



INSIDE



Alabama Baptist churches collect 9,441 Christmas backpacks for children

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Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash

Christmas blessings

From Bob Terry and the TAB staff

(Left to right) Haley Piersol, Deb Lowery, Sarah Gill, Melanie McKinney, Carrie Brown McWhorter, Amy Hacker, Grace Thornton, Bill Gilmore, Editor Bob Terry, Linda Harrison, Hannah Muñoz, Susan Stevens, Teresa Maddox, Richard Maddox, Pam Holt, Debbie Campbell, Jessica Ingram and Jennifer Davis Rash.

Not pictured are Lauren C. Grim and Thomas Felder.

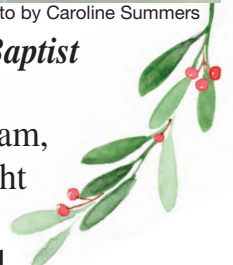


Photo by Caroline Summers

And a special thank you to Bob Terry from the staff of *The Alabama Baptist*

Thank you for mentoring and investing in us as individuals and as a team, Dr. Terry. It has been an honor to work alongside you as we have sought to serve Alabama Baptists through the ministry of the state Baptist newspaper. You have prepared us well and we hope to make you proud.

To watch the videos from this week's issue, visit our YouTube channel or use the HP Reveal app on your phone or tablet and hover over the segments marked "AR."



COMMENT

Thank You and God Bless

I don't know if this is the column one looks forward to writing or the column one fears writing. Either way it is my last submission as editor of *The Alabama Baptist*. My retirement from state Baptist papers officially begins Jan. 1, 2019. I will have completed 23 years and five months as editor of *The Alabama Baptist* and 50 years, four months and 11 days of ministry through state Baptist papers.

Before returning to my home state in 1995 to assume this editorship, I was privileged to serve as editor of the Missouri Baptist state paper *Word & Way* for 20 years and one week. Prior to that I served as associate editor of *Western Recorder*, the Kentucky Baptist state paper, twice serving extended periods as acting editor.

My first church ministry position was worship leader in a church plant my junior year of high school in Michigan. That was in 1959, a few years after our family migrated from an Alabama cotton farm to the Midwest factories. With the exception of my freshman year in college, I have been in a church ministry position or serving Baptists through state Baptist papers every year since.

Important anniversaries

During the past year *The Alabama Baptist* celebrated two important anniversaries. In February we celebrated the 175th anniversary of the founding of *The Alabama Baptist*. Judson College hosted a great birthday party for the ministry. That was followed by an equally successful symposium sponsored by Samford University and the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission examining the contributions of this ministry to Baptist life in Alabama and beyond.

On Dec. 12 another important anniversary occurred. That is the 100-year anniversary of the decision by the executive board of the Alabama Baptist State Convention to purchase the paper from private ownership and make the ministry an entity of the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

According to executive board minutes, W.F. Yarborough, secretary-treasurer of the convention, announced he had purchased the paper "for the Baptists" and the executive board voted to accept Yarborough's offer to sell the paper to the convention for the price he paid — \$3,000.

During the 100 years of being a convention entity, four people have served as editor. L.L. Gwaltney served for 31 years retiring in 1950. He was followed by Leon Macon who died in office after serving almost 16 years. Hudson Baggett served for 28 years before his untimely death in 1994.

***The Alabama Baptist*
will not publish a Dec. 27 issue.
The next issue will be Jan. 3.**



THOUGHTS By Bob Terry

And I have served as editor for the past 23 years.

The two anniversaries, together with my own anniversary of 50 years in state Baptist papers, created the optimal opportunity to step aside and let someone else lead *The Alabama Baptist* into its 176th year of ministry and its second century of service as an entity of the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

One of the highest privileges of my life has been to be a part of the ministry of this illustrious publication. Each of my three predecessors was noted as the most influential Baptists of their respective eras by historian Wayne Flynt. My ministry has been to continue the heritage and influence these men earned for the paper.

The Baptists of this state believe in the ministry of *The Alabama Baptist* and accept the state Baptist paper as a ministry partner. More than 2,000 churches still provide the state Baptist paper to some or all of their active resident families through the church budget. Sixty-five of Alabama's 75 associations use the paper as a communications tool for associational information. All state convention entities regularly report to Alabama Baptists through the state Baptist paper.

While other state papers have reduced the number of issues published or even abandoned print all together, *The Alabama Baptist* still publishes 50 times a year and is still the largest circulated state Baptist paper.

Thank you for the opportunity to be a ministry partner. It has been a privilege to be in every association, to preach in churches across the state and to serve as interim pastor on several occasions.

But Alabama Baptists are more than ministry partners. To me you have been a loving people. When my late wife, Eleanor, died from injuries in an accident in Durban, South Africa, Alabama Baptists cared for me in ways I could never have imagined. Your support for me lasted for years. Seldom do I go into a church even now without someone sharing how they prayed for me during

those days. I will always be grateful that the Lord let me be among this group of believers during my darkest days.

And when the Lord brought Pat Hart into my life four years later, you shared my joy.

No ministry — and certainly no communications ministry — can be stronger than its overseers, its board of directors. After all, the board of directors sets the policies that allow the ministry to report, inspire, analyze, editorialize and more.

Alabama Baptists have elected men and women to the *The Alabama Baptist* Board of Directors from a variety of backgrounds. All have been committed to a strong state Baptist paper. Difficult questions have been asked and policies examined and re-examined. But the board always acted in near unanimity. I am grateful for their leadership and support.

To coworkers both present and past, I am indebted. They have helped me be a better editor and a better person. I hope I have helped them. All have been talented as attested to by the variety of names on the hundreds of awards won across the years. Together we produced a publication focused on the needs of Alabama Baptists and a publication that has been named by at least one national body as the best regional Christian newspaper in the nation 11 times in the past 20 years.

A state Baptist paper takes a team, and I have been fortunate to work with some of the best people in Baptist journalism. To each of them I publicly acknowledge my indebtedness and my appreciation.

New leadership

I cannot close without commending Editor-elect Jennifer Davis Rash to you. Her editorship will be different than mine just as my editorship was different from my predecessor. She is new leadership for a new century of service. Jennifer is an award-winning journalist. She is a strong church person with a theological degree from Beeson Divinity School and service overseas with the International Mission Board. Jennifer is also a recognized leader among religious communicators and among Alabama Baptists.

Jan. 1, 2019, will be her 23rd anniversary with *The Alabama Baptist* so she is intimately acquainted with this ministry. I am sure you will pray for her and support her as she moves this ministry forward.

And pray for me. Pat and I will continue to make our home in Birmingham and continue to serve our risen Lord in whatever ways He provides. Thank you for allowing me to walk beside you these years. God bless. 🙏





"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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Attitudes toward religion

Pew Research report finds divisions across Europe in faith, values

A 2018 Pew Research study finds Europeans are deeply divided in public attitudes toward religion, minorities and social issues such as gay "marriage" and legal abortion.

Today, Christianity remains the majority religious affiliation in 27 of the 34 countries surveyed, Pew reported.

Catholicism is more common in central and southeastern Europe, Protestantism is more dominant in parts of northern Europe and Scandinavia and Orthodoxy is the dominant faith in eastern Europe.

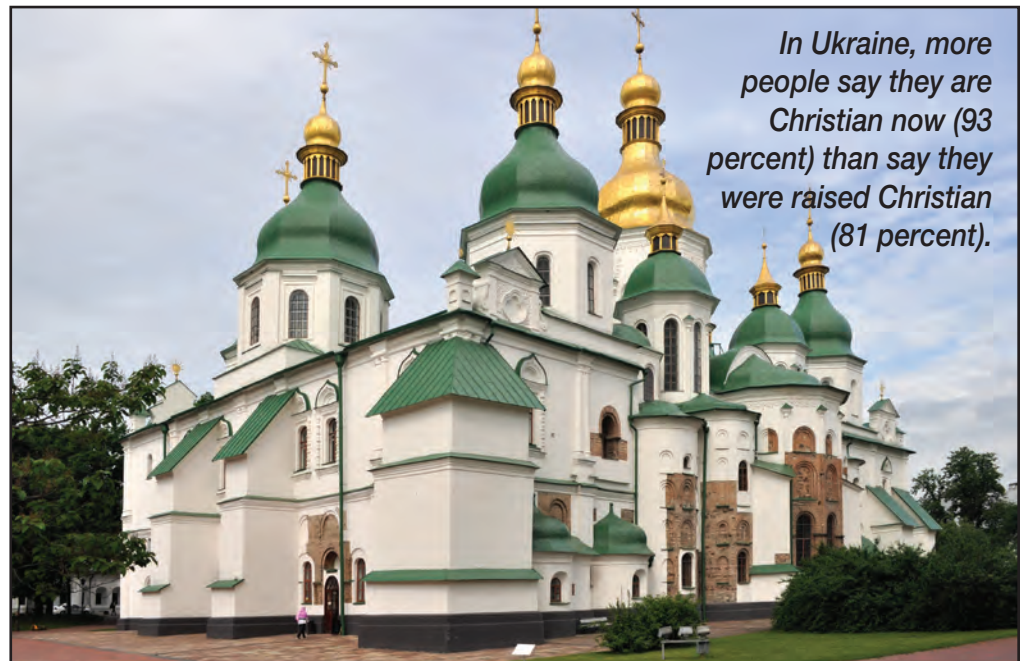
The survey also indicates a "significant decline" in Christian affiliation throughout western Europe — especially in nations like Belgium, Norway, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. In each of those countries there is at least a 20 percent gap in the number of people who say there were raised Christian and those who say they are "currently Christian."

The Iron Curtain once divided the continent into communist and non-communist countries, and Soviet-led communist governments suppressed religion in public life. However, Christian affiliation has shown a resurgence in some of these countries since the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1991.

"In a part of the region where communist regimes once repressed religious worship, Christian affiliation has shown a resurgence," Pew reported. "In Ukraine, for example, more people say they are Christian now (93 percent) than say they were raised Christian (81 percent); the same is true in Russia, Belarus and Armenia. In most other parts of central and eastern Europe, Christian shares of the population have been relatively stable by this measure."

National identity

More than 8 out of 10 people from Sweden, Denmark and Belgium said that being a Christian was not very or not at all important to their national identity. In predominantly Catholic Italy and Ireland approximately half of people in both countries said religion was important to their national identity. In several



Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, Ukraine

commons.wikimedia.org

In Ukraine, more people say they are Christian now (93 percent) than say they were raised Christian (81 percent).

western European countries Christianity is seen by a majority of the population as very or somewhat important to national identity.

That doesn't mean they believe the relationship between religion and government should be closer, however. Across the continent Europeans mostly say religion and government should be kept separate. But this view is more widespread in western Europe, while several central and eastern European countries are more divided.

Fewer than two-thirds of adults in most western European countries surveyed say they believe in God, and in some countries with large populations of "nones," such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden, fewer than half of adults believe in God.

Compared with the rest of the world, the entire European continent has relatively low levels of traditional religious practice such as church attendance and prayer.

western Europeans also are less likely to say they are certain of their belief in God,

but majorities in several of the central and eastern European countries surveyed express certainty about God's existence.

Most church-attending Christians in western Europe say they believe in God as depicted in the Bible. A majority of non-practicing Christians say they do not believe in God as described in the Bible, but do believe in a higher power or spiritual force in the universe.

Differences divide

The definition and boundaries of central, eastern and western Europe are not fixed, Pew noted. Still, strong geographic patterns in how people view religion, national identity, minorities and key social issues, and differences continue to divide the continent, the research shows.

The new research emerged from a series of surveys conducted by Pew Research Center between 2015 and 2017 among nearly 56,000 adults in 34 countries in the region. (TAB)

Marion Baptist Association churches see God at work

Keith Box said he feels privileged to get to be the one to sit behind the desk at Marion Baptist Association.

"These churches have a heart for missions work and evangelism," said Box, who serves as director of missions. "It's a very active association."

It's an association that's on the small side, he said — its 21 churches range in size from about 15 to 550 in attendance.

But they're hard at work. More than 70 people from across the

association's churches went on a recent missions trip to Lamar County. One church held a judgment house in October and saw God really move, Box said. Some others have held joint Christmas programs this month.

"It's a very missions-minded association," he said. "They believe in trying to share the gospel here at home with the people we live with and work with."

One of those missions-minded churches is Hines Memorial Baptist Church, Bear Creek, where

Pastor Ricky Mann has served for a total of 40 years — four years the first time, then for the past 36.

The church, which is out in the woods, runs about 200 on Sunday mornings, with between 20 and 50 youth on Wednesday nights.

Like a family

"We're a millennial church now," Mann said. "Young people want something real, and we're just trying to give it to them."

They operate like a family, he said. They take care of the older

people in the community. They raise money for missions efforts and disaster relief, and over the years they've tried creative ministries like archery outreach.

Box said they "do church a little bit different," but they're drawing people from five towns around them.

"It's a unique church. They're really out in the country, but people are coming," he said. "There are a lot of young folks there who are wanting to do Kingdom work. And that's a blessing." (Grace Thornton)

Sharing *the* love

Operation Christmas Child celebrates 25 years of shoebox gifts



Photo courtesy of FBC Level Plains
FBC Level Plains packs 234 shoeboxes to send out for Operation Christmas Child.



Photo by Linda Adams

The Salem-Troy Drop Off Center collects more than 4,200 shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child. The boxes collected at Salem-Troy combined with five other drop off centers in the region total 11,495 boxes.



Photo courtesy of Happy Hill Baptist Church
Happy Hill Baptist Church, Heflin, collects 225 shoeboxes to send out for Operation Christmas Child.



Photo courtesy of Siloam Baptist Church
Students pray over shoeboxes during Collection Day at Siloam Baptist Church, Marion, on Nov. 11.

Six years ago Brandie Owings was a reluctant shoebox packer. It was the first year her church, Hollins Baptist Church, Goodwater, in Central Baptist Association, had participated in Operation Christmas Child (OCC), and with all the other holiday expenses and activities, purchasing shoebox items just added to her load. Plus, she didn't know anything about Samaritan's Purse and what they did with the shoeboxes.

Within months God had opened her eyes in more ways than one.

"I asked my pastor to pray about what ministry God was leading me to do, and then I saw a story about Operation Christmas Child on Facebook," Owings said. "I did a little research, and I saw story after story about how God matched just the right box to the right child. There was no denying God was in the ministry."

Owings had found her ministry, and since then she has encouraged members of her church and others in Central Association, where she serves as ministry assistant. Last year the association collected 1,380 shoeboxes. This year may top that.

Those boxes, plus millions more collected in Alabama, across the United States and in countries around the world, will be delivered to children in some of the poorest countries in the world.

Since OCC began in 1993, the organization has delivered 157 million shoeboxes to children in need in countries in Central Asia, Africa and Latin America. For some of the children it may be the first gift they've ever received.

But OCC is about more than the toys,

hygiene items and school supplies contained in each box. Since 2010 more than 11 million children who have received a shoebox gift have participated in The Greatest Journey — a 12-lesson discipleship program. Children learn from trained, local volunteers what it means to follow Jesus and share their faith with friends and family.

It's a project that unites church members, associations and a vast network of more than 500,000 volunteers worldwide in filling, collecting, shipping and distributing shoebox gifts for one purpose — to share the love of Christ with children who need to hear the gospel.

Opportunity to pray

An important part of the project for many churches is the opportunity to pray over the boxes before they are sent to the collection center during National Collection Week, which this year was Nov. 12-19.

Bethany Baptist Church, New Brockton, in Coffee Baptist Association, found a creative way to lead their RAs and GAs in prayer for their shoeboxes.

The children prayed in three stations, using colored blocks to build a "wall of prayer." Each block represents a step in the journey of a shoebox: yellow for collecting items, orange for packing boxes, green for shipping, blue for distribution and red for disciplining children who receive the boxes.

"It was a great way to help kids learn to pray," said Barbara Westerbeck, area coordinator for the OCC Alabama/Georgia Wiregrass Area team. (Carrie Brown McWhorter)



Photo courtesy of FBC Fairhope

The members of FBC Fairhope collect more than 1,500 shoeboxes.



Photo courtesy of Bethany Baptist Church
RAs and GAs at Bethany Baptist, New Brockton, learn about the journey of an OCC shoebox.



Photo by Cindy Thomas

Members of Southside Baptist Church, Dothan, fill shoeboxes and write letters to the children to include in each box at a packing party Nov. 7.



Photo courtesy of Rockford BC

Rockford Baptist Church members sew knapsacks to go in shoeboxes.



Photo courtesy of Alabama WMU

Steve Warren of Millbrook Baptist Church helps distribute backpacks at a Dec. 1 block party sponsored by Lakeshore Church, a church plant in New Orleans.

Open door for the gospel

Alabama Baptist churches collect 9,441 Christmas backpacks for children

Alabama Baptist churches helped make Christmas brighter for thousands of children this year through the Christmas Backpack ministry.

Pat Ingram, missions and ministry consultant for Alabama Woman's Missionary Union (WMU), said Alabama churches have collected 9,441 backpacks as of Dec. 7, more than 2,300 more than they collected last year. The majority of Alabama's backpacks went to sites in the Mississippi River Ministry (MRM). More than 1,000 of these backpacks were provided as churches and associations partnered directly through MRM with specific ministry sites.

Working together

Alabama Crenshaw Baptist Association was one of these associations, providing 430 backpacks to a ministry that works with MRM in Kentucky. Two associations partnered with churches in Appalachia as well, Ingram said.

MRM received requests for 12,835 backpacks this year. In partnership with the Alabama Baptist State Board of Mis-

sions and Alabama WMU, churches across the state dropped off their new backpacks, filled with supplies and goodies, at collection sites around the state during the week of Oct. 29–Nov. 3.

On Dec. 1 some 50 volunteers from five Alabama Baptist churches — Millbrook Baptist Church, in Elmore Baptist Association; River Falls Baptist Church, in Covington Baptist Association; First Baptist Selma, in Selma Baptist Association; Macedonia Baptist Church, in Etowah Baptist Association; First Baptist Fairhope, in Baldwin Baptist Association — and Pickens Baptist Association, plus members of Lakeshore

Church, New Orleans, held a block party to distribute backpacks and reach out in a fun way to families in the neighborhood around Lakeshore Church.

Volunteers from the Alabama churches brought hot dogs, snow cones, popcorn, drinks and nonperishable food items to give away at the event.

There also were games, a bouncy house and a clothing giveaway.

Meeting needs

Volunteers shared the gospel every 10 to 15 minutes, and 275 backpacks were given

out to kids in the neighborhood.

"We had a busy, God-honoring day," Ingram said.

MRM partners with churches and associations to provide backpacks filled with gifts each year to the families in the Mississippi River Delta. The backpacks contain food, toys, art supplies, hygiene items, Bibles, candy, socks, gloves and all kinds of useful and fun items. Each backpack also includes a copy of the Christmas story.

The concept works, according to MRM network coordinator Marshall Ingle, who works alongside his wife, Janell, at MRM.

Ingle said MRM gave away 9,560 backpacks in 2017 with 417 professions of faith reported.

"Backpacks open the door for the gospel," he said. "It's hard to share the gospel when someone's hungry and when they're

worried and distracted by other things."

The Mississippi River Delta has a high population of working poor families, Ingle said. They live paycheck to paycheck, often working seasonally on the region's many farms. Christmas gifts are out of their financial reach, and that's where the backpacks come in.

Children's excitement

"A couple of years ago a 16-year-old girl in Arkansas told one of our pastors that the backpack was the first Christmas gift she had ever gotten," Ingle said.

Ingle has heard many similar stories and has seen the excitement on the faces of children as they receive their gift.

"We are thankful for the support of Alabama Baptists," Ingle said. "As a child of God, we should be trying to share the gospel any way we can." (TAB)

The Ingles are available to speak to churches about ministry partnerships in the Mississippi River Delta. For more information, go to MississippiRiverMinistry.com or call 318-315-0743.

Fayette Baptist Association to offer seminary classes from NOBTS

Starting in January, Fayette Baptist Association will be offering extension courses through New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS).

The first class offered by the new exten-

sion center — a class on doctrine — will be taught by John Killian, director of missions for Fayette Association and adjunct faculty member at NOBTS. The doctrine course will begin Jan. 10 and meet every Thursday evening at 6:30.

Classes are open to anyone interested in taking seminary courses. Students who take one class each term will earn a certificate in biblical ministry after two years of study. For more information call the Fayette Association office at 205-932-6901. (TAB)

New Temple Baptist holds prayer walk



Photo courtesy of New Temple Baptist Church

Members of New Temple Baptist Church, Dora, in Sulphur Springs Baptist Association, prayer walk the property where their new facility will be built about a block from their current church. The first phase of construction — a family life center — will begin in the spring. J.J. Creel is pastor.

For more information or to sign up, call the Fayette Association office at 205-932-6901.

North Jefferson CARING Center director a 'tireless force'

Dixie Kuykendall calls herself a "professional scrounger."

She said she doesn't know if that's a good thing or not. But Steve Loggins, associational missionary for North Jefferson Baptist Association, said he believes it's definitely a good thing.

Kuykendall, a member of First Baptist Church, Mount Olive, became director of the association's CARING Center two years ago, and ever since then she has been a tireless force for the ministry, he said.

She's drummed up partnerships with people and businesses from Walmart to Panera, receiving truckloads of donations from socks and underwear to leftover pastries and moving them on to the homeless, hungry schoolchildren and families in need in the area.

Many innovations

"Her innovations are many," Loggins said. "Dixie has grown the ministry of our CARING Center so much in the past two years. She has expanded the volunteer base and involved our churches in local missions while reaching those in need in our community."

He said one of his favorite ways she's expanded the ministry is to offer a clothes

closet to local middle school students.

"Often children will come to school inappropriately dressed, and now they do not have to go home but can take something from the school clothes closet that they can wear that day and keep," Loggins

said. "We have seen an increase in donations to our ministry and more people are involved in local missions because of Dixie's encouragement and influence in our churches."

But Kuykendall says all she does is scrounge, and God just keeps opening doors.

"He's just turned things upside down," she said.

Every Tuesday she runs a Bible study filled with people who say they don't feel like they

fit in at church or don't have the right things to wear.

The center gives food out every day and packs food into the backpacks of needy children every Friday before they go home for the weekend. They served 150 families at a recent Christmas party and were able to do it strictly on donations that partners and churches had given.

"There's never any down time here," Kuykendall said. "We've just been blessed, and I'm blessed to be a part of it." (Grace Thornton)

"There's never any down time here.

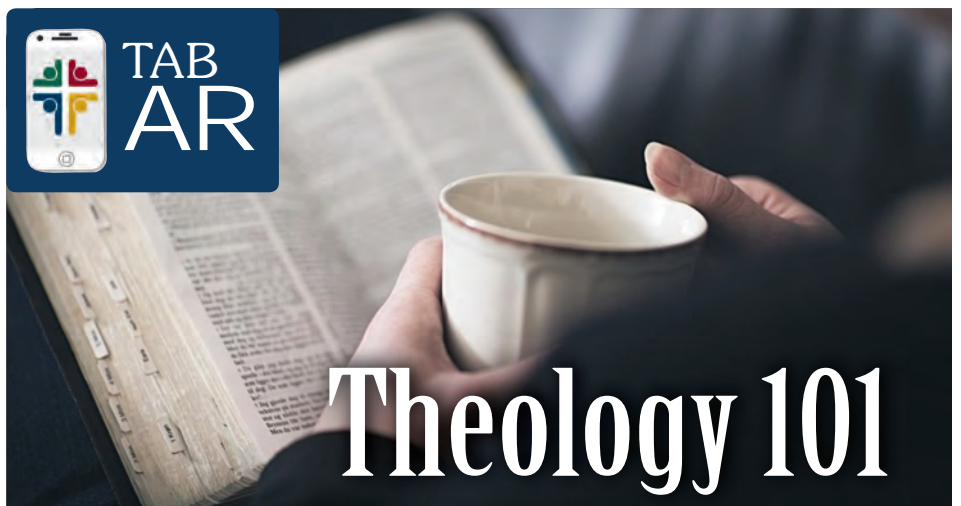
We've just been

blessed, and I'm

blessed to be a

part of it."

**Dixie Kuykendall
director, CARING Center**



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

The Christ of Christmas

A Savior Who is Christ the Lord

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

Of the various names, titles and designations that refer to Christ in association with His coming into the world, none is more to the point of His mission than that of Savior. When the angel of the Lord announced to certain shepherds the coming of Christ, the angel said, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Indeed this was and still is "good tidings of great joy" intended for all people (Luke 2:10).

The intention of being the Savior for all people found its way into the understanding of the Samaritans. When the woman at the well reported her encounter with Christ, the people urged Him to stay with them. Christ remained two days among the Samaritans. The result was revealed in the report the people gave the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).

Years later when Titus ministered among Gentiles at Crete, the Apostle Paul wrote, as a Jewish believer, words that included Gentile believers: "When the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:4-6). Christ came to be the Savior of the world, not merely of Jewish believers. We might note in passing that both God the Father and Christ the Son are designated as "our Savior."

While the noun "Savior" is used readily with reference to Christ, the verb "save" is even more frequently used in association with the coming of Christ. This verb has become the common term that Christians use to speak of their experience of trusting Christ. Through the centuries believers have confessed their

Christian experience as being saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

When Christ is experienced as one's Savior, that salvation has three distinct dimensions to it. Through faith in Him as Savior we are saved from the penalty of sin. The classic statement of this truth is Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." Doctrinally, this aspect of the Savior's work is commonly termed justification.

Deliverance from sin

Christ also seeks to be our Savior from the practice of sin. This dimension of His saving work is related to learning to obey the admonition of Galatians 5:16: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." Deliverance from sinful practices is an ongoing or gradual ministry of the Holy Spirit in believers. Doctrinally this aspect of the Savior's work is commonly termed sanctification.

Ultimately, Christ will be for us the Savior from the very presence of sin. This aspect of His Saviorhood awaits our reception into heaven about which Revelation 21:27 declares, "There shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie." The sinless perfection of heaven awaits every genuine believer in Christ as his or her personal Savior. This aspect of the Savior's work is commonly termed glorification.

Christ the Lord came to be our Savior in every sense of the word. ✝

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.



FBC Wedowee serves hot chocolate at parade



Photo courtesy of FBC Wedowee

(From left) Ricky Daniel, Andy Hall, Tim Coe and other members of FBC Wedowee, in Randolph Baptist Association, show love for their community by serving hot chocolate to participants in Wedowee's Christmas parade Dec. 6. "The parade lines up in our parking lot, so we felt like that was a golden opportunity to show people that we love them," Pastor David Little said. The church has been intentionally reaching into the community in that way lately, hosting a Thanksgiving meal for local foster parents and inviting the community to Pancakes with Santa on Dec. 1.

Still an image bearer

It is vital to remember people behind bars also were made in God's image

By Martha Simmons
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

The Bible is pretty clear when it comes to reminding the faithful to seek justice, love others and minister to prisoners. But for the average churchgoer, mass incarceration might seem a foreign concept, something far removed from everyday life.

However, those who study the human and social consequences of imprisonment and apply biblical perspectives to those issues say mass incarceration reverberates throughout American society with staggering human and social costs. It is, they contend, the key civil rights struggle of our time.

Some stunning statistics — gathered by the Billy Graham Center's Sentencing Project and Institute for Prison Ministries — drive that concept home. Because of American mass incarceration practices, it's becoming more and more common for someone you know — or even yourself — to wind up behind bars.

If you were born in 2001, according to their study, the likelihood of being imprisoned at some point in your life breaks out this way:

- ▶ 1 in 9 of all men, but ...
 - 1 in 3 if you're black
 - 1 in 6 if you're Latino
 - 1 in 17 if you're white
- ▶ 1 in 56 of all women, but ...
 - 1 in 18 if you're black
 - 1 in 45 if you're Latina
 - 1 in 111 if you're white

People of color make up 37 percent of the U.S. population but 67 percent of the prison population, the Institute for Prison Ministries reports. Studies show that African Americans are much more likely to be

arrested and convicted than whites, and face much stiffer sentences for the same crimes. Poverty and lack of education found in non-white communities also contribute to the problem.

Disproportionate burden

Although nonwhites bear a disproportionate burden of incarceration, mass incarceration cuts across all demographics. The United States' overall incarceration rate has increased 500 percent over the past 40 years, according to the institute, driven primarily by new "tough on crime" laws and policies.

Drug offenses represent the vast majority of prison population increases. "Today there are more people behind bars for a drug offense than the number of people who were in prison or jail for any crime in 1980," the institute's researchers report.

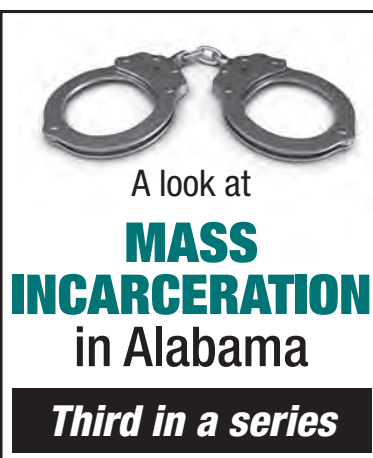
That holds true in Alabama as well. The Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) reports that the top two convictions landing inmates in state prisons are for: 1. Possession

of a controlled substance, and 2. Drug manufacturing, trafficking and distribution. More than 4,300 new inmates were admitted to state prisons in 2017 on those charges alone. Not surprisingly some 75–80 percent of Alabama's 21,000 custodial prisoners also have a documented history of substance abuse. In response ADOC has implemented what it calls "the largest substance abuse program in the State of Alabama," but the program is able to address only a fraction of addicted inmates with various treatment and aftercare programs.

Also contributing to the ballooning prison



123rf.com



population are harsh sentencing laws such as mandatory minimum sentences and "three strikes" laws that mandate a life sentence for anyone convicted of a third felony, even if they were nonviolent property offenses. Judges are meting out longer sentences overall, and there's been a historic increase in life sentences. Combined with cutbacks to parole, people are staying in prison longer.

Perfect storm

Together, these factors form a perfect storm of overcrowded and often violent prisons warehousing people with untreated drug problems and mental illness, while inmates' families languish at home in poverty and without hope or community support.

It's these overarching social justice issues that the Institute for Prison Ministries wants people of faith to consider when they think of prison ministries, not just visiting inmates behind bars. The institute is calling on evangelical Christians to lead a human rights movement to end what they term "epidemic" mass incarceration. To that end the institute joined forces with The Gospel Coalition, a network of evangelical churches, to offer a free online course entitled "The Gospel and Mass Incarceration" (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/mass-incarceration/#what-is-mass-incarceration>). In it a prison missions-minded participant can get a crash course on the causes and effects of mass incarceration and how they can serve.

So why should Christians be concerned not only with prisoners, but also the myriad social justice issues caused by mass incarceration?

First and foremost is because the Bible says so.

"If Christians want to take the entirety of the Bible seriously, then you can't avoid matters of justice," said Vince Bacote, director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College, where the Billy Graham Center is based. "It's easy to think about matters of justice in terms of thinking about law and order, but if you're really going to be thinking about law and order all the way down, that also needs to include how are we stewarding things like the way that we go about justice, when people are arrested and go all the way through to deciding whether people are in prison, how long they're in prison, what the conditions are like for them in prison, the fact that they are human beings, irrespective of whether they've committed crimes or not. If we're really committed to justice all the way down, to me, it seems unavoidable."

Ultimately one of the biggest challenges is to remember that a person behind bars — whether a hapless addict caught with an illegal substance or a serial murderer — is created in the image of God, Bacote said.

"If you really believe this Bible, nowhere does it say that people have forfeited their being an image bearer for anything. You know, whether you're thinking about someone like John Wayne Gacy or whether you're thinking about a kid who took a piece of candy, there's not a forfeiture of them being an image bearer and the fundamental dignity that people have," Bacote said.

He added: "Do you take Matthew 25 seriously? If you take Matthew 25 seriously, you cannot avoid this issue." ✝

What does the Bible say?

The Bible has plenty to say related to prison ministries. Here's a sampling of Scripture provided by Prison Fellowship, which trains and inspires churches and communities — inside and outside of prison — to support the restoration of those affected by incarceration. (For a more comprehensive selection, go to <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/in-prison/ministry-basics/what-bible-says-about-prison-ministry/>.)

Following in Jesus' footsteps

- ▶ Matthew 25:34–40
- ▶ Hebrews 13:1–3

Sharing spiritual freedom

- ▶ Isaiah 42:6–7
- ▶ Isaiah 61:1–3
- ▶ Luke 4:17–19

Transformation

- ▶ Psalm 66:10–12
- ▶ Psalm 68:5–7
- ▶ Psalm 69:33

(Source: Martha Simmons)

Church ANNIVERSARIES



North Shelby marks 25 years of ministry

"It means God did not forget me." Those are the words written by one child on a picture showing what the 25 years of North Shelby Baptist Church's ministry means to him.

On Nov. 18, North Shelby Baptist, Birmingham, celebrated its 25th anniversary.

Pastor Emeritus Allan Murphy spoke on the church's mission statement: "Loving God and one another, sharing Jesus with the world."

A video featuring photos and testimonies from members sharing how God has worked at North Shelby Baptist in the past and hopes for the future was shown.

The service included special presentations by Scotty Goldman, from the Alabama Baptist

State Board of Missions; Pat Musselwhite, from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission; Rebekah Parr, from Shelby Baptist Association; Jeremiah Doan, pastor of North Shelby Vietnamese Baptist Church, which was planted by North Shelby; and Congressman Gary Palmer.

Charter members were recognized during the service, and the congregation of North Shelby Vietnamese Baptist attended the service and was recognized.

Interim Pastor Gary Fenton made a special presentation to

Murphy and announced that a scholarship for Christian Ministry majors has been endowed in his name at Samford University in Birmingham.

"We celebrate the past, but our aim is to look toward the future," member Cindy Riggins said. (Jessica Ingram)

Mount Carmel Baptist celebrates 100 years

Not too long ago the basement at Mount Carmel Baptist Church, Double Springs, flooded damaging the church's kitchen and fellowship hall.

And with the church's centennial anniversary approaching, many members worked tirelessly to repair and renovate the space so it would be ready to use for the anniversary celebration.

All the hard work paid off because on Nov. 18 more than 100 people gathered to celebrate the church's 100th anniversary.

The celebration began at 1 p.m., following the church's regular service and a luncheon.

Pastor Dennis Steward told the history of the church, including all the pastors through its history.

Kathy and Hayden Pendergrass and Brittney Tucker performed special music.

Gerald Glenn presented the deacon board a certificate from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, and Don Smith, associational mission strategist for Winston Baptist Association,

spoke briefly and congratulated the church on the milestone.

Seven easels were placed throughout the church and displayed photos from as far back as the 1920s. A table at the back of the church displayed a photo of the first building, a painting by Linda Clark of that building remodeled and a photo of the current building, built 18 years ago.

"There was an overall feeling of family love," member Annette Little said. (TAB)

First, Enterprise marks 125-year anniversary

On Nov. 18, First Baptist Church, Enterprise, celebrated its 125-year anniversary.

The day began with breakfast, and members were able to fellowship with each other and former staff before the service.

Pastor Ben Bowden preached a sermon titled "Truth, Legacy and Vision" focused on the church's confidence in the future because of its confidence in God's past leadership.

Ellen Dewberry, from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, and John Granger, associational mission strategist of Coffee Baptist Association, presented the church with certificates.

Photos and historical information were on display in the fellowship hall on the Wall of History.

"It was a great day with a packed house," minister of music Ed Brasher said. (TAB)



Photo courtesy of David Musselwhite



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'Burning passion'

Tuscaloosa pastor's football days offer platform for gospel

By Bruce Sims
Special to The Alabama Baptist

Keith Pugh, who serves as co-pastor of Alberta Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, well remembers the verse that led him to Christ.

"I was a freshman football player living in Bryant Hall at the University of Alabama," Pugh said. "I had joined a Bible study that was led by some upperclassmen players. During one session the leader asked everyone to memorize 1 Corinthians 5:17 for the Friday of that week. As I began to memorize the verse, I realized that I wasn't in Christ. As that thought took root in my mind, I went up to my room, closed the door and asked the Lord to come into my life."

Pugh then joined a campus ministry that had been formed in the U.S. Navy called Navigators.

"A member of Navigators, Terry Cook, would come by my room on Friday mornings to have a devotion, pray and then talk about

anything that was on my mind," he said. "As a member of Navigators we were shown how to share our faith with others. I found that people all across campus would listen to what we had to say just as we would listen to their responses."

Sharing the gospel became a burning passion in Pugh's life as he not only shared with his classmates but his teammates as well.

Called to ministry

"As I began to think about what I wanted to do with my life, I began to feel the Lord calling me into the ministry," he said. "During summer break I worked at Camp Marannook, a Christian summer camp, and that's where I met Teresa, my wife to be. I had prayed that the Lord would let me marry a Christian girl, and after seeing how much she loved the Lord, among other attributes, I felt that she was the one."

Teresa said she had begun praying for her husband at age 15.

"I prayed for the Lord to lock

Keith Pugh, a wide receiver on UA's 1978 and 1979 national championship teams, says he learned how to share his faith while in college.



Photo courtesy of Paul W. Bryant Museum/The University of Alabama

my heart and not to unlock it until the right one came along," she said. "When I met Keith I felt my heart unlock as I loved him and knew he was the one."

Counselors couldn't date while serving at the camp so the two had to wait until their duties had concluded before they could develop their relationship.

"When we were finally able to take a walk by ourselves I told her that I loved her," he said. "A week later I asked her to marry me, to which she replied with a big, 'Yes!'"

The two were married May 24, 1980.

"Teresa compliments me as a

pastor as we often lead marriage seminars together," he said. "She is a wonderful speaker, Bible teacher and leader in our women's ministry."

During his collegiate days, Pugh was a starting wide receiver on the Crimson Tide's 1978 and 1979 national championship teams. He also was honored as an All American on the Churchman's All-America team, which combines football ability and church, and received the Chevrolet Most Valuable Player Award for his play during the 1979 National Championship game against the University of Miami. Pugh also earned three SEC championship rings during his time at Alabama. Besides his play on the field Pugh earned All-SEC Academic Team honors in 1977 and 1978. A native of Evergreen, Pugh played his high school ball at Monroe Academy before attend-

ing the University of Alabama (UA).

After graduation from UA, Pugh attended New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary where he earned a master's degree in divinity.

"One of my first jobs was as a Bible teacher and coach at Trinity Presbyterian Academy," he said. "After that I worked with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which is one of the few Christian clubs that are still found in high schools as it is led by the students themselves."

Senior pastor position

At the age of 32 he became a senior pastor at First Baptist, Jackson, in Clarke Baptist Association, after having served as the youth pastor at the church.

"From there I went to First Baptist Church, Sylacauga, and then to Open Door Baptist in Tuscaloosa, he said. "In 2011, Tuscaloosa was hit with a horrific tornado. Open Door and Alberta Baptist both suffered extensive damage to their church sanctuaries. As we both considered how we would rebuild, the idea came about to combine our churches."

The two churches did just that in 2014, and Pugh said 95 percent of his congregation followed him to Alberta.

"So often you hear about churches splitting," he said, "but how often do you hear about two churches coming together to form a greater church?"

Pugh said that during his preaching career, his former football days have given him a platform to present the gospel.

"I just want to disciple my congregation, and especially the men," he said. "I want to pour into them what was poured into me back when I was a new Christian at Alabama."✠



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Unique blessing

FBC Union Springs shares Jesus with help of Critters for Christ

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

In a place as small as Union Springs, and with a camel like Charlie, you don't have to advertise. The whole town sees the one-night-only live nativity.

"The community just loves it," said Mona Crawford, secretary at First Baptist Church, Union Springs, in Bullock Baptist Association. "We're only able to do it one night, but everyone always asks if we can do it more."

This year — the second year for the nativity — the church's children and youth played the roles of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men.

But the sight that brought in the crowds — Charlie — was brought in by a First, Union Springs, family who makes a ministry out of unusual and exotic animals.

"We try to do special things for people," said Kristy Williams, who along with her husband, Sam, runs Critters for Christ.

For the Dec. 13 nativity they brought in Charlie and a gang of his friends — mini horses, mini donkeys, sheep and alpaca. As people in the community stopped



Photo by Mona Crawford

The second year of FBC Union Springs' live nativity featured the church's children and youth in the roles of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men. Also featured in the nativity was Charlie — a camel brought in by Critters for Christ.

by to see the scene and pet the animals, members of First, Union Springs, passed out animal crackers and tracts of the Christmas story.

'Real blessing to us'

"It's a real blessing to us to get to be a part in this way," Williams said.

During the Christmas season, the Williamses find themselves all over the state helping with church nativities. The rest of the year they take a troupe of animals to Vacation Bible Schools, fall festivals, birthday parties, nursing homes and children's homes.

And when they do, they add in a few animals that are less likely to

have been present at Jesus' birth — an African crested porcupine, wallaby, lemur, zebra and others.

"The ferret is our No. 1 petted animal," Williams said.

She and her husband have been involved in evangelism for years, investing their lives sharing the gospel with others. They got into the exotic farm business when they had seven children and realized they needed another avenue of ministry that the kids could be a part of.

"It's unique," Williams said.

"The kids love it, and a lot of parents have never seen some of these animals. We get to talk about how God created us unique."

The family is working now to get their home — Faith Farms — up and running so that people can come to visit them too, not just see their animals at events.

"We're putting Bible verses throughout the farm and there's a big cross just as you walk in," she said. "We want it all to point people to Jesus."

For more information, search for the Critters for Christ page on Facebook.✝

Across ALABAMA'S Associations

BLOUNT

► Pleasant View Missionary Church, Holly Pond, will hold a Watch Night service Dec. 31, 8 p.m. Point of Honor will be the guest performers. There will be a time of prayer for the new year and also a refreshment break at 10 p.m. Randy Burtram is pastor.

MONTGOMERY

► Dale Huff is the new interim pastor of Capitol Heights Church, Montgomery. He retired from the Alabama State Board of Missions at the end of 2016,

where he served as the director of the office of Leader-Care and church administration. He also has served

as pastor of First, Montgomery; and First, Eufaula; as well as Fellowship Church, Lawrenceburg, Kentucky. He and his wife, Lanelle, have two children.✝



HUFF

TAB CLASSIFIEDS

CHURCH POSITIONS

SENIOR PASTOR

First Baptist Church of Vernon, Alabama, is searching for a senior pastor. Please submit your resumé to: office@vernonfirstbaptist.org.

PASTOR

First Baptist Church, New Hope, searching for full-time ordained Southern Baptist pastor preaching God's word. He will minister to pastoral care, spiritual and administrative leadership. Resumé: fbcnhpastorsearch@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Ruhama Baptist Church is looking for a bivocational pastor. Resumés can be mailed to: Ruhama Baptist Church, 3310 County Road 81, Fort Payne, AL 35967, ATTN: Pulpit Committee.

WORSHIP LEADER

Bethel Baptist Church, Dora Alabama, is searching for either a full-time or part-time worship leader to lead blended worship services. Please email resumé to: secretary@bbcdora.com or mail resumé to: Music Search Com-

mittee, Bethel Baptist Church, 7000 Bethel Road, Dora, AL 35062.

WORSHIP LEADER

First Baptist Church in Oxford, Alabama, is seeking a full-time worship pastor to lead dynamic, blended worship. This person must be a self-starter, have strong organizational/administrative skills and able to give leadership to a complete music and media ministry. Please send resumé to: stan@firstbaptistoxford.org, or mail to: First Baptist Church, ATTN: Worship Search Team, 95 E. Oak Street, Oxford, AL 36203.

MINISTER OF WORSHIP

Sisters Baptist Church is searching for a minister of worship. Sisters is a conservative Southern Baptist church in central Georgia. The position involves planning and leading worship services, as well as the other music ministries of the church. He will work closely with the pastor and other staff members. Resumés along with a cover letter may be sent to: SBC Search Committee, 1807 E. McCarty St., Sandersville, GA 31082 or office@sistersbaptist.org.

BIVOCATIONAL MINISTER OF MUSIC

First Baptist Church of Anderson seeking bivocational music minister. Please contact: Lindsey Dabbs, secretary, at 256-247-3871. Send resumé to: Anderson FBC, P.O. Box 67, Anderson, AL 35610, or email: fbcanderson@gmail.com.

MINISTER OF OUTREACH & MISSIONS

FBC Vincent, Alabama, seeking part-time minister of outreach and missions. Will work with the pastor giving coordinating leadership to current mission endeavors. Design/organize/facilitate an outreach ministry to Vincent/Harpersville area. Minimum 20 hours/week. Send resumé to: admin@fbcvincent.org.

FULL-TIME ASSOC. PASTOR TO STUDENTS/MISSIONS

Southside Baptist Church, Andalusia, Alabama, is seeking an individual with experience to provide full-time leadership and ministry to students and student families, as well as leading and working with the membership of Southside Baptist for providing local, state, national and international mission

opportunities. Send resumé to: ATTN: Southside Baptist Church Search Committee, 1213 West Bypass, Andalusia, AL 36420 or southside@sbcandalusia.com.

OTHER POSITIONS

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS

Walton County Baptist Association in DeFuniak Springs, Florida, is seeking resumé for a director of missions. Please email resumé to: wbaptistassoc@panhandle.rr.com.

PERFORMING ARTS SCHOOL TEACHERS

North Shelby Baptist School of Performing Arts is seeking teachers for the winter term beginning Jan. 7, 2019. If interested, please send your resumé to: arts@northshelbybaptist.org.

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in Loving Memory

of Alabama Baptist leaders

David Harford Bentley Jr. Former Alabama Baptist pastor dies at 93

David Harford Bentley Jr. of Opelika, veteran and retired Alabama Baptist pastor, died Dec. 3. He was 93.

Bentley was a veteran of World War II. He held degrees from Howard College (now Samford University in Birmingham) and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and received his doctor of ministry from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Bentley served as a pastor for 40 years. His pastorates included Shoal Creek Baptist Church, Deatville; First Baptist Church, Columbia; First Baptist Church, Shawmut; and First Baptist Church, Tallassee.

He lived in Opelika upon his retirement and served as interim pastor in 24 churches throughout East Alabama.

In 1991, Samford University honored him as Retired Minister of the Year.

In addition to his pastoral career, Bentley was active in the Ministerial Alliance and served on various committees affiliated with the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. He also served as a member of the Board of Trustees at Samford University and was a past president of Tallassee Rotary Club.

Bentley was preceded in death by his wife of 61 years, Jo Marion. He is survived by his daughter, Deborah; and two grandchildren. (TAB)



BENTLEY

Wayne A. Stevens Retired pastor, chaplain dies at 78

Wayne A. Stevens, retired Alabama Baptist pastor and chaplain, died Dec. 1. He was 78.

Stevens, a native of South Carolina, pastored several churches in Alabama, including Shiloh Baptist Church, Sardis; Lineville Baptist Church; Heflin Baptist Church; and Barfield Baptist Church, Lineville.

After retirement from full-time ministry, he pastored several churches as interim or bivocational pastor: New Haven Baptist, Anniston; Post Oak Springs Baptist, Jacksonville; and Bethel Baptist, Lineville.

He also was a chaplain for Southern Care New Beacon Hospice, which he regarded as his most rewarding and satisfying mission.

Stevens was a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Carol Lois Nelson Stevens. He is survived by a daughter, Beth Meehan; three sons, Art, Chip and Charlie; and 11 grandchildren. (TAB)



STEVENS

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ALABAMA

UPDATES

PEOPLE, CHURCHES MAKING NEWS ACROSS THE STATE

Welcome Hill Baptist Church pastor Maples marks 10 years

Jamie Maples said that in 2008 he went to preach at Welcome Hill Baptist Church, Fort Payne, to help fill in. A decade later he's still there, watching God move in the congregation. He's seen God heal hurts, bring people to faith and call a young man into the ministry.

"It's been exciting to see," he said.

Maples himself felt called to preach in 1990 and started serving as pastor of his first church two years later. He served three churches before answering the call to Welcome Hill Baptist.

Through all of his pastorates, he has served bivocationally, running a trucking business with his wife, Karol.

"I can't say enough good things about the two of them," said Ray Hufstetler, a member of Welcome Hill Baptist. "He's really faithful, dependable and has a great desire to be obedient to the Lord. And Karol is as good a minister's wife as you'll ever be acquainted with."

The church honored the couple for their decade of service in October.

Maples also led out when New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary opened up an extension center in Rainsville. He was the first to enroll, and he's earned three certificates — one of which he was awarded Dec. 15.

"He's a tremendous pastor," said Lloyd Borden, director of missions for Lookout Mountain Baptist Association. "He recognizes and reaches out to people from all walks of life." (Grace Thornton)

Chapel Hill Baptist members reach people outside church walls

Chris Davenport says he's only been at Chapel Hill Baptist Church, Florala, for four months, but two things are sure.

God is at work, and the church is a giving congregation.

"I've been amazed at the generosity of our people," he said. "We're a small church, but one of our

focuses is to be as involved in the community as we can be, to get outside the walls and reach people."

It's something the church was doing before Davenport ever got there, he said. The Sardis Baptist Association church has an active Woman's Missionary Union group that's been generously caring for a local family in need through the holidays. They're working toward a generous Lottie Moon Christmas Offering goal.

And Davenport, a bivocational pastor who served as a worship pastor before coming to Chapel Hill, said he's just been able to hold his first baptismal service — the fruit of what church members were doing before he got there, he said.

"My wife and I are elated to be here," Davenport said. "God is doing things, and we can't wait to see what he does in the next year." (Grace Thornton)

Geneva Association volunteer honored as Hero of the Wiregrass

Martha Meadows is known for a lot of things around Hartford. She's known for her 15-layer chocolate cakes, and she's known for the way she volunteers four days a week at the Christ's Helping Hands ministry center of Geneva Baptist Association.

And the week of Dec. 17 she also was honored as a Silent Hero of the Wiregrass by Dothan-area TV station WTVY.

"She's so faithful at her church and at the association," said Dicky McAllister, director of missions for Geneva Association. "She's wonderful. She's always out here from Wednesday to Saturday volunteering."

Meadows, 86, has lived her whole life in the area and is faithfully involved at New Prospect Baptist Church, Hartford, where she teaches a Sunday School class and plays the piano.

"I'm not a hero, but I love helping people. I believe that's my calling, and I enjoy doing it," she said. "My heart's concern is for children who can't help themselves and the elderly who need help. I want to be willing and able to help people anytime they need it." (Grace Thornton)

Union No. 3 holds Mayberry-themed Christmas program

For seven years Union No. 3 Baptist Church, Gadsden, has presented Christmas in Mayberry — a production based on The Andy Griffith Show. Each year the skit is brainstormed by Pastor Joey Hanner and his wife, Connie, but "there's such an army of people who work behind the scenes," Connie said. "It's a team effort each year."

This year's production featured (clockwise) Hayden Haney as Opie Taylor, Hanner as himself, Gerald Johnson as Ernest T. Bass, Adam Thornton as Gomer Pyle, Matthew Loyd as Goober, Cheryl Conklin as Aunt Bea Taylor and Ronnie Pollard as Andy Taylor. "You



Photo by Malcolm Howard

can mix the secular world with Christianity to draw people to the Lord," Connie said. "We just

always want to do something that shares the gospel and His love first and foremost." (TAB)



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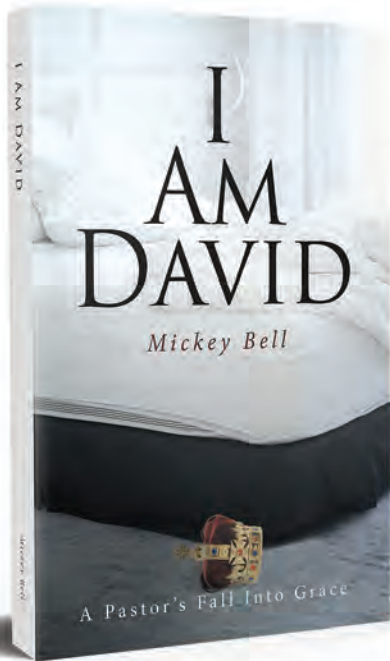
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My JESUS Story

By Jenni Ingram
Member, First Baptist Church, Gantt

As Christmastime fast approaches I’d like to share something with you. As a child I was incredibly spoiled at Christmas. Then there was the Christmas of 1990. I was homeless, and I had just buried my son on Christmas Eve.

It had just snowed — a lot. I was in Maryland, there were no Christmas trees, no gifts, no joy and my Christmas meal came in a Styrofoam container from an angel passing out dinners.

Today we may not have much to unwrap under the tree, but for me Christmas comes all throughout the year — both in the giving and the receiving.

It comes every time my husband does something unexpected to let me know he loves me, my

granddaughters hug me or put their head on my shoulder, when I’m able to cook for the whole family and have them at our house, or when I pay a bill. It’s also when I am able to buy something for someone to help them out, when I can pray for someone or when I can share someone’s pain. It’s all about love.

Love is what held Jesus on that cross — not the nails. Love is what put those gifts under the tree when I was a child. Love is what makes us do things that push us out of our comfort zone to help someone else.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment in the law was He replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments’” (Matt. 22:37-40). God gives us the opportunity to celebrate Christmas 365 days a year — just love.✝



Got a good story idea you think **TAB** readers would enjoy?

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3. At your place of worship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. At work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. At restaurants/eating areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. At concerts/movies/lectures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. At club/social meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. In a car/traveling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Leisure activities:					
9. By self	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. With others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	



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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For December 23

Explore the Bible By Jay T. Robertson, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Christian Studies, University of Mobile

PROMISE KEPT Luke 1:26-38

God is a sovereign God. He has a plan and will bring it to pass. One of the benefits of being sovereign is that He can predetermine the future. God promised He would send His Son to seek and save the lost. We can trace this promise from Genesis 3:15 throughout the rest of the Old Testament. God always keeps His word.

The Greeting (26-29)

God sent Gabriel to Nazareth. Nazareth was not mentioned in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the Talmud or the ancient writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. It was a small town between two cities. Travelers would pass through Nazareth but never go there. It was a small, rural town.

Mary was betrothed to Joseph. They both were probably teenagers who had known each other all of their lives. He was a poor carpenter of the house of David. A girl could be as young as 12 years old and be betrothed to marry. The betrothal would typically last one year. The betrothal would begin with a simple ceremony anticipating the wedding. After the parents had agreed they would get together with a rabbi, priest or teacher of the law. Scripture would be read, a prayer would be prayed and they would sip some wine to commemorate the betrothal. Wealthy families would then have a party.

Gabriel appeared to Mary. Don't think of Mary as sitting on a throne with a gold crown on her head with a halo over it, surrounded by angels, wearing a perfectly adorned embroidered linen garment. Mary was a poor young girl planning her wedding.

The Promise (30-33)

Gabriel said to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Why? Because God is good and gracious.

The word "favor" is grace. Grace is undeserved favor, unmerited love. God chose Mary to be the mother of the Messiah because this was His sovereign plan for her.

Gabriel revealed that she would bear a Son who she is to call Jesus. He would be the Son of the Most High. God would give her Son the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. There will be no end to His kingdom.

What a promise! This is the announced fulfillment of God's promise He declared in Genesis and described in more detail in Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6-7. God uses ordinary people and accomplishes extraordinary things, but He gets the glory.

The Explanation (34-37)

Mary was probably illiterate and formally uneducated. She did not have the New Testament. She had memorized bits and pieces of Scripture read in the synagogue. But she had faith. Mary questioned but she trusted God more than what her eyes could see.

Many of us know more than Mary did but still doubt. Mary knew little but trusted it all. There is a difference between unbelief and having questions. Questions are OK. Christianity is big enough for questions. Mary asked an honest question, and Gabriel answered her question. What is called the virgin birth explains how the eternal Son of God became a human being. Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecies. He is truly God and truly man, sovereign King, eternal, sinless and Savior. Hallelujah!

The Commitment (38)

Mary was willing to let go of her reputation, her marriage and her security so that she could serve God. Mary should not be the object of our faith but she should be an example of faith. Mary heard God's plan for her life and by faith she humbly accepted it. She was a willing servant of the Lord. ✠

Bible Studies for Life By Jim Barnette, Ph.D. Samford University and Brookwood Baptist Church, Mountain Brook

THE ANGELS' ANNOUNCEMENT Luke 2:1-14

Jesus was born according to God's time and place. (1-7)

The emperor mentioned is Octavian, the grand-nephew and adopted heir of Julius Caesar. Born in 63 B.C., Octavian was confirmed by the Roman Senate as emperor in 27 B.C. He was given the title Augustus, meaning "august" and "revered." The title connoted not only political power but religious reverence. The emperor made Judea into a Roman province administered directly by a Roman governor. This was the occasion for taking a census for Roman taxation.

In 6 B.C., Quirinius became governor of Syria, the Roman province just to the north-east of Judea. He carried out the census of Judea as the Romans initiated direct rule of the Hebrew province. The idea that God's chosen people living in the Holy Land should pay tribute to a pagan government was considered an abomination to most Jews (see Luke 20:20-26). The rage against Roman domination led eventually to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Wrapping an infant in bands of cloth was a normal practice of the day. The strips kept the child warm and his or her limbs straight to prevent movement that could cause a fall.

The word sometimes translated "inn" basically means "lodging" and also may be translated "room" or "guest room." Its only other occurrence in the New Testament is in Luke 22:11 for the "upper room." Some scholars suggest that the place where they slept was in a cave. Many such caves exist in Bethlehem today, and they are not unlike the slot caves that are found among the canyons of the American southwest. That Jesus was placed in a feeding trough highlights His humble beginnings, though some sug-

gest that this act is a foreshadowing of the failure of humanity to receive the Lord.

This idea emerges out of the prophecy of Isaiah 1:3, which states that "the donkey [knows] its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

Angels announced the birth of Christ, the Messiah. (8-14)

Shepherds in the first-century Hellenistic world were considered low-life dregs of society. They were scorned as shiftless, lazy, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on the lands of other people. They were perceived much like gypsies are today in parts of the world. That the good news of Christ's birth would come first to these unclean ruffians once again speaks of the Messiah King whose reach includes the disenfranchised underdogs of the world.

The "good news of great joy" is for "all people." This universal offer of grace is a major theme throughout Luke's Gospel as well as Acts. Indeed, through the Spirit's coming in power, this best of news would be carried from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The doxology, "glory to God in the highest," climaxes this portion of the birth narrative. Its two parts relate to heaven and earth respectively. In Luke's telling of the triumphal entry, the crowds cry, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:38). In Ephesians 3:21, Paul speaks of God's glory, not now but "in the Church and in Christ Jesus." The Messiah brings "peace" to His people. Those whom Jesus healed or forgave on the basis of their faith could "go in peace" (see Luke 7:50, 8:48).

Little would the great Augustus know that the Pax Romana during his reign would be eclipsed by the peace that the Christ child would bring to souls both in this world and in the heavenly life to come. ✠

The Alabama Baptist will not publish a Dec. 27 issue. Sunday School lessons for Dec. 30 will be available at www.thealabamabaptist.org.

Christian Crossword

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

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Across

- And ___ things of the world ... hath God chosen. (1 Cor. 1:28)
- He maketh me to ___ down in green pastures. (Ps. 23:2)
- Redecorate.
- Swiss mountains.
- Intent.
- Of ___ the family of the Arodites. (Num. 26:17)
- To drive out.
- Compete.
- Nathaniel to his friends.
- Scold severely.
- King Solomon made a navy of ships ... on the shore of the _____. (1 Kings 9:26; 2 words)
- Pitch.
- Spanish gold.
- She called his name ____: because I drew him out of the water. (Ex. 2:10)
- As an ___ harder than flint have I made thy forehead. (Ezek. 3:9)
- Rhode Island. (abbr.)
- Elevated trains.

Down

- Yes. (Spanish)
- I will incline mine ear to a _____. (Ps. 49:4)
- A ___ of David.
- National Rifle Association.
- A son of God. (Gen. 46:16)
- Who gave himself a ___ for all. (1 Tim. 2:6)
- And the sons of Eliab; ____, and Dathan. (Num. 26:9)
- Sufficient. (archaic)
- Money earned on account. (abbr.)
- ___torian: Roman body guard.
- British princess.
- Golf peg.
- If a man die, shall he ___ again? (Job 14:14)
- The young lions ___ after their prey. (Ps. 104:21)
- First the blade, then the _____. (Mark 4:28)
- Crisis: ___gency.
- Prod.
- That he might know your ____, and comfort your hearts. (Col. 4:8)
- Thou shalt also make a ___ of brass. (Ex. 30:18)
- Roman numeral 3.
- The hand of the Lord ... smote them with _____. (1 Sam. 5:6)
- Chosen in no specific pattern.
- Historical periods.
- A sword is upon the liars; and they shall _____. (Jer. 50:36)
- Greek auditoriums.
- British farewells.
- Equal Rights Amendment.
- Mouth.
- ____, we would see Jesus. (John 12:21)
- Pub drink.
- ___ did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord. (1 Kings 15:11)
- Nothing.
- Inhabitant of Elam.
- A soft ___ turneth away wrath. (Prov. 15:1)

- Sibling.
- Earlier. (prefix)
- The ___ believeth every word. (Prov. 14:15)
- He cannot ___ into the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)
- Backward part.
- ___ Domini.
- Nickname for Wynona.
- There stood up a priest with ___ and with Thummim. (Ezra 2:63)
- Overhanging roof edge.
- Southern Gen.: R.E. ____.
- Teachers organization. (abbr.)



Gettys take Christmas tour to Nashville

Modern hymnwriters Keith and Kristyn Getty, widely known for songs such as “In Christ Alone,” are currently sharing their passion for some of the greatest hymns of the Christian faith — Christmas carols. The final concert of their 2018 Christmas tour is Dec. 21 in Nashville.

The Gettys will be joined at the Schermerhorn Symphony Center by Alison Krauss, Scott Mulvihill and Phil Keaggy.

The Getty’s Christmas concert tour has grown to be one of the largest Christmas concert tours in the nation and has been broadcast on television to more than 45 million households across the country. They will be joined by their award-winning band of instrumentalists — fusing Celtic, bluegrass, Americana, modern and classical music as well as cultural dance and choral sounds of the holiday.

The tour is part of the Getty’s larger Sing! initiative to help pastors, musicians and leaders build a biblical understanding and creative vision for congregational singing in their churches.

‘Imperative time’

“We believe that there is no more imperative time for believers to gather together in song than at the Christmas season,” Keith Getty said. “For many, this season represents celebration and joy, yet for others it can be a painful reminder of those we’ve lost. In any instance, we are all strengthened when we declare our faith through singing, and the great Christmas carols are some of the best expressions we have of the truths we believe.”

For more information about the Sing! An Irish Christmas tour, visit www.gettymusic.com/christmas. (TAB)



Photo by Steven Wylie (courtesy Getty Music)

The Getty’s Christmas concert tour has grown to be one of the largest annual Christmas concert tours in the nation and has been broadcast on television to more than 45 million homes.

Media reviews

MOVIE



TAB
AR



‘Christopher Robin’

Photo courtesy of Disney

Kindness is secret to Winnie’s popularity, ‘Christopher Robin’ producer says

By Michael Foust
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Nearly a century after the first book by English author A.A. Milne was published, Winnie the Pooh remains as popular as ever. Cartoons, videos games and two recent theatrical feature films are continuing the tradition.

But why has the lovable, red-shirted bear, along with his friends Piglet, Tigger, Eeyore and the rest, not waned in popularity? Brigham Taylor, a producer of the Disney film “Christopher Robin” (PG), which is out on DVD and streaming platforms now, believes he knows.

“There’s a politeness, there’s a kindness about him, even when there’s problems,” Taylor said. “These characters don’t always like each other, but they always bend over backwards to be polite to one another. They always come around to an inherent generosity. On top of that, Pooh just has such a unique voice.”

“Christopher Robin” tells the story of an overworked man named Christopher Robin who rediscovers the joys of life when he bumps into his childhood friends,

Pooh and the gang. Pooh, Taylor said, is able to do what Robin cannot: be present in and enjoy the moment.

“That oftentimes is one of the first things to go when do you become an overworked adult — the ability to enjoy the moment that you’re in,” Taylor said. “You’re always concerned about what’s next or what just happened. Pooh has this wonderful, nonsensical way about thinking of things that make total sense to us and he espouses this quality of enjoying where you are and what you’re doing.”

Numerous films

Taylor has made a career out of producing family-oriented films with Disney, having helped with more than 20 films including “The Jungle Book” (2016), “Tomorrowland” (2015) and “Secretariat” (2010). He is listed as a producer on three upcoming movies: “Lady and the Tramp,” “Jungle Book 2” and “The Sword in the Stone” (release dates have not been set). His children, he said, served as inspiration on some of his projects.

“I love these kind of films,” Taylor said. “I grew up on a steady diet of Disney films and really revered them, especially the

animated classics as well as some of the wonderful live-action stuff.”

Although Disney once was known among children for its animated movies, it now is more popular for its hybrid live-action films and remakes, such as the yet-to-be-released movies “Dumbo,” “Aladdin” and “The Lion King.”

Disney’s live-action remakes have their critics, but Taylor believes they’re worth doing.

“The human condition has always been to retell stories that we like — whether that is around a campfire or restaging a play or making a talking film out of what was a silent film,” he said. “The good stories we like to hear again, especially if there’s a reason to retell them. Every time these stories get retold, I think you find more often than not that there’s something added to make it more germane or more relevant to the modern audience, but there’s also a reason to re-present it in a way you haven’t seen before. [For example,] you go see ‘Hamlet’ again because you want to say, well, what is Benedict Cumberbatch’s version of ‘Hamlet’? I’ve seen it four times, but I want to see that interpretation of it.”



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NAMB photo by Hayley Catt

A group of North American Mission Board trustees and staff visit the New York City borough of Queens to get a feel for the neighborhood where several church-planting missionaries live.

'Real people, real souls'

In NYC, trustees deepen their church-planting vision

As the No. 7 New York City subway line rises from underground in Queens, New York, passengers find themselves riding above one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the world.

In the school system alone, 176 languages are spoken among an estimated 800 languages spoken in Queens.

A group of North American Mission Board (NAMB) trustees and staff exited the subway to meet church-planting missionaries Adam Bishop, Silvanus Bhandari and Joseph Biswas on the aptly-named Diversity Plaza in the Queens neighborhood of Jackson Heights.

Walking around the neighborhood with the church-planting missionaries, trustees gained a better vision for their mission.

"To be able to see the diversity," said Stephen Spurgeon, retired pastor of First Baptist Church, Miamisburg, Ohio, "reading about it is one thing, but seeing it, experiencing it, is another. It will help me to pray more efficiently — more fervently — for their needs and what they're dealing with."

Answering the call

Bishop and his wife, Erin, grew up in the United States and answered the call to go to the nations by ministering in New York City.

Bhandari is from Nepal, and Biswas is from Bangladesh. Both felt called to Queens to reach South Asians who had immigrated to the city.

"God called me and my wife to come to New York to reach our Nepali-speaking Hindu and Buddhist people," Bhandari said. "Nepal is a small country, but a lot of people, 70,000 Nepali-speaking people, live in metro New York."

Global Mission Nepali Church, which Bhandari began in 2016, has seen several people come to faith in

Christ, with around 30 people now attending worship.

When Bhandari and his wife came to New York as new immigrants, they had zero credit history and little means to establish themselves. He told trustees of his gratitude for the myriad of ways NAMB supported him and his wife, including missionary housing in Brooklyn that helped them find their footing.

Lack of religious freedom

Biswas said he began his journey "very alone" before he met a Southern Baptist pastor who connected him with NAMB, and after five years of working to start Evangelical Bengali Church, he and his wife, Rozi, are joined by 60 regular members.

Biswas described how the lack of religious freedom in Bangladesh has made it difficult to share the Christian faith there.

"We are not free to share our faith with other faiths, with other people," he said. "But [in the United States], we have rights: freedom of speech, freedom of religion."

Biswas embraces that freedom as a challenge to share the gospel with as many people as possible.

Alabama Baptist Erin Bounds, a member of North Valley Baptist Church, Odenville, was one of those on the NAMB trustees' trip.

"I absolutely love coming on the tours as a trustee, getting to see boots on the ground, what people are doing," Bounds said. "It puts so much more meaning to the decisions we're able to make. They aren't just decisions on paper. It's actually real people, real souls."

As the tour of Queens began winding down, Bounds' smart watch buzzed her wrist with a calendar notification. She couldn't help but smile at the timing and shared the bit of serendipity with the group.

Her scheduled prayer time for that evening was for the people and church planters in Jackson Heights. (BP)

Baptist NEWS BRIEFS

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Religious communicator W.C. Fields dies at 96

NASHVILLE — W.C. Fields, a pioneer in religious communications and defender of an uncensored Baptist press, died Dec. 2 at age 96.

Fields, a native of Louisiana, served as a pastor of churches in Louisiana, Kentucky and Mississippi before becoming editor of the *Mississippi Baptist Record* in 1956. Three years later he was elected secretary of public relations for the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

He retired from the post in 1987 as vice president for public relations and director of Baptist Press, the denomination's official news service.

With innovations such as setting up a media-style press room at annual meetings of the SBC, he built a network of Baptist journalism professionals trusted by people in the pew and respected by the secular press.

"Our role is to help these folks do a good job," Fields reflected on his dealings with secular media in a Baptist News Global interview in 2015. "We have to be honest, transparent, trustworthy. Maybe that includes telling them some things Baptists wouldn't want them to know, but they depend on their sources shooting straight with them."

Quoted by Molly Worthen in "Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelism," Fields argued a censored church media posed a threat to the core of Baptist identity.

"Our forefathers wisely protected and cherished free access to full information," he wrote. "That structural freedom is linked to freedom of access to God, to an open Bible, to a divine right to private judgment in spiritual matters."

Fields was preceded in death by his first wife, Rebecca Elizabeth Hagan "Libby" Fields. He is survived by his current wife, Lawana Jane House McIver; three children, nine grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. (BNG)



FIELDS

SBTS appoints women's support coordinator

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) has appointed its first women's support coordinator to address any gender-related "difficulties or challenges" that women encounter on its campus.

Garnetta Smith, director of the seminary's Center for Student Success, was appointed to the new position. Smith has master's degrees in biblical counseling and practical theology from SBTS. She previously served as SBTS's associate dean for women, academic counselor and manager for disability services.

Albert Mohler, president of the seminary, told Religion News Service on Nov. 29 that an internal review "determined it was not fully supportive of women to require any woman to have to describe what could be very intimate matters to a man." Mohler added that "there is no tolerance on this campus for sexual harassment, assault or disrespect." (RNS)

National CP 2.47 percent under projection

NASHVILLE — Contributions to Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) national and international missions and ministries received by the SBC Executive Committee (EC) in November were 2.47 percent below the projected budget for the first two months of the current fiscal year and 4.47 percent above the amount received during the same period last year.

Cooperative Program (CP) allocation receipts for SBC work for the month of November totaled \$17,081,276.08. Designated gifts received in November amounted to \$3,136,526.20. Gifts received Oct. 1–Nov. 30 by the EC for distribution through the CP totaled \$31,535,913.44. (BP)