My Secure Family: Equipping Parents to Protect Children in the Digital Age" on Jan. 23 to educate parents on the current technological landscape and equip them with solutions that help foster safe technological environments for children and teens.

In 2013, 9,500 web pages of unsuitable content for children were removed. In 2012, 70,000

indecent images of children were reported. There are hundreds of pro-eating disorder websites in existence. The list goes on.

At "My Secure Family," Traylor and Melody Lovvorn, executive director and co-founder, respectively, of Undone Redone, will share about the latest technology available to children and will share practical steps to create a safe environment at home.

Melea Stephens, a Well-spring Christian Clinic therapist, also will speak at the seminar held at Samford University in Birmingham in the Regions Community Resource Room from 9 a.m. to noon.

To register, visit www2.samford.edu/eve/index.php?formid=1281 or email mti@samford.edu. (TAB)

BIBLICAL *hospitality*

Glorifying God by making disciples is good motivator

(continued from page 1)
grows more and more difficult as society becomes increasingly fragmented, according to Henry G. Brinton, author of "The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality." In response, the Christian community must counter the impulse to close ranks around those who are like them and instead continually look for ways to include those who are new and different in the life of the church.

"Hospitality is the key to becoming an uncommon Christian community — one that embraces all people with God's love and grace," Brinton writes. "I am convinced that God wants — and the world needs — churches that are truly welcoming."

Spiritual gift

While utilizing members with the spiritual gift of hospitality is important, teaching geared at the heart of the issue also is vital.

Keane said, "What keeps someone from being welcoming in the first place? Is it selfishness? Pride? Anxiety? Leaders can drill down into what is going on, but reminding your congregation that their role at church is to glorify God by making more disciples can be a great motivator."

Part of discipleship is providing opportunities for new people to plug in, not just in ministry but in fellowship as well. Welcoming others into the group requires an intentional effort,

Hospitality tips

- ▶ Make sure each guest is greeted three times before sitting. Choose greeters who project warmth and smile readily.
- ▶ Don't judge. Just don't. Remember the Bible's gradual unfolding of God's "chosen people" to include first some Israelites, then all Israelites and then (under Jesus) all people, including those on the margins.
- ▶ Don't barrage guests with pleas for money.
- ▶ Choose accessible hymns and songs.
- ▶ Make sure the bulletin spells out what guests need to do, including when the congregation sits, stands or joins together in prayer.
- ▶ Rather than singling out guests, have church members wear nametags or stand during the welcome time.
- ▶ During meals make sure newer members or guests are not sitting alone. Join them for food and conversation.
- ▶ Invite people to your home rather than to your church. Home-based ministry is an excellent way to practice hospitality.
- ▶ As a church be sure you are expending as many resources toward outreach as you are toward preserving your building, your traditions or your administration.
- ▶ Plan your ministries based on the actual needs of your neighborhood and community, not just on what other congregations are doing.

Adapted from "The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality" (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012) by Henry G. Brinton

Keane said. Though it is not always easy, it is biblical.

"Your selfishness to want only to spend time with your clique is simply contrary to what God has called us to," Keane said. "You are called to step out, to make the gospel known in the halls of

your church and beyond."

A welcoming church cultivates a sense of mission and purpose among its members that in turn leads them to serve others, including the strangers in their midst, according to Brinton.

In order for the church to truly be a "house of prayer for all peoples," he said, it must practice hospitality in such a way that "strangers will be welcomed into a place of acceptance, included in a network of relationships and given time and resources to grow in Christian faith and understanding."

Spiritual growth

That kind of biblical hospitality draws people in and results in spiritual as well as numerical growth, Brinton concludes.

"People are attracted to congregations that put faith into action and radiate excitement about making a difference in the world." ❧

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Across ALABAMA'S Associations

BIRMINGHAM

► **Dawson Memorial Church, Birmingham**, will host a luncheon Jan. 30, 11 a.m. Denise George, wife of Beeson Divinity School Dean Timothy George and author of 30 books, will be the guest speaker and will share about "The Six Seasons of a Woman's Life." Gary Fenton is pastor.

BULLOCK-CENTENNIAL

► **William R. Cannon II**, pastor of **First Church, Union Springs**, earned his doctor of philosophy degree from Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, on Dec. 11, 2015.



CANNON

DEKALB

► **First Church, Fort Payne**, surpassed its \$30,000 goal for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering with \$41,000 at press time. Pastor Nathan VanHorn said, "It was powerful ... to see God give His people the spirit of boldness in giving."

EAST CULLMAN

► **Matt Smith** is the new pastor of **East Side Church, Cullman**. His first Sunday was Jan. 3. He previously served as minister of administration for First Church, Enterprise. Smith holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Mobile, a master of divinity degree from Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, and a master of theology degree from Andersonville Seminary in Camilla, Georgia. He and his wife, Julie, have two children.

MONTGOMERY

► **Eric Smith** is the new pastor of **Vaughn Forest Church, Montgomery**. Smith worked as a church planter in Jackson, Mississippi, for six years for Vertical Church. He also has served as director of 242 Network, a ministry that assists church planters. He and his wife, Krystal, have one child. ☪



SMITH

Moore's 'Onward' wins 2015 Book of the Year

Southern Baptist ethicist Russell Moore's latest book, "Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel," is *Christianity Today's* 2015 Book of the Year.

Moore's book is the winner of the magazine's first-ever "Beautiful Orthodoxy" award as the release during 2015 that best exemplifies the magazine's "pursuit of truthfulness and loveliness." *Christianity Today* also named the book by the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commis-

sion (ERLC) as the winner in the politics and public life category.

B&H Publishing released "Onward" in August 2015.

In "Onward," Moore urges evangelicals to engage the culture with hope and boldness. He encourages evangelicals to embrace Christianity and to recognize they are a "prophetic minority" that should speak with "convictional kindness." The book is available at LifeWay Christian Stores, other Christian bookstores and on Amazon. (BP)

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CHURCH POSITIONS

PART-TIME MINISTER OF MUSIC

Raleigh Avenue Baptist Church in Homewood is seeking a part-time music minister. Send resumés to: RABC, ATTN: Personnel Committee, 309 Raleigh Ave., Homewood, AL 35209 or jeantowry@rabc.org.

TWO POSITIONS: WORSHIP & STUDENT

Elkdale Baptist in Selma, Alabama, is seeking two full-time positions: worship pastor and student pastor. Please send resumés by Jan. 8, 2016, to: Cory Horton at cory.horton@elkdale.org.

STUDENT PASTOR

Mineral Springs Baptist Church, near Jemison, Alabama, in Chilton County, Alabama, is currently accepting resumés for a full-time student pastor. Five years experience in proven, healthy student ministry is mandatory.

Only emailed resumés will be accepted. Please send resumés, ministry philosophy and a cover letter to: pastorjasongreen@yahoo.com.

OTHER POSITIONS

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS

St. Clair Baptist Association in Ashville, Alabama, is receiving resumés for director of missions. Cutoff date to receive resumés will be Jan. 31. Please send resumés to: Moody First Baptist Church, c/o Chuck Edwards, 902 Church St., Moody AL 35004.

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS

The Autauga Baptist Association is seeking a full-time director of missions with a master of divinity degree from a Southern Baptist seminary and must have pastoral experience. Deadline to submit resumé is Feb. 15. Send resumé to: Bill Atchison, 925 Running Brook

Dr., Prattville, AL 36066.

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Want to know GOD?

By Pastor Max Buttram
First Baptist Church, Oak Grove, in Sylacauga

Ofentimes we misunderstand what it means to know God personally. Recently an 89-year-old woman who had thought she knew God discovered the real truth about who God is. While in the hospital she began to search her own heart for some assurance that if she were to die she would go to heaven. She had believed since childhood that she knew God because she had publicly expressed her belief and had been baptized. When questioned about her faith by concerned family members, her only response was, "I know I am saved because I have been baptized."

This is a common expression by many others like her who believe in God but do not really know Him personally. They have never had an encounter with God that has changed their life completely. In other words, they have never been "born again." Jesus told Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Nicodemus knew about God, but had never been transformed by God. His knowledge of God left him still searching for assurance of life externally in God's kingdom.

When a person is born again, he becomes "a new creature" in whom "old things are passed away and all things become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). The person receives a new life that is cleansed of sin, a new love for God and His Word, a new desire to follow God's will and a new peace that surpasses all understanding. This radical transformation takes place in the heart of a person who is willing to allow Jesus to come in and take control. For the perfect Son of God to come in we must acknowledge our sin, ask for His forgiveness, believe that He died as full payment for our sin and surrender our lives to Him as a living sacrifice.

When the elderly woman mentioned above knew the truth about Jesus, she opened her heart and allowed Him to come in and change her life. Now she knows God and has found the peace she was searching for. ☪



Rashional thoughts

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

Executive editor • jrash@thealabamabaptist.org

Considering a fresh start?

Who doesn't love a fresh start? It might be buying a new house or car and enjoying the freedom from repairs (at least for a few weeks). It might be cleaning out the pantry, joining a gym and beginning a new healthy lifestyle.

And then there are natural fresh starts that allow us to breathe in the excitement that comes with new opportunities.

Transitioning from high school to college was one of those moments for me. It was a chance to reinvent myself without all the baggage of the past 12 years. New interests, new experiences and new people to meet allowed me to figure out more of my potential and what opportunities lay before me. And believe me, I grabbed hold of everything I could juggle in my arms and tied strings to my belt with the things I couldn't. I threw myself in deep and swam through the endless hours of academics, activities and achievements.

Following college graduation I committed to a short-term missions assignment.

Diving in deep

For the next two and a half years, I swam even deeper — growing in my faith like I had never before experienced, developing life-changing relationships and refining my intense desire to serve others.

Next came my transition to *The Alabama Baptist* (TAB). What started out as a short-term job to get me through Beeson Divinity School at Samford University turned into a beloved career. Now, 20 years later, I look back and realize I've been swimming so far and so deep that I can no longer see the shore. I am one with the sea — but not just with TAB, in all aspects of Alabama Baptist life. I love this people group and am honored to be one of them and serve them.

But even with the depth of my love for Alabama Baptists, are there moments I'm tempted to bail for a fresh start? Absolutely.

The weight from dealing with daily life issues year after year, the frustrations that lie continuously beneath the surface, the disappointments, the unmet expectations, the exhaustion from carrying each other along the journey — they are real.

Holding on to the rope

It isn't any different than the decisions all of us face in life.

It may be a difficult choice in your personal life. It may be in church life — to revitalize the dying congregation or plant a new one. It may be in the workplace or volunteer role — to dig deep to find freshness in a long-term position or make a change which guarantees new energy.

It isn't that one answer is necessarily right and one is wrong; it is about determining what is best despite the cloud of emotions, exhaustion, etc., that might be tainting our view.

Sometimes life gets so marred down that escaping to a blank slate seems like the only way to survive. And in many cases, that truly is the best move to make.

But we also should evaluate if gaining some relief, taking a break or making a specific adjustment would release us from the lack of enthusiasm, loss of love or hopelessness we might be feeling. After all, fresh starts are a never-ending desire and it won't be long before that which is new is old again — complete with its own heavy luggage.

What makes the most difference, whichever decision we make, is to hold on to the rope that connects us to Christ. I may be battered from being pounded in the storm and continuously tossed up against the side of the rescue boat but I hold on tight, knowing with confidence He won't let go of His end.

We may need a fresh start sometimes. But what we need even more is the consistency of a God who doesn't let us go — a God who works in both our current situations and our fresh starts. 🙏

Rashional Extras...

TAB augmented reality



"No one but You can turn all my pain into peace, can turn all my doubts to belief. No one but You can take all the tears that I've cried and mend all the pieces inside. I'm giving it all to You. ... I was helpless on my own, didn't realize how far I'd gone. I was covered in despair. Jesus, You were standing there. When I could not find my strength, that's when You carried me. You carried me. No one but You."

Lyrics from "No One But You"
Natasha Owens

"We call them leaders because they will choose sacrifice so that their people will gain. ... A leader chooses to look after the person to the left of him and to the right of him."

Simon Sinek
Management theorist

"Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it."

Mark Twain

"I think that if God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise, it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him."

C.S. Lewis

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

C.S. Lewis

What I've learned in 40 years as pastor

Pastor Mike Hall
New Salem Baptist Church, Reform

1. Be patient. I don't have to do everything quickly on a strict deadline. God's mercy is Him giving His children time to figure out what He is teaching them.

2. Just because my name is on the sign doesn't make me pastor. It is only when I walk through the fires with the congregation that they will start to trust me.

3. The church is not a democracy. It is a Christocracy. It is better to do nothing than try to do something not within the leadership of God. When God's people move in God's will there is no weapon of hell that can stop it.

4. I don't know everything. I must listen first to God and also to those who are in touch

with God. Carry all motives, intents and ideas to God. A lot of mess-ups can be avoided by listening before acting.

5. I can't do everything. If I want something done right, the best thing is to find someone who knows what they are doing.

6. Don't neglect my family nor my church family.

7. There is no expiration on a pastorate or pastor.

8. There is but one God and His name is Jehovah. It's not about me. It's not about having my way. The sooner I learn that the sooner I become a happy servant.

9. All things in life are a tradeoff. In order to have anything or do anything, I have to trade something else for it so choose prayerfully.

Beautiful character requires hard work

By Pastor Gary Fenton
Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham
excerpt from his blog www.characterpath.com

Meaningless busyness can be just as damaging to the development of character as idleness. Some of the laziest people also are the busiest.

In my own life, I recognize that often I have stayed busy performing morally neutral and mildly good tasks so I wouldn't have to engage the better and best tasks. Better and best always requires more effort, honesty and integrity than good.

When our daughters were

small and my wife would brush their hair, she would occasionally tell them it is painful to be beautiful. It is painful and requires hard work to have beautiful character. If you want to avoid the hard work of character, stay busy doing something.

Building character begins with the silence of reflection and then moves to acting on what you have discovered about yourself and life.

It is through reading Scripture and praying daily that we learn the truth about ourselves and about life.

"Whether you're running a household or managing a multinational corporation ... it can't be all about you until it's also all about them. Some call this servant leadership. Being valued by others is about finding the intersection between what you can and want to contribute and what your MVPs need. ... Not only is it essential to be clear about your needs and goals, if you want to serve your [most valuable people] ... you must help them achieve what is important to

them at work and in life."

Excerpt from "Admired: 21 Ways to Double Your Value" by Mark C. Thompson and Bonita S. Thompson



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- 2** Choose the "ALBaptist" profile under channel and tap "Follow." You will only have to do this one time. (Any ALBaptist options will allow you to follow *The Alabama Baptist*.)
- 3** Tap the [] icon at the bottom of the screen.
- 4** You will see pulsating dots, which indicate the app is searching for a target. Once it finds a target the dots will turn to a bull's-eye. The bull's-eye will remain until the augmented reality image loads.
- 5** Hold your device over a page or image in *The Alabama Baptist* (TAB) marked as augmented reality and watch the paper come to life.
- 6** If the image is slow to load at any point, then it may be your data speed or Wi-Fi strength. Change locations and try again.
- 7** Each week when TAB arrives, open the app and hold your device over the augmented reality articles.

Top 10 most important news stories of 2015

The Supreme Court ruling that prompted the White House to light up like a giant rainbow made the top slot in the Religion News-writers Association's (RNA) annual ranking of the 10 most important religion news stories of the year.

The case was *Obergefell v. Hodges* and in late June 2015 the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 to make same-sex "marriage" the law of the land. Members of RNA, an organization of professional journalists who cover religion, named it the most important religion news story of the year.

That's quite a feat in a year that included the European migrant

crisis; the rise of ISIS; growing anti-Islamic rhetoric, especially among political candidates; and a papal visit to the East Coast. Those stories ranked second, third, fourth and fifth, respectively.

Cracking the list

Also cracking the top 10 from a list of 26 major stories were the Paris terror attacks (ranked sixth), Pope Francis' encyclical on climate change (seventh), the Charleston church shootings (eighth), the support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement from religious leaders (ninth) and Pope Francis' ongoing agenda to

push for change and reform in the Catholic Church.

"The U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision will have repercussions in the religious world for years to come, so it's fitting that journalists ranked it the No. 1 story," said Debra L. Mason, executive director of Religion Newswriters Foundation and director of the Center on Religion & the Professions at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia.

"Pope Francis' impact and ability to drive news is clear from the number of major news stories in which he was a central player, from his visit to the U.S. to his

encyclical on the environment. He was clearly the top religious newsmaker."

Other stories in the list of 26 include the San Bernardino shootings (11), the rise of Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis as a Christian hero (12), the Mormon church's rejection of its gay and lesbian members (18) and the deaths of more than 2,000 people in a stampede in Saudi Arabia during the annual hajj (20).

RNA conducted its survey among its 480 members, most of whom are journalists working in the U.S. (RNS)

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For January 10

Explore the Bible By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D. Dean, School of Christian Ministries, University of Mobile

APPROACHING THE KING Matthew 6:5-18

Our King differs from the kings of the earth. Pomp and circumstance, observing ritual and “putting on airs” are the means by which an earthly monarch is approached. Not so with our King.

Jesus warned against role playing when approaching the King. Acts of worship — giving, praying and fasting — are often practiced by those who believe that ritual is sufficient to placate their deity. Such practices are insufficient in the Kingdom, for our King is fully aware of the thoughts and intents of our heart. Jesus warns that those who play the part of worshipper will receive what they seek, the applause of their audience. True worshippers seek an audience with the King.

Between Him and Us (5-6)

Jesus warned the disciples not to pray for the purpose of being observed by others. The motivation, not the action, was the issue. As a young believer I wrestled with whether or not it was biblical to lead in public prayer. After all, Jesus taught that followers were not to pray to be seen by men. Other passages in Scripture make it clear that public prayers — often confessions of personal and national sin — are appropriate. So what was Jesus teaching? How do we apply this instruction?

When we pray, we must not do so as an actor on a stage. We are conversing with the King, whether or not others eavesdrop. The focus of worship is our King not the crowd.

Honest Communication (7-8)

Here Jesus also warned about repetitious ritual practiced by idolaters. They assumed God would hear them because of their many words and repeated phrases.

This was precisely what I did as a child reared in a congregation who repeated the

Lord’s Prayer (or Model Prayer) as part of the worship liturgy. Rather than focusing on an audience with the King, my thoughts were on how my voice blended into the army of voices ritually responding to our pastor’s prompt: “In the name of Jesus, Who taught us to pray, ‘Our Father ...’”

Respectfully Requested (9-15)

We must be mindful of the Master’s purpose for teaching us the Model Prayer. This prayer is an outline to follow for approaching God in adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication.

Some of the earliest New Testament manuscripts do not contain the final section: “For Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” The content, however, is biblical: “Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the splendor and the majesty, for everything in the heavens and on earth belongs to You. Yours, Lord, is the Kingdom and You are exalted as head over all” (1 Chron. 29:11).

Not only did Jesus instruct us about approaching the King with our requests, but He also warned us to pray with an attitude of forgiveness toward others. Within the prayer, He includes “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Forgiveness is essential in approaching the King.

Proper Motivation (16-18)

Self-denial is not unique to Christian faith. Fasting is practiced by believers and idolaters alike. The practices themselves are held in common by Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and Christians. The motivation for fasting distinguishes us from practitioners of other faiths.

If your purpose for fasting is to play the role of “the ascetic” in a stage production, then congratulations. Enjoy the applause. However, if you are seeking an audience with the King, it is not one else’s business if you are fasting. ☞

Bible Studies for Life By James R. Strange, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Religion, Samford University

USED IN GOD’S SERVICE 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; 1 Peter 4:9-11

Today’s passage follows last Sunday’s, so refer to last week’s introduction (visit www.thealabamabaptist.org and search “Sunday School lessons”). Chapters 12 and 13 should be read as a foundation for the instructions Paul gives in Chapter 14.

Like Paul, the author of 1 Peter talks about “gifts” and comments on their importance for the congregation.

Don’t consider yourself less useful than others in the church. (12:12-21)

Here Paul introduces his famous metaphor comparing the congregation to Christ’s body (Rom. 12:3-8; compare Col. 1:18, 2:19; Eph. 1:22-23). Paul uses two church institutions — Lord’s Supper and baptism — to talk about unity. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 he mentioned Jesus’ words, “This is My body,” along with the idea of “drinking” the cup of the new covenant in Jesus’ blood. Here he talks about all baptized believers being made “to drink of one Spirit.” Our taking communion together and our individual baptisms should erase even our starkest distinctions.

Paul mentions two of the most important distinctions of his day. Although it looks like a religious distinction to modern eyes, in Paul’s day “Jews or Greeks” referred to people of different ethnic groups. “Greeks” denoted descendants of the Athenians, Corinthians and Spartans whom the Romans so admired. “Jews” signified Judeans, that is Syrian foreigners whose native language was Aramaic (Romans said this even of Jews who had been speaking Greek for generations). “Slave or free” referred to people, not merely of different class, but of different rights. A slave was chattel (movable) property without rights. A former slave could not become a Roman citizen. His or her children could, but their names

would betray their status as the children of “freedmen,” and no matter how wealthy they became they could not enter the highest ranks of Roman society. Those were restricted to particular families. Paul does not say “male or female,” but we can probably supply it based on Galatians 3:27-28, which also is about baptism.

Contrary to such distinctions in Corinth and everywhere in the Empire, no “member” (the double entendre exists in both Greek and English; body part and part of a group) of the body of Christ may think of him- or herself as less important than any other. God designates each role and God ignores the various ways humans sort themselves into ranks of value and power.

Don’t consider yourself more useful than others in the church. (12:22-26)

In this section Paul talks about “the members that seem to be weaker” and “that we think less honorable.” Some modern commentators use this language to argue that Paul (and therefore God) limits women’s church roles to places of service that are different — but not lesser than — roles restricted to men. However, elsewhere in 1 Corinthians “weaker” refers to vulnerable Christians who are easily swayed (1 Cor. 8:7, 9-12; 9:22; 1 Thess. 5:14).

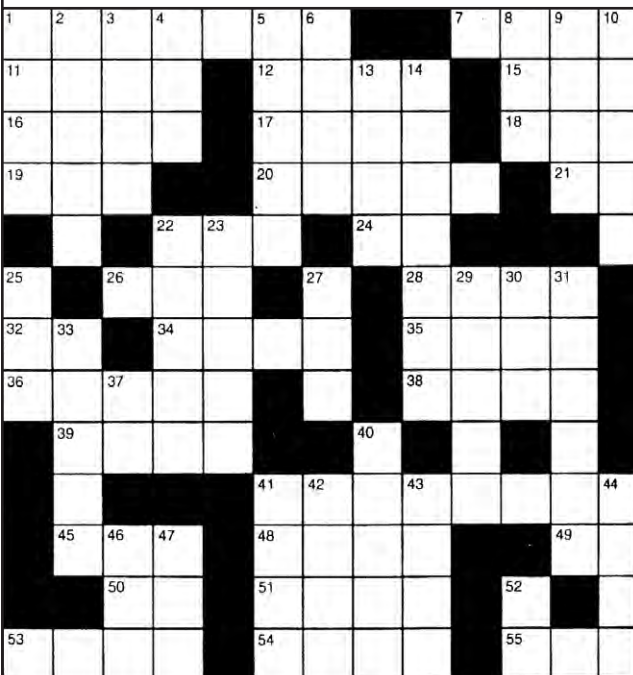
Accordingly, no member of the body of Christ may think of him- or herself as more valuable or powerful than any other.

Use your gifts to serve others and glorify God. (4:9-11)

Peter talks about gifts as grace from God (compare 1 Cor. 12:4). He even likens the words believers speak to one another to words given by God, and the strength of our service to strength from God. So our various gifts, our words and our very strength all display God’s grace. We use them to serve not our own needs or egos but God, for the purpose of giving glory to God alone. ☞

Christian Crossword

By Valerie Barrett Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.



- Across**
- After threescore and two weeks shall ___ be cut off. (Dan. 9:26)
 - He sent him out of the ___ of Hebron. (Gen. 37:14)
 - ___ the Ahoiite. (1 Chron. 11:29)
 - Sons of Shimei were Jahath, ___. (1 Chron. 23:10)
 - And pursued them unto ___. (Gen. 14:14)
 - Behold, O mount ___. (Ezek. 35:3)
 - The ___ of the Lord. (2 Kings 19:31)
 - Until it come ___ at your nostrils. (Num. 11:20)
 - Why is thy spirit so ___? (1 Kings 21:5)
 - When ye blow an ___. (Num. 10:5)
 - Mid-Atlantic State. (abbr.)
 - They that handle the ___ of the writer. (Judg. 5:14)
 - And fast ye for ___. (Es. 4:16)
 - Every ___, whereon he lieth is unclean. (Lev. 15:4)
 - The trees of lign ___s which the Lord hath planted. (Num. 24:6)
 - Full ___ compassion.

- (Ps. 112:4)
- Consumption and the burning ___. (Lev. 26:16)
- Now will we ___ worse with thee. (Gen. 19:9)
- Noah found ___ in the eyes of the Lord. (Gen. 6:8)
- With thy vine ___, and with thy oliveyard. (Ex. 23:11)
- Send forth their little ___ like a flock. (Job 21:11)
- The ___ shall plant, and shall eat. (Jer. 31:5)
- ___ wagons and four oxen. (Num. 7:7)
- Thou shalt ___ the Lord thy God. (Deut. 6:5)
- Even ___ will I certainly do this. (1 Kings 1:30)
- Fear was ___ every side. (Ps. 31:13)
- Good works for necessary ___. (Titus 3:14)
- O ___ of Sibmah, I will weep for thee. (Jer. 48:32)
- And she ___ them away. (Josh. 2:21)
- Vital juice in a tree. (1 Chron. 7:21)
- The Lord ___ unto me. (Jer. 1:7)
- And said, I go, ___; and went not. (Matt. 21:30)
- Paltiel the son of ___. (Num. 34:26)
- ___ the Beth-elite build Jericho. (1 Kings 16:34)
- Why make ye this ___, and weep? (Mark 5:39)
- ___ him, all ye people. (Rom. 15:11)
- They which ___ in may see. (Luke 8:16)
- Sons of Caleb; Iru, Elah and ___. (1 Chron. 4:15)
- It hath been ___ of old time. (Eccles. 1:10)
- Jacob held his ___ until they were come. (Gen. 34:5)
- Joined at the two ___ thereof. (Ex. 28:7)
- One that taketh a ___ by the ears. (Prov. 26:17)
- So ___-hadad hearkened unto King Asa. (1 Kings 15:20)
- I am the ___ in my father’s house. (Judg. 6:15)
- All that handle the ___, the mariners. (Ezek. 27:29)
- The ___ of the congregation. (Lev. 4:15)
- By the breath of God ___ is given. (Job 37:10)
- Their throat is ___ open sepulchre. (Ps. 5:9)
- Zebulun shall dwell at the ___ of the sea. (Gen. 49:13)
- And restore the over ___ unto the man. (Lev. 25:27)
- And thou ___ thy life. (Judg. 18:25)
- The swallow a ___ for herself. (Ps. 84:3)
- And take thee much ___. (Jer. 2:22)
- Out of the spoils ___ in battles. (1 Chron. 26:27)
- I took 12 men of you, ___ of a tribe. (Deut. 1:23)
- If I be a master, where ___ my fear? (Mal. 1:6)





Kristian Stanfill

Photo courtesy of The Media Collective

‘Honest worship’

Stanfill encourages through worship

By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

By putting a modern spin on traditional worship songs, Kristian Stanfill desires to help young worshippers develop an interest in hymns.

“I get so many emails and comments when I lead the song ‘Jesus Paid It All’ and I love hearing how much freedom it brings to people,” Stanfill said. “It’s an amazing moment of worship with a room full of people praising our Savior who set us free.”

While helping audiences grow in their faith journey Stanfill seeks to connect worshippers to unwavering truths and encourages them to worship God in the midst of the storms in their lives.

Real promises

“God’s promises are real and unshakable,” Stanfill said. “I want to give people a voice to express their heart and places where they have been. My prayer is that these songs will lead people closer to God and help them experience Him in a powerful way.”

Stanfill began leading worship as a teenager and was invited to be a part of Passion 2005 by Louis Giglio, founder and director Passion Confer-

ences, annual events for 18–25 year olds to “lift up the name of Jesus,” according to its website. Passion 2016 was Jan. 2–4.

Today, Stanfill maintains a busy schedule leading worship for events and leads onstage at Passion Conferences alongside Chris Tomlin, David Crowder and Christy Nockels. He also serves as a worship leader at Passion City Church, Atlanta.

Focus on Jesus

Stanfill said, “The very center of what we want to declare at Passion Conferences is that Jesus is King and He is ruling on an everlasting throne.”

Stanfill’s songs are featured on several of Passion’s worship albums and he has performed on the Even So Tour.

“For songwriters and worship leaders, the goal of what we do is to get songs into the church and into the hearts of people,” Stanfill said.

“When everything comes together it’s a beautiful moment of honest worship to God. ... At that point I could walk off stage and everything would keep going. At that point no one needs me to keep singing. We are all just focused on God and worshipping Him.”

For more information about Passion Conferences, visit passion2016.com. ☞

Singing truth



TAB augmented reality

Birmingham worship pastor roots songwriting in Scripture

By Caleb Jones
Special to The Alabama Baptist

Music helps us relate emotionally and spiritually to people in ways we would normally not be able to — it also helps us relate to and worship the Lord. Behind great songs are great songwriters and 30-year-old Stephen Fryrear is one of those songwriters.

Fryrear, in his second year as worship pastor at Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, recently released his album, “The Badlands.” The album is a mix of worship songs for church services and songs that people can relate to on a personal level.

“There’s a lot of pressure as a worship leader because you put words into people’s mouths,” he said. “So the words better be right and better be true because these are the songs that people are going to be singing. So the songs better be honest and about who God is, not just songs that sound good.”

While the majority of Fryrear’s songs are written for a congregation to be able to sing on Sundays, the title track of “The Badlands” is not written in that way.

“The song ‘The Badlands’ tells a story but ... is still full of Scripture and truth,” he said.

Fryrear wrote “The Badlands” with a specific story in mind. “The song came because my brother-in-law’s mother passed away from complications with cervical cancer. The death was completely unexpected and I did not know what to do or say, so I just wrote,” he said.

“The song is all about who God is in times of suffering and trials and going through the dark, dark times. We know that He is faithful and that He loves

and that He has put us in these trials for our good. I wrote the song so that I, and others, can know that we are not alone in Christ.”

Songs touch people in unexpected ways, he said as he read a text from his brother-in-law.

Connecting with Jesus

The text read, “I listened to ‘Badlands’ for the first time today and the song hits exactly every feeling that I was going through when I lost my mom. [The song] has helped me with my anxiety

and to grow closer to God. It has also helped me mourn and grieve over the loss of my mother. I have regained the faith I lost when she passed and I’m so thankful for what God has been teaching and showing me through the song.”

Fryrear, who came to Mountain Brook Baptist from Oak Hills Church, San Antonio, Texas, said he pulls from Scripture as much as possible when writing worship songs. They carry more weight than normal songs because they help people connect with Jesus, he said.

“I try to put Scripture to music because that is the best way to write songs that will stand forever,” he said. “For example one of my favorite songs that I have ever written, ‘Sweet Exchange,’ was pulled from Ephesians

2 and Isaiah 53. We must put Scripture to music because that is what will change hearts and minds and that is what the Church needs to be singing.”

Mary Splawn, minister of connections at Mountain Brook Baptist, said, “Stephen is passionate about helping the Church sing theologically rich songs, full of Scripture in order to build up the body of Christ.” ☞



Photo courtesy of Mary Splawn

Stephen Fryrear, worship pastor at Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, released the worship album ‘The Badlands’ in September 2015.

“We must put Scripture to music because that is what will change hearts and minds and that is what the Church needs to be singing.”

Stephen Fryrear, worship pastor, Mountain Brook Baptist Church

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BP photo

Helen McKinney (right) tells a Bible story to residents of a tent community, many of whom are beggars.

Missions begins at home

Local ministry leads couple to international missions work

Donald and Helen McKinneys' outreach to South Asians started in North America. They first got to know a South Asian people group in their church's backyard in New York state before becoming Christian workers on the other side of the world.

Helen McKinney and her Sunday School teacher from Trinity Baptist Church, Niskayuna, New York, began visiting the homes of the church's neighbors, several of whom were from South Asia. Each Thursday over tea, they formed friendships with the families, who showed them photos of family members in South Asia.

"The ladies would so welcome us, they were so lonely for their family," Helen McKinney recalled. The Thursday home visits turned into a weekly Bible study where they also swapped recipes and played with the children. Over the next 10 years, the Thursday class drew about 50 women each week.

"That really started in my heart a love for these people," Helen McKinney said of the South Asian people group she has served among. "They're so precious, so open to hearing the truth of God's Word."

Leadership development

Donald McKinney was invited on a missions trip to South Asia while he was a professor and dean at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary's Northeast Campus in Albany, New York. Year after year the McKinneys spent their summers in South Asia, where Donald McKinney taught theology, outreach and leadership development to pastors who had started house churches in South Asia but had little access to pastoral training.

Most of the pastors were raised Hindu, which purports that "gods are in everything"

After deciding to devote his time to church leader development there, Donald McKinney said, "I was initially overwhelmed by this ocean of idolatry."

He visited Hindu temples to see how people worshipped, observing people offering food, flowers and incense to statues and praying to them.

Also overwhelming to Donald McKinney was the sheer number of people in the area.

There are 1.6 billion people living in this part of the world, and it has "the greatest concentration of lostness," he said. There are more unengaged, unreached people groups in South Asia than in the rest of the world combined.

One of the most rewarding yet humbling aspects of sharing the gospel in an unreached area is being the first one to tell someone about it, he said. When looking at someone absorbing the words of the gospel for the first time, Donald McKinney can see the person "listening to the power" of God's Word, curious to know more.

By the look on a man's face "I know this guy's never heard this in his life. ... He has no idea how the story ends."

Donald McKinney said the leaders are hungry "to grow and to know and to learn," despite what it has cost them.

"I see my brothers (in Christ) who are faithfully, steadily witnessing; seeing people saved; baptizing them; and starting new churches," he said.

"I'm encouraged by the work of the Lord in the churches, by the work of the Holy Spirit to raise up young leaders, and I see many of them coming forward to do the work of the ministry." (BP)

**"I see my brothers
(in Christ) who are
faithfully, steadily
witnessing (and)
seeing people
saved."**

**Donald McKinney
missionary to South Asia**

PERSECUTED CHURCH

Compiled from Wire Services



Muslim Fulani attack, kill Christians in Nigeria

BACHI, Nigeria — Muslim Fulani herdsmen attacked two households and a compound of displaced people in a village near Jos on Dec. 13, 2015, killing 15 Christians, including two small children.

The attack killed 3-year-old Happy Matthew and 1-year-old Monday Matthew. A 5-year-old girl, Anna Matthew, was wounded and was receiving treatment at Plateau State Specialist Hospital in Jos. The attack took place in Bachi, a predominately Christian village.

A grandmother of the three children, 57-year-old widow Rose Monday, died in the attack by several armed Fulani herdsmen, relatives said. Monday's daughter, whose name is withheld for security reasons, said relatives are consoled that one day they will be reunited as a family with the Lord Jesus Christ. Pointing out bullet holes in the now-abandoned house, she said she was not in the village at the time of the attack.

At the other house, members of the family of Gyang Christopher Choji were killed: his son, Monday Gyang; daughter, Gbari Gyang; son-in-law, Kaneng Nyen Gbari; and grandchildren, Dorcas Timothy and Rose Timothy. Those killed were members of St. Paul's Catholic Church in Hwak Kwata-Zawan, Nigeria. (MS)

Sudanese pastors arrested for unknown reasons

NORTH KHARTOUM, South Sudan — Security officials arrested two Sudanese pastors in the Khartoum area of Sudan on Dec. 18, 2015, sources said.

Authorities from the National Intelligence and Security Services arrested both leaders of the Sudan Church of Christ (SCOC) separately at their respective homes at 7 a.m., the sources said. Kowa Shamaal, head of missions at SCOC, was arrested at his house in Hai Thiba Al Hamyida, in Khartoum Bahry (North Khartoum), while Hassan Abdelrahim, SCOC vice moderator, was arrested at his home in Ombada block 43 in Omdurman.

Family members and church officials have been given no reason for the arrest of the pastors, who have objected to government demolition of SCOC worship buildings. Their whereabouts also were unknown at press time.

"We have not gotten any information on why our pastors were detained and their families also have not been informed," an SCOC official said. Ethnic Nuba, along with Christians, face discrimination in Sudan, where President Omar al-Bashir has vowed to adopt a stricter version of "sharia," or Islamic law, and recognize only Islamic culture and the Arabic language. (MS)

Christian TV station resumes transmission after fire

KARACHI, Pakistan — Three weeks after what its owners call a suspicious fire, Gawahi TV, one of Pakistan's few Christian television stations, resumed transmission.

Sarfraz William, owner and CEO of the Karachi-based television station, said that since the station's equipment was completely lost in the fire, he borrowed equipment to continue broadcasting concerts, prayers and church services during the busy Christmas season.

"We are doing God's work and we are doing whatever we can to render our services on Christmas by resuming the transmission," he said. "Though it is not in the way we had planned on Christmas, but something is better than nothing."

William and his brother, Javed, who also works at the station, described the Nov. 24, 2015, fire as deliberately set. They said locks were cut and chemicals were sprayed to boost the flames and burn evidence of arson.

Local police dispute claims that the fire was an attack on Christians. Station house officer Sarwar Commando said an electrical short circuit caused the fire. But he could not say how it was determined that the fire was not an attack. (RNS)