

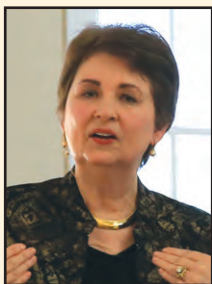


INSIDE



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Changing lives

Alabama Baptist Children's Homes celebrates 125 years of faithful service

By Carrie Brown McWhorter
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

On Feb. 14, 1891, a long-held vision finally became reality when Alabama Baptists officially established a home to care for widows and orphans. Now known as the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries (ABCH), the ministry will mark 125 years of faithful service this year with celebration and thanksgiving for what God has accomplished through the dedicated staff, volunteers and partners who have been part of the ABCH mission.

"The mission of ABCH is to protect, nurture and restore children and families through Christ-centered services, and we have been privileged to serve alongside Alabama Baptist congregations throughout our 125-year history," said Riley Green, ABCH vice president of administration.

When the state officially recognized the Louise Short Baptist Widows' and Orphans' Home in 1891,

those charged with setting up the ministry were lacking a few important resources — specifically money and a location.

According to ABCH history, Mariah Woodson agreed to deed her estate to the Alabama Baptist State Convention for the purpose of establishing the ministry. However, in 1891, Woodson was still alive so those funds were not yet available. The committee also needed a place to establish the home. In 1893, John Stewart, pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church, decided it was time for the committee to act and proposed his town for the location. Stewart and Evergreen Baptist converted an old parsonage owned by the church, hired a matron and officially opened the doors March 8, 1893.

Since the establishment of that first home in Evergreen, the ministry of ABCH has experienced significant growth: a relocation of its home office first to Troy and later to Birmingham; the expansion of campus homes into other

"The mission of ABCH is to protect, nurture and restore children and families through Christ-centered services."

Riley Green
vice president of
administration, ABCH



Photo courtesy of ABCH

Decatur house parent Haley Terry (center) reads a book to children at the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries' Decatur campus care home.

parts of the state; the development of programs to help children stay with their biological families; and the addition of a counseling ministry to help children and families throughout the state.

Six locations

Today there are six ABCH locations: Birmingham, Decatur, Oxford, Dothan, Mobile and Montgomery. All but the offices in Birmingham and Montgomery offer campus care for children and each location offers foster care, counseling and family education. Additionally, counseling services are available in more than 40 lo-

cations throughout the state.

Throughout its history ABCH's commitment to its mission "to protect, nurture and restore children and families through Christ-centered services" has never changed.

The results of that commitment are seen in both the data that has been collected through the years and the stories of those who have been touched by the ministry.

Rod Marshall, president and CEO of ABCH, said, "With the support of Alabama Baptists and like-minded followers of Christ, in the past 125 years we have served more than 30,000 children

(See 'God,' page 4)

COMING NEXT WEEK ...

Spotlight on **CHRISTIAN EDUCATION** choices



COMMENT



Making Dramatic Changes

It is too much to say that dramatic change of an institution or entity can only be made by someone from outside that organization's culture, but studies indicate that is usually the case.

Scholars of institutional dynamics point out that dramatic change involves reshaping an organization's goals, roles, processes, values, communication practices, attitudes and assumptions. None of these can be changed individually. They are like interlocking parts each protecting the other.

That is why scholars say single-fix changes (like a change of leader) eventually fail because the interlocking elements of an organization inexorably draw back into the existing culture.

Usually it takes actors who are not steeped in a particular institution's culture to make dramatic changes. These new actors must offer a new vision (leadership), new processes and procedures (management) and new systems of reward and punishment (power).

Studies cite case after case where a new leader offered a new vision or a new strategic plan or new motivation but was unable to make significant change because the whole culture was not impacted. The final result was more of what had been.

That observation may sound overly academic but it has been demonstrated in Southern Baptist life and is being demonstrated now at the International Mission Board (IMB).

Some Baptists will remember the Covenant for a New Century adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1995. The Conservative Resurgence had won a multiyear struggle for SBC leadership and sought to reshape the convention in a particular direction. Before the Covenant for a New Century report was released people wondered how far the leaders would go in their changes.

Experience level

Rarely mentioned in the run-up to the report's release was the experience level of committee members. Scholars say that is important because one must know the "institutions that guide the actor's perceptions and activities."

Louisiana pastor Mark Brister chaired the committee. He later became president of Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee. Ronnie Floyd, current SBC president, was a prime mover on the committee. He was elected president of the SBC Executive Committee at the same



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

meeting the Covenant for a New Century was adopted, but at the time his primary identity was as a Baptist pastor.

The only SBC entity leader on the committee was Albert Mohler, who had been elected president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, two years earlier at age 34.

None of the committee members had extensive experience in leadership of SBC entities or working with the interlocking pieces of convention structure.

Previous reorganization

The result was the largest intentional SBC reorganization in history. Entities were abolished. Other entities were combined. Program assignments changed. Entity names changed. Some entity leaders were reorganized out, others demoted. When the report was approved, SBC was dramatically changed.

Shortly before the Covenant for a New Century was proposed, some Southern Baptists who felt disenfranchised by the Conservative Resurgence formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). Instrumental in the formation of this new group were some former SBC entity leaders.

Not surprisingly, the first iteration of the new group reflected much of traditional SBC structure.

It was classic textbook principles at work. Those with the least experience in the organization created something new and different. Those with the most experience tweaked their new organization but kept it similar to what they had known most of their ministry lives.

As textbooks teach, one must know the "institutions that guide the actor's perceptions and activities."

Southern Baptists saw the principle at work again when Kevin Ezell was elected president of the North American Mission Board (NAMB). Ezell was a well-known pastor but had almost no background with NAMB. Ezell made drastic changes in NAMB's partnerships with state conventions much to the consternation of practically all state leaders.

Ezell was unhindered by NAMB's culture as

he led the organization to jettison many of its SBC-assigned programs to focus primarily on church planting in underserved areas. In the new organization, the "interlocking parts" did not fit together as they had in the past.

That brings us to IMB. Traditionally, IMB looked inside the organization for its top leadership. Baker James Cauthen, who led the organization for 25 years (1954–1979), was a former missionary to China. He was succeeded by Keith Parks (1980–1992) who served as a missionary in Indonesia before becoming an organizational vice president. Jerry Rankin, also a former missionary and area director in East Asia, served as president from 1993 to 2010. Tom Elliff, who led IMB from 2011 to 2014, is best known as a pastor but also served as an IMB missionary and IMB vice president.

While each IMB president made changes — some of them difficult changes — they were largely in keeping with the traditional IMB culture.

In August 2014, IMB trustees elected David Platt, a 36-year-old pastor from Birmingham, as its new leader. Platt, a popular speaker and author, was active in missions efforts around the world and worked closely with IMB.

But in terms of working with the interlocking parts of IMB's culture, his experience was limited.

The result was that Platt is able to make dramatic changes to IMB unhindered by experience within the organization's culture. Where others opted to address the deficit spending problem through missionary attrition, Platt attempts to solve the problem in one year. He can rework missionary qualifications, tilt IMB's balance between career and short-term missionaries, even close an award-winning communications department that others built up over the years.

Whether the changes are good or bad is for another discussion. History has yet to pass its judgment. But from an institutional dynamics understanding, IMB's overall dramatic change should not be surprising. In fact it could have been anticipated because the "institutions that guide the actor's perceptions and activities" were not those of IMB as it has been known over the years.

Pray for all impacted

Now the changes are a reality just like the Covenant for a New Century or NAMB's new relationships and structure. The task now is to ensure the interlocking parts of IMB's new emerging culture work together effectively for the task of sharing the gospel.

Please join me in praying for Platt and all who have been impacted by the dramatic changes at IMB and those yet to come. ☞

Follow Bob Terry
Twitter
@drbobterry



TAB
THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

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

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Protecting children

TAB AR

Birmingham ministry helps equip parents in today's digital age

By Grace Thornton
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Traylor Lovvorn saw porn for the first time when he was 8 years old.

It set him on a path that ripped his family apart for years before God healed him and put them back together.

It breaks his heart. It sobers him.

And it makes him wonder what's about to happen in the next few years.

"Today's 8 to 12 year olds, when they are first exposed to porn it is not a Playboy or Penthouse centerfold — it is much more graphic and hardcore," Lovvorn said. "We are just now seeing the first wave hit the beach of the 20 year olds who were exposed to such graphic images at 8 and 9 years old."

And, he said, "the Church is not ready."

The implications are massive, he said. And the numbers are staggering.

These days 6 out of 10 girls and 9 out of 10 boys are exposed to this kind of hardcore porn before age 18, he said.

So it's in response to this epidemic that Lovvorn and his wife, Melody, started Undone Redone, a Birmingham-based ministry that seeks to help protect and heal families from the devastating effects of pornography and sexual addiction and sin.

And it's why they held an event called "My Secure Family: Equipping Parents to Protect Children in the Digital Age" on Jan. 23 at Samford University in Birmingham in partnership with Sam-

ford's Ministry Training Institute (MTI) and *The Alabama Baptist*. They wanted to

open the conversation for families to be involved in preparing their children for when — not if — they are exposed to porn, Traylor Lovvorn said.

'Got to be engaged'

"As a parent, we have got to be the safe place where our children feel safe to come and ask their questions and to be curious," he said. "Otherwise our children are left to traverse the landscape by themselves. I know we're busy and sometimes it's easier to let the phone or device be the babysitter, but we've got to be engaged with this."

Melea Stephens, a licensed professional counselor from Birmingham who also spoke during the seminar, said it's important for parents to give their children a way to categorize porn so they know how to respond when they are exposed to it.

"For example I know of one little girl who was first exposed to porn at a neighbor's house when she was 6. Because she didn't have a way to categorize it, she started acting out what she saw. She started acting things



Photo by Maggie Walsh

Melody (center) and Traylor Lovvorn (right) of Undone Redone speak to participants about protecting children in today's digital age at 'My Secure Family,' a seminar held Jan. 23 at Samford University in Birmingham.

out on her siblings," Stephens said.

Porn warps children's sense of safety and their development because they don't have a compartment for it, she said. "To give them a way to compartmentalize porn is a first way to help them deal with it, because it's not a matter of if, but when they are exposed."

Traylor Lovvorn said trying to insulate children from the world is like having a pool and — instead of teaching them to swim — building a fence around it and pretending it's not there.

"We are pretending the world isn't broken, and we're trying to keep them from seeing that it is," Traylor Lovvorn said. "Life is messy. It's broken. We have to have the conversations. I'm not talking about 'the talk.' I'm talking about an ongoing conversation that lasts. Think about the onslaught of information they are inundated with. We are foolish to think that one conversation is adequate."

Some parents respond to threats like porn with fear-based reactions like denial, he said.

But denial sends the message that you don't care that your child is facing the world's brokenness alone, Traylor Lovvorn said.

But the other end of the spectrum — hypervigilance — communicates to your child that he or she isn't trustworthy, he said.

"We need to set boundaries but we need to talk about the 'why,'" he said. "We need to have a grace-based response rather than a fear-based reaction."

And that grace-based response provides the compartment that Stephens said is so important.

One resource for talking with children is a

book called "Good Pictures, Bad Pictures," which is meant to "porn proof" young children, she said.

"Instead of eliciting curiosity, it helps diffuse some of that by teaching them that there are bad pictures out there and why they can be bad for them," Stephens said. "It (porn) is not some major secret that way, so when it comes up they are more like, 'Oh, I know what that is,' and know how to deal with it."

It helps them know how to take their thinking brain and make it the boss of their feeling brain, she said.

Traylor Lovvorn illustrated this idea with the story of some young children who decided for themselves to change the channel when something inappropriate came on even when no authority figure was around to tell them they shouldn't watch it.

"It was a beautiful picture of how they can learn that it's not just a rule, it's the heart behind the rule," he said. "It's about shepherding their hearts and training them early so that they can understand and think for themselves."

Talk early

Starting the conversation early also helps set up a safe place for children to return to talk as they grow up and face more real threats, Melody Lovvorn said.

"If we have those conversations, they know 'Mom and Dad are preparing me and I've got this safe place to go back to,'" she said. "One of the things I told my boys was, 'In middle school, if you get a picture from a girl and it's naked photos, this is how we want to handle it,' and then I gave them a plan."

(See 'To protect,' page 11)

The ministries of the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries cover the state with campuses in Decatur (pictured here), Birmingham, Oxford, Dothan, Mobile and Montgomery.

'God has been good'



Photo courtesy of ABCH

Support from Baptist churches, individuals make a difference in ABCH

(continued from page 1)

in need of out-of-home care. We have actively served fragile families to keep them from disintegrating. We have provided excellent care to children who through no fault of their own were in need of other-than-family care. We have watched over the last two decades as our foster care program has grown rapidly to now include 145 foster families all across the state who in 2015 provided 41,507 days of care to 312 children. God has been good to this ministry."

The numbers show the breadth of the ministry, but the stories like Vanda Davenport's show the heart.

Davenport works in the ABCH Birmingham office, but her involvement in ABCH ministry goes much deeper.

"Every workday I walk past the spot where my two adopted children were first placed in my arms," Davenport said. "I remember those first moments they came into my care. I remember the first days at home as they adjusted to their surroundings. I remember their eyes when I held them as they tried to make sense of my face. I knew then and I know now that God was there in those first moments. He is there now in the teenage moments and has been there in all of the moments in between. His faithfulness to my children is one of the sweetest blessings I have ever witnessed."

Kori McCormick, a social worker for ABCH in Mobile, said she has been blessed by seeing God work in multifaceted ways through the ministry.

"He has restored families, expanded

families and opened people's eyes to have a heart for children in need," she said.

The faithful support ABCH receives from Baptist churches, individuals and business partners contributes to the fruitfulness of the ministry, said Michelle Drashman, ABCH director of communications. Though every donation and drive is important, Drashman said some of the most touching gifts come from children.

"So many gifts come from children who are responding to the needs of the kids in our care, and it's a blessing to know that their families are helping these children see the world outside themselves," Drashman said.

The ABCH story is one worth sharing, which is why ABCH representatives are regular guests at churches throughout the state. Sharing the mission and the stories in churches and now on social media is a way to connect people in the pews with the needs of

hurting families, Green said.

The 125th anniversary also will provide many opportunities throughout the year to share the story of ABCH.

Anniversary celebration

The celebration will begin Feb. 14. Marshall and others from ABCH will be at Evergreen Baptist to recognize the role the church and Stewart played in starting the ministry. Lonette Berg, executive director of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, will present a recognition plaque to Marshall that day in honor of the anniversary. On Feb. 15, ABCH will launch a website dedicated to the history of the

organization. That day, offices around the state will be celebrating the anniversary and sharing photos on various social media channels.

The anniversary will not be the end of the celebration, however. Throughout the year the anniversary will be incorporated into several annual events for the children and families served by ABCH, including Party at the Parks in April, the Mad-dox Farm Day & Trail Ride in April, Camp of Champions in June and other events throughout the year.

Followers of ABCH social media channels also will receive weekly photos and spotlight stories all year that highlight various aspects of the ministry.

Sharing stories

Drashman said, "We hope by sharing photos and stories of so many lives and communities impacted over our 125 years of ministry, it will excite, inspire and en-

courage others in their part of our story as either a longtime supporter or one who will jump in for the very first time to join in what the Lord has been doing and will continue to do through His people."

Though 2016 will be spent recognizing

the past, it is the future that really matters, not because of ABCH but because of the children whose lives are changed through the ministry.

"Everyone here recognizes the op-

portunity to introduce Christ to children in our care," Drashman said. "For some of our children, this might be the first time someone has taken them to church. Some make decisions to follow Christ while in care. Over the last decade we've seen more than 200 professions of faith made through the ministry.

"We have the opportunity to plant seeds in their hearts. Our prayer is that through our ministry children's lives are changed, and when they go back home their families are changed as well." ✝

For more information about the 125th anniversary of ABCH and additional resources, visit www.alabamachild.org.



Photo courtesy of ABCH

Christy (left) and Greg O'Connor (right) are ABCH foster parents to brother and sister Jaxson (front left) and Kaya.

Day-by-Day Prayer Guide

for the ministry of the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries

Monday

Pray for the children in our care and their family situations.

Tuesday

Pray for our house parents and foster families.

Wednesday

Pray for our support staff: social workers, counselors, administration and development teams.

Thursday

Pray for our leadership: president and CEO, regional vice presidents and

children's homes campus directors.

Friday

Pray for our 16-member board that provides overall direction and accountability for the ministry.

Saturday

Pray for those in our care who have not accepted Christ and for spiritual growth in ones who have.

Sunday

Pray for our birth parents to know Christ personally if they don't already and to experience true life change.

Obama says 'faith is cure for fear' at prayer breakfast

At the 64th National Prayer Breakfast, President Barack Obama shared from 2 Timothy 1:7 about the need to rise above fear through faith and God's power over death.

The prayer breakfast, held Feb. 4 at the Washington Hilton Hotel, was hosted by the Fellowship Foundation and the United States Senate and House of Representatives.

Congressman Robert Aderholt, R-Alabama, and co-chair for the event, said to participants, "We believe that Jesus and His reconciling power of prayer is so desperately needed these days."

In his last prayer breakfast speech as president, Obama focused on cooperation between different faiths in the United States, even through fear.

"Fear does funny things. Fear can lead us to lash out against those who are different or lead us to try to get some sinister 'other' under control," Obama said. "Alternatively fear can lead us to succumb to despair or paralysis. Or cynicism.

"Faith is the great cure for fear. Jesus is a good cure for fear. God gives believers the power, the love, the sound mind required to conquer any fear. And what more important moment for that faith than right now? What better time than these changing, tumultuous times to have Jesus standing beside us, steadying our minds, cleansing our hearts, pointing us toward what matters?"

Everlasting life

He also said, "My faith tells me that I need not fear death. That the acceptance of Christ promises everlasting life and the washing away of sins."

Obama said he joins the continuing prayers for Christians and other people of faith around the world who are persecuted for their beliefs, and he expressed gratitude for the safe return of Iranian-American Pastor Saeed Abedini, who was released in January from Iran after being imprisoned since 2012.

House Speaker Paul Ryan noted America's "growing impatience with prayer" and the idea that prayer doesn't really work.

"When people say they're praying for someone or something, the attitude in some quarters seems to be, 'Don't just pray; do something about it,'" Ryan said. "The thing is, when you are praying, you are doing something about it. You are revealing the presence of God."

The breakfast hosted notable guests like University of Alabama running back Derrick Henry, who said the closing prayer. (TAB, RNS)

'We've become stronger'

February marks 10 years since arsonists burned 9 Alabama churches

By Grace Thornton
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

It took roughly four days to reduce a handful of Baptist churches in Alabama to ashes in February 2006.

But it took the same amount of time — only four workdays — for volunteers to frame up a new building for Galilee Baptist Church, Panola, in the aftermath.

It was "a miracle," Pastor Bob Little said. "We've rebuilt. And awesome stories have come out of it."

And for the other eight churches, it's been a very similar tale — like for Rehobeth Baptist Church, Randolph, near Lawley, where Edith Wilson is a member.

Wilson said she'll never forget the smell and sight of her beloved church reduced to rubble.

But they've rebuilt. And they're still going strong 10 years after three college-age boys set them on fire in two arson spree.

The other four churches in the first string of arson attacks — which happened during the night between Feb. 2 and Feb. 3 — have done the same thing.

▶ Ashby Baptist Church, Brierfield, met in mobile chapels for several years after the fire, continuing to grow even before it moved into its new building.

▶ Antioch Baptist Church, Centreville — along with Old Union Baptist Church, Randolph — only suffered minor damage and made repairs fairly quickly.

▶ Pleasant Sabine Baptist Church, Centreville, a predominantly black church and the only 1 of the 5 not affiliated with Bibb Baptist Association, was rebuilt by Carpenters for Christ volunteers.

And in west Alabama, Galilee and the other three churches attacked Feb. 7, 2006,



Photo by Grace Thornton

Edith Wilson, a member of Rehobeth Baptist Church, Randolph, near Lawley, looks for recognizable remnants of the church in the pile of ash and debris left when arsonists burned the building down Feb. 3, 2006.

have bounced back and continued in ministry, thanks to help from volunteers.

▶ Though the inside of Dancy First Baptist Church near Aliceville was a total loss, the congregation got back into its building in July 2006, thanks to volunteer teams from Baptist churches around the state that gutted and renovated the interior of the church.

▶ Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church near Boligee is meeting in a new building constructed by volunteers. The church has a library room open to the community that was furnished with 1,000 books collected by Pickens Baptist Association.

▶ Spring Valley Baptist Church near

Emelle, which suffered smoke damage, got back into its building at the end of Summer 2006.

Galilee Baptist is the only 1 of the 4 in the first string of attacks that still has the same pastor at the helm from 10 years ago. And Little said he was excited to honor what God has done with a celebration service Feb. 7 marking the anniversary.

He's been amazed as he's seen the church grow, join Pickens Association and reach out to the community in ways it was never able to before the fire.

"We've become stronger," Little said. "We've been able to do a lot. We've seen God do so many awesome things — it's mindboggling to see." ✠

DR teams mobilize in wake of Pickens Co. tornado

Disaster Relief (DR) teams from several associations converged on Pickens County on Feb. 3 not 24 hours after a large tornado tore through Aliceville, leaving massive devastation in its wake.

Six Alabama Baptist DR teams from Pickens, Tuscaloosa, Walker, Bethel, Selma and Lamar Baptist associations assisted with chaplaincy and chainsaw efforts. The volunteers put in approximately 380 hours of combined work Feb. 4, clearing debris from roads and properties in Aliceville, Carrollton and Reform. A laundry unit also was deployed to the Aliceville area.

JoAnne Hendon, administrator for deployment and wife of the white hat for the clean-up efforts, David, said 40 people were working on tree removal Feb. 5.

"Right now we're just trying to get all

the areas assessed," JoAnne Hendon said from the Pickens Association office, where DR efforts are based.

David Hendon said Feb. 5, "We still have somewhere around 13 jobs that we know of left to do and hopefully we'll get that knocked out this weekend (Feb. 5-7)."

He expects other jobs to come to their attention, but notes that the major destruction is confined to the Sapp community northwest of Aliceville.

A tornado shelter in the community that was constructed to hold about 50 people sheltered about 200 residents as the tornado raked through the area.

"A lot of houses [in the Sapp community] are totally destroyed, but we only heard of two injuries," Hendon said. "That's a God thing there."

Chainsaw crews also removed a tree that fell on Salem Missionary Baptist Church, Carrollton, and placed a tarp over the roof Feb. 4.

Mel Johnson, DR strategist for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, said, "There was a lot of destruction and a lot of homes destroyed ... (but) the response of the volunteers has been overwhelming."

More associations are anticipated to send DR crews and at press time First Baptist Church, Pickensville, was prepared to host those teams, according to Hendon.

DR teams worked alongside the Salvation Army, Red Cross and Methodist-affiliated relief workers in the days after the tornado hit. (Maggie Walsh)

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.

AUTAUGA

► **Tom Taylor**, pastor of Billingsley Church, is the new interim director of missions for **Autauga Association**. He began Jan. 1. Taylor has served for more than 50 years in ministry, including 22 years as a U.S. Army chaplain. He also served as a disaster relief chaplain. He and his wife, Peggy, have two children and four grandchildren.



TAYLOR

205-599-3245. Jim Cooley is pastor of First, Birmingham. Mike McLemore is director of missions.

CLEBURNE

► **Sammy Rex Freeman**, who served as **Cleburne Association's** Disaster Relief coordinator, died Jan. 26. He was 66. He is survived by his wife, Brenda; two children; and four grandchildren.



FREEMAN

BESSEMER

► **Concord Highland Church, Hueytown**, will host New Ground in concert Feb. 20, 6:30 p.m. Richard Larson is pastor. ► **Kyle Sullivan** is the new student pastor of **Canaan Church, Bessemer**. He previously served as youth pastor at Ezra Church, Bessemer. He holds a bachelor's degree from Southeastern Bible College in Birmingham. He is mar-



SULLIVAN

ried to Caroline. Morgan Bailey is pastor.

NORTH JEFFERSON

► **Glenn's Chapel Church, Gardendale**, celebrated Pastor Thomas Perkins on Jan. 31. The celebration honored Perkins for his 65 years in ministry.



PERKINS

SAND MOUNTAIN

► **Chris Guinn** is the new director of missions for **Sand Mountain Association**. He resigned as pastor of First Church, Crossville, on Jan. 29. He also served at Roaches Cove Church, Fackler, and Ider Church. He holds a bachelor's degree from Andersonville Seminary, Camilla, Georgia. He and his wife, Angela, who will work alongside him in this new position, have two children. †



GUINN

BALDWIN

► **Jerry Henry**, pastor of **First Church, Fairhope**, announced his retirement Jan. 31. His last day will be May 31.

BIRMINGHAM

► **First Church, Birmingham**, will host "An Evening of Sacred Music," a fundraiser to benefit the ministries of Birmingham Association. The concert will be March 3, 6:30 p.m. Concert pianists Daniel Cason and Frank Jones will perform with soloists Joe and Suzanne Hopkins. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit bbaonline.org/SacredMusicConcert or call

Discipleship Tour makes stops across Alabama to help in discipleship process

"Go therefore and make disciples." That's the command in Matthew 28 for followers of Jesus. That's our main task — make disciples. To help in that holy, yet at times trying, process the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions is sponsoring the 2016 Alabama Discipleship Tour with Claude King, discipleship specialist at LifeWay Christian Resources.

The tour, "Returning to Disciple-Making," is designed to help aid pastors, church staff and key leaders examine strategies for effective disciple-making.

King is co-author of "Experiencing God" and "The Mind of Christ." He also wrote "The Call to Follow Christ" and "Come to the Lord's Table."

Each event will be held from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and registration is required.

► **Feb. 16 — Tuscaloosa Baptist Association office**
4300 Highway 69 N., Northport
Registration deadline: Feb. 11
Email Haley Hulsey at haley@tuscaloosacba.com or call 205-339-2273.

► **Feb. 17 — Walker Baptist Association office**
230 North Walston Bridge Rd., Jasper
Registration deadline: Feb. 11
Email Sue Martin at martinsue@walkerbaptist.net or call 205-387-1820.

► **Feb. 18 — Colbert Lauderdale Baptist Association office**
3901 Hatch Blvd., Sheffield
Registration deadline: Feb. 12
Email Jennifer Richardson at jennifer.richardson@clbaptist.com or call 256-383-7021.

► **March 22 — Birmingham Baptist Association office**
750 Montclair Rd., Birmingham
Registration deadline: March 18
Email Katie Schock at katies@bbaonline.org or call 205-599-3245.

► **March 23 — Brooks Memorial Baptist Church**
904 McRae St., Atmore
Registration deadline: March 18
Email Anna King at annaking@bellsouth.net or call 251-296-4640.

► **March 24 — Mobile Baptist Association office**
616 Azalea Rd., Mobile
Registration deadline: March 18
Email Kelly Jones at kjones@mobilebaptists.org or call 251-661-7111.

► **Aug. 4 — Morgan Baptist Association office**
1410 State St. NW., Hartselle
Registration deadline: July 28
Email Joan Jenkins at jjenkins.mba@gmail.com or call 256-206-1260. (TAB)

Someone You Should Know

By Leigh Pritchett, Correspondent, *The Alabama Baptist*

Ben Hayes

*Southside Baptist Church, Decatur
Morgan Baptist Association*

FAVORITE VERSE: Ephesians 3:20

FAVORITE HYMN: "Victory in Jesus"

HOBBIES: Reading, working with computer

FAMILY STATUS: Husband of 34 years to wife, Sonya; daughters, Jennifer Carr and Ashley Andrews;



HAYES

three granddaughters

Ben Hayes, 53, of Decatur, has been in ministry 33 years. He has served as a pastor in Louisiana and in Alabama from Gulf Shores to Decatur. He is pastor of Southside Baptist Church, Decatur. He also is moderator of Morgan Baptist Association and leads a Bible study for Morgan County Mental Health Association. He holds a bachelor's degree from Mobile College (now the University of Mobile), as well as a master's degree and doctorate from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

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

A: My father was a bivocational pastor. But it was not until I was 16 that I made the decision to accept Christ as my Savior. On a youth trip my friend was upset. We went outside and he said he was lost. I told him the plan of salvation and realized I had never accepted Jesus myself. At a service after the youth trip, I accepted Christ as my Savior.

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

A: I felt like from an early time in my teenage years that I was going to be a preacher. After I had made that decision to trust in Christ, I still felt called to the ministry. I have been preaching since I was 16.

Q: What does your ministry demand?

A: Loving the people of Southside, attending to their

needs, taking care of administration at the church, working with the association.

Q: What do you get from your ministry?

A: The satisfaction of knowing I'm where God wants me to be, doing what He wants me to do. I get tired sometimes but it is a good tired. I just have satisfaction knowing I'm doing what I was created to do.

Q: How do family members support you?

A: My girls are grown and gone but they've always been supportive. My wife walks beside me every day. She is my prayer partner.

Q: How do you see yourself involved in this in the future?

A: I can't see myself doing anything else. I can't imagine ever being retired from the ministry.

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

A: I think it will help me to grow as a minister, to grow stronger in my faith and give me the opportunity to lead a lot of people to Jesus.

Q: What difference has Jesus Christ made in your life?

A: All the difference in the world. From the time that I trusted Him as my Lord and Savior until today, I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without Him. He gives me hope; He gives me vision. He has totally transformed my life, my heart, everything about me. †

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.



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Knowing God

God Is Everywhere Present

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

Just as Christians often use the term “omnipotence” to speak of God being all-powerful, we also use the companion term “omnipresence” to affirm that God is everywhere present. By omnipresence, we actually think of God being everywhere present at the same time. His omnipresence is possible because of the fact that God is by nature Spirit and not physical, thus is not limited by time and space. He is present in every place at all times.

Recognizing this truth about God’s essential nature, David posed two related questions: “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” In response to his own questions, David continued, “If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me” (Ps. 139:7–10). The prophet Jonah experienced it just as David said. Though Jonah took to the sea, he did not escape God.

Comforting truth

Not only can humans not hide from God, nothing escapes God’s notice. This is a two-edged truth. For God’s obedient children, it is a comforting truth. God knows when life seems to be falling apart. He takes notice when tragedies and hardships befall us. God promised through Isaiah, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you” (Isa. 43:2).

However, the truth that nothing escapes God’s notice can be a discomfoting truth. There are no absolutely secret sins. While others may not know, God always sees and knows. Through Jeremiah, God said, “Am I a God near at hand and not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so

I shall not see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth?” (Jer. 23:23–24).

We must take the idea that God is present everywhere a step further. God also exists outside or above the created order. In the language of Psalm 33:13–14 we are to understand that “the Lord looks down from heaven; He sees all the children of man; from where He sits enthroned He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth.”

Vast God

In the same vein, Isaiah 57:15 speaks of God as “the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place.” Job 26:6 takes God’s omnipresence even further, declaring, “Hell is naked before Him.”

When we begin to grasp something of the vastness of our omnipresent God, the particularity of His presence on earth in the person of Christ is all the more wondrous. God who is everywhere present compressed His fullness into a single Person at a particular place and at a particular time. As amazing as it sounds, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). In response to Philip’s request to be shown the Father, Jesus declared, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Furthermore, it is almost too good to be true that God, who is everywhere present, can be present in each of our lives. The vastness of the universe, which God created and inhabits, does not preclude His personal interest and presence in each of His children. †

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.



Mr. Hardin goes to church

Age doesn’t stop Bigbee Association church member from setting example

By Maggie Walsh
The Alabama Baptist

As Don Wallace was on his way to Cuba Baptist Church to speak as a Gideon one Sunday morning in October 2015, he experienced a traffic challenge. And in a town with a population of about 300, it was unexpected.

Wallace had come to a stop at a four-way intersection in the residential area where the church was nestled. But before he could go, a man on a motorized scooter came from another street and breezed through the intersection, also on his way to the church.

“He didn’t even stop, like he owned the road,” Wallace recalled with a laugh.

The man was 92-year-old Lamar Hardin and as the oldest member of the Bigbee Baptist Association church, he sets the bar high for his fellow members.

Hardin said, “I’ve had some people that tell me they didn’t want to go to

church one morning and then they see me go in that scooter and they say, ‘Well that doesn’t give me an excuse not to go.’

“But it [doesn’t] take me but just a few minutes to get there because I can go faster than most people,” he said with a chuckle.

Not even the weather keeps Hardin’s wheels from rolling.

Cuba Baptist Pastor Mike McKee said, “If it’s raining he has a big umbrella and if it’s really cold he has his gloves and a blanket.

“I remember when I first came to Cuba Baptist and saw him coming down the road on his scooter, I thought, ‘Now that is a dedicated church member.’”

“Dedication” is a good word to describe Hardin, as he has exemplified commitment and steadfastness in all areas of his

life. A World War II veteran, Hardin was a draftsman for Sumter County for 38 years and the Cuba town clerk for 43 years. He’s been a member of Cuba Baptist for about 70 years and was church clerk for 28 years. And he and his wife, Margaret, have been married 71 years.

Hardin also taught the men’s Sunday School class and was a longtime deacon and member of the finance committee at

Cuba Baptist.

McKee said, “His wisdom and money management have been a blessing to the church for many years. He’s also a wealth of wisdom on just about anything you want to talk about.”

Hardin was saved as a 10 year old at a revival in Mississippi and has been in church ever since, leading his three children, five grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren by example. And he does the same for his church family, McKee said.

“He’s an inspiration to others to be faithful to the church when the doors are open.

... I know it’s an

inspiration to me to see him come (up the road).”

While he likes being an encouragement to others, Hardin goes to church to be inspired, especially through the men’s Sunday School class, he said.

“We have about 20 men in our Sunday School class so I just enjoy them and the questions (that are discussed) give you a spiritual uplift. ... It just kind of makes you feel good with worship.”

Wallace, the Gideon who saw Hardin riding down the road, said Hardin reminded him of his own grandmother, 95-year-old Velma Sebring who taught Sunday School for 70 years.

“You’re never too old to serve and ... [Hardin and Sebring] are two prime examples of that,” Wallace said. †

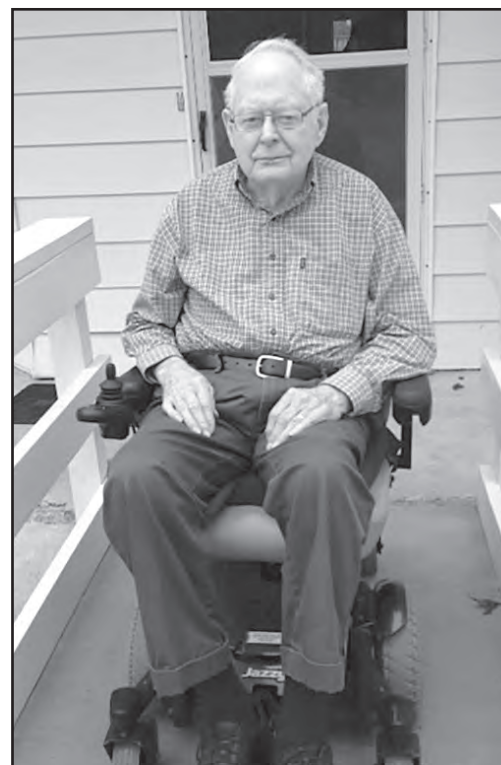


Photo by Shirley Hardin

With the assistance of his motorized scooter, Lamar Hardin makes attending Cuba Baptist Church a priority and encourages fellow members to do the same.

Dawson Memorial Baptist reaches out to widows through new ministry

By Neisha Roberts
The Alabama Baptist

For women who have entered into it recently or years ago, widowhood is a new season — one that comes with its own unique worries, trials and blessings.

For one widow in Birmingham, those trials and blessings brought her closer to God and in the process, closer to His will.

A member of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham, she found her heart being pulled toward widow ministry in Spring 2014.

She met with Kristen Torres, minister of spiritual development at the Birmingham Baptist Association church, and the two began planning for and praying over Seasons, a ministry of and for widows.

“We all go through seasons,” Torres said. “Seasons are inevitable. Even though I haven’t walked where (widows) have walked, I do know Who walks with me and He walks with them too.”

The ministry will have three aspects — widows receiving, widows responding and widows reaching out.

To launch Seasons, Dawson Memorial Baptist hosted a lun-

cheon Jan. 30 in the church’s fellowship hall. About 50 widows of various ages gathered for fellowship and heard from Denise George, author of 30 books and wife of Timothy George, dean of Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham.

George shared about turning points in a woman’s life.

“We all have wonderful and horrible turning points in life,” George said, mentioning some of her own — when she accepted Christ at 9 years old; when she felt God’s call on her life to write; when her father died in the hospital.

The last turning point was a “eureka moment,” she said. “It came during a crisis and it has changed my life and will change any woman’s life if she surrenders herself — it’s rest.

“I learned that I can trust God and that He keeps His promises even when things are out of control and not perfect,” George said, referring back to her time in prayer over her father who had fallen ill. She prayed that God would heal him and bring him home, but God didn’t answer

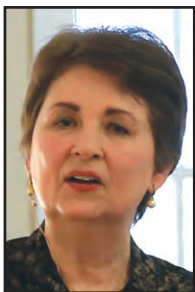
George’s prayers like she thought He would. Her father died. It took time but she eventually learned to embrace God’s love and faithfulness and found rest in His promises.

It wasn’t easy, the resting and the trusting, she said. “But I think it’s OK for Christians to struggle because it sends us back to the Word. ... Today, I encourage you to completely rest and trust in Christ. He keeps His promises.”

Torres said that idea was really what the event was all about.

“The whole purpose of the day is that they find their rest in Jesus and know that He is with them,” she said. “We also hope the event will help build unity (among them) and relationships as sisters in Christ.”

A survey was handed out at the end of the luncheon where participants could mark whether they want to receive (assistance with financial issues and/or daily living activities, given a care basket, community grief support), respond (participate in regular gatherings, have a prayer partner, participate in a Bible study for widows) or reach out (join the intercessory prayer team, welcome new missionaries to the missionary house, volunteer in kids ministry). ☞



GEORGE

For more information about Seasons, contact Torres at ktorres@dawsonchurch.org or 205-871-7324.

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INTRODUCING OUR NEW LOGO



THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

After almost 20 years, *The Alabama Baptist* has launched a new logo and style for the ministry. A new look and feel to our digital platform, including an upgraded website, will follow soon. To read the details behind the design of the mark as well as the overall logo, visit www.thealabamabaptist.org and search for "With Outstretched Arms" (Bob Terry's editorial from Feb. 4).



Harold A. Shirley

Retired Alabama Baptist pastor dies

Harold A. Shirley, founding pastor of Weatherly Heights Baptist Church, Huntsville, died Jan. 23. He was 87.

A native of Meridian, Mississippi, Shirley graduated from Samford University in Birmingham and earned his master's degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Besides founding Weatherly Heights Baptist, Shirley served as pastor of First Baptist Church, Talladega, in the 1970s. He also served for more than 50 years in six states as a pastor. His longest residency was in Rock Hill, South Carolina, where he was fondly referred to as "Happy" Shirley. He was a member of Oakland Baptist Church, Rock Hill, at the time of his death.

"Happy" was preceded in death by his wife, Betty, in 2011. He is survived by two children, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. (TAB)



SHIRLEY

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Reverse Mortgage News

By Jimmy Dixon

Some of you may be wondering if your home would qualify for a reverse mortgage. Over the years we've done reverse mortgages for condos, manufactured, townhomes and regular single family dwellings. The value has ranged from \$35,000 to \$700,000. If you have a very expensive home please be aware that FHA's cap is \$625,500. In other words, you could have a million dollar home, but we will have to treat it as though its value is \$625,500. On the other end of the spectrum it would be difficult to have an appraised value too low for FHA to consider.

Thinking of appraised values leads me to also let you know that FHA appraisers received word from FHA to not be so "cosmetically minded." The appraiser is to focus on

structure, square footage, etc., but not so much on appearance. If repairs are needed you can go ahead and close on the reverse mortgage and you'll have



Jimmy Dixon

six months to get the repairs done. If there's a safety issue, the repair will need to be made prior to closing.

Remember, like *The Alabama Baptist*, Jimmy covers our great state helping seniors improve the quality of their lives. He and his wife, Pat, have been married for 45 years, have three grown children and six grandchildren. Jimmy likes to tell of taking Pat to the church Valentine banquet when they were in the sixth grade. For a free reverse mortgage brochure or proposal, call him direct at 205-567-4800 or email jdixon@mcg-winking.com.

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LifeWay authorizes land purchase for headquarters

Trustees of LifeWay Christian Resources authorized the purchase of land and construction of a new corporate headquarters in Nashville in their semiannual meeting Feb. 1-2.

An Alabama Baptist pastor also was elected as an officer of the board.

The property is five blocks north of LifeWay's current headquarters with frontage on Interstate 40/65. LifeWay administration will continue its due diligence on the 2.7 acres of land in Capitol View, a new mixed-use development site in Nashville's central business district.

Trustees also approved a recommendation for the construction of a new corporate headquarters. The recommendation included the authorization to enter into a contract with Gresh-

am, Smith and Partners for the design of the facility and "to execute other contracts and documents as necessary for LifeWay to complete the new campus."

In other business, LifeWay trustees elected new board officers. They are: Kent Dacus, vice president for enrollment and student services at California Baptist University in Riverside, as chairman; Bruce Moseley, pastor of Zion Baptist Church, Mobile, as vice chairman; and Darron Edwards, pastor of United Believers Community Church, Kansas City, Missouri, as recording secretary. (BP)

Beeson to host racial reconciliation conference

Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham will host a racial reconciliation conference titled "Black and White in America: How Deep the Divide?" on March 3-4.

Chairing the conference will be Birmingham Mayor William Bell, Bishop Robert J. Baker of the Catholic Diocese of Birmingham and Beeson's Dean Timothy George.

"In the wake of recent racial

turmoil in our country and having experienced much anguish over racial issues in our city of Birmingham, we want to offer a possible pathway to dialogue and harmony for the future," the chairs said.

Conference speakers will include Bell; Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr., of Charleston, South Carolina; Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange; Edward K. Braxton, Catholic bishop of Belleville, Illinois; Wayne

Adcock was sentenced to 10 years in prison, split with 15 months to serve in state prison, WHNT News 19 reported. He will get credit for the time he has already served and could be eligible for release as early as 2017.

The plea bargain kept the victim, who is now 20, from having to testify in court. It also ensures Adcock is a registered sex offender for life, according to Colbert County District Attorney Bryce Graham. (TAB)

Former Muscle Shoals minister pleads guilty to sodomy

A former Muscle Shoals youth minister charged with rape and sodomy pleaded guilty to second-degree sodomy Jan. 29.

Charles Kyle Adcock served as youth minister at Woodward Avenue Baptist Church, Muscle Shoals, from December 2008 to May 2012. The 31 counts of sex crimes against a teen took place from 2010 to 2012 and began when the victim was 14. Adcock was arrested Aug. 20, 2014, in Texas.

Want to know GOD?

By Jenni Ingram
Member, First Baptist Church, Gantt

How is your 2016 going so far? I only make one resolution every year and I am so proud of myself. I have kept it every year for the last three years. What is the resolution you may ask? Well I will tell you: I resolve not to make any other resolution. It's worked out well for me (you are supposed to grin here).

There is a solid reason behind this decision; I am a planner. I make lists, appointments and have meetings. I have made the resolution in the past to lose weight, but I can't plan every aspect of it. I have made the resolution to complete that 365-day devotional only to end up reading it all in December before the end of the year. You get the idea.

Do you want to know the really incredible thing about God? He has planned out our whole lives and He did it before He created us. Sure we have free will and will make bad decisions, and He knows that too. He planned out what spiritual gifts we would have, what parents we would have, what choices we would have to make, etc.

When we make the choice to follow Jesus and give our lives to Him, all of those bad decisions, all of those sins we have accumulated, everything that would hold us back from a loving relationship with Christ is washed away in believer's baptism. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's masterpiece, He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago."

If you believe for one second that God would ever give up on you or that He has forgotten you — forget it. Scripture is God's letter to us, His Bible — B-asic I-nstructions B-efore L-eaving E-arth — is full of promises. In it He tells us: "God promises to seek the lost, bring back those who have been driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick" (Ezek. 34:16). He loves us and He wants us with Him for eternity. He will never leave us. That's His promise. ☩



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Deerfoot Baptist Church, Trussville, Alabama, is seeking a full-time pastor. Resumes are being accepted. Email: dkovacich@deerfootbaptist.org. Fax: 205-661-6073.

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Chapel Hill Baptist Church is searching for a bivocational pastor for our church. Please send resume to: Pastor Search, ATTN: Mike Moody, 2489 Gopher Ridge Rd., Samson, AL 36477.

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Cullman County church seeking full/part-time qualified worship leader. Worship style is primarily praise and worship led by the worship leader and worship team. Please send a cover letter and current resume to: ckpenn4@gmail.com. No phone calls or onsite visits will be accepted. Deadline to submit resume will be March 1.

MUSIC/WORSHIP LEADER

Oak Bowery Baptist Church in Calhoun County, Alabama, is seeking a part-time music/worship leader. Resumes may be mailed to: Oak Bowery Baptist Church, ATTN: Personnel Committee, 3300 AL Highway 144, Ohatchee, AL 36271, or oakbowerybaptist@att.net.

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A Certain Trumpet

Sermons by Alabama Baptists

Christian Discipline Series

Evangelism: Every Believer's Calling — Matt. 28:18–20

Many Christians feel as if evangelism is “not their calling.” Listen to what William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, said, “‘Not called,’ did you say? ‘Not heard the call,’ is what you should have said. Put your ear down to the Bible and hear Him bid you go and pull sinners from the fire of hell. Go stand by the gates of hell and hear the condemned beg you to go to their houses and plead with their brothers and sisters to get saved.”

Jesus declared that His salient purpose in life was evangelism when He said in Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” For every believer, evangelism is not an option, but an obligation. In fact every saved person living on this side of heaven ought to be concerned about every lost person living on this side of hell.

The Great Commission is stated in all four Gospels and the Book of Acts. It is great because of the greatness of the One who gave it. These were His final words before ascending back to the Father. Notice four things.

1. The Power for Evangelism

Matthew 28 begins with Jesus rising from the grave. Only 40 days later Jesus is standing on this Galilean mountain giving the Great Commission. Just days before, Jesus was dying on a cross and lying dead in a tomb. But now, Jesus is alive and has conquered death. By virtue of His atoning death and victorious resurrection, Jesus rightfully commands our obedience.

Jesus claims, “All power (authority) is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” In other words, Jesus has the authority to say and do whatever He wants. Therefore, He has the authority to command us to “go.” The Great Commission is not the Great Request or the Great Recommendation. It is the Great Command.

Jesus exercised authority over diseases by healing the sick, over natural disasters by calming the storms and even over death by raising Lazarus to life. If the Great Commission has been given to us by the One who has authority over demons, diseases and death then why would the Christian not obey this au-

By Daniel Wilson

Daniel Wilson, pastor of First Baptist Church, Pleasant Grove, received his education from Campbellsville University in Kentucky; Luther Rice Seminary in Lithonia, Georgia; and Trinity College and Seminary in Newburgh, Indiana. He and his wife, Erin, have two sons.



thoritative command from His voice?

2. The Plan for Evangelism

Matthew 28:19–20a lays out the three-fold plan for fulfilling the Great Commission. The order that Jesus gives in this plan is very important. First Jesus says we are to “go ... teach all nations.” The word “teach” is the verb. It is better translated as “disciple.” The word “go” is a participle and it means “as you go.” The text could read, “As you go, disciple all nations.”

William Carey, the father of modern missions, was a shoe cobbler by trade. He longed to go to India as a missionary. Meanwhile, he told everyone about Christ who came into his shoe shop. A customer said, “All your talk about Jesus is going to ruin your business.” Carey replied, “Ruin my business? My business is talking about Jesus. I only cobble shoes to pay the expenses.”

John Wesley said, “You have one business on earth — to save souls.” Like Carey and Wesley, whatever we do and wherever we are, our business is to talk about Jesus.

Second we are to baptize new believers in the name of the Triune God. Baptism is one's public identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Notice Jesus' command is not to baptize a person before he believes, but to baptize him after he believes unto salvation. This is because people are not confirmed into Christianity. They are converted to Christianity.

Finally we are to teach new disciples to observe all of His commands. If new Christians are not taught then they will be

spiritually malnourished and weak.

3. The Places for Evangelism

To what places are we to go in our attempt to share the gospel? Matthew 28:19 says, “All nations.” Mark 16:15 says we are to go into “all the world ... to every creature.” No place is exempt and no person is to be excluded. The message of God's wonderful love and matchless grace is for all people everywhere.

Our world is comprised of more than 7.3 billion people living in 196 countries and speaking 6,500 different languages. Every single one of those persons is made in the very image of God and has the right to hear the gospel of Christ.

However, in order to “go into all the world,” we must first get out of the church. In fact, nowhere in the Bible are lost people commanded to come to church and hear the gospel. But all through the Bible, Christians are commanded to go into the world and tell the gospel. If anything, we need to stop condemning the lost for not coming to church to hear the gospel and start condemning Christians for not going from church to share the gospel.

4. The Promise for Evangelism

Evangelism is a work that promises Christ's empowering presence. Jesus said in Matthew 28:20, “I am with you always.” Christ is not asking us to do evangelism for Him, but He is asking us to do evangelism with Him.

Finally notice that the Great Commission ends with a prophecy of the end time. Jesus says His presence is with us “even unto the end of the world.” There is an urgency to the Great Commission because this world is coming to an end. We do not have forever. One day Jesus will return and the day of grace will expire.

The logic behind evangelism is simple. There is a heaven and a hell. Jesus died to keep people out of hell and to take them to heaven. And that's good news worth telling.

I plead with you. Eternal destinies are at stake. About 103 souls per minute and more than 6,000 souls per hour plunge into a hopeless, Christless eternity. We must recapture the urgency of evangelism. †

To protect children in today's digital age 'create safe fences'

(continued from page 3)

As parents, the Lovvorns want to “create safe fences” but also teach their children to “think and be aware of the Holy Spirit telling you when something is not right.”

Teaching them to think is the most important thing, Traylor Lovvorn said. But he also offered some practical helps to be that “safe fence” as children grow up.

One of them is Circle, a device that helps parents monitor and filter devices and even set bedtimes for phones and laptops in the house to cut off their Internet access at a certain time.

A parent's responsibility

Another is an app found at teensafe.com that allows parents to view their child's texts, see the location of their child's phone and see what apps he or she has installed on the phone.

Stephens said, “Kids say things like, ‘You have no right to do this,’ but we do. You are their parents and it's your responsibility to help them navigate the world.”

Kevin Blackwell, Samford's assistant to the president for church relations and MTI executive director, said he was encouraged by the seminar's information.

“Although I was there as the official host, I quickly found myself fully engaged in the presentation,” Blackwell said. “I took pages of notes and that evening my family and I had a great conversation at the dinner table about all the things I learned.”

He said he strongly urges churches to invite the Lovvorns to speak to their congregations.

Safe from heartache

“I love how God has taken the Lovvorn's brokenness and made something so beautiful from it,” Blackwell said. “Every parent and grandparent needs to hear this information. It might just save your family much heartache in the future.”

Bob Terry, editor of the state Baptist paper, agreed and said the conference “dealt with an important topic for every Alabama Baptist family.”

“The Alabama Baptist always seeks to provide helpful resources and we are glad to play a role in making this essential information available. If I were still pastoring a church, providing a conference like this would be a priority. I believe churches and associations would provide a valuable service to their families by sponsoring a conference like this.” †



BLACKWELL

“And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” 1 Cor. 14:8

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Religious history of

Does 'XO' really stand for 'hugs and kisses'?

By Nadine Epstein
Moment Magazine

When I was a young girl, my mother taught me to add “x” and “o” — a kiss and a hug — after my signature. So deeply embedded was this English-language tradition that it never crossed her mind that these symbols had anything to do with religion. I never thought about it myself until she passed away a few years ago and I found myself emitting streams of “x’s” and “o’s” like a binary love code in the countless emails that consume much of my daily life.

From where do these emotions that English speakers of all faiths sprinkle so liberally come? Let’s start with the “x” — a

simple, easily drawn shape that got its start in Western civilization as the ancient Phoenician letter “samekh” for the consonant sound “s.” In early Hebrew, “x” was the letter “tav” and makes an appearance in the Book of Ezekiel as a mark set “upon the foreheads” to distinguish the good men of Jerusalem from the bad.

Christian texts

With the advent of Christianity, “x” came to stand for Christ. “In Christian texts, one abbreviation of the Greek ‘christos’ — meaning ‘messiah’ — used the first two Greek letters of christos, ‘chi’ (X) and ‘rho’ (P), combined into one shape,” says Stephen Goranson, a historian of religion at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, who studies the

etymology of symbols and words. “So both orientations of crossed lines — the ‘x’ shape and the more-or-less lower case ‘t’ shape — took on religious significance among Christians.”

Once it was a sacred symbol the “x” represented “faith and fidelity,” said Marcel Danesi, a professor of linguistic anthropology and semiotics at the University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada. It became the signature of choice in the Middle Ages when few could write and documents were sealed with an x embossed in wax or lead. This may be when the “x” first became associated with the kiss: It was customary to close books with a kiss and oaths of fealty, or faithfulness, to kings were sealed with a kiss.

“Symbols have a way of jump-

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BEFORE

AFTER



“Despite their relatively recent appearance on Valentine’s Day cards, the ‘x’ long ago shed its religious significance and the ‘o’ likely never had one. And so I — an editor of a Jewish magazine — plan to continue signing off with hugs and kisses. XO.”

Nadine Epstein
editor, *Moment Magazine*

ing from one domain to another, and it’s a small step to come from sealing a letter to sealing a love affair,” said Danesi, who wrote “The History of the Kiss: The Birth of Popular Culture.” He speculates that “x” underwent a conversion in an act of medieval romantic rebellion. “Romantic love becomes an obsession and the kiss became empowering.” This may have been particularly true for women, who had less say than men over the choice of lovers. “The kiss became ‘If I kiss that man, then this is the man I love and want,’” Danesi said. “So much was packed into that symbol of a kiss. ... It has become a kind of

collective memory. We use ‘x,’ even if we don’t know why.” There’s another theory about how “x” crossed over into kissing territory. According to Goranson, “x” was a symbol for a blessing, and blessings and kisses have long been intertwined in the human psyche. “Mystics went back and forth on the love of God and love of a beloved spouse going way back,” he said. “Just look at the Song of Songs. The same song could be one person’s devotional hymn and another’s love poem.”

Love of God

“A Woman of Valor,” the Hebrew poem recited by Jewish

husbands to their wives before the Sabbath evening meal, also is understood to be an expression of love of God.

When the circle — “o” — came to signify a hug is another unknown. I stumbled across an unexpected Jewish angle postulated by the late Leo Rosten in his 1968 book, “The Joys of Yiddish.” Rosten suggests that the “o” evolved in connection with the word “kike.” Jews refused to sign entry forms at Ellis Island with the customary “x,” which they interpreted as a crucifix and a symbol of oppression. Instead they drew a circle, leading immigration inspectors to call Jews “kikel” (or “circle” in Yiddish) or

“kikeleh” (“little circle”), which was shortened to “kike.”


Most scholars consider this theory apocryphal. Linguist Ben Zimmer says it is far more likely that the “o” stems from an entirely nonreligious source: the ancient Egyptian-Roman game of tic-tac-toe. The game was originally played with pebbles or coins and only incorporated the easy-to-master symbols of the “x” and “o” when paper became plentiful. Zimmer also believes

this explains why “x” and “o” are used together.

Despite their relatively recent appearance on Valentine’s Day cards, the “x” long ago shed its religious significance and the “o” likely never had one. And so I — an editor of a Jewish magazine — plan to continue signing off with hugs and kisses. XO. (RNS)

EDITOR’S NOTE — Nadine Epstein is editor of Moment Magazine. ✡

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For February 14

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

AN OPEN INVITATION Matthew 11:20-30

When a subject is invited to stand before a king, the invitation might strike terror or bring joy. Serious questions may come to mind. Who am I that he would grant me an audience? Will he sentence me for a crime? Will he issue a royal decree on my behalf? Will he appoint me to a royal position? Will he extend to me royal favor?

In this week's lesson we find that our King passes judgment for infidelity, as city inhabitants who witnessed the works of God through Jesus refused to believe He was Messiah. He hides His secrets from the prideful but reveals them to the humble. He invites believers into a favored position within the Kingdom. Finally the King offers His beloved rest.

Promised Judgment (20-24)

"To whom much is given, much is required" (Luke 12:48). Jesus performed miracles in Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, yet the people refused to believe in Him. Consider the severe judgment of fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). Capernaum's sentence is worse. The Phoenician coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon were barraged by Greek and Roman armies during the intertestamental period, the gap of time between the conclusion of the Hebrew Bible and the beginning of the New Testament. But Bethsaida would face a more devastating punishment.

Promised Revelation (25-26)

Pride comes before destruction. Theologians are prone to pride themselves on their education, experience and academic status. As we eavesdrop on Jesus' intimate worship here, we discover religious leaders in the first century were no different. The Master distinguishes those who are ignorant of His simple revelations, and gives little children understanding of the Kingdom.

Luke records this reality in Acts 4, when fishermen Peter and John stand before the theological authorities in Jerusalem to give account of the healing at the Beautiful Gate. The physician notes that the Sanhedrin saw them to be unlearned and ignorant men, but they had been with Jesus. These simple men had been granted spiritual authority and boldness in the presence of the King. We must be careful not to allow pride in our training or accomplishments to blind us to the simple truths that God is teaching us through His Word.

Promised Relationship (27)

Jesus has a unique relationship with the Father. Those who enter into a faith relationship with the Son come to know the Father, and those who do not believe in the Son cannot know the Father. While this position is not acceptable in our politically correct world, it reflects the words of Jesus here and elsewhere: "Anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the One and Only Son of God" (John 3:18). "No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). This relationship is a blessing to those who believe and a curse to those who do not.

Promised Rest (28-30)

"Come." This is the King's recurring invitation. Isaiah records it in 1:18 with a promise of forgiveness and cleansing, and three times he writes it in 55:1 with a promise of provision.

Here Jesus' invitation is accompanied by a promise of rest. Disciples are invited to cast off the wearisome yoke and exchange it for the yoke of Jesus. In the oxen's double-yoke, the lead ox takes on the greater burden of direction and strain. In this analogy Jesus takes the lead and we learn from Him as we walk alongside Him. We experience peace as we walk and labor in His presence. †

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

DISTINCT IN MY RELATIONSHIPS Matthew 5:27-32

We continue our unit on the Sermon on the Mount and this week we look at a second passage in what has been called "The Antitheses." Last week we noted that contrary to what some have taught Jesus does what a good rabbi would do — He "builds a fence around the Torah." Not only should people not sin they shouldn't come close to sinning and their intentions matter. Last week we read instructions about murder. This week's passage is about another of the Ten Commandments (see also 33-37).

Practice purity in your sexual conduct. (27-30)

Prohibitions against adultery appear in Exodus 20:14, Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 5:18. Verses 1, 9 and 10 of Job 31 contain warnings about lust. Whereas Proverbs regularly blames women for adultery and lust (see also the crowd in John 8:1-11), Jesus warns men. Perhaps He is reminding His audience that men themselves, not women, are responsible for men's sexual ethics.

Jesus again mentions "hell" or "Gehenna" (see v. 22): "Ge Hinnom," the Hinnom Valley south of Jerusalem, which became associated with a place of posthumous torture for the wicked.

The instructions to mutilate oneself in response to sin are hyperbolic expansions of the idea that one should not even come close to sinning (compare Matt. 18:8-9). On the other hand Jesus might be instructing churches to expel members who refuse to repent of sexual immorality and whose actions hence endanger the moral behavior of more besides themselves. In Greek, as in English, "member" can refer both to a body part and to a member of a group. Jesus will instruct churches to expel recalcitrant sinners in Matthew 18:15-17.

Wayne Oats, the father of Christian pastoral counseling, once said that if he found himself selecting his tie based on the impression he hoped it would make on any woman not his wife it was a warning sign that his feelings were becoming inappropriate. Do not even come close to sinning.

Maintain faithfulness in marriage. (31-32)

Jesus says something similar in Matthew 19:3-9 in a conversation with Pharisees. "Certificate of divorce" or "a written notice of divorce" in some translations is "get" in Hebrew. The biblical instructions on divorce are found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. They do not mention the possibility of a woman divorcing a man and neither does Jesus, so it might not have been possible.

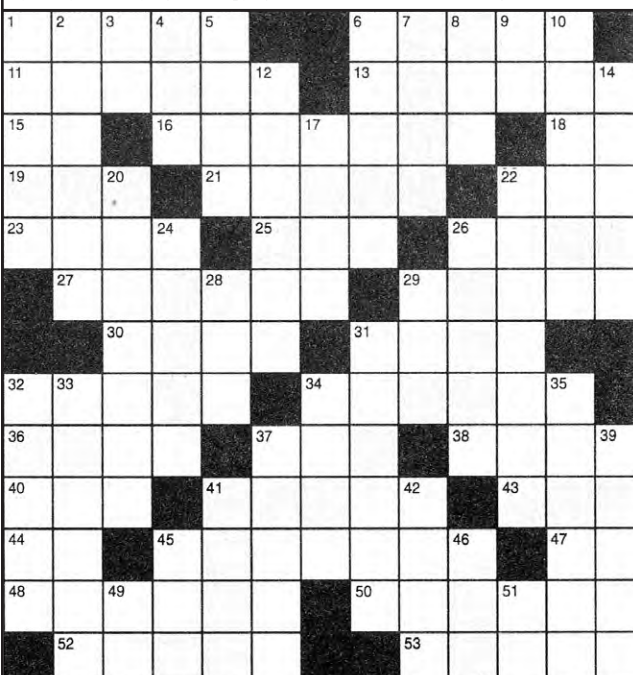
Also marriage in Deuteronomy, and even in Jesus' day, was not the same institution that many American Christians practice. Although married couples often loved one another (Gen. 24:67), a person married someone his or her parents selected. Furthermore, one important purpose of marriage (certainly not the only one) was to provide male heirs to whom the husband could pass property.

It's difficult to say with certainty but Jesus may be speaking against a practice that left too many women helpless: divorced and in His day unable to support themselves by any means other than prostitution or selling themselves into slavery. A male slave owner in Jesus' day had sexual access to the female slaves in his household. The prohibition against marrying a divorced woman is more difficult to understand.

If we're right about what Jesus is saying, He is concerned not only with individual righteousness (both right actions and right intentions) but also with unjust systems that oppress people with little power. Do not sin, do not come close to sinning and do not allow the system to sin. †

Christian Crossword

By Evelyn M. Boyington Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.



Across

- The ___ was like a lion. (Dan. 7:40)
- Thou shalt tread upon the lion and ___. (Ps. 91:13)
- The Lord is risen ___. (Luke 24:34)
- Recycled.
- The children of Gad called the altar ___. (Josh. 22:34)
- He hath cut ___ the cords of the wicked. (Ps. 129:4)
- Trade union. (abbr.)
- ___ not your heart be troubled. (John 14:1)
- Leah said, A ___ cometh. (Gen. 30:11)
- Cozbi, the daughter of ___. (Num. 25:15)
- They that ___ truly are his delight. (Prov. 12:22)
- Incline thine ___ unto me. (Ps. 17:6)
- Equalities.
- A broken spirit ___ the bones. (Prov. 17:22)
- Three times in a year did Solomon offer ___ offerings. (1 Kings 9:25)
- Lest thou ___ thy foot against a stone. (Ps. 91:12)
- He paid the ___ thereof.

(Jonah 1:3)

- Blouse.
- I will restore ___ unto thee. (Jer. 30:17)
- The ___ of the feet were part of iron. (Dan. 2:42)
- Therefore called she his name ___. (Gen. 30:6)
- ___, why persecutest thou Me? (Acts 9:4)
- The Lord ___ God shall deliver us. (2 Chron. 32:11)
- They would come and take Him by ___. (John 6:15)
- Compass point.
- Mind your ___ and Qs.
- The Father ___ such to worship Him. (John 4:23)
- Southern state. (abbr.)
- Have their ___ exercised to discern both good and evil. (Heb. 5:14)
- As they ___ He fell asleep. (Luke 8:23)
- All the land which thou ___ (Gen. 13:15)
- Masts.
- The Lord is risen ___. (Luke 24:34)
- Ave.
- The ___ and the waves roaring. (Luke 21:25)
- Exam.
- Zeal.
- All the fountains of the great ___ broken up. (Gen. 7:11)
- He set it up in the plain of ___ a. (Dan. 3:1)
- Plural ending.
- ___ unto Me; for I have redeemed thee. (Isa. 44:22)
- Hath he not root in himself, but ___ for a while. (Matt. 13:21)
- None of the disciples ___ ask Him. (John 21:12)
- And ___ built an altar unto the Lord. (Gen. 8:20)
- Later.
- The city Adam, that is beside ___. (Josh. 3:16)
- All men are ___. (Ps. 116:11)
- Knitting stitches.
- Eastern Standard Time. (abbr.)
- Sheep's bleat.
- Barriers.

Down

- Let the ___ be joyful. (Ps. 96:12)

- Who ___ his ears from hearing of bloodshed. (Isa. 33:15)
- David made him ___ in the city of David. (1 Chron. 15:1)
- Listen!
- They shall not ___ nor thirst. (Isa. 49:10)
- ___ thou well to be angry? (Jon. 4:4)
- He ___ me beside the still waters. (Ps. 23:2).
- Plural ending.
- Greek letters.
- Compass point.
- He smote them ___ and thigh. (Judg. 15:8)
- Maine direction.
- City on the west coast.



'Poignant'

'Risen' shows resurrection of Christ through 'original lens'

Risen," a new movie distributed by Affirm Films, tells the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection from the perspective of a fictional unbelieving soldier whose investigation of the mystery leads to a personal encounter with Jesus.

Opening in wide release weeks before Easter, the film is promoted as both a picture of faith and a mystery designed to draw believers and nonbelievers.

Johnny Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia, and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, is among the film's endorsers, calling the production "a must see for pastors and their congregations."

"'Risen' is intriguing in that we all wonder what the response of the religious establishment of Jesus' day would have been after His death and resurrection," Hunt said.

The lead character, Clavius, is a fictional Roman military tribune, but the film includes biblical characters such as Jesus, the disciples, Mary Magdalene and Pontius Pilate, and strives for historical accuracy, movie promoters said.

Lead actor Joseph Fiennes, who won a People's Choice Award for his leading role in 1998's Academy Award winner "Shakespeare in Love," said, "For me, 'Risen' stands out because it's a quite conservative rendering of the gospel that accepts the extraordinary

Word as written. I love that this film embraces the mystery of Christ through an original lens."

Producer Mickey Liddell and Director Kevin Reynolds said they worked to remain true enough to Scripture to please the faith community, but dramatic enough to entertain unbelievers.

"We don't really want to tell anyone what they should believe," Reynolds said. "People

can use this film as a vehicle to examine their own spirituality, or just enjoy the story purely from a cinematic standpoint."

Ted Baehr, founder and publisher of Movieguide and chairman of the Christian Film & Television Commission, calls

"Risen" "a powerful, poignant and entertaining movie revealing the impact of the greatest event in history."

Resources available

The PG-13 movie opens Feb. 19 in wide release and is accompanied by ministry resources including a novel from Bethany House Publishers and a church kit with customizable sermon outlines, outreach resources including postcards, door hangers and bulletin inserts.

Affirm Films, a division of Sony Pictures, has distributed top faith-based films including the Kendrick Brothers' "War Room" and "Courageous." For more information, visit risen-movie.com. (BP)



Rhett Walker Band



Photo courtesy of Provident Label Group

'Love like Jesus'

Rhett Walker Band reminds listeners to reflect Christ

By Leann Callaway
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

With a mix of Christian rock, contemporary worship and country music, singer/songwriter Rhett Walker has a unique sound that appeals to a variety of audiences.

But it's the message behind the music that he hopes captures the most attention.

With the songs on his latest album, "Here's to the Ones," Walker reminds listeners to reflect Christ's love in their everyday surroundings.

Walker, who toured around the country as the featured artist for Pepsi MidAmerica's Mountain Dew Camo Promotion in Fall 2015, desires to connect audiences with the gospel by sharing powerful messages about how God has transformed and redeemed his life.

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

Rocky years

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

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

As Walker's life was interrupted with a dose of re-

ality, he decided to step up and change the direction of his life by returning to the Lord.

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

'Give everything to Christ'

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

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

"I started out playing the drums, but one day they asked me to sing 'Grace Like Rain' by Todd Agnew. ... After that song, they never let me go back to drums. From there, opportunities started opening up for me to lead worship at other churches."

After forming his band five years ago in Nashville, the group stepped out and embarked on a faith journey. Since its beginning, the Rhett Walker Band has seen God move in incredible ways.

The band's debut album, "Come to the River," received a Grammy nomination for the hit single "When Mercy Found Me" and the band's sophomore album has gained acclaim for the single "Love Like Jesus."

However, Walker said the testimonies of lives that have been changed is what matters most.

"At the end of the day the only thing that matters is if you love Jesus and share His love with others. That's the kind of story we hope we can tell. Our goal is to live life to the fullest, but I don't believe we can unless we choose in every area of our life to always love like Jesus." ¶



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Susanne Geske (center), widow of martyr Tilmann Geske, lays a flower down after a memorial ceremony for Ugur Yüksel in 2014.

MS photo

Paying damages

Turkish court rules in favor of martyrs' families

A Turkish court ruled Jan. 26 that the government was negligent in its duty to protect three Christians who were tortured and killed in 2007 and ordered it to pay damages to the victims' families.

The Malatya Administrative Court ruled that nearly nine years ago, the Interior Ministry and the Malatya Governor's Office ignored reliable intelligence that Turkish nationalists were targeting the three Christians days prior to the April 2007 killings.

Five young men with alleged links to Turkish nationalists killed three Christians on April 18, 2007, in the office of the Zirve Publishing House in Malatya in southeastern Turkey. Ugur Yüksel, 32, and Necati Aydin, 36, both Turkish converts from Islam, and Tilmann Geske, 45, a German national, were bound, interrogated about their Christian activities and then mutilated and killed with knives, according to court evidence.

According to several Christians close to the victims, one or more of those accused of the killings cultivated relationships with the three Christians, one even going so far as to pose as a new convert to the Christian faith.

The court also ordered the Interior Ministry to pay the families close to \$333,980 in damages.

Susanne Geske, Tilmann Geske's widow, and her three children were awarded \$105,000 for emotional distress and \$5,500 for physical harm. The remainder of the damages were awarded to Aydin's wife and Yüksel's father.

Susanne Geske said Jan. 27 that the concept of a monetary award for the death of her husband and her children's father is lost on her, as no amount of money will bring him back or fill their loss.

"Four-hundred thousand lira for someone being killed is baffling, funny," she said. "And anyway, although the money is welcome, we're not yet believing we will see the money."

She said government appeals to the court-ordered award, if filed, could take years to settle. After taxes, civil fees and lawyer's fees are assigned, the amount

her family receives could be greatly reduced.

The Geske family filed its civil case with others in 2008, around the same time criminal proceedings began against the five men accused in the killing. The civil ruling offers some resolution but the criminal case grinds on with little hope of resolution.

Although police arrested the five suspects almost immediately after the crime was reported, prosecuting them has been problematic from the start. The judges have been changed at least twice and the prosecutors have been changed four times, causing significant delays.

Subpoenaed witnesses have simply refused to show up in court to testify without legitimate reason and without being punished later for contempt of court.

Exploring links

Most significant in delays was the attempt to explore links between the killings and a larger alleged attempt by the Turkish military to subvert the Justice and Development Party-led government. In 2009 the murder case was linked to the Ergenekon file, concerning a suspected cabal plotting against the government. As a result of this a host of new witnesses were called into court, including a colonel in the gendarmerie and three army officers.

Especially galling to families of the victims, the five suspects in the trial were released on bail March 10, 2014, under a new reform law that reduced the allowable period of pretrial detention from 10 years to five. Authorities required them to wear electronic monitoring devices but the release caused extreme distress among families and friends of the victims.

The suspects had previously threatened family members of the victims.

In the most recent criminal court hearing that took place Jan. 5, Susanne Geske voiced her frustration about the length of time the court was taking in coming to a verdict. Today she said she thinks the civil verdict will have no impact on the criminal trial.

"I don't think one thing has to do with the other," she said. The next hearing is set for March 1. (MS)

PERSECUTED CHURCH

Compiled from Wire Services



Pastor in India feels privileged to suffer for Christ

ORAI, India — A pastor in northern India who was beaten and paraded through streets with his head half-shaved as crowds called for him to be cut to pieces said he is thankful that he was counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

On Jan. 29, Hindu extremists posing as policemen picked up Avdhes Savita, a 35-year-old father of four, from his home in Rendhar village in Uttar Pradesh state and took him to Orai, Jalaun District. They beat him, shaved half of his head, one eyebrow and one side of his moustache, and put him on a donkey as they led him in a procession through Orai.

"The mob that was parading me was shouting, 'Kill him, cut him in pieces,' but I kept telling them that faith unites, it does not divide," Savita said. "I told my tormentors that I believe in Christ out of my own freewill, and that I have never hurt anyone, but they just did not listen to me."

The assailants were reportedly members of Yuvavahini (Youth Brigade), a Hindu nationalist group, and took Savita to the head office of the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal in Orai, where others joined in the abuse.

"I kept praying throughout the ordeal, I am not afraid of dying," Savita said. "I thought, 'This is the day when I will stand before my Savior.' But I also thought of my children. They are young and that was my only concern. In the [name of the] Lord I am persecuted. I am thankful for this privilege." (MS)

Islamic extremists kill 4 Christians in Kenya

MAPOROMOKO, Kenya — In a pre-dawn raid on a predominantly Christian area in coastal Kenya on Jan. 31, Islamic extremist Al-Shabab rebels killed at least four Christians, beheading one of them, area sources said.

In the Kaisari area of Maporomoko village, near Pandanguo about 25 miles inland from the Indian Ocean town of Lamu, Al-Shabab rebels attacked from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m., said a wounded survivor at Mpeketoni Sub-County Hospital.

The survivor, a Christian from the Maporomoko-Bonden area who was shot in his right hand, said there were five or six heavily armed assailants who spoke Somali and were dressed in military uniform. They shot two Christians to death, hacked and beheaded another and killed at least one other by setting his house on fire, he said.

The beheaded man was identified only as Mwaura, a Christian. "This is the third time the area has been attacked and we have lost several Christians," the survivor said.

The rebels, who are fighting government and regional forces in Somalia, regard the northern coastal area of Kenya as Islamic territory. Al-Shabab, linked with Al-Qaida, took responsibility for the attack in a call to news organization Al Jazeera. (MS)

Pastors in Sudan arrested by government officials

KHARTOUM, Sudan — Sudanese authorities have released 1 of 2 pastors detained in December 2015, sources said.

Kwa Shamaal, head of missions for the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC), was arrested Dec. 18, 2015, and released Dec. 21 but had been required to report daily to the office of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), where he was held from 8 a.m. until midnight, sources said. That requirement was removed Jan. 16.

His colleague, Hassan Abdelrahim Tawor, SCOC vice moderator, remains in detention without charges.

NISS officials were said to have been upset with the pastors for telling others that Christians faced persecution in Sudan. Authorities arrested the two pastors from their respective homes at the same hour. No charges have been brought against them, although NISS officials were said to have objected to their Christian activities.

Christians in Sudan and elsewhere have been praying fervently for the two pastors and for other Christians jailed in Sudan. (MS)