



The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

INSIDE



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joy & glad tidings

WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

WE HOPE YOU ARE ABLE TO SPEND TIME WITH THE ONES YOU LOVE THIS CHRISTMAS SEASON.

Above photos: TAB staff members gather for 'Tinsel Tuesdays,' a time of fun and fellowship each Tuesday in December. Last week staff made homemade Christmas cards for friends and family.

To watch the videos from this week's issue, visit our YouTube channel "TAB Media."

Photos by Jennifer Davis Rash and Amy Hacker

TAB debuts 'lunch and learn'-style seminar with caring for caregivers

We at The Alabama Baptist (TAB) are excited about a new feature we are offering for our subscribers and other ministry partners — topical “lunch and learn”-style seminars.

Our debut seminar — Caring for Caregivers of those with Alzheimer’s — took place Dec. 4 from 9 a.m. to noon.

Miller Piggott, executive director of Alzheimer’s of Central Alabama, and Morris Murray Jr., minister and author experienced in the study of various aspects of Alzheimer’s Disease, led the seminar for 17 participants.

Lunch was provided by WMU Foundation and dessert was provided by Tara Strickland of Comfort Care Hospice and Home Health.

Along with receiving a variety of tips and resources from the presenters, participants also had opportunity to ask questions and network with others in a similar situation.

We plan to offer this seminar again in the future and look forward to developing seminars on other topics as well. We are excited to team up with many of our ministry partners in these efforts.

TAB has access to a variety of expert sources and resources so let us know which topics are of the



Photo by Hannah Muñoz

most interest to you right now. Are there areas in which you are struggling or need guidance? What topics would be helpful for our team to address? How can we better serve you through seminars, workshops and

other learning opportunities?

To make a suggestion or to find out more information call Annette Brown at 800-803-5201, ext. 100, or email abrown@thealabamabaptist.org. (TAB)



The crossword puzzle can be found on page 17.



“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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MY RASHIONALE

By **Jennifer Davis Rash**
President and Editor-in-Chief

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Simplifying even one tradition could amplify our 'reason for the season'

December arrived in overdrive mode this year especially by showing up before we even wrapped the Thanksgiving weekend.

Tree-lighting events; parades; photo shoots; school, work and church activities; and a variety of other Christmas festivities filled calendars the first two weeks of the month.

School students are counting down the last few weeks until Christmas break and college students have already wrapped up classes or are taking those last few finals.

Along with working our way through the first half of December's seasonal events, we have one eye on the events coming the last half of the month with friends and family.

Those of us still thinking about gifts and making shopping lists are down to the two-week mark or less if we need to mail them. Anyone else OK with letting the postmark count as the gift being on time rather than the delivery date?

And then consider all the end-of-year expectations connected to our ministries and places of business.

Whew! The more I stare at the growing list of things to do and places to be, the more stressed I become.

Some Decembers through the years have indeed overwhelmed me and in turn left me exhausted and missing out on experiencing the true reason and joy of the season — celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior.

However, a few Christmas seasons remain among my favorites because I guarded my time, planned ahead and captured special memories by merely being fully present in the moment.

When our friend from a sister Baptist entity shared his Apple Watch story (see tabonline.org/apple-watch), God started working on my heart. What's something I'm wanting more than Him this season? And am I willing to give it up?

As I thought through gifts I wanted for myself or wanted to give others I couldn't quite find

a peace about what to give up there. Our gifts have become more and more streamlined during the past several years so I was already in that mindset.

Even our gifts at *TAB* turned more toward ministry and service projects several years ago.

We continued that tradition this year by sponsoring two children in care of foster parents connected to the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries. Our staff had fun picking out the gifts on each child's Christmas list.

With a peace about gifts, my

mind turned to time and the extra elements related to Christmas. I absolutely love Christmas decorations but the time and effort they take as well as the storage space they require can easily become more important than Jesus Himself at this time of year.

So a simple wreath on the door, a beautiful poinsettia for a pop of Christmas color in the lobby, a Nativity scene and a few other simple Christmas decorations is all you will find at *TAB* this year — but we believe the spirit of Christmas will more than fill the building because of the hearts of those inside.✝️

RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

Could we be seeing the end of the 20–80 rule in church life? And not because it is going in a positive direction

A request for nursery and child care workers at church is as old as time — or at least as old as my memory.

Churches of all sizes in every part of the state and nation always need more help with the little ones.

But a somewhat new and consistent void seems to be growing in every other area of church work as well.

Pastors, church leaders and active lay leaders across the state mention frequently how they are struggling to find people to assume the various volunteer positions in the church.

Some have determined more and more of our church-going folk don't feel equipped to lead in the various areas.

Others say it is because of the

busyness of life and how people are pulled in so many directions.

With so many demands in other parts of life volunteering to serve at church becomes an easy cut when something has to go.

Another theory is that we may finally be seeing a breakdown of the 20–80 rule, where 20% of the people do 80% of the work.

If 20% of church members for the past 30 to 40 years have carried the load and this group happens to be the 50- and 60-year-olds today who have responsibilities with aging parents as well as new grandchildren, then it is possible church life will change drastically in the next few years.

Not only are the demands and desires of the 50- and 60-year-olds different now, but also those in their 70s and 80s will gradually

need to slow down some of their activities.

That leaves the 20-, 30- and 40-year-olds, who most likely fall in the other two categories of being overwhelmed and thus not able to help and/or ill equipped, in their opinion, to handle the various church responsibilities.

Whether any or all of the theories are accurate the issue remains real and something churches must address.

It may be time for each church family to seriously evaluate its activities and consider purging anything that isn't absolutely necessary for evangelizing the lost, discipling the saved and helping meet the needs of the community to which the congregation ministers.

—Jennifer Davis Rash

Your Voice



Share your comments, letters to the editor, blog excerpts, social media posts

OT command to 'honor your parents' has no requirements

Relationships with our parents are foundational relationships of human life. We are formed and shaped by our mothers and fathers, for better or for worse.

This is why this relationship is addressed right in the middle of the Ten Commandments.

As the Israelites moved into the promised land, God gave His people 10 laws that would define their relationships with Him and each other. The fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12).

As others have noticed, this is the first commandment with a promise attached, but notice something else. The commandment is directed to the children, not the parents.

I would have thought the commandment would be directed to the parents, something like, "Raise up [a] good kid," or "Take your children to church." It's not. It's directed to the children who are commanded to "honor" their parents. The parents don't even have to be worth honoring — there's no descriptive clause here — for the children to be required to honor them.

This verse is never qualified

or watered down. It says what it means, and it means what it says. What it says is there is something about people who love God that is shown by the way they honor their parents.

As in many other aspects of our lives, our actions are never dictated by others, but only by our obedience to Christ.

So, what does that mean? How do you honor a parent who isn't worthy of the honor?

First, we're grateful to them for giving us life. The circumstances of our birth may not have been idyllic, and our home life may never have been a Norman Rockwell painting, but for better or worse, you're here, and you're here because of them. If for nothing else, we're grateful to them and honor them for bringing us into the world.

Second, we forgive them. Most of the time, our mothers and fathers were doing the best they could.

If they failed, they didn't intend to fail. They made bad decisions without ever understanding the consequences of their decisions. Other times, mothers and fathers were mean and evil. Either way, forgiveness is something we offer to them, not something they ask for from us. Forgiveness, simply put, is releasing the other person from the expectation they can fix what they did.

If your parents hurt you, they could apologize a thousand times, and it wouldn't heal the pain in your life. Only Christ can bring that kind of healing. No one else can do it. When we stop waiting for other people to "fix" what they've done, we are free to find another way to move on.

Third, if we can't help, we don't hurt. Again, our behavior is always in response to the grace of Christ in our life.

Just because your mother or father hurt you doesn't give you the right to hurt them. If it's best for you not to have a relationship with your parents, fine, but don't go out of your way to "make them pay" or "give them what they deserve."

Judging others isn't in our job description. We don't help anyone, including ourselves, when we only try to make things worse.

Next, ask yourself, what would you do for a stranger? If you didn't know your mother or father at all, but they were simply someone who was going through a hard time, what would you do? Would you call them? Would you send a card? Would you visit? How would you act if you had no relationship with them at all?

In reality, this is where you are. The old is gone, buried with Christ. The new is possible in the resurrection of Jesus.

You're not going to rebuild the old relationship. That's over. If there is to be a relationship at all, it will be something new Jesus does in the power of His resurrection.

The greatest journeys all start with one step. Don't be afraid to take small steps in this new relationship. Rome wasn't built in a day, and it wasn't torn down in a day either. It won't be rebuilt in a day either. Mercy takes its own time.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Excerpted with permission from "Coffee with Mom" by Mike Glenn. Copyright 2019, B&H Publishing Group.

Letters to the Editor

I was browsing *TAB* recently and noticed an article lauding Disney's new Disney Plus streaming service. I believe Christians' support for Disney needs to be re-evaluated as Disney is increasingly promoting values that are anti-biblical.

Disney is an enormous media entity with a great deal of influence in our culture. For Christians to promote Disney, considering their current messaging, so nonchalantly undermines our responsibility to raise disciples of Christ, not kids who tolerate and rationalize worldly and sinful values.

Todd Johnson
Daphne, Ala.

I just reviewed (again) *Fruitful*, the magazine *TAB* developed

for the 2019 Alabama Baptist State Convention in Daphne. I cannot say enough about how wonderful it is. It is professional, thoughtful, helpful, cheerful, informative, encouraging, inspirational, guiding and spiritual.

This is a "home run" publication for *The Alabama Baptist*! I am so impressed with this work and wanted you to know how much I appreciate it and your work in promoting our convention, Pastors Conference, associations, ministries and partners. Keep shining the light!

Pastor Richard L. Richie
Blue Springs Baptist Church
Somerville, Ala.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Read Fruitful magazine at tabonline.org/fruitful.

“God doesn’t want you to go through another year without His peace.”

RICK WARREN

Pastor, author

Jesus came as a baby in a feeding trough to transform our awkward and misplaced lives. In His power and grace He circles around us, decorating our lives from the inside out with His light and beauty. His work is not mere tinsel and greenery, but the deep beauty of His own presence shining through us. Because of Him our bare and intrusive lives can invite people to life and joy.

As you enjoy the beautiful Christmas decorations that transform your home and church, don’t forget to give thanks to Him for redoing you!

Bob Adams
Retired pastor

The more believers who step in to foster and adopt, the more likely we will have children who have a safety

net around them so they don’t run after they’ve been in a vulnerable environment.

Todd Chipman
Author, “Until Every Child Is Home”

Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His only Son. The only requirement is to believe in Him. The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life.

Corrie Ten Boom

We should all be grateful for the many ways in which we can offer and receive encouragement in our day. It can mean so much to receive a kind text message, a phone call or

especially a hand-written note of encouragement from a friend when we most seem to need it. ... But there is something extraordinarily powerful when encouragement comes in person. When’s the last time you went out of your way to seek someone out to offer them a word of encouragement in person?

Matthew Hall
Provost
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.

Someone, somewhere, is depending on you to do what God has called you to do. Never underestimate your ability to make someone else’s life better.

A.J. Benefield
Ranburne, Ala.

From the *Twitterverse*

@PastorGregC

“No man ever served God by doing things tomorrow. If we honor Christ and are blessed, it is by the things which we do today.”

— Charles Spurgeon

@sendrelief

Children in #FosterCare need our help and support. Buying them Christmas presents is a simple way to share the true meaning of Christmas this holiday season.

@jamesaross

A person who wishes to remain anonymous gives me a \$100 gift card to give to a foster/adoptive family every month and I get to

pick someone and hand it out. The recipient expresses their appreciation to me but I’m just the one who hands it to them. This sums up pastoral ministry.

@1MissionStudent

As followers of Christ, we have all been given gifts specifically to serve others. It’s the calling on our lives. Don’t wait for summer to use your gifts. Serve others now!

@myutmost

If your faith is in experiences, anything that happens is likely to upset that faith. But nothing can ever change God or the reality of redemption. Base your faith on that.

@haines_matt

Had a great time talking to one of my deacons tonight who excitedly told me how he had a gospel conversation with his “one,” which is actually a couple he’s been praying for a few years. He thinks they are close. #WhosYourOne @NAMB_SBC

@NOBTS

“Our courage in the world is proportional to our commitment to the Word.” — @newsomblake

@KevinBumgarner1

“The highest form of worship is obedience.” — evangelist Kelly Green



Photo by Alabama WMU

Candace McIntosh is executive director of Alabama Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU).

Lottie Moon’s Legacy

Seventeen years ago, I took my first journey to China. I was overwhelmed as we visited churches, spoke with pastors and fellowshiped with believers who were very much aware their churches had resulted from the work of Lottie Moon and her co-workers.

As we walked through her home, I felt assured it looked much like it did during her life. It was a very simple home — dim lighting, brick stove. In her bedroom was her kang bed.

I envisioned Lottie Moon sitting upon her bed, penning one of the hundreds of letters she wrote imploring women to give and pray so the people of China might know her Savior.

Only God knew what He would do with the passionate words of a tiny woman who had given of herself to take the gospel to a people who had not yet heard.

Although many years have passed, Lottie Moon’s message is still the same. I pray that as you walk through this season of celebration you will give generously to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and pray passionately for our missions force and those they serve.

Much has changed since the days of Lottie Moon but her voice echoes still. To God alone be all glory!

—Candace McIntosh

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

HISPANIC

ministries

Church plants, ministries reaching out to Alabama's Hispanic population

By Lanell Downs Smith
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

According to estimates, approximately 200,000 Hispanics live in Alabama. Only 22% of these residents are evangelical Protestants, served by approximately 40 Baptist churches throughout the state.

More Hispanic churches are needed in Alabama, says Annel Robayna, an associate who focuses on Hispanic works and church planting in the office of associational missions and church planting at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (SBOM).

Robayna was called to missions and evangelism as the result of a SBOM missions trip to his home country, Venezuela. He was working as an interpreter for missions teams when he sensed God's call.

"God opened the doors for me to share the gospel so many times that when I went back home I re-

member feeling like I was missing something," Robayna said. "God used this missions event to change my life and show me that there's nothing that compares with the power of the gospel."

Through a SBOM church planting conference, God stirred his heart for church planting. Simultaneously God was moving to add a SBOM staff position to meet the growing need for ministry within the Hispanic community. Robayna filled that position in June.

New church plants

Now Robayna works with churches and associations across the state, encouraging them to assist in starting new Hispanic churches. Robayna's role is to help with strategy for new church plants and to aid existing churches with resources.

Partnerships are vital, he said. Hispanic churches face similar challenges, including finding a core



Photo by Doug Rogers
Kirby Wilson (right) leads a craft activity as part of a Bible study time for children living in the Martin Trailer Park in Enterprise.



Photo by Doug Rogers

Volunteers from Coffee Baptist Association tutor students after school at Faith Community Church, Enterprise. Faith Community Church hosts events and activities to minister to Hispanic children and teens in the area.

group to support the work in prayer and finances, locating facilities in which to meet, and developing effective ministries to their communities, including utilizing missions teams from other churches to assist with outreach.

Iglesia Comunidad de Fe in Fultondale, for example, began with Bible studies and prayer groups hosted by the Hispanic ministry of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham. When it was time to locate a meeting place Fultondale First Baptist Church stepped up.

"We've been blessed that Fultondale First Baptist Church has provided us the facilities," said Iglesia Comunidad de Fe pastor Joshua del Risco. "[And] we've been blessed in that we have a strong core group of believers from the Dawson Hispanic congregation

who have come over to help us."

Hispanic church plants also face unique challenges.

Dixon Klinger, pastor of Iglesia Bautista el Calvario in Dothan, said his ministry faces the challenge of ministering to those in the Hispanic community who may not have citizenship documentation, many of whom fear discovery.

"The way to minister to them is just to help them to trust the Lord," Klinger said.

About half of the U.S. Hispanic population identifies as Roman Catholic, according to Pew Research, and sometimes that's a barrier too, Klinger said.

'Keep praying'

"Keep praying for us," he said. "Pray for the Lord to break those traditions because it's very difficult. Pray also that we can keep work-

To learn more about Hispanic ministries in Alabama, contact the SBOM at 334-613-2270.

ing as a partner with the churches to keep reaching the Hispanic people.”

According to Robayna, churches can help to meet the needs of Hispanic communities by offering activities for Hispanic children and youth. He added that it’s not necessary for churchgoers to speak Spanish to work with young people.

Afterschool Bible studies, sports events and block parties help to build relationships, he said.

‘Build trust’

“They will not come to church if they don’t feel they can trust you,” Robayna said. “So any activity that can build trust would be a blessing.”

Churches and associations can partner to provide financial support or share building space with a Hispanic church and church members can pray for the Hispanics around them.

First Baptist Church, Center Point, supports a Hispanic ministry of around 115 members, according to the church’s senior pastor, David Haynes.

The Hispanic ministry partners with English-speaking members for Sunday School and fellowship and hosts Hispanic family nights once a month. A recent celebration saw more than 700 Hispanic people in attendance.

First, Center Point, members undergird the Hispanic ministry through financial support and the sharing of space

“We have a super generous church,” Haynes said.

In addition to church planting efforts Robayna works to help existing Hispanic churches thrive.

For instance, in Coosa River Baptist Association, he’s helping guide the association through the process of welcoming Iglesia Biblica Berea into its fellowship.

Robayna said the church has had the opportunity to be supported by two associations — it started in Cleburne Baptist Association,

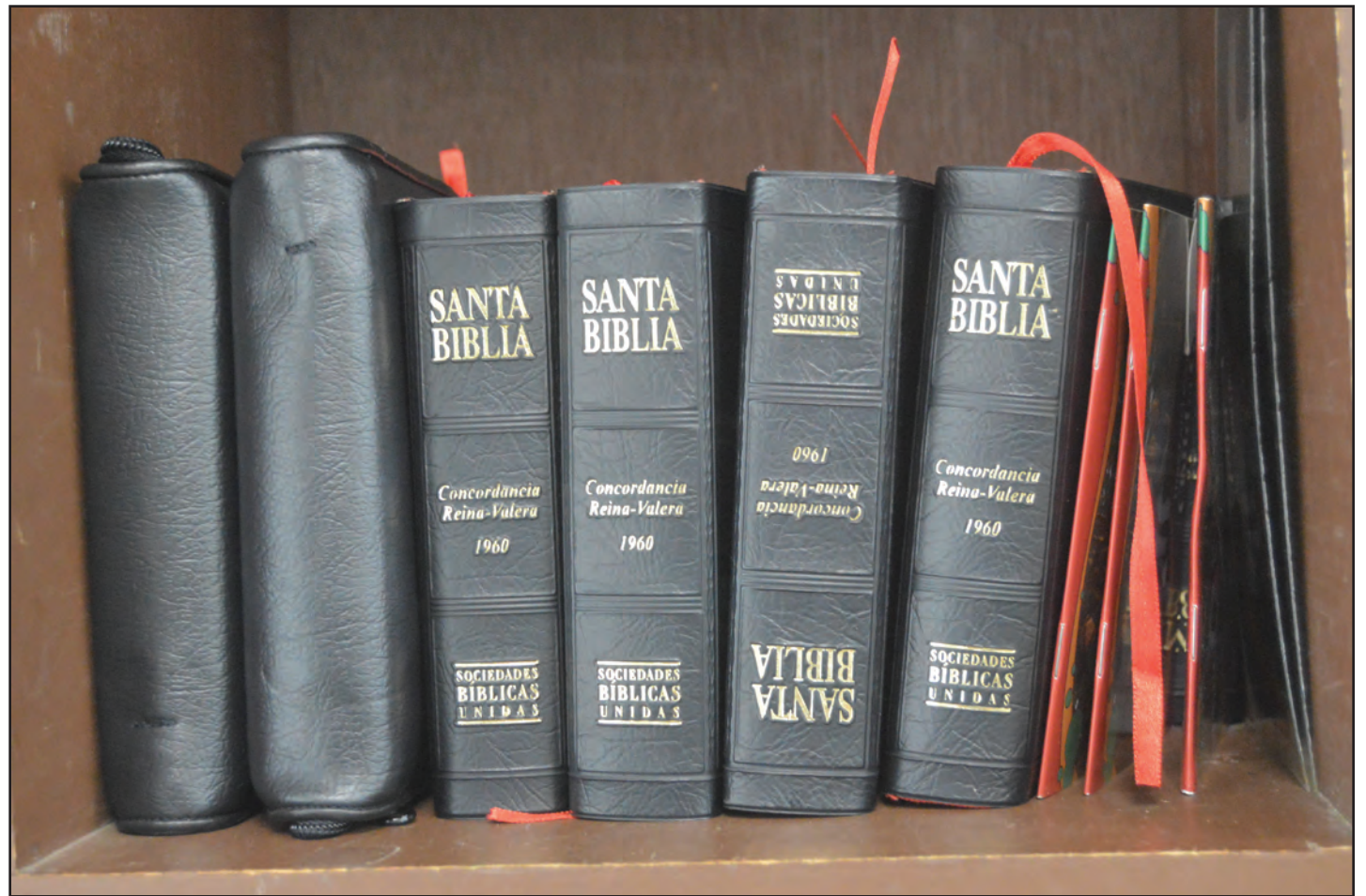


Photo by Doug Rogers

According to estimates, approximately 200,000 Hispanics reside in Alabama. Only 22% of these residents are evangelical Protestants served by approximately 40 Baptist churches throughout the state.

and when the congregation bought a building in Coosa County they began to discuss becoming part of Coosa River Association. So Randy Hagan, director of missions for Coosa River Association, went and

preached there one Sunday and Robayna translated.

“It was a good time for them to get to know each other and for him to express all the resources the association could offer,” Robayna said.

That’s just one area of support. The SBOM support strategy also offers training in different areas of ministry, including a statewide youth camp for Hispanics, a marriage retreat for

pastors and their wives, a men’s retreat, a pastor’s conference, an evangelism conference and a worship conference. Regional prayer meetings, outreach events and specially focused trainings will be offered in 2020.✝



Photo by Sydney Basden

SBOM associate Annel Robayna, leads a Spanish Speaking Church Planting Basics workshop at Tuscaloosa Baptist Association.

HISPANIC calendar of events

- Jan. 28** Day of Prayer
- Feb. 24** Hispanic Evangelism Conference, Heritage Baptist Church, Montgomery: 4:30–6:30 p.m.
- Feb. 25** Day of Prayer
- March 20–21** Worship Team Training Conference, Shocco Springs: Fri., 6 p.m. to Sat., 12 p.m.
- March 31** Day of Prayer
- April 16–18** Global Mission Conference, Shocco Springs: Fri. 6 p.m. to Sat. 12 p.m.
- April 28** Day of Prayer
- May 26** Day of Prayer
- June 29–July 2** Hispanic Youth Camp, Shocco Springs: Fri., 6 p.m. to Sat., 12 p.m.
- June 30** Day of Prayer
- July 28** Day of Prayer
- Aug. 20–22** Hispanic Marriage Retreat, Shocco Springs: Fri., 4 p.m. to Sat., 12 p.m.
- Sept. 18–19** Hispanic Men’s Retreat, Shocco Springs: Fri., 6 p.m. to Sat., 12 p.m.
- Sept. 29** Day of Prayer
- Oct. 27** Day of Prayer
- Nov. 9** Hispanic Pastors Conference, Eastmont Baptist Church, Montgomery: 6–8 p.m.
- Nov. 24** Day of Prayer
- Dec. 29** Day of Prayer

Baptistry flood turns into blessing for congregation

It's no secret that Bethabara Baptist Church, Northport, has had an active baptistry in the past couple of years. On Kevin Morrison's first Sunday as pastor in 2017 someone came to Christ — and that kept happening every Sunday for 17 straight weeks.

"It's been good. We've been growing and had more salvations and baptisms," he said. "We're up to 41 total since we've been here. God's been good to us."

But in recent weeks the baptistry got a little too excited, Morrison said. Something happened one day and it filled with water and overflowed, flooding the sanctuary and the basement below.

"The cleanup crew and the insurance company estimated that it was probably running for three days," he said. "There were three inches of water in our sanctuary."

Closer together

In the past few weeks the congregation has had to shuffle around, meeting in different parts of the

building that weren't affected as much.

But Morrison said he's amazed — it's brought them closer together and their crowds are even bigger than normal.

'Pieces coming together'

"I looked at the flood as a bad thing, but God has made it a good thing," he said, noting the rebuild

process is going smoothly too, thanks to God's provision. "Everything is like a puzzle and all the pieces are coming together. What gets me the most is that God's using the church and no matter what comes our way, it seems like we've overcome it."

Gary Bonner, associational missionary/director of missions for Sipsey Baptist Association, said it's incredible to watch how the church is thriving even — or especially — in the midst of crisis.

In times like these, "people's faithfulness touches other people's lives and makes a difference," he said. (Grace Thornton)

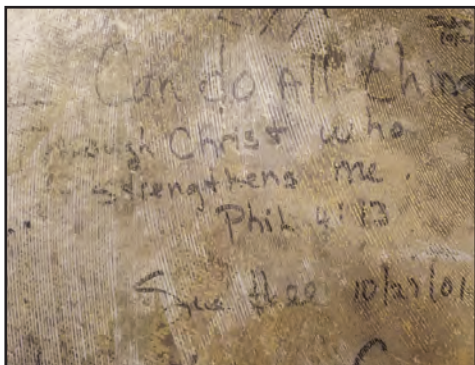


Photo courtesy of Kevin Morrison

When the carpet was ripped up by cleanup crews at Bethabara Baptist, church members rediscovered verses inscribed on the floor when the building was built in 2001. This one, Philippians 4:13, was written by Sue Hall Montgomery, a beloved church member who passed away a year ago.



Photo courtesy of Kevin Morrison

Bethabara Baptist Church's basement and the sanctuary above it suffered major water damage when the baptistry flooded the church.



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Christmas Features and Figures

Gifts and Guests

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

Last week Theology 101 focused on angels and carols as features of our Christmas programs and pageants. As we continue using common features and figures associated with our celebration of Christmas as pointers to biblical truths, we focus this week on gifts and guests.

To the extent resources allow we typically find several seasonally wrapped gifts under the Christmas tree. Behind our custom of giving gifts lies the example of the wise men bringing their gifts to the Christ Child. The extraordinary example of gift-giving that first Christmas was the fact that God Himself so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son to be the Savior of the world. Hence, we might say that gift giving is a Godlike thing to do.

This season of the year affords us opportunities to be givers of gifts. To the extent we are able we give gifts to family members and friends. A common question sometimes posed at Christmas-time is, "What did you get for Christmas?" This was especially common in our childhood years.

For grown-ups a better question to ponder perhaps is to change the verb from "get" to "give" and ask ourselves, "What did I give at Christmas?" The Christmas season affords us a special opportunity to give to people we have never met and will likely never meet, namely by making generous gifts for missions. By extension this is a primary way

of obeying Christ's mandate to go into all the world to proclaim the gospel and make Christian disciples.

In addition to giving and receiving gifts we often invite guests to join us at Christmas or we join others as their guests. This custom reminds us of the guests who showed up at the time of Christ's birth, guests like the shepherds and, later, the wise men.

A somewhat negative example about entertaining guests was the anonymous innkeeper who had no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph to be received as guests. His redeeming feature, however, was he did give what he had available — space in the inn's stable.

Inviting guests into our home brings joy at Christmas but inviting heaven's Guest into our hearts brings everlasting joy. I believe the hymn writer phrased it best, "O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee."

The Christmas season is an ideal time to make certain we have made God's gift of His Son the welcomed Guest in our lives — a Guest who will abide with us forever both for God's glory and our good.✝

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.





Outreach TOP 100

Several Alabama congregations among top growing, reproducing churches of last few years

By Lanell Downs Smith
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

An Alabama church is among *Outreach Magazine's* latest Outreach 100 list of fastest-growing, largest and reproducing churches in the United States.

For more than a decade, the collaborative efforts of *Outreach* and LifeWay Research have ranked the fastest-growing and largest churches in America.

Exponential, a church-multiplication advocacy group, partners with *Outreach* to identify reproducing churches: congregations that are strategically invested in reproduction and multiplication through church planting.

Carol Pipes, LifeWay Christian Resources director of corporate communications, said LifeWay Research completes all research to discover church size and prior year's attendance.

Once the research is complete both LifeWay and *Outreach* teams interview churches for stories and profiles published in the Outreach 100 Annual Report.

Church multiplication

Churches are invited to participate in the reporting process and can access the information sheet and tracking form at www.lifewayresearch.com/outreach-top-100.

Some 30,000 churches are invited to participate each year, *Outreach* reports. The churches are contacted via fax, email, letter, phone and certified mail.

The survey is self-reported with congregations providing information on average attendance, but not membership, through the months of February and March, excluding Easter weekend.

Reports are compared with the previous year's averages for the same months with final rankings reflecting average numerical gain and percentage gain.



Photo courtesy of Adam Gooch

Faith Church, a nondenominational multisite church based in Florence, is one of the fastest-growing churches in the U.S., which church leaders attribute to intentional strategies to reach people and get them involved in church life.

According to the magazine's website, the 2019 fastest-growing list includes surveyed churches with attendance greater than 1,025, a numerical gain of 176 or more and a percentage gain of at least 3%.

Churches ranked on the largest churches list report attendance of 4,328 or more.

Churches of any size may take the Church Multiplication Challenge to declare their intention to multiply. The challenge is designed to help churches shift from good intentions to action and provides foundational priorities and commitments to assist the church on its journey to plant other churches.

The reproducing list has grown from 25 into the thousands because of the challenge and is now labeled as the Reproducing 100+ list.

One Alabama church, Faith Church, Florence, has ranked among the fastest-growing churches for four consecutive years and is listed as number 61 in 2019. With 2,424

attending, the non-denominational church grew 16% by gaining 332 members this year.

Executive pastor Adam Gooch said the growth began when lead pastor, Steve Huskey, joined the staff in 2012 and the congregation began an intentional path toward growth.

According to Gooch, the church's first step toward growth was realizing "why" they needed to grow.

"We know that we exist to reach people and connect them to God and others. That's our vision and that vision informs and inspires everything

we do as a church," Gooch said.

One specific area of focus for Faith leadership was in refining the systems and processes for guest services, worship, preaching, youth groups and children's ministry.

The church's vision dictates the processes, Gooch said, and none of those things happen by accident.

Faith now has implemented refined systems for first-time guests, second-time guests, first-time giv-

ers, membership, volunteering, missions and children's ministry.

But as important as the processes are, Gooch added that systems and processes are only tools used to reach God's people.

"We understand that every person at Faith Church is someone the Lord has sent for us to lead and to love," Gooch said. "We work hard to make sure our environments are excellent, our teams are trained and our people are prepared. We know every single week we have the opportunity for God to use us to change someone's eternity and that's not an opportunity we ever want to waste."

Gooch attributes Faith's growth to God's faithfulness and to the staff who, led by Huskey, passionately pursue the vision for the ministry.

The church launched its Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, campus in September 2018 to meet the needs of the hundreds of guests who drove down from south Tennessee to worship each week.

With an average attendance of 450 the Lawrenceburg congregation will break ground on a multi-million-dollar facility in 2020.

"God is doing something really special at Faith Church," Gooch said. "Numbers do matter to us because we know that every number has a name, and every name has a story, and every story matters to God."

Other Alabama churches

Other Alabama churches have appeared on the Outreach 100 lists in previous years.

Church of the Highlands, Birmingham, ranked among the fastest-growing and largest churches from 2015 through 2018 but chose not to report in 2019. Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham, was among the fastest-growing churches in 2018. Vaughn Forest Church, Montgomery, appeared on the list in 2017 and 3Circle Church, Fairhope, was listed in 2015. ☪

To learn more about America's Top 100 churches, visit www.outreach100.com.

Last wish sets Christmas parade's wheels in motion

Fifteen years ago a 92-year-old woman in Piedmont divulged a little secret to Grady Rhinehart.

"She told me she'd never seen a Christmas parade before and she wanted to see one before she passed away," Rhinehart said.

So that night he went to his church, Rock Run Baptist, for Wednesday night prayer meeting and notified them they had a little event to organize.

"We put that thing together in two or three weeks and we carried it right by her house. She was able to sit out on her porch and watch it," Rhinehart said. "We probably had 20 floats that year. It's grown since then."

He laughs, though, as he admits "grown" might be an understatement. Through the

past 15 years that dear lady's dying wish has turned into the state's biggest Christmas parade, he said.

"The community loves it and people come from all over," Rhinehart said.

And they don't just come from other states to see it — they come to be in it.

The parade includes John Deere tractors, Gators, trailers and cars. Some years the Mayfield cow shows up and they toss out ice cream sandwiches. A local man called Cat-head throws stuffed animals from a deer stand on his float. Bass Pro Shop even sponsors the event now, Rhinehart said.

The sheriff's department shuts that mile and a half of road down and thousands of people gather. On display are tens of thousands of Christmas lights.

"You have to see it to believe it," Rhinehart said. "We're just a bunch of old country folks trying to have a good time and it's just gotten bigger and bigger."

But not only that, it's a big opportunity for outreach, he said. Rock Run Baptist opens up the fellowship hall to serve chili, hot dogs and soup to anyone who wants a meal.

Working together

Pastor Lewis Conaway says it's a great opportunity to talk to people and invite them to church.

"We all work together," he said.

And by that he means the churches. On the other end of the parade route is a local Methodist church that opens its doors to dispense hot chocolate, doughnuts and other snacks.

Wendell Dutton, associational missions director for Cherokee Baptist Association, said the local churches work together "in a tremendous fashion."

They engage in a lot of conversations and the Gide-

ons distribute Bibles. All in all it's more than Rhinehart and his friends could've ever dreamed up 15 years ago.

"We thought it would just be a one-time deal. We were just trying to make a woman happy and make her wish

come true," he said. "But we said, 'Lord, this is your parade — do what You want to with it.' And this is what He did."

This year's Christmas parade will be held Dec. 21 at 2 p.m. (Grace Thornton)



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash

People come from other states to see — and be in — the Rock Run Country Christmas Parade each year in Cherokee Association.

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Photo courtesy of Todd Wilson

A decade ago Todd and Lori Wilson started serving as foster parents with the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries. Since then they've hosted 15 children and led their church, Grace Covenant Baptist, Vestavia Hills, to be more hands on with orphan care.

Caring for the fatherless

Radio commercial propels couple toward years of foster care with ABCH

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

One morning 10 years ago Todd Wilson heard a radio commercial that changed the course of his life.

It was about foster care, and when he got to his laptop he went straight to the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries (ABCH) website to do some research.

"I made a phone call and ended up meeting with their lead social worker and another social worker while my wife, Lori, was still in

school and didn't know anything about it," said Wilson, pastor of Grace Covenant Baptist Church, Vestavia Hills.

A decade later

But when Lori got home from teaching that afternoon and Todd told her what had happened, she said she'd heard the same radio commercial — and also had planned to have a conversation with him about it.

"So that's kind of how our journey began — we both heard the same commercial on the same day," Wilson said.

And now, a decade later, they've hosted 15 children in their home from age 13 down to 7 months old. They've grown as parents and as Christ followers, he said. And they've led their church to be more hands on with orphan care.

"We wanted to get involved in this with the goal of planting the gospel in these kids while they were in our home and also reach out to the parents either directly or through the kids when they went home," Wilson said. "We try to love them well, and our church gets attached to them too."

Their church has 50 to 60

people on a Sunday morning and nearly everyone is involved in the children's lives in some way, he said.

Sunday School teachers have welcomed every child his family has brought to church and two other

families have gone through the training to become foster parents too.

He's been encouraged and challenged —

and he's now challenging other pastors and churches to get involved too. Of ABCH's 259 foster families, currently 29 are the families of church staff members.

"I'm still a work in progress in this, but what I

would say to pastors is that even if you can't take a child into your home you still need to lead your church in orphan care," said Wilson, noting that James 1:27 says true religion is to care for orphans and widows.

"You can't just be passive — you're not walking with the Lord if you're not involved at all. It's important that you try to instill in your people to be involved in some way."

'Love of Jesus'

All of the children the Wilsons have hosted have come from a place where they've rarely, if ever, been exposed to the gospel, he said.

"They're all hurt in some way, they're all needy in some way," Wilson said. "That's been the purpose for us — to try to get the gospel to these kids who more often than not are not hearing about the love of Jesus in the environment that they've come out of."

Rod Marshall, ABCH president, called the Wilsons "exceptional foster parents."

"Todd and Lori demonstrate a commitment to care for the fatherless that I have had the unique privilege of watching close up as it has transformed their family, including their adult daughters, their church and their own sense of calling to caring for children from hard places," Marshall said.

For more information about ABCH and foster care, visit alabamachild.org.

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3 stories you should know



Photo by China Christian Daily

The Chinese government has designated Lottie Moon's home church, Wulin Shenghui Church of Penglai in Shandong province, a nationally protected historical and cultural site, the China Christian Daily reported Nov. 14. Built in 1872 by Southern Baptist missionaries Tarleton and Martha Crawford, the church is still in use with a current church membership of about 4,000. The church was closed to foreigners in the early 1900s but reopened in 1988. (BP)

New report shows abortion rate continues to decline

The latest statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that reported abortions in the United States continue to decline.

In a Nov. 29 report the CDC said the total number of abortions in the U.S. fell by more than 13,000 from 2015 to 2016. In 2016, the latest year for which data is available, 623,471 abortions were performed.

That 2% drop matched a 2% decrease in the abortion rate to 11.6 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 years, according to the CDC, which also reported that women in their 20s had 59% of the abortions in 2016; about 57% of the women who chose abortion had the procedure for the first time; and the number of chemical/medical abortions before 9 weeks' gestation has doubled since 2007. (BP)

Attack in Africa's Burkina Faso kills 14 churchgoers

At least 14 people were killed and several others injured in a Dec. 1 attack on a Protestant church in the West African nation of Burkina Faso. The attack happened in the eastern town of Hantoukoura.

Gunmen shot into the church and fled on motorbikes, according to news reports.

Islamic extremists have grown more active in Burkina Faso in recent years. Since a Jan. 15, 2016, attack that killed 28 civilians including a U.S. missionary hundreds of attacks have been reported.

The U.S. State Department warns against travel in most of Burkina Faso, stating that terrorists may attack places of worship and other targets. About two-thirds of the country's population is Muslim, with a Christian minority. (TAB)

— NEWSBRIEFS —

Belk Baptist pastor, Nabors, celebrates 10 years at church



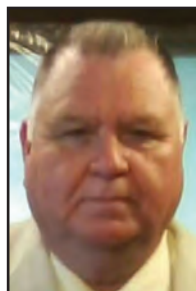
Gene Nabors says when Belk Baptist Church in Fayette Baptist Association called him as pastor, one of the oldest church members gave him a gift.

"She said, 'Everybody calls me Granny and you can call me Granny too,'" he said. "She became like my mother and when you get somebody who loves you like that — a whole church who loves you like that — you've got a real blessing. I love them with all my heart."

For Nabors the past 10 years have felt like being part of a "big ole family in Christ."

"We're all close," he said. "And you can feel the Spirit of the Lord at our church."

Nabors said his journey started at 55 when he rededicated his life to the Lord and God immediately began dealing with him about preaching. He served as pastor of an independent church for two



NABORS

years before answering the call to Belk Baptist.

The congregation at Belk has prayed and supported him as he's battled cancer. He's baptized at least 10 new people into the faith family, and the church has made some improvements to its facilities along the way.

"We have really, really been blessed," Nabors said. "God has blessed us so much at Belk." (Grace Thornton)

Youth evangelist Bowen pleads guilty to child sexual abuse charges



Alabama evangelist Acton Bowen pleaded guilty Dec. 2 to 28 counts of sexual abuse against children.

Bowen entered the plea in an Etowah County courtroom on the day his trial was set to begin, according to Etowah County District Attorney Jody Willoughby.

Bowen, a prominent youth leader and speaker and founder of Acton Bowen Outreach Ministries, was first arrested by Hoover police in April 2018 on several criminal charges, including enticing a child for a sexual act and sexual abuse involving six different victims between the ages of 13 and

16. He was later charged for similar crimes in Etowah County and in Bay County, Florida.

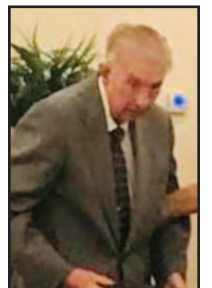
A sentencing hearing is scheduled for Dec. 20. No agreement was made, Willoughby said, which means Bowen could face the maximum sentence for each offense, including up to life in prison. Willoughby declined to comment on sentencing or charges in other jurisdictions. (TAB)

Longtime Stockdale Baptist member, servant recognized by church



Stockdale Baptist Church, Munford, in Coosa River Baptist Association, recently recognized longtime member Jim Parton with a plaque.

Parton, who recently celebrated his 90th birthday, has served Stockdale Baptist in many capacities for more than 75 years, including as worship leader, children's minister and Vacation Bible School director. He currently serves as a deacon and Sunday School teacher.



PARTON

News near you

AUTAUGA ASSOCIATION

▶ On Oct. 20, **Marbury Baptist Church** celebrated 150 years of ministry.

Former pastor Mike Henson was the special guest speaker and the Headley Trio provided special music before and during the service.

The congregation read the church history together and Ralph Foster presented a certificate from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission. Lunch followed the service.

“It was a good day of sweet fellowship,” Pastor Scott Watson said.

BESSEMER ASSOCIATION

▶ **The Baptist Church at McAdory, McCalla**, will host a live nativity Dec. 13–15 from 6 to 8 p.m. nightly. A hayride will take guests to view seven scenes from Christ’s birth to His resurrection. Hot chocolate and Christmas snacks will be served in the fellowship hall. For more information call 205-477-8265 or visit beam.info. Bill McCall is pastor.



Photo by Ralph Foster

COLBERT-LAUDERDALE ASSOCIATION

▶ **Ransomed Community Church, Florence**, recently moved into its new facility. Ransomed Community Church was previously meeting at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. Members of Ransomed Community Church renovated the building given to them by Colbert-Lauderdale Baptist Association and held their first service in the new building Oct. 27. Approximately 300 people attended the first service. Justin Cosby is pastor.

FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION

▶ On Oct. 20, **Straight Mountain Baptist Church, Oneonta**, celebrated its 100th anniversary. Mark Lacks, associate pastor at Lakeview Baptist Church, Highland Lake, was the guest speaker.

Special music was brought by former pastor Jeff Lybrand and his wife, Dawn; former member Darlene Adamson; and Chuck Lacks and Darren Wamble. Former member Luke Townsend presented a song he wrote to the church.



Photo by Lonette Berg

Gerald Glenn from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission and Ernie Carroll, director of missions for Friendship Baptist Association, presented certificates to the church.

A lunch was held following the service and old church photos were shown.

“It was a great celebration with a house full of people,” Chuck Lacks said.

NORTH JEFFERSON ASSOCIATION

▶ **Pineywood Baptist Church, Gardendale**, will host a Christmas concert featuring the Scott family Dec. 22 at 5 p.m. Desserts and coffee will be served following the concert. Everyone is invited. Fred Chapman is pastor.

TUSCALOOSA ASSOCIATION

▶ It was a bittersweet day as **Chapel Hill Baptist Church, Northport**, celebrated its 75-year anniversary Oct. 6. As members of the church celebrated the occasion it was hard to ignore who was missing — Pastor James Nichols, who died in April 2019.

“We honored those gone before and challenged those still here to continue the legacy of Chapel Hill,” said Rob Livingston, minister of education and children.

Former pastor Tim Patrick preached on “Rebooting the Church,” and minister of music Casey Speigner led the congregation in singing “music through the ages.” Special music was brought by the adult and children’s choir.

Angie Cooper presented a certificate from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission.

Photos of past church events and weddings, along with other church memorabilia, were on display. Lunch followed the service. John Pennington is interim pastor. 🇺🇸



Facebook photo

— NEWSBRIEFS —

Through the years Parton also has been involved in prison, nursing home and visitation ministries. (TAB)

Judson Association’s Derrah retires as associational mission strategist



Otis Derrah said Judson Baptist Association has a special place in his heart. He loves the way its ministry centers meet the needs of thousands — and lead people to Christ on a regular basis. He also loves the association’s churches — he himself has served as bivocational pastor of Adoniram Baptist Church, Abbeville, for a while now.

And at the end of October, as Derrah retired as associational mission strategist for Judson Association, he said his five years there have been a “blessed time.”

“We’ve seen God bring a greater sense of unity in our association in the past few years,” he said, noting that he has grown to love the work



DERRAH

of Alabama Baptists even more through his time in associational ministry. “We’ve also seen God do a lot through our ministry centers and help us secure a permanent property and home for the association office.” (Grace Thornton)

WMU’s Blume missions event for girls, teens set for July in Memphis



Blume, a national missions event for girls in grades 5–12, will take place July 8–11, 2020, at Germantown Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee. At Blume, sponsored by Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU), girls will be challenged to serve others and fulfill their part in God’s plan as they hear from speakers and missionaries, pray and worship together and serve the community.

Amy-Jo Girardier, author of “Authentic Love” and “Faithful One,” editor of girlsminister.com, and girls minister and missions coordinator at Brentwood Baptist Church, will lead Bible study.

Registration is now open with early-bird rates available through Jan. 31, 2020. Registration is open until May 1, 2020. Visit blumeforgirls.com for details and to register. (WMU)

UM athletics director, founding baseball coach dies at 64



Mike Jacobs, baseball coach and athletics director (AD) at the University of Mobile (UM), has died at the age of 64.

A Mobile native, Jacobs founded the UM baseball program in 1990 and won 993 games in 30 seasons. He won seven conference championships and reached the NAIA World Series in 2001.

The baseball field at UM was named in Jacobs’ honor in 2011. In 2018 he was inducted into the Alabama Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame. Jacobs was named AD in June 2018.

In a statement UM President Lonnie Burnett called Jacobs a “legendary coach” and a “spiritual mentor to hundreds of players.”

“He was a kind and thoughtful person who went to great lengths to make others successful,” Burnett said.

Jacobs is survived by his wife, Joy, two sons and eight grandchildren. (UM)



JACOBS

Devotional book guides family discipleship, funds missions

By Susan Withrow Murphy
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Great ideas often germinate for years before they fully bloom. Rob Jackson began improvising Billy Bear stories when his daughter Abigail was a toddler, creating the character as a discipleship tool.

As Abigail grew Jackson wrote devotional moments to continue teaching her to love and follow Jesus. At 22, Abigail is a committed Christ follower.

This year Jackson's devotional messages written for his daughter were published as "Moments with God," which Jackson hopes will help other parents in discipling their own children and provide a source of funding for missions.

"I wanted to instill theology in a way that's fun but communicates truth," said Jackson, associate professor of Christian studies at University of Mobile (UM) and chairman of the board of trustees for *The Alabama Baptist*.

"Discipleship materials usually start with teens but the Christian home needs to retake the cradle so children will develop an early passion for Jesus Christ."

Helping parents

Long before Jackson thought of publishing a devotional he shared the lessons with members at Central Baptist Church, Decatur, where he served as pastor until July 2018. It was a hit with parents who found the lessons helpful in training their children.

"They said, 'We need something like this,'" said Jackson.

"Moments With God" is a 42-day, parent-led study that introduces the Bible and concepts about God. The book wraps up with a chapter on explaining the way of salvation and leading a child to Christ.

Evangelism is central to Jackson's life personally and professionally.

At UM, Jackson teaches the youngest Millennials and the oldest of Generation Z (the oldest Z being born in 1996). But his book — and his vision for a series on discipleship — is targeted at the youngest of Generation Z. He believes his involvement in a variety of ministries and organizations could produce solid partnerships in making his vision to disciple Generation Z and their parents a reality.

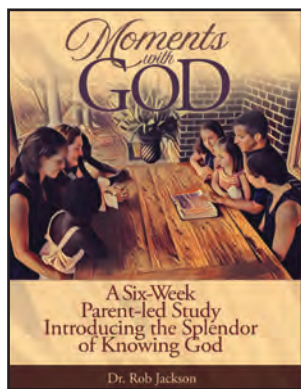
"Generation Z is the most unevangelized group," said Jackson. "I want to create materials that train parents to disciple their young children in spiritual disciplines like giving, fasting and prayer. As families teach their children parents will learn to model the truths of Scripture."


No profit motive

For Jackson no profit motive exists in publishing "Moments with God." The publisher will retain a small amount to compensate for its services but any additional income will go to missions.

"I prayed that God would increase what I can give to further God's kingdom," said Jackson. "I think this simple book that I wrote with my daughter in mind is an answer to that prayer."

To order "Moments with God" visit www.livingwordpublishing.org/product/moments-with-god.









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PASTOR

College Heights Baptist Church, Glencoe, is searching for a full-time pastor. Send resúmes to: College Heights Baptist Church, 411 Rabbittown Road, Glencoe, AL 35905.

PASTOR

Cave Spring Baptist seeks full-time, energetic pastor for a motivated, multi-generational flock to accomplish Kingdom work in the fast-growing area of Priceville, Alabama. Only those whose life and principles align with 1 Timothy 3:1-7 need apply. Deadline: Dec. 28. Email resumé to: info@thecsbcc.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

First Baptist Church, Uriah, is prayerfully seeking a bivocational pastor. Please mail resumé to: First Baptist Church, ATTN: Pastor Search Committee, P.O. Box 337, Uriah, AL 36480.

YOUTH MINISTER

Silver Run Baptist Church seeking a part-time passionate youth minister with 1 year or plus experience in leadership associated position with youth. Send resumé to: P.O. Box 8, Seale, AL 36875, ATTN: Lena Harris or email to: cowgirl-lena@yahoo.com.

BIVOCATIONAL YOUTH MINISTER

The focus is loving and discipling our youth. Dogwood Grove Baptist, Adger, Alabama. Email queries to: pastor at bobfitz1.pcc@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL/PART-TIME YOUTH MINISTER

Montevallo First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 46, Montevallo, AL 35115 is prayerfully seeking a part-time youth minister. To apply, please submit a cover letter and resumé to the above address or email to: mfbc@bellsouth.net.

OTHER POSITIONS

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS

The Lamar Baptist Association is prayerfully seeking and currently accepting resúmes for the position of director of missions. This person should have a background in pastoral service or missions related experi-

ence. This will be a bivocational position with a minimum hourly requirement for weekly duties. Resúmes should be sent to: Lamar Baptist Association, P.O. Box 550, Vernon, AL 35592 or dropped by the office at 175 10th St. NW, Vernon, AL. No application will be considered without a resumé and references. The deadline to submit is Dec. 15. Contact the association office at 205-695-9165 with any questions.

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Big day, new way



Unsplash.com

Understanding Alabama's new marriage law, what it means for churches, pastors

By **Susan Withrow Murphy**
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

A new law has changed the way couples tie the knot in Alabama.

Gone is the marriage license requirement under which every other U.S. state currently operates. Replacing the license is a certificate obtained on the internet that must be signed by the couple while witnessed by a notary then filed at the probate court within 30 days.

Under this new law no ceremony is required to solemnize the occasion. But what are the precedents, merits and potential complications to Alabama's new marriage law and how might it affect pastors, churches and couples seeking to marry?

History of marriage

Religious and political dissenters of state-issued licenses have argued that marriage is a natural right and not a privilege to be granted by the state. Among U.S. states marriage licenses were not uniformly issued until 1929. Just six years later, primarily for reasons of public health, couples were required to obtain blood tests before receiving their license. As tests became too costly and sexually transmitted diseases became easier to treat states began discontinuing blood tests to marry. However, obtaining a license and holding a civil or religious ceremony remained a requirement for marriage in all states until Alabama decided otherwise in 2019.

Seeing the legal winds changing on marriage, in 2015 the Southeast Law Institute (SLI) petitioned the

Alabama Supreme Court on behalf of Alabama Citizens Action Program (ALCAP) and Alabama Policy Institute to uphold the constitutionality of marriage as between one man and one woman in Alabama. Five months later the U.S. Supreme Court decided in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that same-sex "marriage" was a constitutional right in all states, overruling state laws.

Some probate judges faced a moral dilemma in issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples, according to Eric Johnston, president of SLI. After *Obergefell* several Alabama judges refused

to issue any marriage licenses. They excused themselves based on ambiguous wording of a statute regarding probate judges' duties. However, these judges were generally expected to issue marriage licenses in Alabama. Litigation against them was expected if they refused to comply with the Supreme Court decision.

Months before *Obergefell*, in an effort to protect the religious freedoms of dissenting probate court judges, SLI began sending proposals to Alabama legislators that would recognize judges' religious rights and excuse them from having to issue same-sex "marriage" licenses.

"We spent thousands of hours in an effort to preserve religious freedoms in Alabama," Johnston said. "Legislators failed and, in some cases, refused to support those proposals."

State Sen. Greg Albritton (R-Atmore) proposed a change that would return marriage to contrac-

tual law so probate judges need not be involved in issuing licenses. This change removed any threat to the religious principles of objecting judges.

"The new law is a last-ditch effort to work with the circumstances and cultural changes we face today," said Joe Godfrey, executive director of ALCAP.

'Sacred covenant'

"Government is not God," said Alan Floyd, lead teaching pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church, Mobile. "Marriage is a sacred covenant, not just another social contract."

Instead of defending marriage Floyd believes churches should start teaching and re-teaching marriage — what it means in the context of the Bible and society — to counter any misunderstanding. Cottage Hill Baptist requires couples to receive premarital counseling before Floyd or any other Cottage Hill minister performs a marriage ceremony.

"Many in today's generation have a romanticized view that marriage is basically the government's affirmation of romantic love between two willing people," said Floyd. "A biblical

understanding of marriage is that the couple is giving themselves one to the other. An accountability exists, a public accountability for the marriage, for the wedding."

He noted that "church" weddings have decreased throughout the past five years or more in favor of outdoor or venue weddings, where he has officiated. Since the law passed in August he saw no significant

change of the number of weddings he or other Cottage Hill ministers officiated in the month of September compared to the previous year. But the lasting effects of the law remain to be seen.

"The new marriage law is probably going to seem like a radical change," said Jim Swedenburg, director of the office of Cooperative Program and stewardship development for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. "Not having a license will be what's strange to our ministers."

Swedenburg said concerns have been raised regarding administrative details. He advises that if a church policy does not exist regarding the use of outside officiants one should be established.

Since a legal requirement for a ceremony no longer exists couples who choose to marry in a church may have someone in mind to officiate other than the church pastor.

Pastors should decide if the requirement for notarization of the Alabama Marriage Certificate should be completed before, during or after the ceremony. As a courtesy to the couple having a church staff member available to notarize the form just prior to the ceremony would ensure

the legal and ceremony date are the same. Ultimately it is the couple's responsibility to provide the proper documentation. If the pastor is concerned the ceremony he is performing is legal in the eyes of the state as well as in the eyes of God he should make certain the document is signed in front of a notary before the couple leaves the church or venue.✝

"Marriage is a sacred covenant, not just another social contract."

**Pastor Alan Floyd
Cottage Hill Baptist Church,
Mobile**

The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions has recommendations for church policies and best practices regarding marriage and gender on its website, www.alsbom.org/safe under the "Gender Issues" link.

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WMU of Virginia offers resources for domestic violence awareness

As a member of Woman's Missionary Union of Virginia's (WMUV) Hope Team: Domestic Violence, Jocelyn Henry-Whitehead emphasizes that "domestic violence or intimate partner violence is really a global issue."

As she seeks to help others break the cycle of domestic violence through awareness and education, she has participated in several conferences and missions trips across the U.S. and in Kenya, Rwanda, South Korea and Spain.

'First pray'

"Wherever I go domestic violence is there in that particular place," she said. An advocate for domestic violence awareness based on her own experience growing up in an abusive home, she added, "I'm so thankful that I can do this."

Approximately a third of women worldwide face domestic or intimate partner

violence, she said, citing World Health Organization statistics. Males can be victims, but females are disproportionately affected.

Many in WMUV's domestic violence awareness initiative participate because of domestic violence suffered personally, Henry-Whitehead said.

A key factor of outreach addresses strategies churches, communities and individuals and groups can use to tackle the problem.

"Of course, the first thing is to pray," she said. "We pray for relationships, we pray for marriages because domestic violence is across ages and stages and gender."

Research involves locating shelters and answering legal concerns.

"It's educating, equipping, encouraging, supporting people and empowering them," she said.

Brainstorming ideas during a recent conference included such options as

publishing 1-800 numbers in church bulletins, distributing brochures and posting information in men's and women's restrooms at churches.

Facing it in churches

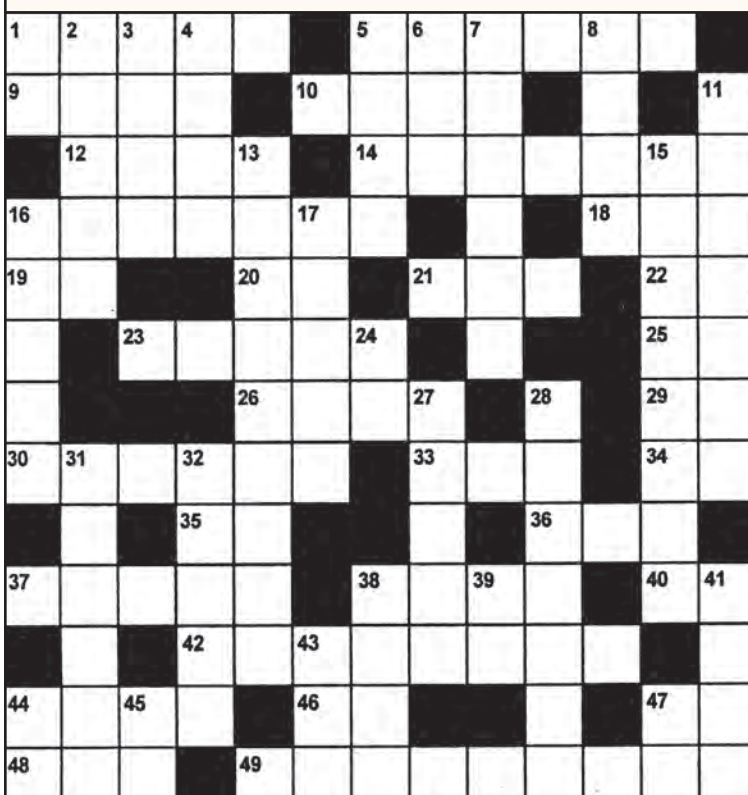
Churches can tackle domestic violence in inoffensive ways, she said, even including children's, youth and adult ministry.

"For some people it's going to be deliverance," she said. "For some people it's going to be restoration. For some people it's going to be transformation and for some people it brings the opportunity to assist and help."

Churches, missions organizations or others interested in domestic violence awareness initiatives may contact Valerie Carter-Smith, WMUV executive director, at vcarter@wmuv.org or Laura Davis, WMUV director of missions involvement, at ldavis@wmuv.org. (BP)

Christian Crossword

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Across

- Sermon on the _____. (Matt. 5-7)
- Barabbas was in prison for insurrection and this. (Luke 23:19)
- Old Testament priest and book.
- Hill made of sand.
- Beersheba means "well of the ____." (Gen. 21:31)
- The Lord will do this to Zion. (Isa. 51:3)
- The Sovereign Lord will ____ His anger on Israel. (Ezek. 7:3)
- O taste and ____ that the Lord is good. (Ps. 34:8)
- Master of Education. (abbr.)
- A, B, C, ____, ____.
- What the risen Jesus did with broiled fish. (Luke 24:43)
- Mister. (abbr.)
- I will not ____ you as orphans. (John 14:18)

- Annum. (abbr.)
- Where lions lie down. (Ps. 104:22)
- Radium. (abbr.)
- Nehemiah prayed before the God of _____. (Neh. 1:4)
- One of Noah's sons. (Gen. 6:10)
- J, ____, ____.
- Slang for simple.
- Little Jack Horner's pastry.
- A half shekel was given to ____ for one's life. (Ex. 30:15)
- A servant for life had an awl put through this. (Deut. 15:17)
- District Superintendent. (abbr.)
- The apostles were unschooled, ____ men. (Acts 4:13)
- Jesus' garment did not have one of these. (John 19:23)
- I ____ WHO I AM. (Ex. 3:14)
- Expression of mild sympathy.

- Is the Lord's ____ too short?
- Boaz told his men not to do this to Ruth. (Ruth 2:15)

Down

- Come to ____, all you who are weary. (Matt. 11:28)
- Layer of the atmosphere.
- Mountains in Asia.
- Nickname for Nathan.
- You expected ____, but see, it turned out to be little. (Hag. 1:9)
- One in Spanish.
- Type of place where 5,000 were fed. (Mark 6:35)
- One of the kinds of love.
- Believers receive this kind of life.
- Son of Rehob. (2 Sam. 8:3)
- Others ____, "He seems to be advocating
- foreign gods." (Acts 17:18)
- An inheritance of Asher. (Josh. 19:30)
- Number of Sceva's sons. (Acts 19:14)
- ____ Gedi. (1 Sam. 24:1)
- An inheritance of Issachar. (Josh. 19:19)
- Paul appealed to him. (Acts 25:25)
- Jewish queen of Persia.
- This of the wicked is like that of a snake. (Ps. 58:4)
- Zacchaeus sat on one of these. (Luke 19)
- Bachelor of Arts. (abbr.)
- The people of Rabbah labored with these. (1 Chron. 20:3)
- Starting a quarrel is like breaching one of these. (Prov. 17:14)
- Salvation Army. (abbr.)
- I ____ the light of the world. (John 8:12)
- ____ a hen gathers her chicks. (Matt. 23:37)

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For December 15

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.
Dean of Christian Studies, University of Mobile



GOD REQUIRES Numbers 20:1–13

God requires holiness from His people. For those whom He appoints to leadership a greater accountability is expected. The same God who judges rebellion in the pew also judges rebellion in the pulpit. Every leader is accountable to God.

Forty years of wilderness wandering took its toll. The book of Numbers records accounts of rebellion in the ranks. It seems everyone had complaints against Moses: first his older siblings (Num. 12), then 10 spies (Num. 14), his fellow Levites (Num. 16) and the rank and file Israelites (over and over again).

Such rejection takes a toll on leaders often resulting in frustration and anger. That frustration, or even righteous indignation, does not give leaders permission to disobey the instructions of God.

The Timing (1–5)

The timing was not good. Moses was mourning the death of Miriam, his older sister who watched over him in the Nile until Pharaoh's daughter drew him out of the water from his basket. No doubt he recalled how they reunited after almost 80 years apart, how she questioned his choice of a wife and how she recognized God had chosen Moses for this monumental task.

While mourning for their sister Moses and Aaron heard the people complaining about their lack of water. Had Israel forgotten how God had turned the bitter water sweet at Marah? Did they not remember that God brought water from the rock at Horeb, enough water to provide for all the people and their livestock? Evidently not.

Israel remembered the menu from which they ate as slaves in Egypt, but they could not remember the time when God abundantly provided for them through the rock as a result of Moses' obedience.

The Directions (6–8)

God does not give the same directions for every situation. When Israel was preparing to meet with God at Horeb, God told Moses to take his rod and strike the rock.

This time God's clear instruction was to speak to the rock. Implicit in this instruction was "don't hit it."

Christian leaders have much to learn from this event. God gives us clear instructions in His word including the qualifications, theology, character and conduct of church leaders. Why do we complicate matters by explaining away these instructions? How can we justify excusing ourselves because of our intent while judging others by their actions? The answer is we have no excuse for our sins.

The Frustration (9–11)

Moses was clearly frustrated. "Take the staff" — check. "Assemble the community" — check. "You and your brother Aaron are to speak to the rock while they watch." Moses didn't merely speak; Israel would learn a lesson. Israel wants water? Let's give them water! "Hear now you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses struck the rock — twice.

God, not Moses, brought the water from the rock. In the midst of his frustration Moses lost sight of the fact that the Almighty God is the author of miracles. He and Aaron did not bring water from the rock though his words seem to indicate that he thought so.

The Fallout (12–13)

Moses lost his temper. Who doesn't, right? Frustration is no excuse for disobeying God. Let me write those words down again so I am doubly accountable for them: frustration is no excuse for disobeying God.

I type this with tears in my eyes thinking of the many times and many ways that I've excused my own rebellious heart because of the actions of others.

Moses and Aaron missed out. Aaron wouldn't come close to the promised land though he had served as high priest in Israel. Moses would catch a glimpse of the land from the trans-Jordanian mountains, but he would never step foot in the land "flowing with milk and honey." Don't miss out. 🌿

Bible Studies for Life

By Dr. Jim Barnette, Professor, Samford University
Senior Pastor, Brookwood Baptist Church



DOES ABSOLUTE TRUTH EXIST? John 1:14–18; 8:30–32; 18:36–38a

Many wonder if we can really know the truth. (18:36–38a)

When Jesus tells Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world He is referring to its origin, not its location. John's Gospel repeatedly asserts that Jesus originates from God and that His kingship has the same origin (see John 3:31; 8:23; 16:28). Some New Testament scholars remind us the word for "kingdom" can be translated as "reign" and this word can help highlight Christ's lordship as God's Son.

Truth is a major theme of John's Gospel. The word appears here 25 times but only seven times in the other Gospels combined.

Pilate's question is wrongly put. He is assuming that truth is a "what." But the real truth is not a "what" but a "who." Jesus is Himself the truth, the ultimate reality with whom people can have personal experience and relationship.

We can know what truth is because Jesus has revealed it. (1:14–18)

John does not say that the Word became a man or even a body, but "flesh," a crude, blunt word for sophisticated Greeks who assumed the body would be cast aside.

The living God has made His great, decisive move in arriving to us in the flesh.

In his first two epistles John goes on the offensive against the Gnostic sect, the Docetists, who taught that Jesus only *appeared* to be in the flesh. So heretical are those who were corrupting the truth of the incarnation that 1 and 2 John refer to these false teachers as "antichrists."

The eternal Word "became flesh." This is the first time the verb "to become" has been used. Prior to verse 14 only the verb "to be" had been used. The verb changes in verse 14 to show that the Word has moved from the eternal to the earthly. Jesus, the begotten Son of God, has stepped out of eternity and into our world.

The Word "lived among us" or more accurately, "made His dwell-

ing among us." John's Greek word means literally "tent" and is related to the Old Testament words for "tabernacle," "tent" and "temple," in which God lived among His people.

In the days of Moses, God's glory was seen in the tabernacle and later His glory was revealed in the temple. John's Gospel will show that the glory experienced in the tabernacle and temple is now eclipsed by the glory of the living Christ.

When we trust and follow Christ we discover the truth and experience life and freedom. (8:30–32)

Some in the crowd heard Jesus and believed in Him. But how deeply were they committed and how long would their belief last?

Jesus makes clear His expectations of discipleship for those who claim to believe. He does not seek fair-weather followers or short-term adherents who will fall by the wayside. They must "abide" in His word if they are to be a part of His movement. They must not only hear what He teaches but be steeped in it.

This means not only hearing but obeying Him and submitting to His authority. Only through obedience can a disciple know the truth. A constant theme of John's Gospel is that the deepest knowing comes through doing. This means far more than memorizing concepts to be verbalized. The discovery of truth comes from encountering and yielding to the Christ who is the living truth.

The connection Jesus makes between truth and freedom is vital to Christian faith. Truth never leads to bondage. The whole idea is perplexing to the Pharisees, who were not in the least convinced that they needed freedom.

In spite of the heavy yokes they placed on themselves and so many others they never recognized the bondage under which they lived. Only the truth and freedom that Jesus provides brings light and life to those fortunate to receive it. 🌿



Media reviews

MUSIC

Guntersville FBC Pickers

Christmas Pickin'

Guntersville FBC Pickers

If you're looking for songs that will inspire and make you laugh, look no further than this collection of 18 Christmas tunes performed by the Guntersville FBC Pickers. Group members play banjo, guitar and mandolin, but it's the vocals where the inspiration and fun are. Titles like "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem" and "Joy to the World"



will lift your spirit, and songs such as "Nuttin' for Christmas" and "Christmas Shopping" will provide the laughter. Hear a sample at gvillefbc.org. (Reviewed by Don Campbell)

Plumb

Behold; It's Christmastime

The talented female Christian rocker known as Plumb has released two Christmas EPs — and both are worth your attention. "Behold" features the light-rock, Christ-centric title track "Behold" and classics like "O Holy Night" and "Silent Night." "It's Christmastime" is more playful, with



catchy songs like "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" and "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas." Both EPs contain five tracks. ✝

'Music was a source of healing'

Jazz artist Jonathan Butler expresses 'love for Christ' through music

By Michael Foust
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Ever since Jonathan Butler was a child growing up amid apartheid in Cape Town, South Africa, music has carried extra significance.

It crossed racial barriers. It served as an escape from the hatred he experienced. It also brought happiness.

"I was refused entry in many, many, many places during apartheid," he said. "Music was a source of healing. Music was where I could feel safe."

That was four decades ago. Eventually Butler became a Christian — despite the segregation he observed in churches in South Africa — and he learned to sing about the God he loved.

Today the 58-year-old Butler is known within the music world as a talented jazz artist who isn't shy about his faith.

His latest release is a Christmas album, "Christmas Together," that includes other artists, including Sheléa, Dave Koz, Keiko Matsui and Kirk Whalum.

Butler's music career began when he joined a traveling stage show. He recorded his first album at age 12. In 1988 at age 27, he was nominated for two Grammys, including for best R&B vocal performance for a single for his song "Lies" (Smokey Robinson won that year) and for best R&B instrumental performance for "Going Home."

Many of his 25-plus albums over the years have been faith-centric.

"When I got to the point where



Jonathan Butler

Photo by Raj Naik

I could embrace who I was and I didn't have to be ashamed to express that through my music — my love for God, my love for Christ

— I felt so free," Butler said. "I feel like I'm just a channel for which God can play through me and reach people through me."

Butler grew up in poverty and says Christ saved him from a life of "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll." But it didn't happen overnight.

Tough questions

He had to overcome tough questions about racism and segregation. He eventually realized that "the God that I serve is not involved in any of that stuff." He was saved at age 19.

"It was through love that I realized my own inability to save myself," he said, referencing a friendship with his wife's late brother.

Butler lives in southern California, although he travels back to South Africa once a year. He founded the Jonathan Butler Foundation for at-risk South African children. Part of its purpose is to reach children through music. Butler's foundation recently became part of the Lalela Foundation, a larger organization with a similar purpose.

"Giving back, to me, means everything, because the opportunities that I received over the years — I'd like to pass that on." ✝

Meet the reviewer

Michael Foust covers the intersection of faith and entertainment as a media reviewer for The Alabama Baptist. He also is the husband of an amazing wife and the father of four young children.



Pastor Silas Lian planted Agape Myanmar Mission in San Diego to reach the city's estimated 2,000 Myanmar people. Lian fled Myanmar more than 15 years ago because of political and religious persecution.

Fulfilling the vision



Agapemyanmar.org

Myanmar refugee plants church in San Diego, leads others from country to Christ

By Margaret Colson
California Southern Baptist

Fleeing civil unrest in their homeland many refugees from Myanmar (formerly Burma) desperately seek new lives in America. Here many, like Soe Htwe, find new life in Christ.

Htwe, a Buddhist monk, journeyed from Myanmar through a refugee camp in Thailand to San Diego. He soon met Pastor Silas Lian, who planted Agape Myanmar Mission to reach the city's estimated 2,000 Myanmar people.

Passionate and committed, Lian and other Christian leaders visit "Burmese family's houses to pray for them and to share the gospel day and night," he said.

Meeting and soon developing a relationship with Htwe, the pastor invited the monk to a house fellowship on Saturday evenings.

Htwe heard the gospel, but "he could not make the decision to accept Christ as his Lord and Savior easily," Lian said. He then invited Htwe to weeknight Bible studies.

'A great decision'

"We went through creation and the story of Christ," Lian said. "In the end he made a great decision and got baptized. He is still in the process of discipleship to become a mature disciple of Jesus Christ."

Htwe is just one of many refugees from Myanmar who have made professions of faith. Lian said he has personally led more than 70 people to Christ; more than 40 have made professions of faith so far this year.

Lian has a heart for Myanmar refugees because he was once one

himself. He left Myanmar more than 15 years ago because of political and religious persecution.

"He is a refugee and he can relate to the mindset of other refugees," said Ross Shepherd, California Southern Baptist Convention (CSBC) church planting initiatives team leader.

He also has a heart for those who do not know

Christ personally because he recalls his life before becoming a Christian. Although born into a Christian family, "I did not experience salvation in my life," Lian said. It wasn't until he was "reading and studying the word of God" while in seminary in India in 1999 that he made a profession of faith in Christ.

After seminary Lian planted churches among Myanmar refugees in Thailand and Malaysia.

Arriving in San Diego in February 2014, Lian started intentionally meeting refugees from Myanmar and helping them with practical needs such as translation and transportation. He began leading Bible studies for the refugees, who are predominantly Buddhist, and on Christmas Day 2016, Agape Myanmar Mission held its first public worship service with 125 in attendance.

"It is a difficult ministry and I am so encouraged by the success the Lord has blessed Pastor Silas with in reaching refugees from Myanmar for Christ," Shepherd said.

"He has a passion for Christ and a passion for His people."

Each Sunday those in the worship services of the young church recite its vision statement in unison: "By the year of 2030 all the Myanmar (Burmese) people must hear the gospel of Jesus Christ." Then they put that vision statement into action holding numerous community engagement events, many centered around holidays and other important calendar dates such as back-to-school.

Through these events, "We have come to know a lot of new Myanmar refugee families, getting to know our community better," Lian said. "A lot of Myanmar people hear the gospel for the first time and some of them have made a decision to follow Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior."

CSBC has walked alongside the church planter every step of the way as he reaches into his community.

"We are called to assist the church planter in every way we can," Shepherd noted.

Funds from the California Mis-

sion Offering (CMO) help make the many outreach events of Agape Myanmar Mission possible.

"We really thank God for the California Southern Baptist Convention," Lian said.

'Step up'

To further fulfill the church's vision statement, Lian asks "all my people every Sunday to share their testimony and their blessings to their families and relatives not only in America but back in Myanmar."

This year Lian has led the church to "Step Up!" the 2019 CMO theme, "to train and support 120 church planters and pastors in Myanmar," with plans to conduct a training conference in Yangon, Myanmar, in November. Participants will receive meals, accommodations, a Burmese Bible, books and training materials, a backpack, a notebook and pen and a return bus ticket to their missions field, Lian said.

It's a big undertaking, one that would not be possible without financial support through CMO.

Agape Myanmar Mission "has raised enough money to cover 60 of the pastors' costs. CSBC is going to provide the funding for 30 more pastors to attend the training on full scholarship," Shepherd said.

Training church planters and pastors in Myanmar is another facet of fulfilling Agape Myanmar Mission's vision statement of sharing the gospel with all Myanmar people, wherever they are.

"To fulfill that vision we need to partner with all believers, churches and pastors who believe the Great Commandment and the Great Commission," Lian said. (BP)



Bagan, Myanmar

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