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(NOUN) com·mence·ment /kə'mensmənt/
A beginning or start.

UNIVERSITY OF MOBILE



SAMFORD UNIVERSITY



JUDSON COLLEGE



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For graduation stories from our three state Baptist schools, see pages 8–12.

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Photo courtesy of Carrie B. McWhorter

Stella McWhorter spoke on what defines success in her valedictory speech at Cleburne County High School's commencement on May 10. Stella is the daughter of TAB Content Editor Carrie McWhorter and her husband, Owen.

Daughter's graduation speech defines success

By Carrie B. McWhorter
TAB Media

Though thousands of books have been written on parenting, the old observation is true — children don't come with instruction manuals.

From day one, parenting is a process of learning through experience, of leaning on God's guidance and the wisdom of others to direct our children "onto the right path" (Prov. 22:6).

During this graduation season, as my daughter, Stella, finishes high school and transitions to college in the fall, I'm sure I'm not the only parent wondering, *Have I done enough to help my children choose the right path?*

But as Stella delivered the valedictory speech at her graduation on May 10, her words reminded me that parenting, like so much in life, is most successful when it's a collaborative effort.

My husband and I have certainly been influential, but our extended family, our church family, her teachers and friends — each, I believe, placed in her life by the Lord — have been important influences as well, and for them, we are so grateful.

Here are some of Stella's thoughts on success, which I hope will encourage you as well:

"For a long time, I held a view of success that was more distorted than I would like to admit. I have

always been determined to succeed, but sometimes it felt as though no matter what I did, I would never be significant enough, kind enough, or most of all, successful enough.

"Last year, during a dark time for many people, with quarantines in effect and sickness all around, I heard a quote that sparked a change in my mind. 'For our own success to be real, it must contribute to the success of others.'"

Small actions

"These words, written by Eleanor Roosevelt, cast a new light on my definition of success. Where previously I had looked upon success as something individual, something big that everyone could see, I now saw that success should be measured in small actions, in the relationships formed with those around you.

"Recently I was honored with the 'Kindness Award' for actions I had taken to assist one of my fellow students with work she had missed while away competing at a cheer competition. Due to my small actions, she succeeded on her virtual tests. Her words as she spoke about how she saw me as a classmate and as a friend meant the world to me.

"For all the time I had spent dreaming of success, it had been in front of me all along. I realized that I had never been more successful than when my teammates, classmates and friends were succeeding right beside me."✝



The crossword puzzle can be found on page 13.

TAB Media

"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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RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

By Jennifer Davis Rash

President and Editor-in-Chief



jrash@thealabamabaptist.org
@RashionalThts

Watts reflects on beginnings, endings, consistency of change

EDITOR'S NOTE — The first day Cynthia Watts walked into the office, she and I almost forgot to go home that night. We brainstormed about all the upcoming projects and ideas yet to be fleshed out. She listened as I dreamed, and she encouraged me to dream even more. And before long, Cynthia was the muscle behind making many of those initial projects come to life. Read her account of those projects below. I will always be grateful for her diligence, hard work and care for me personally. —Jennifer Davis Rash

By Cynthia Walker Watts

Executive Assistant

Jennifer Rash officially began her role as the president/editor-in-chief of The Alabama Baptist on Jan. 1, 2019. That was my first day too. Timing is everything.

She began her leadership with a staff retreat filled with training, games, meals, speakers and brainstorming. The rules of the brainstorming were that all ideas were welcomed. Everyone on staff was encouraged to participate. And everyone did.

Ideas from the staff flew faster than they could be written down: brighten the building; get new office furniture; create opportunities to participate in missions; pray together during the week; engage younger readers; partner with other Alabama

Baptist entities. Then one idea was mentioned I thought would be impossible — publish a paper for all of the United States.

Activity began immediately and continues even now. The glass wall came down in the entry, and the receptionist's area became a museum honoring former editors and The Alabama Baptist legacy.

The antique brass sconces were replaced with new light fixtures. The walls were painted a brighter color. Heavy draperies were replaced with attractive blinds. The front door was painted red.

The longtime board room was transformed into a community room, furnished with tables,

chairs, coffee maker and a coffee cart selected from Facebook Marketplace, a smart budgetary decision. The room now welcomes outside guests, staff lunches, meetings, board members and events.

A former office is now a small conference room available to local pastors or others needing a place to meet. The storage room is now a podcast studio.

The former business office is a state-of-the-art training room with tables, chairs and audiovisual equipment for virtual meetings. This room has already hosted an Alzheimer's conference, writing workshops and several other events.

TAB staff members are encouraged to train as Alabama

Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers, and many have served in Alabama and other states.

The staff has provided Christmas presents for children at the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes. Several staff members also have relationships with our Baptist colleges, the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, Shocco Springs Conference Center and The Baptist Foundation of Alabama.

An online offering, The Rope, is written for college students and young professionals.

We enjoy relationships with the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, state and national WMU and ALCAP. The flow of information with the local churches and associations is daily.

And now, the pièce de résistance, The Baptist Paper — our new 28-page, full-color print edition which will be delivered every other week. Several pastors have called this “a brilliant idea,” and it is. The brainstorming idea I thought was impossible was mailed out last week.

All this and more have happened since January 2019, and I have gotten to watch these incredible people make it happen. I will miss the magic of TAB when I retire May 19. However, we know that timing — God's timing — is everything. 🌈



During her time on the TAB Media staff, Cynthia Watts (left) helped Jennifer Davis Rash (right) participate in a variety of activities across the state, such as a 2019 Samford University Legacy League event that included a meet and greet with Christian artist David Phelps.

Photo courtesy of Samford University

Your Voice



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

Call it a comeback: VBS 2021 offers fresh start

By Jack Lucas

Illinois State Baptist Association

In 2020, churches in my state reported a drastic decline in Vacation Bible School enrollment. Churches saw 73% fewer people participate in VBS due to pandemic-related shutdowns.

While some churches pivoted to offer VBS in small modules, in driveways or online, many were forced to postpone the 2020 version of a beloved, dependable outreach opportunity.

What a great opportunity, then, this summer offers us!

There is still time to make 2021 the year of the comeback for VBS at your church. It will look different

than in previous years, almost certainly. But let's not miss the chance we do have to share the gospel with families who desperately need to hear it.

As Lifeway's Melita Thomas wrote recently, VBS is an opportunity to reengage people who haven't yet returned to regular worship attendance. Reach out and ask how they would like to be involved in this year's VBS, advised Thomas, or mobilize them to invite friends and family who don't know Jesus.

Still in the planning stages? Consider these ideas:

► **Weigh your options.** Churches may have purchased curriculum last year that went unused when VBS

was postponed. Now's the time to dust off those decorations and ideas.

► **Switch it up.** Last year was different. This year will be too. Families inside and outside the church may still be hesitant to participate in person. Take VBS outdoors using a backyard Bible club-style model. Lifeway has created a kit to help churches do just that. Or set up a "drive through VBS" in the church parking lot, with volunteers ready to lead participants through craft, recreation and Bible study rotations.

► **Take a whole-family approach.** Even if the family model isn't a fit for your VBS, there are ways to provide an experience for parents that coincides with their kids' involvement. Offer a parenting seminar or other opportunity for them to connect with parents in the community and at church. If the teenagers aren't serving that week, provide alternative activities for them based on the general principles you're teaching in VBS. And don't forget senior adults. Invite everyone to be there for VBS in some form.

We likely won't see pre-pandemic numbers at this year's VBS. But every participant we meet this year is one more person who will hear the gospel and one more life potentially changed.

This is indeed a comeback and a step in the right direction. It's a way to show the communities around us we're moving forward, compelled by a powerful mission and message.

I love the image of generosity shared by our Lord Jesus as He taught the crowds (Luke 6:38). This is the perfect picture of what happens when we have a generous heart and allow that to lead our actions. How much the Lord will press down, shake a bit and add more, until everything runs over, filling our hearts and lives with His generosity!

Jesus taught the Christian character trait of being generous. Trust goes hand in hand with generosity. If we give generously and sacrificially to others, we must trust and rely on the Lord to continually fill our coffers and provide for our own needs. Our Lord created and owns all things. He can and will provide. He is worthy of our trust and honor.

Angie Quantrell
WMU preschool
resources editor
wmu.com

The Lord gave us prayer as an avenue to have an ongoing intimate personal relationship with Him. When you think of prayer, think of it as a relationship. It will really encourage you, excite you, invite you to come into the presence of the Father.

Pastor Morgan Bailey
Macedonia Baptist Church
Ranburne, Ala.

Every church member needed

Through seasons of worshiping online and now back in person, new opportunities have arisen from the challenges.

New pathways to connect people to life in Jesus are being explored and implemented.

Amplifying hope to friends, neighbors and strangers ... has taken on new urgency.

Gathering to worship in person with fellow believers and family has and always will be vital as "we see the day of Christ's return approaching."

We need you!

Every member is needed to

"encourage one another" and to be encouraged, meeting together for "worship and instruction," rekindling the flame and passion of faith in corporate worship and in small groups.

In 2021, may we ALL gladly say with the Apostle Paul, "[Forget] what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. ... Press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

Pastor Jimmy Stewart
First Baptist Church
Gulfport, Miss.

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“Sorrow and pain began in Genesis. By Revelation, they will be no more.”

GREG MATTE

Senior pastor, Houston's First Baptist Church (Texas)

Sometimes I think we are so eager to be a part of something, to be accepted, that we will unite around our shared meanness without even seeing what we have done.

Amy Whitfield
Associate vice president for convention communications at the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, in a 2014 Christianity Today article

For a lot of the last year, I feel like we've just been in survival mode, ... just kind of getting through. But God has so much more for you than just to survive.

He wants you to thrive. He wants His church to thrive. He wants your family to thrive. He wants your

marriage to thrive. ...

In Isaiah chapter 44, God is speaking to His people during a season of great stress and struggle. He makes this stunning promise when he says, ... I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants, and my blessing on your children. They will thrive (v. 3b-4a). They will thrive. What an amazing promise!

Kevin Lee
New Work Fellowship
Hopkinsville, Ky.

My firm conviction, based on our research over the past 26 years, is that the Christian community is woefully unprepared to address the questions, mindsets and worldviews of Gen Z.

No, it's not just a stage-of-life

thing that the younger set will simply "outgrow." The sacred canopy under which they live — the plausibility of the Bible's claims, the informational world they inhabit, the way screens shape their perceptions of reality — is quite disconnected from the structures of discipleship that most congregations employ.

I believe the church is going to need new models of discipleship (or new wineskins, as Jesus described) to address the actual questions younger generations are asking of the Bible and of belief in general.

David Kinnaman
President, Barna Group
From the preface to the "State of the Bible USA 2021" report by the American Bible Society

Westmoreland shares 9 life lessons

Samford University President Andrew Westmoreland, who will retire as the university's 18th president at the end of the academic year, spoke at three of Samford's commencement ceremonies this spring.

Over the course of the three commencements, he imparted nine lessons, three at each ceremony.

"These nine points reflect the things I have tried to understand over the 42 years of my career in higher education. They are incredibly simple yet difficult to follow. Remember, as I mention them to you this morning, I am preaching to myself, as well as you," he said.

1. I need to respect everyone.
2. I need to take a walk when I'm stressed, even if it is raining and — perhaps, especially if it is raining.

3. I need to remember to trust the Lord with all my heart and lean not on my own understanding.

4. I need to listen carefully.
5. I need to guard and limit my own speech, spoken or written.

6. I need to extend grace to others, even if I feel I have not received grace from them.

7. I need to apologize quickly and without qualifying conditions when I have been wrong or have hurt someone.

8. I need to recognize that the loneliness I sometimes feel is actually shared by everyone.

9. I need to find happiness in the fleeting moments of the day.

Westmoreland encouraged the graduates to remember these lessons.

"Do these things and when you are old, your lives will be fulfilled, your families will be happier and maybe, just maybe, the world will be better for it." (Samford)

From the *Twitterverse*

@MarkDever

"On the cross we see sin fully punished and yet fully pardoned." C.H. Spurgeon (MT15.39).

@edstetzer

Interesting so many pastors conferences, denominational meetings and more are asking me to speak on the same thing now:

- ▶ Where do we go from here in a post-COVID reality?
- ▶ How do we help Christians live faithfully in a divided world?
- ▶ How to engage God's people in mission?

@timkellernyc

God sees us as we are, loves us as we are and accepts us as we are. But by His grace, He does not leave us as we are.

@revandyfrazier

If you have been overwhelmed

by the grace of Christ, you delight in obeying Him. It is not work to follow His commands, but worship. You can attempt to obey Jesus without loving Him, but it's impossible to love Him and NOT obey Him. —John 14:15

@macbrunson

The best argument for Christ is the committed Christian. The best argument against Christ is the life of the cultural Christian.

@brocraig

"The gospel ain't going to change or transform society if it's not shared with individual people." —@demyronhaynes

@JackieHillPerry

How Jesus handled "fame": But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.

But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. —Luke 5:15-16

@Rgallaty

Henderson: The Lord's Prayer is divided into 2 sections: God-ward and man-ward. He is worthy, and I am needy. Adoration cultivates desperation.

@daneortlund

The law says: You shall. The gospel says: You are.

@hartramsey

As Christians, we must understand, accepting the Bible as the Word of GOD means we CAN-NOT alter it to fit our preference, perspective or culture. Truth that is bendable is NOT Truth at all.

@trillianewbell

"Seek the Lord and live ..." (Amos 5:6).

DENOMINATIONAL DISCUSSIONS

— SBC Executive Committee leader Ronnie Floyd's Vision 2025 proposal —

ACTION 4 — FOCUSING ON NEXT GEN

EDITOR'S NOTE — This is part 4 of 5 in a series of stories related to Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee President Ronnie Floyd's Vision 2025 proposal that will be voted on at the SBC annual meeting in June. To follow the series, visit tabonline.org/vision2025.

Bottom line for how to achieve Action Step 4, according to SBC/NAMB leaders: Intentionally focus on reaching teens with the gospel and equipping them to share the gospel with their peers.

By Margaret Colson
TAB Media

According to an unscientific social media poll of 2,700 people conducted in fall 2020, an astounding 77% of professing Christians state they made their professions of faith before the age of 18. That percentage jumps to an overwhelming 95% of Christians who made their professions of faith under the age of 30, the poll indicates.

Southern Baptists' "harvest is in the next generation," believes Shane Pruitt, who conducted the poll and who has served as executive director of next gen evangelism for the North American Mission Board since November 2019.

If Southern Baptists don't focus evangelistic energy on people under 30 years of age, "it's like we're fishing in 5% of the lake," he said.

"God can save whom He wants,



NAMB photo

Vision 2025 Action Step 4 calls on Southern Baptists to reach, baptize and disciple 12- to 17-year olds. "The most effective person to reach a teenager with the gospel is another teenager," says youth evangelist Shane Pruitt.

whenever He wants. But practically speaking, if we don't reach somebody by the time they're 18 [years old], then the chance of reaching them with the gospel goes way down, especially if we don't reach them in their young adult years," Pruitt said. "Then [the chance of reaching them with the gospel] goes even further down. Now is the time."

Endangered generation

From 2000 to 2018, teenage baptisms declined by 35,548 people (38%), according to Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, in a Febru-

ary 2020 address to the EC.

A Pew Research study in spring 2019 indicated that 45% of 13- to 17-year-olds believe many religions may be true, while only 31% believe only one religion is true. Another 15% believe there is little to no truth in any religion, and 8% believe no religion is true.

A recent Wall Street Journal poll found that among Americans ages 18–38, only 30% listed religion or belief in God as "very important" compared with 50% overall, and two-thirds of those age 55 and older.

In addition to those statistics, "This generation of teenagers is experiencing things at a much earlier age than we had experienced," Pruitt said. Many are struggling with mental

health issues, such as depression or thoughts of suicide.

They have been exposed to cultural acceptance of non-Christian teachings regarding sexuality and gender issues.

The pandemic exacerbated these pressures as teens were isolated, with "many looking at things on the internet that are addictive."

Many of these teens "did not grow up in church and do not know Jesus," he said.

"It's almost an endangered generation. It's a generation that desperately needs the gospel."

With about 80% of young people placing a high value on self-fulfillment, Pruitt said, "The only way toward that is setting aside self and living for something bigger. To me that is a door wide open for the gospel."

Such trends are one rationale for the Vision 2025 Action Step 4 that calls on Southern Baptists to "turn around our ongoing decline in reaching, baptizing and discipling 12- to 17-year olds."

Resources leveraged

In February NAMB and the Executive Committee announced that NAMB will support student-focused evangelism outreach through an additional \$5 million in new and expanded efforts over the next four years.

NAMB will use some of these funds in national efforts to reach the next generation for Christ, and a portion of those funds will be sent to state conventions to use in more localized student evangelism events, strategies and resour-



PRUITT

**STRATEGIC
ACTION STEP 4:
Reach, baptize, disciple
12- to 17-year-olds**

“If we don’t reach this age group, the one after them will be even more difficult to reach.”

Shane Pruitt, executive director of next gen evangelism, NAMB

es. The \$5 million is in addition to monies already allocated to state conventions.

NAMB, Pruitt said, “will partner with state conventions because they know how to reach their state with the gospel.”

Strategic focus

What’s the bottom line in turning around downward trends in baptisms of teens? In presenting his Vision 2025 in February, Floyd put it simply: “You cannot baptize those you do not reach. You cannot disciple those you do not reach. The order is clear: We must reach, baptize and disciple teenagers.”

Pruitt believes there is no “secret” in reaching teenagers for Christ. “What worked for 2,000 years works today.

“We need to understand the culture so we can speak into the culture, but we need to stick to the Bible, stick to the gospel, because that’s what has saved for 2,000 years and that’s what saves today,” he said. “The most effective person to reach a teenager with the gospel

is another teenager that has a heart that beats with passion for Jesus but that same heart is broken for their lost peers.”

To that end, NAMB has started a youth pastor coaching network, and Pruitt is personally coaching more than 60 youth pastors.

“The way to move the needle on this is to pour into leaders and youth pastors. ... If a youth pastor is spiritually healthy and lives evangelistically, they are more likely to lead student ministries that are healthy and evangelistic. Students are never going to do what they don’t see their leaders doing,” he said.

Another way is to mobilize teenagers, Pruitt said.

“We want to reach teenagers with the gospel. We want to equip teenagers with the gospel to go reach their peers. We want to see those baptism numbers grow.

‘Urgent time’

“If we don’t reach this age group, the one after them will be even more difficult to reach,” he said. “We are in an urgent time, and we could lose a generation.”

NAMB has launched a YouTube channel with GenSend Conversations for teens and young adults. A new video, with a short evangelistic message, is posted weekly. To view the videos, go to tabonline.org/gensend-conversations.

Collegiate ministry change at SBC level won’t impact Alabama’s BCMs

Messengers to the SBC Annual meeting in June will vote whether to allow the North American Mission Board to be the new national home for SBC collegiate ministry efforts.

The ministry was previously an assignment of Lifeway Christian Resources.

Mike Nuss, Alabama’s state missionary in the area of collegiate and student ministries, noted the change will not impact Alabama’s ministry efforts.

“Alabama Baptists have a long-standing and strong commitment

to reach our college campuses and over 300 college students in our state for Christ. That will not change.

“Baptist Campus Ministries along with vital church collegiate ministries and collegiate church planting efforts will continue to serve as our strategy to reach, disciple and mobilize Alabama college students,” Nuss said.

“We are confident that we will continue to see students come to faith in Christ and find places of service in Alabama and around the world.” (TAB Media)



Photo by Andrew Lucas

Rend Collective gives a concert during SPEAK 2018. The annual youth conference will be held July 16–17 at NorthPark Baptist Church, Trussville, and will feature speakers, plus music by Crowder and Iron City Worship.

Youth members learn best by leading, so let them

By Patrick Franklin
Minister of students, Coosada Baptist Church

Students long to have meaningful, serious and critical leadership roles in our ministries. But how willing are we to allow crucial tasks to be offered to someone else? Is the risk worth the reward? I say, “Yes!”

Over the past year, our student ministry has grown by 20%, and I believe this growth is directly attributable to students owning their ministry.

The important shift in mindset is for students to discover there’s more to church than consumption.

As a part of the Body of Christ, we’re called to contribute. Here are some tips for empowering student leaders.

1. Identify the leaders in your group.

Don’t just focus on the popular students. There is a vast distinction between mere popularity and leadership potential. Speak with these students one on one, and speak life into the God-given abilities you see in them. Cultivate the passion that’s hidden inside of them. Eventually you’ll recognize which students you can use to form a leadership team.

2. Clearly define the roles for your leadership team.

Teams are intended to work to

achieve a purpose. And everyone on a team needs a reason for involvement.

There will naturally be an allure to the team, and many students will ask to be involved. But don’t fill your team with purposeless positions. This is just a retread of doing nothing at all. Assign roles and set goals in order to motivate students to serve well.

3. Let students own their roles.

Don’t condemn their method. Remember, we’re teaching them to replace us. There will be a day when these students are out of your direct influence.

Student ministry is a transitional ministry by nature. So let students actually lead.

They will often come up with ideas you would have never dreamed of, and you’ll be blown away by the results. There’s something incredibly powerful and attractive to other students when they see that they can actually be a part of something significant. They may never be one of your leaders, but just seeing their peers serve does plant the seed that they can serve too.

More ideas for student leadership are at tabonline.org/student-leaders. (This article originally appeared at ymlink.org.)

'Faithful under pressure'

Samford graduates urged to prepare hearts, stand firm

In five ceremonies stretched over two weeks, Samford University awarded 1,340 degrees to its 2021 graduates.

It also honored graduates from 2020, who matriculated last year through virtual commencement services. About 275 came back to walk across the stage and celebrate in person with their peers.

At three of the ceremonies, Samford President Andrew Westmoreland offered three different lessons for a total of nine. (The lessons are printed on page 5.)

"The nine points reflect the things I have tried to understand over the 42 years of my career in higher education, things I lived out very imperfectly but that I still hold as the aspirational goals for my life and my work," said Westmoreland, according to a Samford news story. "They are incredibly simple, yet difficult to live out."

The commencement was the last for Westmoreland, who will retire in June after 15 years at the university's helm. He and his wife, Jeanna, have been honored in various ways in recent weeks, including a resolution of appreciation passed by the Alabama Baptist Education Commission in April.



Photo courtesy of Beeson Divinity School



Photo courtesy of Samford University

Samford University President Andrew Westmoreland, who is retiring in June, congratulates a graduate with a fist bump during one of the school's commencement ceremonies earlier this month.

Andrew Brunson, a pastor who was held in a prison in Turkey for two years, spoke at Beeson Divinity School's April 30 commencement service. "I think you are coming into a much more challenging environment than I did when I graduated from seminary 30 years ago," he said. "This time needs men and women of courage who will remain faithful to Jesus under pressure."

Brunson, who served as a church planter and pastor in Turkey for 23 years, was released in October 2018 after two years of being held on false charges. While in prison, he was threatened with a life sentence and solitary confinement.

"I can tell you from experience you need to prepare your hearts now so that when you are under pressure, when you are afraid, you do not run

Pastor Andrew Brunson speaks at Beeson Divinity School's April 30 commencement. Brunson, who was imprisoned in Turkey for two years, told graduates "this time needs men and women of courage who will remain faithful to Jesus."

but you stand firm," he told Beeson graduates.

Cassandra W. Adams, former assistant dean for Cumberland School of Law's Public Interest Program and current dean of students at Wake Forest University School of Law, also delivered a moving speech at Cumberland's event, addressing some of the struggles and hurdles students have faced in the past two years.

'Pride and joy'

It was a meaningful experience for the class to have her back, as Adams started the journey with this class in 2018 and mentored many students before taking the position at Wake Forest. "To stand before you today, as you are leaving Samford, clothed in Juris Doctor regalia, I am filled with pride and joy as we take this momentous opportunity to recognize and celebrate each of you," Adams said.

Read the Education Resolution and find additional information at tabonline.org/westmoreland. (TAB Media)

Cunningham earns Samford degree at 78

By Sean Flynt

Special to TAB Media

As a child in Birmingham's Titusville neighborhood, Vivian Cunningham thought she'd be a seamstress.

She inherited the sewing skills of her grandmothers, studied the trade in school and sewed for others. She even worked in a dress shop in Atlanta before returning to Birmingham as a single mother of two children in the late 1960s. She traded that career for one in custodial service on the night shift at Alabama Power Company in order to provide for her children.

Now retired, Cunningham recently achieved a long-held dream. On May 8, she graduated from Samford University at the age of 78.

There was no easy path to her degree, but the online option through the school's professional studies program made the difference.

Bryan Gill, director of professional studies, said, "Working with Vivian all these years, I thought I was the one helping her but in reality, she was the one helping me see why I do what I do. We are so excited to see her get recognized."

Read more of Cunningham's story at tabonline.org/cunningham.



Photo courtesy of Samford University

Vivian Cunningham earned her bachelor's degree from Samford University at age 78. She received her diploma during commencement May 8.

'Prove you belong'

NFL referee Sarah Thomas encourages UM graduates to 'leave their mark'

NFL referee Sarah Thomas received an honorary doctorate and 265 graduates were awarded degrees, including the institution's first doctoral degrees, at University of Mobile's spring commencement held May 8.

The outdoor ceremony concluded a year of uncertainty and precautions.

"You are a special class that has impacted this university and the people here and beyond in many positive ways, and we have no doubt you will go on to change the world and boldly share the love of Christ," Allie Ratcliff, UM alumni programs director, told graduates.

"You've had men and women scattered across this state praying for you before you even arrived, praying for you as you've been here. And they will continue to pray for

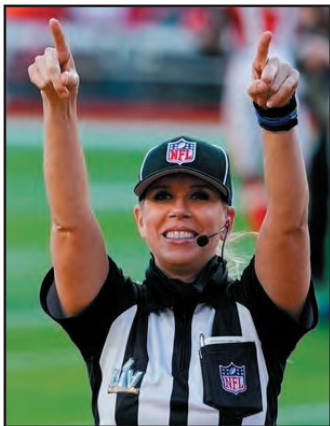


Photo courtesy of University of Mobile
UM grad Sarah Thomas is the first woman to officiate a Super Bowl.

you as you go," said Fred Wilson, chair of UM's board of trustees.

Thomas, a 1995 graduate of UM, where she earned a basketball scholarship and Academic All-American honors, was awarded the doctor of humane letters.

Thomas began her football officiating career in 1996 when she attended a meeting for aspiring football officials with her brother. She became the first full-time female official in NFL history in 2015, and on Feb. 7, 2021, she became the first female to officiate a Super Bowl, serving as down judge for Super Bowl LV.

She shared lessons learned on that journey

during her commencement address to the class of 2021.

"I want to share a few things that I've learned after leaving the University of Mobile that have truly



Photo courtesy of University of Mobile
Graduating seniors touch the University of Mobile's Great Commission Globe, a tradition signifying to God that the graduate is ready and equipped to be sent out in fulfilling the Great Commission through his or her vocational calling.

helped me to become the first female in the National Football League. But I don't hide behind that title, it does not identify who I am," Thomas said.

So many people get wrapped up in titles, she said, but graduates shouldn't go through life trying to do things for the recognition.

"Do not go out in life trying to prove people wrong. That list of people will never end. It will exhaust you. Instead, you prove to yourself that you belong," Thomas said. "Go out and do something because you love it. The recognition will come. People will see it in you. The people you thought you had to prove wrong, they will fall by the wayside. Or, they will get in line and start respecting you on your merit."

"What you did to be able to sit in that chair today is a huge accomplishment. But what you do with that accomplishment when you get out of that chair today will matter."

She urged graduates to not fear failure.

"You're going to come to a fork in the road at some point, and let's say you choose left instead of right.

When you get to that roadblock on the left, don't start letting self-doubt creep in and make you wish you had chosen right. ... Put that in your rear-view mirror. Don't look behind you. Don't focus on it. ... Your windshield is so much bigger, and there are so many opportunities in front of you."

'Be kind to each other'

Failing does not mean someone is a failure.

"Your best successes will come from your greatest failures," she said.

She encouraged graduates to succeed in the right way.

"I'm going to leave you with this: It takes all kinds of people to run this world. But that doesn't mean we can't be kind to each other in making it a better place. Leave here today and go leave your mark, and make this world a better place."

Among this year's graduates were the first students to earn doctoral degrees in nursing and vocal performance. To view the ceremony, visit umobile.edu/graduation. (TAB Media, University of Mobile contributed)

Burnett installed as fifth president of University of Mobile

Calling it a "great honor" to serve, Lonnie Burnett was formally installed as the fifth president of the University of Mobile in a May 7 celebration on the campus' Great Commission Lawn.

Burnett was named president in November 2019, but his inauguration was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Little did Dr. Burnett know then that right out of the gate, he would lead this university through a global pandemic, two hurricanes and nationwide unrest," said Fred

Wilson, chair of UM's trustee board. In his inaugural address, Burnett thanked Alabama Baptists, who "support us financially, pray for us and send us students."



BURNETT

Elaborating on the university's theme, "Know and Be Known," Burnett said UM will continue to strive to help students better know God and themselves, and he called the UM community to be known for excellence,

faith, love and devotion. Read more at tabonline.org/burnett. (TAB Media, UM contributed)

‘He knew exactly what we needed’

No accidents: Church secretary sees God’s hand in financing daughter’s education

By Grace Thornton

TAB Media

Ever since Angela Smith’s son and daughter were born, she’s been passionate about helping them get an education that puts God at the center.

“I wanted to homeschool my children. I just really wanted God to be personal to them in everything that they learned,” she said. “I wanted them to know God was their Creator, and I wanted them to be able to learn Scripture in with their math and their history.”

That was the first thing that came to mind when leaders at North Phenix Baptist Church, Phenix City, approached her about becoming the church’s part-time secretary in 2008. It felt like something that might draw her away from the commitment she had made to her children.

“But I talked to the pastor, and he said we could put a desk in the office, and I could homeschool them there, as long as I didn’t mind

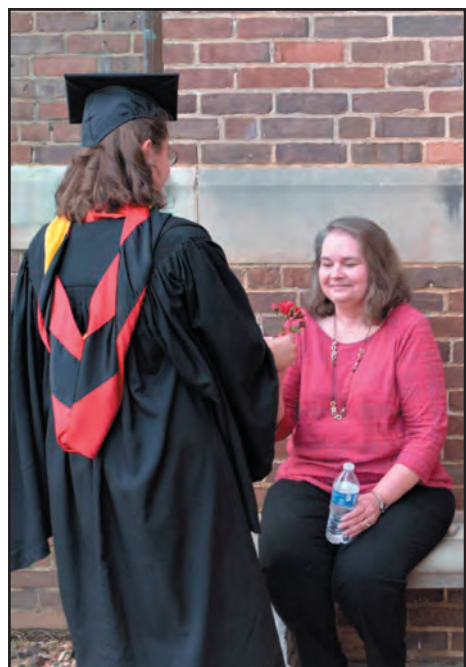


Photo by Sherri McClendon



Photo by Sherri McClendon

The Smith family — Angela, Victoria, Victor (back, right) and Anthony — gather at Judson College on April 30 for Victoria’s graduation. Angela Smith says God used her role as a part-time secretary at two Alabama Baptist churches to provide a scholarship for her daughter to attend Judson.

having flexible hours,” Smith said.

They decided to try it, and it worked.

About eight years later, nearby Emmanuel Baptist Church began sharing North Phenix’s facilities while they built their new building, and Smith began helping them occasionally on a volunteer basis.

“When they moved into their new building, their pastor said, ‘Would you be interested in being a part-time secretary at Emmanuel in the morning and come to North Phenix in the afternoon?’ I told him my husband and I would pray about it,” Smith said. “But I knew quickly that the Lord was leading me to do that.”

They made the same arrangement

Judson graduate Victoria Smith hands her mother, Angela, a rose on graduation day April 30. It’s a tradition for seniors to give roses from Judson’s rosebushes to their mothers.

as North Phenix — Smith could homeschool her children at church. Everything worked great.

And a few years later, she and her husband, Victor, found out another way God was using her situation as an unexpected financial help — their daughter, Victoria, wanted to go to Judson College.

‘Fell in love’

“When she toured Judson, she just fell in love,” Smith said. “I thought, ‘The Lord will have to pay for this, because I don’t know how this is going to happen.’”

They talked with staff members of the financial aid office, and Smith told them she was a church

secretary — at two churches.

It wasn’t long before leaders at Judson decided Smith’s two part-time positions could count as one full-time position to make her eligible for the secretary’s dependent grant at the college.

“I worked just enough hours to make that possible,” Smith said. “It took care of a lot of her school.”

A step ahead

God was always a step ahead of them, she said, and once again He was paving the way for the Smith children’s education.

“He knew exactly what we needed when we needed it.”

And that didn’t stop. When North Phenix Baptist decided to close its doors in late 2020, the church that moved into its building — New Beginning Baptist Church — decided to keep Smith on as their secretary.

And North Phenix left behind enough money to pay for Smith’s position until June to help them get started.

“All I can do is brag on the Lord,” Smith said.

And Victoria, who finished her classwork in December and graduated from Judson on April 30, is already teaching fourth grade at an elementary school in Seale.

“She’s loving it, and they love her,” Smith said. “The Lord has blessed her.”

He’s blessed all of them, she said. “Nothing happens by accident with the Lord, and I strongly believe that.” ✠

“Nothing happens by accident with the Lord, and I strongly believe that.”

Angela Smith
Church secretary and Judson mom



Photo by Mary Amelia Taylor

Elizabeth Wells speaks at a luncheon at Judson College on April 30. She was honored as this year's Outstanding Alumna during the school's final commencement activities that day.

'We're all sisters'

Wells honored as Judson College's final Outstanding Alumna during last graduation

By Grace Thornton
TAB Media

When Elizabeth Wells was growing up, she always liked hearing stories about her family history and where she came from.

Then she got to Banks High School in Birmingham, and her history teacher, Gladys Rawls, helped her take that feeling from "like" to "love."

"She didn't have to have a note — she knew that history, and she made it come alive," Wells said. "It was so exciting, and as we did research and projects in her class, I thought, 'This is fun.'"

Decades later, she still thinks it's fun. Wells, retired archivist for Samford University and librarian for its Special Collection and Archives department in Birmingham, was honored April 30 during Judson College's graduation for her lifetime of work in Baptist history.

She was named this year's Outstanding Alumna — the last the college will have, as it is closing its doors at the end of the summer due to an ongoing budget shortfall. (Read more about the Judson trustees' decision at tabonline.org/judson-closes.)

Spring graduation was Judson's final commencement service.

Wells said even though she knew she loved history in high school, she didn't immediately declare that as her major when she got to Judson.

"I knew my math minor, but I didn't know what was going to be my major," she said.

But she quickly "fell in love again" with history and "knew that was what I wanted to do," she said. She graduated with honors in 1970 and went on to earn a master's degree in history from Auburn University and a master's degree in library science from the University of Alabama. Along the way, she fell in love a third time, this time with archiving.

And then a fourth

time — with a man named Michael. She was teaching at a high school in Marion, and this young man lived in the same apartment complex she did. They met in September and married the following March.

The couple eventually moved to Birmingham, and one day she got a call from Samford University.

"They said, 'You have what we need — you understand Baptist history, you have a master's in history and you know archives.' But they said they could only guarantee

the position for a year," Wells said.

That was in 1975. She retired in 2015. She chaired the department for 38 of those 40 years.

"It was a wonderful career, I'm just so blessed," she said. "Not only did I get to use the history I loved, but I got to learn and grow every day, and I got to teach. I worked with history students and helped direct a lot of research projects."

Preserving history

She also got to work in preserving the history of Alabama Baptists, including doing the research for the book "The Alabama Baptist: Celebrating 175 Years of Informing, Inspiring and Connecting Baptists."

She had been around the newspaper for a long time — she wrote her master's thesis on its early years, and in researching for the book about TAB's history, she read every available issue from its founding in 1843 up to the present.

She also co-authored "Daughters of the Dream: Judson College 1838–1988."

Her Outstanding Alumna award is

not the first honor she's received for her work. In 2013 she received the Marvin Yeomans Whiting Award from the Society of Alabama Archivists for significant contributions to the preservation and dissemination of local history in Alabama. She also received the Virginia Hamilton Award by the Alabama Historical Association in 2015 for her contributions in promoting Alabama history. And in 2016 she was presented with Judson's doctorate of humane letters.

Both awards from the college are special, Wells said. "Judson is not just buildings — it is the epitome of sisterhood and relationship. It's got the foundation of academics and Christian growth and ministry, but it is a sisterhood. No matter what year you graduated, we're all sisters. We all shared those traditions."

During Judson's spring commencement services, 41 graduates received degrees. John Nicholson, pastor of Siloam Baptist Church, Marion, gave the commencement address and was presented with an honorary doctor of divinity degree.✠



Photo by Katlin Bailey

Rhonda Caver Lewis (right), past president of the Judson College Alumnae Association, presents Elizabeth Wells with her award.



Photo by Sarah Fowler

Diplomas were presented to 41 graduates at Judson College's final commencement service April 30. The school's board of trustees announced May 6 its decision to close Judson due to budget shortfalls.

I N R E C O G N I T I O N O F Y O U R

service **TO THE CAUSE OF** *Christ*

Judson College is honored to bestow the degree of Doctor of Divinity upon John W. Nicholson Jr., our commencement speaker, on this 30th day of April in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty-one, and of Judson College the one hundred eighty-third.

From President W. Mark Tew, Th.D. —

There is a phrase that has fallen out of our American vernacular — “Hale Fellow Well Met” — but it is an apt descriptor of our commencement speaker.

John is a native of Alabama, spending his high school years in Holt. He subsequently graduated from Samford University and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and has led churches in Georgia and Alabama, coming to Siloam Baptist Church in Marion from First Baptist Church of Sulligent. Pastor John has led Siloam with distinction since his arrival in 2010 and has “pastored” countless Judson students, faculty and employees.

John and Vanessa have three children, Jeremy, Joanna, and Clayton, and two grandchildren. John’s two sons had the good sense to marry and to propose to marry Judson graduates, the former Miriam Hart (Class of 2012) and Jordan Hooks (Class of 2020).

John is deeply engaged in the work of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, having served on numerous boards and committees, including two terms on the Executive Committee. He currently serves as the Chair of the Judson Board of Governors as well as a member of the Education Commission of the state convention.

But perhaps my greatest reason for excitement that John will bring this address is that he embodies Colossians 1:11 more fully than any person I know. “May you be strengthened with all power, according to God’s glorious might, for all fortitude and perseverance with joy.” It is this last phrase in particular that speaks to John’s character.

The two Greek words for fortitude and perseverance are frequently translated as patience when used in isolation. But the idea of simple patience cannot begin to express the meaning of either. Furthermore, when used together, the force of these substantives demands separate objects to complete the thought. Fortitude addresses an ability to bear up under any strain so that one conquers every circumstance. Perseverance is the quality of being long-suffering with people, regardless of how disagreeable or contrary, always finding a path to a relationship. Fortitude knows no circumstance so great it cannot be conquered, and perseverance knows no person so small he or she cannot be uplifted.

John also carries fortitude and perseverance with joy. Psalm 34:5 teaches that “Those who look to the Lord are radiant. Their faces are never downcast.” Regardless of the severity of the circumstances and the difficulty of the relationship, John is one who has within him the joy of the Lord.

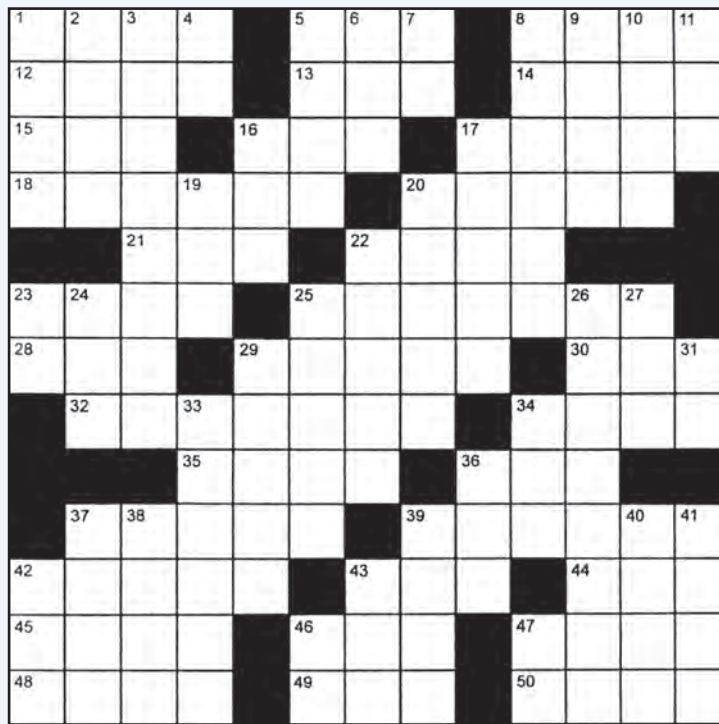


JUDSON COLLEGE BESTOWS AN HONORARY DOCTOR OF DIVINITY DEGREE UPON JOHN W. NICHOLSON JR. (CENTER), THEIR COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER, ON APRIL 30. PICTURED ARE JUDSON PRESIDENT MARK TEW (RIGHT) AND CHARLOTTE CLEMENTS, VICE PRESIDENT FOR ADMISSIONS AND FINANCIAL AID.

CHRISTIAN CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1. I am the brother to dragons, and a companion to _____. (Job 30:29)
5. _____ the son of Abdiel. (1 Chron. 5:15)
8. Festive.
12. An invasion.
13. Leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent _____ him. (Amos 5:19)
14. For this _____ is Mount Sinai in Arabia. (Gal. 4:25)
15. But let him _____ in faith. (James 1:6)
16. To marry.
17. Outer layer.
18. The man took a golden earring of half a _____ weight. (Gen. 24:22)
20. Trainee.
21. A brother offended is harder to be _____ than a strong city. (Prov. 18:19)
22. In that day when I _____ up my jewels. (Mal. 3:17)
23. The churches of _____ salute you. (1 Cor. 16:19)
25. Governing board.
28. Possesses.
29. The dogs came and licked his _____. (Luke 16:21)
30. Meadow.
32. Era.
34. Now the coat was without _____. (John 19:23)
35. For my yoke is _____. (Matt. 11:30)
36. A scarf.
37. Roller or ice.
39. Cooled.
42. Blaze.
43. Illuminated.
44. _____, Elah and Naam. (1 Chron. 4:15)
45. Who shall _____ us away the stone? (Mark 16:3)
46. What _____ eth thee, Hagar? (Gen. 21:17)
47. To break suddenly.
48. Children, _____ your parents in the Lord. (Eph. 6:1)
49. Thou shalt _____ thy children's children.



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

- (Ps. 128:6)
50. To leer.
- ## DOWN
1. Danish money.
 2. _____ me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (Ps. 51:7)
 3. Go, and do thou _____. (Luke 10:37)
 4. Midwest state. (abbr.)
 5. _____ was a keeper of sheep. (Gen. 4:2)
 6. In whom are _____ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col 2:3)
 7. _____ is finished. (John 19:30)
 8. God sent him forth from the _____ of Eden. (Gen. 3:23)
 9. Terror, consumption, and the burning _____. (Lev. 26:16)
 10. And it shall come to pass in the _____ days. (Isa. 2:2)
 11. Rabbi, thou _____ the Son of God. (John 1:49)
 16. Blind, or broken, or maimed, of having a _____. (Lev. 22:22)
 17. And they baked unleavened _____ of the dough. (Ex. 12:39)
 19. All the Chaldeans, Pekod, and Shoa and _____. (Ezek. 23:23)
 20. Tricky.
 22. A _____ heart doeth good

- like a medicine. (Prov. 17:22)
23. _____ sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity. (Isa. 1:4)
 24. A pouch.
 25. Who shall _____ him up. (Gen. 49:9)
 26. Washing.
 27. For all the promises of God in him are _____. (2 Cor. 1:20)
 29. The last _____ of that man is worse. (Matt. 12:45)
 31. I _____ become a fool. (2 Cor. 12:11)
 33. Almost.
 34. This is my beloved _____, in whom I am well pleased. (Matt. 3:17)
 36. The lapwing, and the _____. (Lev. 11:19)
 37. A sloppy person.
 38. Cabbage.
 39. Yet they had a _____ for the mattocks. (1 Sam. 13:21)
 40. Epochal.
 41. To deceive.
 42. I am full of tossings to and _____. (Job 7:4)
 43. But wild beasts of the desert shall _____ there. (Isa. 13:21)
 46. Even _____ Christ forgave you, so also do ye. (Col. 3:13)
 47. Even _____, come, Lord Jesus. (Rev. 22:20)

Ashworth named new president of TBFA

John Ashworth has been named the new president of The Baptist Foundation of Alabama.

“I am humbled and honored to continue serving at The Baptist Foundation of Alabama,” Ashworth said. “I look forward to seeing where the Lord will lead in the days ahead.”

Ashworth joined the Foundation in January 2014 as chief administrative officer, where he has overseen many aspects of the Foundation’s ministry, including trust operations, scholarships, property, investments and eldercare.

Ashworth will take the helm of TBFA when Barry Bledsoe retires this year after 20 years as TBFA president. Bledsoe praised Ashworth’s leadership at the Foundation and in his church and expressed confidence in his selection to lead TBFA.



ASHWORTH

“John Ashworth came to the Foundation 7 years ago with a strong background in finance and administration,” Bledsoe said. “More importantly, John came as a committed

Christ follower. As an active member of First Baptist Church in Montgomery, John has served in many capacities ranging from deacon chairman to Sunday School teacher for 4-year-olds.

Strong background

Prior to joining the Foundation, Ashworth spent many years working in the capital markets.

Ashworth is a graduate of Vanderbilt University. He and his wife, Ivy, are active members of First Baptist Church, Montgomery. They

have two children. “John will lead with integrity and a Christ-centered world view,” Bledsoe continued. “The best days of the Foundation are ahead.” (TAB Media)

NEW CONFERENCE FORMAT



2021 ALABAMA BAPTIST PASTORS CONFERENCE

DATE: Nov. 15
TIME: 11:30 AM
LOCATION: FBC Decatur
COST: \$10
 (includes lunch and dinner)

MUST REGISTER AT ALBAPTISTPC.COM

Celebrate missions

Shades Mountain highlights 20 years of 'global impact'; honors retiring pastor

By Dianna L. Cagle
TAB Media

People in the crowd standing to their feet and cheering might be the normal reaction at a sports arena, but for Danny Wood, it's the response to celebrating missionaries in church.

"Missions is in our DNA, and the GIC is what began fueling it and continues to fuel it," said Wood, pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church, Vestavia Hills, referring to the Global Impact Celebration that the church has held for 20 years.

"Over the [past] 20 years, we have partnered with 55 church plants, numerous international missionaries and ministries and 12 local ministries. ... [The GIC] has fueled our vision, and we have worked in 21 time zones, 80 countries, 50 states and have had 70 units and a total of 205 members serving full-time around the world."

About 35 missionary units are brought in every year, and Wood said the goal is for Shades members to "love on them and encourage them and learn from them."

Groups within the church are assigned missionaries along with wish lists of items that will help the missionaries with their work.

The Birmingham-area church averages 35 missions trips a year with about 1,300 people participating. For many of the missionaries, their GIC time results in ongoing partnerships.

"It has allowed us to meet missionaries/church planters up close and personal," said Wood, "hear their heart, their challenges, successes, vision and how we can come alongside of them to help them in their work."

The groundwork for Shades' involvement in GIC began in 2000 when two laymen approached Wood



Shades Mountain photo by Eleanor Stenner

The opening ceremony for the Global Impact Celebration at Shades Mountain Baptist Church involves cheers and sharing a missions spirit. Members of the church yell for the missionaries as they are introduced and enter the sanctuary.

about missions organization Global Focus. The church began to "flesh out a vision and strategy," he said.

Now, 20 celebrations later, Wood serves on the board for Global Focus and will retire from Shades later this

year after 24 years as pastor.

Shades has contributed \$42 million to global missions during the past 20 years.

This year's GIC brought back many members who serve around

the world, "along with some new missionaries/church planters that we will be partnering with," he said.

The celebration was a "trip down memory lane," Wood said.

Making a difference

Mike Tubbs, a Shades member for almost two years, said he was impressed by how the GIC stresses the importance of reaching beyond the church walls.

"We have a country that's turning away from God," he said. "The church has got to make that great effort."

Nurse Jennifer McCormick was raised at Shades. Her family has participated in food and diaper drives for local ministries, as well as preparing backpacks for school children. As she perused missionary display tables in the foyer of the church with her 12-year-old daughter Caroline, she reflected on the impact GIC has had on her family.

"It's been refreshing," she said, not just for her family but for the missionaries who attend. "I want to see what I can do."

Samford scholarship named after Danny Wood



Photo by Dianna L. Cagle

Samford University officials present Danny Wood, (fourth from left) senior pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church, Birmingham, with a scholarship named in his honor — The Danny Wood Social Entrepreneurship Scholarship. A check for \$42,000 to establish the scholarship was presented May 11 during Wood's last PowerLunch, a monthly business leader's lunch held for the past 24 years. Wood is retiring later this year. (TAB Media)



Shades Mountain photo by Eleanor Stenner

Danny Wood will retire this year after serving 24 years as Shades' pastor.

Wood was surprised during the morning worship service on April 18, the final day of GIC 2021, when Kevin Ezell, president of the North American Mission Board, announced the church planters care fund at NAMB has been named after Wood, who is the previous past chairman of the board of trustees for NAMB.

Shades executive pastor Chad Cossiboom said the church will contribute \$25,000 to the fund in honor of Wood, and a new children's book — "A to Z: GIC!" — was commissioned to help raise money for that contribution. The book is dedicated to Wood's young grandson and was illustrated by one of the many missionaries sent out by Shades.

Guest pastors

Wood also was surprised by a video message from Paul Chitwood, president of the International Mission Board, and Todd Lafferty, IMB executive vice president, who recently served on staff at Shades.

At the recent GIC opening service, Texas pastor Gregg Matte of Houston's First Baptist Church shared a heavenly look at missions from Rev. 5:8–14. "Missions is a combination of prayer and praise with an eye on people," he said.

The April 18 sermon was delivered by Ben Mandrell, president of Lifeway Christian Resources, who said, "Church people must continually be challenged to spend time with unchurched people."

He called on the church to hold fast to traditions based on the Bible, such as communion and baptism, but to "stand ready to release the others. The church should avoid offending people unnecessarily." (Jennifer Davis Rash contributed)

'Together': Through cooperation, we can do so much more

By **Dianna L. Cagle**
TAB Media

Being back in my sending church on April 18 brought back a lot of memories.

Shades Mountain Baptist Church, Vestavia Hills, was finishing its 20th Global Impact Celebration, an annual five-day focus on missions.

I was a member of Shades more than 20 years ago when Pastor Danny Wood proposed a vision for our church. I'll be honest: I thought he was crazy.

But as I prayed and fasted with other members of my church, God began to change my mind.

It wasn't about our effort; it was about Him calling us to lay our goals, time, money and everything else at His feet. The vision that was set seemed out of reach — by human standards. But God!

God doesn't operate by our puny standards. God loves us fiercely and wants His best for us. God wants us to play a part in His grander plan.

The GIC was, in part, the reason my heart and brain started to evaluate my vocational purpose. At the time I was working at the Birmingham Post-Herald, an afternoon newspaper. I had been there five years when I left for a call as a US/C-2 missionary with the North American Mission Board to South Carolina.

God called me out of a management job at a newspaper with a growing salary to a church and community service opportunity making less than half my salary.

God knew I didn't need to rely on my salary for comfort and to pay my bills.

College loans were still being repaid, yet I bought a new car while on the missions field. God provided when human reason would say it wasn't possible.

Even as a child, I always had a fascination with other peoples and cultures. I loved hearing and reading stories that introduced me to new sights, smells, sounds, etc.

The GIC brings that to church,



Photo courtesy of Dianna L. Cagle

Dianna Cagle drills holes to run wiring at a church in Hannibal, Missouri, as part of a Shades Mountain Baptist Church missions team in 2003. She served on the electrical crew for the trip, cutting conduit and running wiring.

allowing people to meet and hear from people who serve everywhere.

At one point, I was even one of the featured missionaries. Groups at the church supported the people I served by purchasing items from my wish list. They filled the list and then gave more in gift cards and donations that were then turned into ministry opportunities.

Their lavish gifts guaranteed continued ministry to a hurting area for years to come.

Returning to Shades recently was one of my first assignments as a new full-time staff member of TAB Media Group, where I worked previously part-time in the late 1990s–early 2000s.

Heart for home

My home state of Alabama has always held a special place in my heart. I know many of the back roads in and around Birmingham and Blount County, as well as roads around Talladega, Tuscaloosa and Decatur, all places I've lived and worked at some point.

While I moved again, this time to North Carolina, after my two-year missions term ended, my love and support for missions did not wane.

As a seminary student at South-

eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, I went on missions trips twice (to Jackson, Tennessee, and to Haiti).

Sharing good news

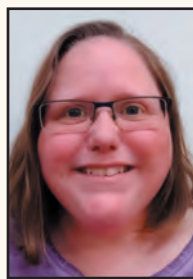
While in seminary and after, I worked at the Biblical Recorder, North Carolina's Baptist news journal.

Serving at a Baptist paper is a great honor. There are tough topics to cover but the good news above all — that's what we're tasked with sharing.

Writing stories featuring church outreach, missions and missionaries brings satisfaction, especially when you see church members saying, "We can do that too."

Our giving — to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering and the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, and to the Cooperative Program through our local Southern Baptist churches — supports missions, as well as our six Southern Baptist seminaries and other entities like GuideStone Financial Resources and the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

Alone, we are not able to do too much to serve the Kingdom. But together ... we can do so much more.✝️



CAGLE

3 stories

you should know



AP Photo/Heidi Levine

Israeli police officers stand guard during a protest on May 12, a day that resulted in nearly 400 arrests across Israel. Tensions are high between the nation's Jewish and Arab citizens, who disagree over policing of holy sites in Jerusalem and other longstanding issues. Israeli President Reuven Rivlin described the country as gripped by "civil war." Both he and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged citizens to cease their attacks on each other. (TAB Media)

Writers conference to be held online June 4–5

Since 1991, the Southern Christian Writers Conference has brought writers together for inspiration and instruction. Though this year's conference will look different, the SCWC is dedicated to providing the same resources and encouragement in a virtual event.

The 2021 SCWC will be held June 4–5 and will be streamed in the SCWC's private Facebook group.

Twenty-three workshops will be offered, along with two keynote speakers — Todd Gerelds, author of "Woodlawn," and Ginger Rue, author of the middle grade Aleca Zamm novels.

All workshops and sessions will be available to view on-demand following the conference.

For more information and to register, visit southernchristian-writers.com. (TAB Media)

Survey: Bible reading up in 2020, ABS finds

The 2021 "State of the Bible" report from American Bible Society shows mixed signs when it comes to Scripture engagement.

The report shows 54% of U.S. adults believe America would be worse off without the Bible, a 5% increase since last year. The same number of Americans believe the Bible contains "everything a person needs to live a meaningful life."

Some 181 million Americans opened a Bible in the past year, up 7.1% from 2020, but just 23% of Americans said they turned to the Bible as a source of comfort during the pandemic. Approximately 38% relied on prayer/distinct meditation to cope with difficulties, but only one third see the Bible as unique or distinct from other spiritual books.

Find the report at stateofthebible.org. (TAB Media)

Headline news

from around the Southeast

Florida

Because natural disasters often destroy cellular communications, Florida Baptist Disaster Relief leaders are gearing up to provide emergency communications through amateur radio operators when the need arises, the Florida Baptist Witness reported. "When a disaster happens, team members will communicate back to FLDR leadership about conditions on the ground ... [allowing] us to mobilize needed resources quickly," said Brad Gwartney, who coordinates communications and technology for FLDR.

Kentucky

Hurstbourne Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, looked a little different May 2 as hundreds stayed after the service to greet the church's new members: six families from the Congo. Despite cultural and language differences, greetings were exchanged and the church

celebrated. "Our church will now look more like heaven," said Chase Grubb, student and missions pastor. Five Congolese families joined the previous week, Kentucky Today reported.

Tennessee

Gibson County Lake in Tennessee was the site of 48 baptisms, including a number of inmates from Gibson County correctional facility, on April 19. The correctional facility recently hosted a one-night revival, organized by Sheriff Paul Thomas. Eleven separate services were held simultaneously in the facility's living pods. Nearly 100 inmates made salvation decisions, with 40 men saying they wanted to be baptized, the Baptist and Reflector reported.

South Carolina

Like mother, like daughter. Celeste Toole learned the importance of making missions a

lifestyle from watching her mother, the Baptist Courier reported. Her mother, Patsy Waters, served as Woman's Missionary Union director at First Baptist Church, Camden, South Carolina, for nearly 20 years. When she ended her tenure in 2013, Toole naturally followed in her footsteps. "We should live a missions lifestyle every day," said Toole, whose mother died last August.

Virginia

"It's never been better!" said Daniel Tesfaselase, pastor of Emmanuel Eritrean Baptist Church, Arlington, Virginia. The church planter moved to the Washington area several years ago due to religious persecution in his home country of Eritrea in northeast Africa. Many Eritrean refugees have now resettled in Virginia. The pastor believes he is able to reach and baptize more of his own people in the states than he could in Eritrea, the Proclaimer reported.

Alabama news

OBITUARIES

► **Dale Norris** — pastor of two churches in Georgiana, Mount Pisgah Baptist and Welcome Baptist — died April 29. He was 69.

A resident of Honoraville, he served the two Butler Baptist Association churches simultaneously for years. He began his pastoral ministry at Macedonia Baptist Church, Sylacauga, in 1984. Over the years, he served as pastor of a number of south Alabama churches including Spring Bank Baptist, Chatom; McKenzie Baptist; Northside Baptist, Troy; Gantt First Baptist, Andalusia; Mount Pisgah Baptist, Andalusia; and Pleasant Home Baptist, Brantley. Norris is survived by his wife of 46 years, Velesia; daughter, Christy; son, Tony; and two grandsons.

► **Michael A. Magnoli**, second president of the University of Mobile, died May 1 at age 75. Magnoli served as president of his alma mater from 1984 to 1997.

He was a member of the then-Mobile College charter class of 1967 where he served as editor of The Rampage yearbook and was a campus leader, helping establish many of the university's traditions that continue today. He joined the Mobile College administration and served in development, becoming president upon the retirement of founding president William K. Weaver Jr.

While Magnoli's final years as president of UM were marked with controversy, he is still credited for several updates to the school, such as an organizational structure change that also changed the name to the University of Mobile on July 1, 1993.



MAGNOLI

AUTAUGA ASSOCIATION

► **Keith Phillips** is the new executive pastor of **First Baptist Church, Prattville**. He is currently a loan processing officer at Bank Independent in Florence and has more than



PHILLIPS

12 years of experience in the banking and finance industry. Phillips also has ministerial experience that includes serving as a college pastor, as a pastoral intern and on his current church's executive team. He has a bachelor's degree in finance from Auburn University and a master of divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He is married to Paige and has three children. Phillips will start June 6.

BETHLEHEM ASSOCIATION

► **Wayne McMillian** recently stepped down from the pastorate of **First Baptist Church,**

Uriah, to take a sabbatical and spend time with his wife, Alice, before stepping into interim pastoral ministry.

"I think that churches need that 'transitional pastor' who can bridge the gap between an ongoing minister and an incoming minister," he said.



MCMILLIAN

Before his time at First, Uriah, McMillian served as pastor of Mexia Baptist Church; First Baptist Church, Satsuma; First Baptist Church, Foley; and First Baptist Church, Monroeville; and as director of missions for Bethlehem and Pine Barren Baptist associations. He also served with the International Mission Board for 10 years in Africa and served with the North American Mission Board in the Dakota Baptist Convention.

CHILTON ASSOCIATION

► **Mineral Springs Baptist Church, Clanton**, will host its 18th annual Lay Lake Open Bass Tournament, benefiting student ministry and missions, on May 29. On-site tournament registration begins at 3:30 a.m. Breakfast and lunch provided to participants. For more information or to preregister, contact student minister DJ McGaughy at 205-937-8031.

MARSHALL ASSOCIATION

► **Brent Roe** is the new



ROE

pastor at **Bethany Baptist Church, Horton**. He comes from Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Albertville, where he served more than 11 years as pastor.

MORGAN ASSOCIATION

► **Fellowship Baptist Church, Decatur**, celebrated its 50th anniversary and said goodbye to Pastor Martin Poe on April 25.

Poe, whose job is taking him to the Mobile area, said he has fond memories of everything about his time at the church. "Everyone was excited about celebrating the anniversary," he said. "It was a good service; excellent fellowship; the best in a couple of years."

Jim Peppers, minister of music, shared about the history of the church. He also sang a solo and led congregational singing. Ken Blackwood, director of missions for Morgan Baptist Association, presented a certificate on behalf of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission.

TALLAPOOSA ASSOCIATION

► **Stone Ridge Baptist Church, Alexander City**, has relocated to its new campus.

They held their first worship service there May 9. The church, formerly called Sixth Street Baptist, bought the land about 17 years ago with a vision to expand. They broke ground October 2019 and had to remove so much stone that it inspired the church's new name. Brett Self is pastor.



Facebook photo

Persecuted church

Mosque leader's wife, children flee after conversion, baptism

MUSASA, Uganda — After his wife placed her faith in Jesus Christ, a mosque leader in Uganda ordered the rapes of three female relatives of a Christian church pastor.

The females — ages 19, 17 and 16 — were raped Feb. 16 in Musasa village.

The attack came two days after imam Caled Bwambale Hussein of Kasese learned of the Jan. 30 conversion and Feb. 6 baptism of his wife, Mariam Mbambu.

Mbambu found out her husband planned to kill her, and she fled.

All Saints Cathedral, Church of Uganda in Kasese placed her and her five children in hiding.

Ali Masereka visited the church two Sundays. He finally admitted he was sent there to avenge Mbambu's conversion, to learn the whereabouts of her and the children

and to cause suffering to Christians.

He said Mbambu's husband ordered the rapes and paid 13 Muslim teens to attack the

church. The imam and others have threatened the church pastor.

Uganda's laws and constitution allow religious freedom. Muslims compose 12% of the population. (MS)



MS photo



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PARTNERING TOGETHER IN HIS KINGDOM WORK

Smaller churches growing stronger through COVID challenges and opportunities

By Margaret Colson
TAB Media

In the inaugural Small Church America webinar, titled “The Smaller-Attendance Church: Stronger Than Ever,” two pastors of small Southern Baptist churches discussed the challenges and opportunities experienced by their churches during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Southern Baptist Convention is a “large convention with small churches,” said Joe Wright, executive director of the Bivocational and Small Church Leadership Network.

An estimated 66% of Southern Baptists’ 47,000 churches have fewer than 75 people, said Wright, as he called on William Dooley, pastor of Middletown Baptist Church in Berea, Kentucky, and Kevin Sellars, pastor of RoEllen Baptist Church in Dyersburg, Tennessee, to share their experiences leading their small churches. Although some leaders estimate that “upwards of one in three” churches will close due to the pandemic, Wright said, smaller churches that “have been faithful will find a way to do God’s work and ministry in [their] communities.”

Tough decisions

Before the pandemic, Middletown counted about 80 regular attendees in its Sunday worship services, Dooley said, and the church is now regaining close to that number as the pandemic is beginning to decline and the church is reopening. However, as the pandemic first began to take hold in America in the spring of 2020, making decisions to suspend worship services and other church activities was “miserable,” Dooley said.



The Southern Baptist Convention is mostly comprised of small churches. An estimated 66% of SBC churches have fewer than 75 people, said Joe Wright, executive director of the Bivocational and Small Church Leadership Network.

As the church began to reopen slowly, two Sunday morning services were offered to adhere to social distancing guidelines. Today, the church will continue with those two services, a decision applauded by Dooley because it allows for expected church growth.

The “best thing” over the past year for Middletown has been the development of discipleship groups. Dooley recounted a text message he received from a young man who thanked the pastor for inviting him to be a part of a discipleship group. Discipleship, the young man wrote, “saved” his life spiritually because he had been wandering from the faith. Discipleship, said Dooley, is more than curriculum. “It’s about doing Christian life together.”

The next 30-minute Small Church America webinar is scheduled for May 23. For more information, visit bscln.net.

Those who have been disciplined, like the young man, will be key leaders for the church moving forward, Dooley said. “As we disciple people, those people [will] step up and fill leadership roles. We are coming out of COVID stronger than when we went in,” he said.

Before COVID, RoEllen Baptist Church, a rural church in a farming community, was beginning to grow, Sellars said. Attendance was in the “solid” forties, and the church had begun welcoming young families and had hired a part-time youth director.

Going through a cycle

As the pandemic wreaked its havoc, RoEllen went through a cycle of closing its doors and then reopening, only to have to close and reopen time and again. The

small church lost a few members along the way as it closed its doors.

With a median age of 75 in the congregation, varying opinions among church members and no deacons, Sellars felt the weight of each decision made during the pandemic.

“You’re the one, as pastor, that has to stand before the Lord on that great and terrible day and answer for what you decided for that church,” he said.


‘My God is bigger’

“COVID really knocked the wind out of us,” acknowledged Sellars. “I ... got mad,” he recalls, but then he realized, “That’s enough. My God is greater than this. My God is bigger than this.”

Today, the church is moving forward. The church is keeping its online presence, which it didn’t have prior to the pandemic, and church members have begun planning for summer Vacation Bible School. The church is “going to be open to what the Lord wants to do,” Sellars said.

Speaking directly to his fellow small church pastors, Sellars implored, “The best advice I can give you right now is to stay in the Word. We’ve got to be men of the Word, ... and we’ve got to be in prayer.”

Small church leader Ken Sartain, who helped co-host the online event, closed the inaugural webinar, saying, “This is our time, guys. God is opening the door for us to partner together in His kingdom work.” The webinar, he said, is “designed by and for small church pastors.”

The next 30-minute Small Church America webinar is scheduled for May 23. For more information, visit bscln.net.

State Board establishes office of church health

A new office of church health has been established by the trustees of the State Board of Missions, and Rob Jackson was unanimously elected to serve as the office director effective immediately.

Rick Lance, SBOM executive director, said, "We need someone to be the singular focus for church revitalization and church health."

"This role will work hand in hand with the office

of leader care to develop healthy leaders in healthy churches," he said. "If we don't have healthy leaders, we won't have healthy churches. That office is sorely needed especially coming out of the pandemic."

Jackson, a longtime pastor who originally studied to be a pharmacist, previously worked as a state missionary for Alabama as

an associate in the office of evangelism.

"I want to see healthy churches become healthier and unhealthy churches to become healthy, so that we might join hands in the power of the Spirit of God," Jackson said. "This joining together ... might be a spark that spreads over all of this country and the globe."

Jackson and his wife, Tonya, are members of Eastern Shore Baptist Church, Daphne.

Jackson is a native of Alabama, and a graduate of Samford University and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he earned a master's degree and a doctor of philosophy.

He served in pastoral ministry in Alabama and Kentucky and is a prolific writer.

Jackson previously served with University of Mobile and Volunteers of America. (TAB Media)



JACKSON

Alabama, Alaska enter five-year partnership

In its first in-person meeting since February 2020, the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions met May 14 and approved a new five-year partnership with Alaska Baptists, among other business.

Randy Covington, executive director of the Alaska Baptist Resource Network, shared with the group via video.

"We are excited about the opportunity and to see what God is going to do. Thank you so much for praying for Alaska, and we look forward to seeing you in this great state."

Those in attendance

also heard from Mark Tew, president of Judson College, and other entity leaders.

Rick Lance, executive director of SBOM, reviewed "Beyond 2020: One Mission Alabama," a five-point missional initiative that includes:

- ▶ Spiritual renewal
- ▶ Making disciples
- ▶ Church health
- ▶ Calling out the called
- ▶ Biblical stewardship.

Also approved was a new office of church health and hiring Rob Jackson as the director (see story, this page). (TAB Media)

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CHURCH POSITIONS

SENIOR PASTOR

Enon Baptist Church, Morris, Ala., is seeking a full-time senior pastor. Seminary degree with master of divinity and 5-10 years experience as lead/senior pastor. Please email cover letter, resumé and recommendations to: ebcmorrisPSC@gmail.com.

SENIOR PASTOR

We are prayerfully seeking God's man to be the under shepherd and spiritual leader of His church here at Farmstead Baptist Church in Jasper. We are seeking a man who loves the Lord unconditionally, is led by the Holy Spirit and has a heart for the people. Farmsteadpastorsearch@gmail.com. 265 Curry Hwy, Jasper, AL 35503. <https://farmsteadbaptist.church>.

PASTOR

Horseshoe Bend Baptist Church seeks a full-time pastor. In prayer for supply pastors also. Please send resumé to: horseshoebendbaptistchurch@gmail.com.

PASTOR

Hollinger's Island Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala., is prayerfully seeking a full-time pastor to lead our congregation. Please submit a resumé to: HIBCpastorsearch@gmail.com or mail to: Pastor Search Committee, 2450 Island Rd., Mobile, AL 36605.

BIVOCATIONAL MINISTER OF MUSIC/WORSHIP & PIANIST

Bon Air Baptist Church is accepting resumé/applications for a bivocational minister of music/worship and a pianist. Please send your resumé to: BABC, 600 Lower Bon Air Road, Sylacauga, AL 35150. If you have questions, call Pastor Jeff Thomas, 256-391-7344. BABC is located right outside Childersburg, Ala., near Central Alabama Community College.

YOUTH DIRECTOR

Trinity Baptist Church Roanoke, Ala., is looking for a part-time youth director. Please send resumé to: Trinity Baptist Church, 3501 US Hwy 431, Roanoke, AL 36274. Deadline: May 25.

CHILDREN'S MINISTER

First Baptist Church in Greenville, Ala., is seeking a part-time children's minister. Please send resumé to: 212 Fort Dale Rd., Greenville, AL or email to: kelly@myfbcgreenville.com.

OTHER POSITIONS

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The boards of Alabama Citizens Action Program (ALCAP) and American Character Builders are seeking a new executive director to succeed Joe Godfrey, who has announced his upcoming retirement. To apply and receive a complete job description and salary range information, send a cover letter and resumé to ALCAP.Search@gmail.com or mail to: ALCAP & ACB, 2376 Lakeside Drive, Birmingham, AL 35244. All information will be kept confidential. Applicants must be willing to submit to a background screening.

DIRECTOR

North Shelby Baptist Church is seeking a part-time director for the School of Performing Arts (SOPA), a ministry of NSBC. The director will oversee all daily operations of SOPA including accounts receivables; hiring and management of SOPA staff; lesson scheduling; program database management; publicity of SOPA programs; communication with students, teachers and other church ministries. This position is a 15 hour per week administrative position. General knowledge of music is helpful but not required. Please email resumé to: office@northshelbybaptist.org.

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MINISTRIES

NEW: STORIES PODCAST

Have you checked out TAB Media's new Stories serial podcast yet? If not, then you'll want to catch the first episode of Season 2, the Flatline story, which came out May 14. The full first season is also available featuring Sammy Gilbreath, state missionary in evangelism with the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. TAB Media's Grace Thornton writes and produces the shows. Listen to the Stories podcast anywhere you get your podcasts or at thealabamabaptist.org/explore/stories.

TAB DIGITAL

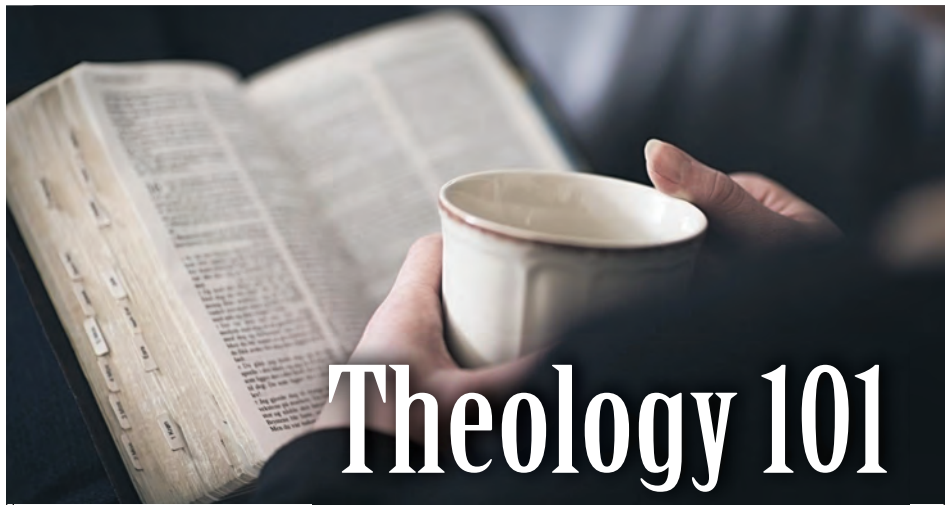
In addition to the print edition The Alabama Baptist also releases a weekly digital edition of the newspaper to every subscriber's email. The digital edition comes in pdf form as well as part of an app and is included with all subscriptions. To update your email address, contact subscribe@thealabamabaptist.org.

TAB HIGHLIGHTS

TAB Highlights is an email newsletter delivered every Monday-Wednesday-Friday with the day's top stories from the world of faith-based news. The complimentary service is managed by the TAB Media team. Headlines come from international, national and Southern Baptist coverage as well as one story that has been trending during the week. TAB Highlights also provides a link to the latest podcast released from the TAB Media team. To sign up, email news@thealabamabaptist.org.

VISUALLY IMPAIRED READERS

Know someone who's visually impaired and finds it difficult to read? *The Alabama Baptist* is now offering a free way to listen to stories and news in a format that comes in the mail. For more information contact 205-870-4720, ext. 118 or email hpiersol@thealabamabaptist.org.



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Divine Relationship

God's Friends

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
TAB Media

On the merely human level, society tends to put a distinction of status between being a child in the family and being a servant. However, in God's family being a willing servant carries its own status, privileges and rewards. This week we look at another description of Christians as God's friends. The biblical truth is that one who serves God also enjoys the status of being His friend.

Jesus used the designation of servants and friends to speak of His disciples and, in so doing, connected that friendship with obedience. He voiced the divine requisite of obedience by declaring to the disciples in the upper room, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:14). He then elaborated: "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (v. 15).

Compliment

Centuries earlier, Abraham was described as God's friend forever (2 Chron. 20:7). The New Testament picks up that description and relates it to Abraham's obedient faith, quoting Genesis 15:6 in James 2:23: "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness," adding, "And he was called the friend of God." That testimony about Abraham lived

on through subsequent centuries, inasmuch as the Lord said through Isaiah, "But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend (41:8)." What higher compliment could a forgiven sinner in any generation receive than to be called God's friend?

'Reconciliation'

Since God is the more exalted party in this friendship, we as His friends should render obedience. As God in the flesh, Christ told His followers to do what He commanded. Our friendship with God is richer and more fulfilling when we render obedience to Him.

Incidentally, the theological word for describing believers becoming God's friends is "reconciliation," which speaks of enemies becoming friends by putting away what stood between them, causing any enmity. That which stands between all individuals and God is sin.

Bearing our sins in His body on the cross, Christ removed that enmity, making it possible for forgiven sinners to be forevermore God's friends.✠

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.



Famous Christians from previous centuries

Heroes of the Faith

Hymn composer Excell remembered for beloved arrangements

E.O. Excell (1851–1921) was a prominent composer, song leader, singer and publisher in the late 19th century and early 20th century. This year marks the 100th anniversary of his death.

Excell was born in Uniontown, Ohio, on Dec. 13, 1851. His father was a minister in the German Reformed Church.

In 1871, he married Eliza Jane Bell in East Brady, Pennsylvania. They had a son, William, in 1874. Excell supported his family for several years as a bricklayer and singing instructor.

J.B. Espy of East Brady Methodist Episcopal Church asked him (even though he wasn't a Christian) to conduct music at his revival. He accepted, and a great revival followed with Excell being one of the many converts.

His life's focus turned to sacred music. He studied music formally under George Root from 1877–1883 in Chicago. He took vocal training under Root's son, Frederick. He served as the singer for many of the most famous evangelists of his day, including Dwight Moody. For 20 years, he sang at all of the revivals of evangelist Sam

Jones throughout the United States and Canada until Jones' death in 1906.

Excell was described as "a big robust six-footer." He had an extraordinary vocal range that enabled him to solo as a baritone or tenor. He sang with expression and a sympathetic tone, which had a moving influence on audiences. His singing led many to Christ. He was a prolific composer authoring, composing or arranging more than 2,000 songs.

His arrangement of John Newton's "Amazing Grace" has been the most widely used since the second half of the 20th century. It first appeared in his hymnbook *Make His Praise Glorious* (1900). He used the tune of the folk song "New Britain." For Newton's sixth verse, he substituted one he found in "A Collection of Sacred Ballads" (1790). It is the familiar "When we've been there ten thousand years..."

'Count Your Blessings'

Excell also wrote the tune of the familiar hymn "Count Your Blessings." The hymn was popular in Britain, and during the Welsh Revival of 1904–1905, the hymn was sung at every service.

A versatile writer, Excell compiled or contributed to 90 hymn books for various publishers over a 40-year publishing career. He started his own publishing company, E.O. Excell & Son, which published many hymn books.

Excell became ill while working with British evangelist Gipsy Smith in a revival in Louisville, Kentucky. He spent 30 weeks in Wesley Hospital in Chicago. He died on June 10, 1921.✠



EXCELL

By Joanne Sloan

Joanne Sloan, a member of First Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa, has been a published writer of articles and books for 30 years. She has a bachelor's degree double majoring in history and English from East Texas State University (now Texas A&M–Commerce) and a master's degree specializing in English from the University of Arkansas (1978).

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For May 23

Explore the Bible

By Benjamin Stubblefield, Ph.D.

Visiting Assistant Professor of Christian Studies, University of Mobile



REVEALED Luke 24:18–31

We have a few games we play in the car with the kids when we're taking a road trip. One that's fun is when one person chooses a color, and the others compete to see who can first find a car with that color.

What's weird is that once you start looking for a turquoise vehicle — a color you'd never think you'd see — you start to notice a bunch of them. This is actually called Baader-Meinhof phenomenon or frequency illusion. It describes what happens when we become aware of something that's always been around us but never raised to our attention. And now that it is, we start to see it everywhere.

In this week's passage, the Lord puts the disciples on the road to Emmaus through a whopper Baader-Meinhof phenomenon. While they've been looking for the Messiah, Jesus points out to them that they've been looking for the wrong kind. The real Messiah that they've been missing is all through "Moses and the Prophets," a fact they'll realize when their eyes are opened to see it (v. 31).

Questions (18–24)

Cleopas and the other disciple express their understanding of what has happened in Jerusalem but they are confused, and their confusion becomes clear.

They thought the Messiah would do for Israel in Rome what Moses did for Israel in Egypt. They report what the women saw at the tomb but have yet to decide what to think about it.

In short, these two have more questions than answers, even with the resurrected Messiah walking step by step beside them.

While Jesus is about to challenge them, what He does not do is abandon them. Though supreme and in resurrected glory, our Lord is patient with the doubtful. He's willing to sit and visit awhile even with those who struggle to believe He's alive.

You and I will likely have similar seasons of doubt. And that's OK, because Jesus is still willing to

spend time reminding us that He is a rewarder to those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6).

Answers (25–27)

It's clear the believers still don't yet recognize Him, but His instruction moves them deeply (v. 32) — so much so that they press Him to stay and eat with them (v. 29).

What's so interesting here is that Jesus chose to walk these guys through the Old Testament in order to correct and enhance their understanding.

He could have just said, "Fellas! It's Me!" But, among other reasons, I think He went about it this way to establish a pattern for His present and future disciples, namely, that to know God we must know His word.

In a time when people seem obsessed with finding "their truth," the Lord invites us to discover "The Truth," written clear and bold in His Holy Bible.

What a confidence, calling and challenge to know that we can seek the Lord's truth in the Lord's word.

Recognized (28–31)

We don't exactly know what caused the men to suddenly recognize Jesus. But the passive language, "their eyes were opened," suggests that they recognized Jesus because someone else did the opening.

Through the Scriptures, God opens the eyes of the physically and spiritually blind — removes the veil, so to speak. And here, God is doing the same that they might have the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Similarly, when we pray, evangelize or study our Bibles, we recognize the Holy Spirit must work in order to bless our efforts.

Jesus tells us that without Him, we can do nothing. And I think He means it.

No lasting, spiritual fruit can come from a life disconnected from the Lord. So, brothers and sisters, we must pray the Holy Spirit would visit us, our churches and our world that we might behold the glory of God in the face of Christ. 🌿

Bible Studies for Life

By Rony Kozman, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies, Samford University



SHARE THE MESSAGE Acts 17:16–18; 22–23; 30–31

In Acts 17 we get a glimpse of Paul's missionary strategy. How did the apostle proclaim the gospel to those who were not followers of Jesus? How did he make Christ known?

Here we see how Paul shared the message about Christ to two groups of people: those who were devoted to Israel's God and who were learned in Israel's Scripture (v. 17); and Greek philosophers (v. 18).

Be sensitive to opportunities to share the gospel. (16–18)

Paul goes to the places where he can reason about Christ. He goes to Jewish synagogues where he will reason from Israel's Scriptures — from the Old Testament — that Jesus is the Messiah (vv. 1–3). He also goes to the place in Athens where the people entertained "the latest ideas" (v. 21).

Paul intentionally went to spaces where opportunities to make Christ known would readily arise. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom" (v. 2), and he also went to the spaces where the most cutting-edge ideas were being presented. Since Christ was both the fulfillment of Israel's Scripture and the wisdom/reason that permeates the world, Paul goes to the places where Israel's Scripture and Greek wisdom (i.e., philosophy) were readily discussed — the synagogue and the Areopagus.

We might ask ourselves: What are the spaces in my community where religious and philosophical ideas are discussed? How can we contribute to not only making Christ known but also to creating the contexts and environments in which Christ can be shared? And how can we participate in these spaces and dialogues and bring those who do not know Christ into these spaces so they can discuss and consider Christ?

Find a common ground for introducing the gospel. (22-23)

When Paul is in these two different spaces — the synagogue and

the Areopagus, he uses different frames of reference, a different grammar and vocabulary to make Christ known. He takes different approaches depending on his audience.

When Paul preaches in the synagogues to those who know Israel's Scripture, Paul makes Christ known from Scripture. He reasons from the Old Testament that Jesus is the crucified and risen Messiah Who fulfills the promises and covenants that God made to Abraham and to David (vv. 1–3; 10–11).

When Paul speaks to the Greek philosophers in the Areopagus, he appeals to things with which they are familiar. He uses their own altar "to an unknown God" as a launching point to make God known to them.

While Paul begins from what is familiar to them, he also makes the case for this unknown God whom he proclaims is the Creator and does not live in temples (v. 24) and is not an idol fashioned by human hands (v. 29). Paul moves from what is familiar to his audience to what is distinct about his message.

Even when Paul makes the case for an idea that is different from his audience, he ties it to what they know: He quotes from a Stoic philosopher, "we are his offspring" (v. 28). Paul reasons from this familiar quotation that if we are God's offspring, then the divine being cannot be made by humans as an idol. Since we are His offspring, He is not made by us; we are made by Him.

Help others understand the truth of the gospel. (30-31)

Paul continues his message to its climax in the resurrection of Christ, which holds people accountable to worshipping the God of whom Paul speaks. For Paul, the dialogue he has with the philosophers is not simply speculation and the discussion of ideas without consequence.

Instead, this great idea demands not simply intellectual curiosity but repentance to the one true God and to the resurrected Messiah of whom Paul speaks. 🌿

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Grace Thornton

TAB Media

Longtime missions author Rosalie Hunt writes first memoir

Rosalie Hunt's life is forever changed by a leper who came to her front door on Christmas morning when she was 9 years old.

Hunt — the daughter of missionaries to China — answered the door, and the man was kneeling on the front porch begging for bread.

“He was shivering and had no shoes on his feet,” she said. “He said, ‘Please give me a little bread, I’m starving.’”

So she ran and got some biscuits from that morning’s breakfast. As she handed the bread to him, he dropped some.

She watched as he picked up every crumb from the ground with his partially missing fingers, determined not to waste any of what she had given him.

‘Watershed moment’

“That’s been 71 years ago, and it’s like I still picture him in my mind,” Hunt said.

“I stood there weeping, and it was as if God spoke to my heart. I told Him I would tell people like this that He was the bread of life. It was a watershed moment for me.”

Stories like that one fill the pages of Hunt’s new book, “6



Facebook photo

Girls in Action participants and their leaders at First Baptist Church, Guntersville, gather around Rosalie Hunt (fourth from left) in April to help launch her new book, “6 Yellow Balloons: An MK’s China Story.” The GAs are holding their handcrafted “6 Yellow Balloons” bookmarks.

Yellow Balloons: An MK’s China Story.” It’s by no means her first book — over the years, Hunt has written volume after volume of

stories about missionary heroes from Ann Hasseltine Judson to Kathleen Mallory.

She’s also written about the history and legacy of Woman’s Missionary Union.

What makes this book different is it’s the first time Hunt has written her own story about growing up as a missionary kid.

“With the passing of the years, I’ve had more and more people say, ‘When are you going to tell your own story?’

“And, of course, the kids have been after me for many years,” she said.

But when the COVID-19

pandemic hit, she ran out of excuses. Suddenly her calendar was clear, and she had plenty of time. And she found the subconscious reason she’d

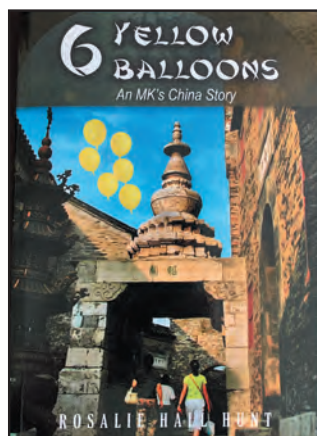
been putting it off all along — it was hard emotional work, just like she thought it would be.

“I know this first person too well,” Hunt said. “That made it incredibly difficult.”

She had worried she wouldn’t have enough content, but what she

found was the opposite — she had to break it into two volumes.

“6 Yellow Balloons” starts with the story of the leper and then goes back to the beginnings of Hunt’s missions journey — the story of her parents and how they answered the call to go to China.



That was a foundation she felt she couldn’t leave out — and because of that, Hunt’s own birth doesn’t come until much later in the book.

The second book will cover more of her young life as well as the story of how she embraced her parents’ missions legacy and became an international missionary herself.

New insights

As Hunt has worked on both, she’s laughed, cried, reflected and had some moments of self-revelation.

She said in retrospect, she’s been able to see God’s footprints and how He worked in difficult situations.


“I hope these stories are going to give people new insights into what it’s like to be a missionary kid, how you fit in and how you don’t fit in and where is home for you,” she said.

“6 Yellow Balloons” is laced with stories of God’s faithfulness, the perseverance of missionaries and the struggles of growing up in another culture.

The book is “about the reason for missions, finding God’s direction through finding Him and how He takes even your mistakes and molds them into something usable,” Hunt said. “Nothing is wasted with God.”

And if you’re wondering about the significance of the six yellow balloons, Hunt isn’t going to tell you — you’re going to have to find out for yourself.

“It’s symbolic,” she said. “You’ve got to read the book.”

For more information or to get a copy of “6 Yellow Balloons” or any of Hunt’s other books, visit rosaliehallhunt.com.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Reviews of films, books, music or other media that appear in TAB are intended to help readers evaluate current media for themselves, their children and grandchildren in order to decide whether to watch, read or listen. Reviews are not an endorsement by the writer or TAB Media.



FROM CUBA TO THE U.S.

Irma Moss, president of Florida Woman's Missionary Union, immigrated to the U.S. at age 8 with her family in the wake of the Cuban Revolution.

WMU photo by Pam Henderson

President of Florida WMU reflects on life lessons amid upheaval

By **Trennis Henderson**
WMU National Correspondent

Irma Moss vividly remembers five or six communist soldiers invading her family's home in Cuba and whisking her father off to jail in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. That was more than 60 years ago.

It was a traumatic, life-changing experience for the frightened 8-year-old girl and her family.

Fast forward to 2021 and Moss' life journey eventually led to her current leadership role as state Woman's Missionary Union president for Florida Baptists — but more on that in a moment.

Sudden departure

Incredibly, the day after her father's arrest, he was released from custody. He told his wife and two young daughters that they had less than 12 hours to leave their house, abandon most of their possessions and find shelter elsewhere. Her father, a successful businessman in Cuba whose assets were immediately frozen by the communist officials, made arrangements to immigrate to the United States and found work as a restaurant busboy.

Moss, her mother and sister took refuge in her aunt's one-room apartment in Havana. Her family eventually reunited in Florida several months later.

Recounting their departure from Havana, Moss said flights to the U.S. were on the verge of being halted, and the plane they hoped to board was overbooked by 13 passengers.

"That was the beginning of the journey where my mom taught me that prayer changes things," Moss recalled.

She said her mom began praying that they would be able to get on the flight "and 13 people did not show up. God saved the last three seats for my mom, my sister and me."

That also was the start of Moss' new life in the U.S.

"God was in control," she affirmed. "My mom and my dad always looked to do God's will. The doors closed for us in Cuba, but the doors opened in America, and

I bleed red, white and blue. I have lived the American dream."

After learning English and completing elementary, middle and high school in Orlando, Florida, Moss went to college where she sensed

God calling her to full-time Christian service. She earned her master's degree at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and was involved in education and youth ministry for several years.

Along the way, she met and married her American husband, Tony, and they raised their son, Jonathan.

Moss said the Lord eventually led her to "the missions field of public education" where she served as a teacher, principal and director of bilingual English as a Second Language for Orange County Public Schools in Florida.

"In the school system, God gave me the opportunity to share Jesus Christ by my witness and my life," Moss noted.



Photo courtesy of Irma Moss
Irma Moss and her older sister, Leisy, take a photo with their mom in Cuba prior to the island's communist takeover.

Connecting that belief to her WMU involvement, she said, "That's why I love WMU so much because WMU is about prayer. My mama taught me to pray for everything and God will answer your prayer.

"The other thing I love about WMU is that we're teaching people about the best answer in life and that's Jesus Christ — He is the way, the only way."

Telling the story

Describing WMU as "the wonderful ministry that unites the church" amid today's chaotic world, Moss said, "Missions will never grow old because missions is telling the story of Jesus. It's telling the lost world that God loves them and He died for them — and the only hope we have for our sin is Jesus."

In her role as Florida Baptist WMU president, she added, "This is what the Lord was calling me to do, and I needed to do it and to do it enthusiastically and do it to the best of my ability to glorify Him."

Cindy Bradley, executive director of Florida WMU, said "Her commitment to our God and to His kingdom is unswerving."✝



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