

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

INSIDE



Church signs allow congregations to connect with the community

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Express genuine concern for abuse survivors

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Community influence starts with acknowledging Baptist church perception

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Attendees respond to an altar call at the State Evangelism Conference at Taylor Road Baptist Church in Montgomery. Four churches hosted conference events this year.

Photo by Doug Rogers/SBOM

Equipping believers

State evangelism team tries out multi-city approach

The state evangelism conference is a tradition in Alabama Baptist life, and this year's approach — four events held in different locations throughout the state — offered more opportunities than ever for encouragement, fellowship and training.

Each year, the evangelism-focused event seeks to equip Alabama Baptists to share the good news of Christ.

After scaling back last year's event due to safety concerns amid the COVID-19 pandemic, organizers wanted to get closer to Alabama Baptists, geographically speaking.

"This year, we decided to offer regional conferences to communicate the message that instead of expecting Alabama Baptists to come to us at one central location, we want to come to you," said Daniel Wilson, director of the office of evangelism at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

"At the end of the day, I believe we accomplished our goal of getting encouragement, training and resources to areas

of the state that have not had the opportunity to benefit from this conference before."

Four churches hosted the events under the Sharing Hope label: Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile (Jan. 30–31), Taylor Road Baptist Church in Montgomery (Feb. 6–7), First Baptist Church Pelham (Feb. 27–28) and FBC Cullman (March 13–14).

Practical strategies

Alabama Baptist pastors shared the stage with nationally recognized authors, pastors and speakers, and each event featured worship, prayer and small group sessions focused on practical evangelism strategies. All in all, Wilson said

he and his team were pleased with the response.

More accessible

"Several people expressed appreciation that this conference allowed them to attend without traveling a long distance," Wilson said.

"So I think a big win was that the Sharing Hope Conference was more accessible to Alabama Baptists across the state.

"After all, our desire is to make it easier for pastors and churches to get the tools they need to reach their communities."

Read more about the four Sharing Hope conferences on pages 10–11.

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Facebook photo

Baptist Communicators Association's annual workshop will be April 25-28 at New Orleans Seminary. As members visit the hometown of the New Orleans Saints, they will explore how God is equipping His saints for the work of ministry.

BCA to hold 67th annual workshop in New Orleans

For The Alabama Baptist and many of our media partners, the Baptist Communicators Association is a key networking and training resource.

BCA is a professional organization of communicators who serve in a variety of editorial, public relations, media and marketing positions within Baptist agencies and institutions.

The editorial team at TAB Media Group has long been a part of BCA, as have communications staff members at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, the University of Mobile, Samford University, Dogwood Media Solutions, national Woman's Missionary Union, First Baptist Church Montgomery and Valley View Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa. Fellow BCA members help us in our mission to share news and information that empowers believers to live out discipleship in their personal, professional and church lives.

BCA will hold its 67th annual workshop April 25-28 at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Keynote speakers will be Ted

Jackson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer; Sally-Ann Roberts, a long-time New Orleans news anchor and author; Kerry Myers, an award-winning journalist and deputy director of the Parole Project; and Amy Whitfield, executive



Photo courtesy of Doug Rogers/SBOM
Doug Rogers (left), office director of communications & Cooperative Program for SBOM, is this year's BCA president. His daughter, Bethany Franklin, is BCA's awards chair-elect.

director of communications for The Summit Church in North Carolina.

Additionally, multiple breakout sessions will be offered, and conference attendees will hear from Kay Bennett, executive director of Baptist Friendship House, and participate in a missions project there.

"Those who attend this year's BCA workshop will walk away better prepared to fulfill their God-called communications ministries," said Margaret Colson, BCA executive director. "After two years of not being together in person, we will enjoy a time to reconnect and fellowship, encouraging each other to use our gifts for the glory of God."

Learn more about membership in BCA and the annual workshop at baptistcommunicators.org. (The Alabama Baptist)

The Alabama Baptist

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

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The crossword puzzle can be found on page 13.

RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

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

✉ jrash@thealabamabaptist.org 🐦 @RashionalThts

Glimmers of hope, sweetness can still be found in darkest moments

Sometimes we need an escape from all the heaviness pressing down. The joy in a child's laughter or the sweetness of a puppy's excitement could bring the perfect relief.

You might also find a walk in the park or morning stroll down the beach uplifting, or maybe a drive in the country with your favorite person. Reading an entertaining book and even an afternoon nap could do the trick.

The options are countless if we slow down, take a breath and look for them.

Starting and ending our day with prayer and meditation on Scripture also plays an important part in keeping ourselves centered. And realizing what we can control while accepting what we can't control helps release unnecessary negative stress we place on ourselves.

Taking the next step and working on the next thing in front of us keeps life manageable.

It's true we can't help everyone and take care of every prob-

lem in the world; it's also true each of us can do something and help someone.

Looking beyond our own circumstances to see the world around us might add fear and anxiety in some cases, but it also helps us maintain proper perspective.

Take some time this week to look for the precious gifts in your life.

Along with thanking the Lord for them, allow yourself the freedom to appreciate, enjoy and gain energy from those special blessings.

You might also find inspiration through the stories we share each week in The Alabama Baptist and on our various digital platforms — websites, social media and podcasts.

As you glance at the headlines, read the articles or listen to the audio stories, zero in on what's being shared.

How are God's people showing up? Do any ideas come to mind for you, your family or your church? What are ways you can pray for the situations being described?

Like you, I've had the Ukrainian people on my heart a lot the past few weeks.

Rick Lance and others share more about the latest realities and ways to help on page 4.

We've also worked to keep a continuous flow of stories relating how our brothers and sisters in Christ are standing strong and demonstrating His love boldly.

They need our prayers and to know they are not forgotten.

The communications team from the International Mission Board is a tremendous help as we pull together coverage day after day.

And opportunities to interview those who are serving in and around Ukraine or who have been in the area recently provide important insights.

During a presentation hosted by Bob Terry and Kevin Blackwell of Samford University on

campus March 17, we learned about specific ministries taking place in Ukraine and nearby countries.

These are ministry efforts organized by Baptist churches in the areas, said Elijah Brown, general secretary and CEO of Baptist World Alliance.

"In the first six days of this war, 600 (of the 2,100) Baptist churches (in Ukraine) provided basic food and humanitarian relief, helping 45,000 people who had been displaced by war," he said. "But they can't do it alone."

Brown asks Baptists to pray for the people of Ukraine. To write out prayers that will be shared with Baptist leaders on the ground in Ukraine, visit baptistworld.org/shareaprayer.

"It doesn't matter if they can't read English," he said. "They'll know that other Baptists are praying for them and their nation."



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

Katrina Rash's 1-year-old Sheepadoodle, Liv, loves to play and has boundless energy.



Photo by Lauren C. Grim/The Alabama Baptist

Five-year-old Alana Grim loves when snow is in the forecast. Her 3-year-old brother, Mason, is starting to share her enthusiasm. Their recent adventure included sledding, building a snowman and staying up late to watch the first snowflakes fall.

Your Voice



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

How do we respond when breaking news breaks our hearts?

By Rick Lance

Executive director, Alabama Baptist SBOM

You don't have to be a news junkie to have been bombarded by the sad news coming out of Ukraine. Even a casual viewer realizes this is a major event unfolding before our eyes.

Not since World War II has the world been so impacted by an invasion such as we are witnessing in Ukraine.

Russia's actions are reminiscent of the German invasion of nearby countries in the run-up to World War II. This is sobering news indeed.

Some things have really sad-

dened us. The bombing of civilian residential areas and hospitals in an intentional way can qualify as war crimes. The death toll is rising higher and higher with no end in sight.

Historic cities are being left in a state of ruin which begs the questions: What will happen to these cities and other impacted areas? Will they be able to rebound, or will this war rage on in a seemingly endless fashion?

'Resilient resistance'

Some things have surprised us. The mere fact that Russia would invade a sovereign nation has sur-

prised some people and others not so much.

The resilient resistance of the Ukrainian forces — many times outnumbered by the Russian military — has nonetheless fought gallantly. The Russian invasion did not turn out to be the blitzkrieg that was intended. This invasion has inflicted unexpected losses for Russia.

The outstanding leadership of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been an admirable surprise for us. He is no stranger to the camera. He knows how to communicate.

Not since Winston Churchill have we witnessed such bravery in a leader of a country in crisis. His leadership has helped us all understand the plight of the Ukrainian people and the implications of this war for Europe, the U.S. and the rest of the world.

Some things are for certain. Our heart breaks for the people of Ukraine. We are overwhelmed with concern for their safety.

The Ukrainian refugees fleeing across the borders of neighboring nations are now more than 3 million. This number will continue to rise, although escaping the war zones will be increasingly dangerous.

Responding to needs

Another certainty is that the refugees need our help. Many people

are responding to these needs. Your State Board of Missions and the Alabama Baptist family as a whole are numbered among them.

The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions recently sent \$100,000 from Disaster Relief funds to the International Mission Board. The IMB has boots on the ground there seeking to meet the needs of people.

Any personal or church contribution given through the State Board of Missions marked as "IMB Ukraine Relief" also will be sent to our International Mission Board for its ministry to refugees from Ukraine — and will

be over and above the \$100,000 gift mentioned above. We assure you all of these funds will be in the hands of trustworthy people seeking to give a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus.

How to help

For certain we need to pray for all involved in these acts of war. Not only do we need to pray for the leaders of Ukraine and the people in harm's way, but we also need to pray that somehow, some way this war will end soon.

Our prayers ought to be for a quick resolution of this war grounded on a basis of peace, not war.

We know God is on His throne. We realize none of these events surprised Him. We also know He can teach us valuable lessons from these horrible circumstances. Let us have ears to hear and eyes to see what our Lord is teaching us.

To give to the International Mission Board's ministry to refugees from Ukraine through the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, visit alsbom.org/ukraine.

Reports from Ukraine

From here on out, it is our understanding that the majority of refugees who come across the border are those who do not have the means, who do not have family in other places," said Tom Beam, state disaster relief coordinator for North Carolina Baptists and part of a Disaster Assistance & Response Team who went to Poland to survey how trained volunteers from the U.S. can serve. "That changes the dynamic of the type of refugee and what the types of needs are."

This is a new reality for us. Our home, the way we knew

it before, is gone. ... Every morning when I take a warm shower, I really think that might be my last warm shower. ... That's the way life is right now. ... What you have now, you might not have tomorrow. It kind of makes life simpler and more complex at the same time. ... But God did not call us to comfort. ... He called us to our people. So I'm very thankful I have that opportunity. Would I have sought this freely and willingly? Probably not, but it came to me, and I better use it.

Yaroslav "Slavik" Pyzh
President, Ukrainian Baptist
Theological Seminary, Lviv

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“Our expectations literally are to be God’s hands and feet to everybody we encounter.”

WALTER (WALLY) LEYERLE

Disaster relief associate from Texas who will serve Ukrainian refugees in Romania

“All of these individuals are made in the image of God, and seeing them celebrated affirms that to us. It’s a highlight of our church and community’s year,” said **Ryan Johnson, pastor of Agape Baptist Church in Scottsboro**, which is involved with Night to Shine, an event sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation. The event, Johnson said, allows his church to show the love of Christ to the community through helping provide a special night of celebration for those with special needs.

“True contentment comes ‘through Christ’ and means being satisfied and at rest with what I have, where I am and Who I have,” said **Jarman Leather-**

wood, pastor of House of Hope and Restoration Church in Huntsville, Alabama, who spoke at the Pursue conference, Feb. 25–26 at First Baptist Church Opelika.

“In a culture that has an insatiable appetite for more, the Christian must be willing to swim upstream and say, ‘I don’t need any ‘more’ ... because I have it all already,’ ” said **author and Christian communicator Michael Kelley**, who spoke at the Pursue conference, Feb. 25–26 at First Baptist Church Opelika.

“We want to teach our members what the word of God says, but also how to do what the word of

God says. If you don’t go out and practice what you’re learning, what good is it to learn it? There’s a need for people in the community to see you have a heart for God. It’s a witness,” said **Charles Spence, pastor of Indian Mounds Baptist Church in Moundville**.

“He could finish dead last but still be ecstatic, walking up to people and high-fiving them and saying, ‘Nice job.’ I wished I could be a little more like him,” said **Nik Nikic**, about his son, Chris, who has Down syndrome. Despite his disability, Chris became the first person with Down syndrome to complete a full Ironman triathlon in 2020 in Panama City Beach, Florida.

From the *Twitterverse*

@tedtraylor

Only one life,
Will soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ
Will last!

@revandyfrazier

If we want a better country, let’s start by being good citizens and neighbors. Let’s complain less and pray more that our country has leaders who seek wisdom from God and His word.

@shane_pruitt78

“Every world religion teaches that you must do ‘good works’ to reach up to your god/gods. The gospel says that no amount of ‘good works’ are enough, so our great God came down to us.”

@DrPaulChitwood

In Poland & just met with a Baptist church planter from Lviv, Ukraine, who brought his family

out of the war. Now working to help us get relief supplies back into Ukraine.

Struggling to talk, he said, “I’m sorry for getting emotional. I wasn’t prepared for this in seminary.”

@trillianewbell

Speaking at an event and a 76-year-old woman told me, “I didn’t want to come, but I’m so glad I did. I’ve been tired but returning to my First Love.”

You are never too old, broken or weary to go to Jesus.

@GaryFenton07

Studying the word of God with a bad attitude often leads to a bad interpretation. Lord, create a right heart in me each time I study Your word.

@MichaelCatt

Do not be the one in your city

who’s competing with other pastors for the most people. Be the one who prays God will bless them. Love one another, serve one another & pray for one another.

@LysaTerKeurst

God is good at being God. We don’t have to try to fix what He hasn’t assigned to us to fix. No need to manipulate, control or spend all our emotions trying to figure it out. We can let Him be God & free ourselves from the impossible assignment of trying to keep it all together.

@jordaneasley

Sin thrills. Then it kills. It fascinates. Then it assassinates.”
—@johnnymhunt

@BillyGraham

Don’t let the headlines frighten you. God is still sovereign. He’s still on the throne.

A mission from God

Christians believe our mission from God began with Abraham. God called him away from his home and family and promised to bless the world through him. And to this childless senior and his wife, Sarah, God promised to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Abraham and his descendants taught the world the laws of God in the Old Testament, and one of Abraham’s descendants became the Messiah. We who follow the Messiah, whom we normally call by the Greek equivalent, “Christ,” continue this mission to bless the world.

How do we bless the world?

Jesus appeared on the shores of Galilee and said, “Follow Me.” As we follow Christ, we go with Him into places of need. Christ had compassion for the sick and He healed many. We’re commanded to care for the suffering and to pray for them.

Faith hospitals from St. Jude in Memphis to local Baptist hospitals in Birmingham offer compassionate care for the sick. My mother spent time in Birmingham’s St. Vincent’s Hospital before her death and told me how much it meant for the Catholic sisters to stop in and pray with her.

Christ had compassion for the hungry, and He fed them. Christians know that if people have empty stomachs they probably won’t listen to our message about empty hearts.

Christ had compassion for the outcasts. He spent time with the immoral and despised Samaritan woman. He promised living water to satisfy her spiritual thirst.

Christians disregard social barriers because our task is to share the same living water with those who need to know God’s love. It’s true. We’re on a mission from God.

Pastor Michael J. Brooks
Siluria Baptist Church
Alabaster, Ala.

3 stories you should know



Submitted photo/Baptist Press

Ukrainian refugees eat a hot meal in Romania provided through Send Relief. Working in partnership, Send Relief and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief representatives from several states have identified sites in the Polish cities of Warsaw, Chelm and Gdansk and in Suceava, Romania, where small teams of volunteers will serve local churches who are ministering to the needs of refugees. Read more about these efforts at tabonline.org/sbdr-ukraine. (BP)

Alabama legislators consider gambling bills

As the clock ticks on the 2022 Alabama legislative session, Alabama Citizens Action Program is monitoring several late-filed gambling bills now under consideration.

Two lottery bills were introduced March 15: House Bill 501, which calls for a statewide constitutional amendment authorizing a state lottery, and HB 502, an enabling bill that would take effect should voters approve the amendment.

Two gambling bills also are under consideration in the Alabama Senate. Senate Bill 293 proposes a constitutional amendment to allow state-controlled casinos, a lottery and online sports betting. SB 294 is the enabling bill for that effort.

Learn more about the bills and efforts by the Alabama Citizens Action Program to stop them at tabonline.org/2022-gambling-bills. (TAB)

Branch elected chair of Lifeway trustees

Missie Branch was elected chair of Lifeway Christian Resources' trustee board March 8. Branch is the first African American woman to hold that position.

Branch is assistant dean of students to women and director of graduate life at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. A member of Imago Dei Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, Branch began her service on the Lifeway board in 2017.

Lifeway CEO Ben Mandrell said he is "excited and thankful for her historic appointment" and praised Branch's character and love for the local church. (Lifeway)



BRANCH

Persecuted church

Finnish official may face prison for expressing beliefs on marriage

HELSINKI, Finland — A Finnish Parliament member could face imprisonment for expressing some of her Christian beliefs on marriage and human sexuality.

According to legal advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom International, Dr. Paivi Rasanen has been charged with three criminal offenses and could face two years in prison. Rasanen, a Lutheran, also was Finland's minister of the interior from 2011 to 2015.

The medical doctor, mother and grandmother is accused of "hate speech." ADF International says the charges stem from information about marriage and human sexuality Rasanen included in a pamphlet she wrote in 2004 for a Christian foundation; comments she made on radio in

2019 and on television in 2018; and a tweet in which she criticized her church's decision to sponsor the LGBT "Pride 2019" event.

More than two-thirds of Finland's population (66.5% of the 5.5 million overall population) are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. More than 25% of the population claim no religious affiliation. Finland legalized same-sex "marriage" in 2017.

Christian family forced out of Laotian village for their faith

DONG SAVANH, Laos — Twelve members of a Christian family were driven from their Laotian village by individuals angry over the family's practice of "foreign" religion, reports the relief group Barnabas Fund.

The family's home in the Dong Savanh village in Savannakhet province was burned in the

Feb. 9 attack, the report stated. This incident followed another attack on the family in December. That time, individuals struck the family



Photo courtesy of citizen journalist

members and beat the coffin of their deceased father forcing them to bury the father in their own rice field, the report said.

Laos is a communist country with a predominately Buddhist population. In 2019, the government passed its Law on the Evangelical Church, giving Laotian Christians the right to conduct services and preach, the report says.

Laos is No. 26 on Open Doors' 2022 World Watch List of places most difficult to be a Christian.

Alabama news

OBITUARIES

▶ **Robert “Bob” Ford**, 88, who served in Baptist Campus Ministries at several Alabama universities, died March 11.

He served Ensley Baptist Church, Birmingham, and Calvary Baptist Church, Vincent, but spent the bulk of his career as a campus minister, serving students at Livingston University, the University of Montevallo and Jacksonville State University.



FORD

He held a bachelor's degree from Howard College (now Samford University) and master of theology and doctor of ministry degrees from Southern Seminary.

He is survived by his brother, George P. Ford. ▶ **James Donald “Don” Dendy**, 91, of Cropwell died March 6. He was a U.S. Marine during the Korean conflict and received a Purple Heart.



DENDY

He graduated from Southwestern Seminary and led three churches in Alabama: East Centre Baptist Church, Clay Baptist Church and First Baptist Church Odenville. He also served as a chaplain for the Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief Team and the Pell City

Police Department. He was a member of FBC Pell City.

He is survived by five children, 14 grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild.

BLOUNT ASSOCIATION

▶ **Pleasant View Missionary Baptist Church, Holly Pond**, will host its spring revival April 6–8. Services start at 7 p.m. The evangelist will be William McClellan. Earl Harper is pastor.

CALHOUN ASSOCIATION

▶ **Saks First Baptist Church, Anniston**, will host revival services March 27–30 at 6:30 nightly. Pastor Todd Stewart will preach the 10 a.m. service Sunday with Willy Rice preaching the other services. Rice is pastor of Calvary Church, Clearwater, Florida. He is a former pastor of Gladeview Baptist Church, Anniston. Music will be by Saks FBC worship choir and music ministries, Pat Barker, Rodney Gilmore and Tiffany Hamilton. Contact 256-237-6932 or visit fbcSaks.org.



RICE

COFFEE COUNTY ASSOCIATION

▶ **Mount Zion Baptist Church, New Brockton**, is hosting a revival, April 4–6 at 6 nightly. Lloyd Snellgrove, pastor of Mount Vernon Assembly of God, Elba, will preach.

ETOWAH ASSOCIATION

▶ **Zac Clay** is the new pastor of **First Baptist Church Altoona**. He previously led Pine Grove Baptist Church, Centre.

He is a graduate of UAB and has a master's degree in Christian leadership from Liberty University's Rawlings School of Divinity. He has taught and coached in Gadsden City Schools and West End High School, Walnut Grove. He and his wife, Rachel, have three children.



CLAY

▶ **Audrey Young** is the new director of Redeemer Kids at **Redeemer Community Church, Oneonta**.

She was a preschool teacher at Clearly Kids Christian Academy for more than 10 years.

She and her husband, Neil, have two children.



YOUNG

MOBILE ASSOCIATION

▶ **Blake Herron** is the new preteen pastor of **Cottage Hill Baptist Church, Mobile**. He previously served students at Lake Hills Church, Candler, North Carolina, and Life Fellowship Church, Pryor, Oklahoma. He studied at Fruitland Baptist Bible College and is currently studying at Liberty University. He is married to Kelsey.



HERRON

SHELBY ASSOCIATION

▶ **Lance Driskell** is the new worship minister of **Indian Springs First Baptist Church**.

He grew up singing southern gospel music. Since 1995, he has performed individually and with musical groups. He now records gospel music. Driskell and his wife, Erin, have three children.



DRISKELL

MORGAN ASSOCIATION

▶ **Blue Springs Baptist Church, Somerville**, celebrates 175 years April 3, 9:30 to noon. There will be a building walk-through,

cemetery tour, special displays, fellowship time and a worship service with congregational singing, choir and special music. Testimonies also will be shared.

The church is collecting special notes to include in its celebration album. An offering for new playground equipment will be taken at the service. No lunch will be served. Richard Richie is pastor.

ST. CLAIR ASSOCIATION

▶ **Billy Abrams** recently celebrated 30 years as pastor of **Cedar Grove Baptist Church, Leeds**, where he preached his first sermon Jan. 6, 1991. He and his wife, Lorie, have three adult children and four grandchildren.



ABRAMS

▶ F.A.I.T.H. Riders of **Cedar Grove Baptist Church, Leeds**, will host the 10th annual Lyla Ride April 16 benefiting the Ronald McDonald House of Birmingham. The event includes lunch and door prizes. The ride is a marble run where riders visit several stops — churches in St. Clair and Talladega counties — to pick up marbles. Call Ronny Burleson at 205-229-2136.

TUSCALOOSA CO. ASSOCIATION

▶ **Forest Lake Baptist Church, Tuscaloosa**, is hosting a retirement celebration March 27 for one of its three senior pastors, **Rick Mitchell**. They all serve as co-pastors.

The event will be in the fellowship hall and begins at 2 p.m.

WEST CULLMAN ASSOCIATION

▶ **Dennis Trimble** has returned to **Ebenezer Baptist Church, Vinemont**, as its new pastor. He was formerly director of missions for West Cullman Baptist Association for six years and pastor of Northside Church, Cullman, and Panama Baptist Church, Vinemont, before coming to Ebenezer.

He holds a bachelor's degree in religion from Samford University and has taken additional graduate level courses at Southern Seminary and the Birmingham extension center of New Orleans Seminary. He and his late wife, Shirley Jo, have one son.



TRIMBLE

OTHER

▶ The University of Alabama's **Baptist Campus Ministries** celebrates 100 years April 9. Doors open at 11 a.m. with lunch at noon. The celebration begins at 1 p.m. followed by building tours and fellowship. Visit uabcm.com/100 to reserve your lunch.

‘Another member of your ministry team’

Church signs allow congregations to connect with the community

By Lanell Downs Smith
The Alabama Baptist

Church signs come in a variety of styles: lighted and unlighted, brick or stone monuments, pole signs, lighted crosses or letters on the building.

No matter the design, these signs are vital to a church’s image and connecting a congregation to its community.

‘Ministry in itself’

“[A church sign] is a ministry in itself,” said Danny Williams, president of Reliable Sign Services. “Many churches do not realize that, and their signs may be old and yellowed and not kept

up or functional. [Those] are a bad first impression.”

Churches that do realize the importance of a good quality sign are more successful at drawing in new worshippers, Williams asserted. Signs enable congregations to advertise ministries and programs and to encourage passersby with Scripture.

“Digital signs help grow the church through great communication to thousands of hurting and lost people passing by each day,” Williams said. “The best tool or sign should include a digital portion. Yes, they can be expensive but can do so many things and display what you want

as often as you want in the touch of a few buttons. No ladders or dealing with the rain or wind to put up a message.”

Church is alive

An effective sign shows the community that the church is alive and doing things, he added.

By embracing technology or spending money to maintain or improve a sign, congregations communicate they have a heart to reach out to those who don’t know Christ.

“Our churches do many great things the community should know about,” said Reliable’s office manager Stephanie Smith.

“We think of the sign as another member of your ministry or outreach team. The sign can help get [interested participants] in the door.”

Sign improvements can enhance the church’s community image and attract new worshippers, Williams explained.

Results can depend upon the chosen design, he said, but churches usually notice a surge in visitors, enhanced program and worship service participation and fewer calls asking for program information.

Effects of COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic has made signs even more important and impactful, he said.

Digital signs are easily changed to communicate program changes, offer encouraging Scripture, adver-



Photo courtesy of Stephanie Smith

Reliable Sign Services walks congregations through the process of picking fonts and lighting as well as other decisions when choosing the right sign.



WILLIAMS

tise Zoom meeting times or provide website and livestreaming information.

“Those who communicate the best in all areas, including signs, will have the best opportunity to grow, show they care and draw and reach the unchurched,” Williams asserted.

Churches looking to add or improve a sign should consider a reputable brand, ask good questions and request references, he noted.

Reliable’s team offers customers a digital demonstration allowing them to see sign capabilities, sizes and clarity.

Reliable has been providing sign sales consultation, permitting, design, fabrication, installation and

maintenance services to churches, schools and business in Alabama and parts of Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee since 1994.

Attracting attention

Their digital sign off Interstate 59 in McCalla displays uplifting messages to more than 75,000 travelers each day.

Many call to thank Williams for the encouraging messages, Scripture and proverbs.

“Several have called us — a trucker called us a few weeks ago to thank us for saying, ‘God bless our truckers’ on

the sign,” Williams recalled. “It really means a lot to me, and we often have people honk when passing by if they see something on the sign they like.”



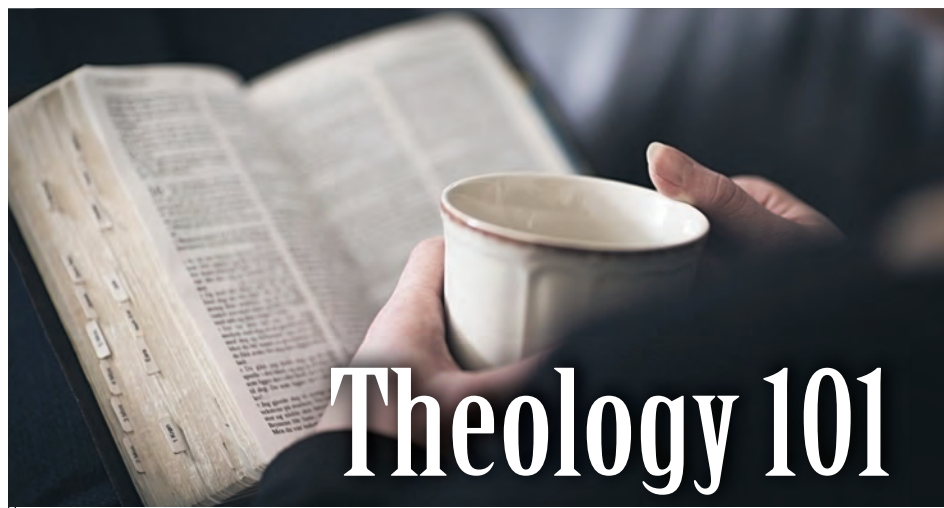
Photo courtesy of Stephanie Smith

Reliable Sign Services President Danny Williams and long-time employee Johnny Carroll install ventilation on the business’ digital sign. Their digital sign off Interstate 59 in McCalla displays uplifting messages to more than 75,000 travelers each day.



Photo courtesy of Stephanie Smith

A quality church sign will communicate the message of a church clearly, said Danny Williams, president of Reliable Sign Services.



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

The People of God

God's Temple

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
The Alabama Baptist

In thinking about the Church as God's building, the Bible takes the imagery a step further than a physical structure.

Some buildings are devoted to office space, while others are apartment homes; some are commercial in nature, others are dedicated to education.

The Church, however, is no ordinary building. It is a temple. After the paragraph in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 that elaborates on the Church as God's building, the next verse asks, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"

The imagery of a building in Ephesians 2:20–22 also designates God's building as a temple, saying, "The whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

As a temple, a church ideally is a holy place where God's Spirit manifests His presence. Sadly, the church in Corinth was falling short. It is no less sad when it happens in our day at our church.

God's warning

A serious warning attaches to the metaphor of the congregation as a temple where God manifests His presence among His redeemed people.

This warning could hardly be cast with greater severity than in 1 Corinthians 3:17: "If any-

one destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are."

Even though the nature of that destruction is not spelled out, the force and seriousness of the warning carry their own impact.

Grace note

When we accept God's gracious salvation and affiliate with a local church, we give up the right to be a disruptive force in a congregation.

Church members tread on dangerous ground when they choose to be troublemakers in God's temple.

Though the warning is serious we must not miss the note of grace that sounds from the throne of God.

This grace note is a reminder that imperfect people are, in fact, the living stones that comprise this temple of God.

By His grace, our church as God's temple is where spiritual sacrifices are made, where divine worship takes place, where praises ring out, where prayers are offered up and where truth is believed and dispersed.

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.



Teaching Sunday School 'comes so naturally'

By Erin Roach
The Alabama Baptist

Mary Jo Looser recently was recognized by Five Points Baptist Church in Northport for teaching Sunday School for 60 years, and while she admitted she felt unprepared some weeks, "it comes so naturally after a while."

"There were Sundays when I thought, 'Why, Lord, am I in this position?' and, 'What in the world am I going to say today?' And then there were Sundays when I absolutely could not wait to share the lesson because I had been inspired," Looser, 86, told The Alabama Baptist.

When she retired from teaching several months ago, she had taught some of the women in the class for as many as 30 years, she said. Through the years, she taught adult, college-and-career and children's classes, and said she never had to be begged to teach.

"I don't want to make it appear that teaching is the easiest thing in the world. It isn't, but it certainly enhanced my walk with the Lord," Looser said, "knowing every Sunday that I was going to be responsible for a lesson."

Joy in helping

A graduate of the University of Alabama with a journalism degree, Looser noted she was "privileged to work for two Pulitzer Prize-winning newspapers," the Montgomery Advertiser and The Tuscaloosa News, where she was responsible for reporting state news.

"The wonderful thing about newspapering is not so much what you write, but it's who you write about and who you meet," she said.

She went on to work for the Alabama Department of Public Health, where she continued to write but got to interact with mothers and babies in the Maternal and Child Health Services Program.

Looser was married to her husband, Dick, until he died 10 years ago, and they have three grown children — two who work in higher education, and one who works for Easterseals.

"I think in my years of being a Sunday School teacher, I taught each of the three children when they drifted through primaries, and then one of the real joys was the period that I taught college-and-career along with Dick, and we had our children in class then," Looser said.

Particularly meaningful to her is when a former student, especially from the college-and-career class, reminisces about learning from her.

When Looser looks back on how her participation in Sunday School started, she remembers walking to church as a little girl, carrying her Sunday School lesson "in a little 5x7 folder."

'It was a treasure'

"The front page of that folder was covered with pictures, and the inside had a Bible story. The back had key verses. I remember crying because I dropped my leaflet and I didn't know where it was. It was a treasure."

She contrasted that with the way life changed by the time she retired from teaching.

"I'm sitting here now, looking across the room at a messy stack of Bibles and reference books, and I think we're losing something. I can't imagine crying over losing a book now."

Looser surmised some in the world today might think it strange that an 86-year-old attends Sunday School "because they think Sunday School is for children."

"It really is for children," she said, "and it really is for adults. It knows no age limit."

Looser said as you age, you realize more that "friends are a gift. If I've learned one thing in Sunday School, I've learned that having friends is healing, and Sunday School should cultivate friendships."

Often people will hesitate to teach a class when they're asked.

"You just have to say, 'Try it, and then come back and tell me you can't,'" she said. "... You have to try it before you turn it down. We're commissioned to share the good news."



LOOSER

Evangelism catalysts

State Evangelism Conference speakers share challenges, resources

Evangelism is the first step in multiplying disciples, and this year, the Alabama Baptist State Evangelism Conference tried its own type of multiplication — a variety of pastors, evangelists and ministry leaders speaking at four events in four cities spanning the state from south to north.

Mobile

Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile kicked things off Jan. 30–31. Chuck Kelley, president emeritus and distinguished professor of evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, told attendees the gospel has reached further now than ever before in history “because God always accomplishes His agenda.”

Blake Newsom, former senior pastor of Dauphin Way, said evangelism flows naturally from believers’ identity as the people of God.

“When we’re talking about evangelism, ... it’s not a hard conversation. Just do it because it’s who we are,” said Newsom, who became director of New Orleans Baptist Theo-

logical Seminary’s Caskey Center for Church Excellence March 1. “We are people who have embraced the gospel.”

Terry Long, evangelism associate for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, said total surrender to Christ catalyzes evangelistic power.

“This is the power we’re missing in the church today,” he said.

Lawrence Phipps, senior pastor of First Baptist Church Gulf Shores, presented The Simple Gospel, a method he developed for sharing Christ based on John 3:16.



NEWSOM

“People want to come up with all kinds of theologies that take the pressure off us” in evangelism, Phipps said. “But I’m going to tell you something: it’s still on us — the pressure to share. The pressure to be saved, that’s the job of the Holy Spirit. But if I’m not sharing, that’s on me.”

J.J. Washington, evangelism catalyst with the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, spoke from Acts 8:26–40 about the example of Philip the evangelist. To share Jesus, believers must be available, sensitive, ready and committed, Washington said.



Photo by Erin Roach/The Alabama Baptist

J.J. Washington, evangelism catalyst with the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, preaches from Acts 8:26–40 at Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile.

“The narrative shows us that God has already set up divine appointments for us with people who are open to the gospel.”

Have a method for sharing Christ committed to memory if possible, he encouraged, but don’t rely more on the method than on the Holy Spirit.

“Sometimes when we’re listening and not talking, when we’re asking good questions, what I’ve found is that God will open a door,” Washington said.

Montgomery

Speaking at Taylor Road Baptist Church Feb. 6–7, Sammy Gilbreath, SBOM’s evangelism event and training specialist, said “evangelism and discipleship are two

wings on the same airplane.”

And questions about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus are “timeless,” said Daniel Atkins, pastor of Taylor Road, because “they matter more than any other question any human can ever answer.”

The way the gospel is presented has changed, but the core message has not, he added, and the gospel “changes the way we understand reality and the future.”

Dean Inserra, founding and lead pastor of City Church in Tallahassee, Florida, said the most underrated missions field in America today is the Bible Belt, and the most underrated people are the unsaved who consider themselves Christian but live without Jesus.

“If your reason for believing you’re a Christian is anything other than the name of Jesus Christ and His work on your behalf, dying in your place for your sins to make you right with



GILBREATH



Photo by Doug Rogers/SBOM

Daniel Atkins, pastor of Taylor Road Baptist Church in Montgomery, says the way the gospel is presented has changed, but the core message has not.



To view a gallery of photos, visit tabonline.org/sharing-hope.

Photo by Tracy Riggs/The Alabama Baptist

The First Baptist Church Pelham choir sings Feb. 27 during the Sharing Hope evangelism conference. The event at FBC Pelham also included a time of intercultural worship and prayer featuring Hispanic and Korean Baptists.

God, you might not be [a Christian],” Inserra said.

“[Most] people aren’t atheists and agnostics. They believe in god. And that’s the problem. They believe in a ‘lowercase g’ god. Very vague, very generic. Anywhere from a divine Santa Claus to a Yoda-type figure from ‘Star Wars’ to a good luck charm to a grandfather kind of figure.

“You’d be surprised how many people think they’re Christians because they come from a Christian family. They treat it like an ethnicity ... part of our family makeup.”

Ted Traylor, pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, Florida, closed the Montgomery conference with a message from Acts 28.

“Paul’s in jail, and the gospel is unhindered. What’s your excuse?”

Traylor noted six things to help advance the gospel:

- ▶ Faithful stewardship
- ▶ Kingdom preaching
- ▶ Inspirational writing
- ▶ Developing disciples
- ▶ Spiritual friendships
- ▶ Personal evangelism.

Pelham

At the Sharing Hope conference Feb. 27–28 at First Baptist Church Pelham, Lee Strobel urged attendees to pray for their neighbors because it is the “first thing [Jesus] would do. We must never give up in prayer.” Strobel is the director of the Lee Strobel Center for Evangelism and Applied Apologetics at Colorado Christian University and author of

“The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus.”

His second recommendation: leave the door open for questions.



LEATHERWOOD

“Apologetics doesn’t mean ‘apologize’; it means we offer reasonable explanations for our faith,” he said.

Jarman Leatherwood, pastor of House of Hope and Restoration Church in Huntsville, exhorted Christians to love their neighbor, preach the good news and speak truth to power.

“We must lift up the blood-stained banner of Jesus Christ,” he said. “This is the way we turn the light on in our dark world.”

Daven Watkins, pastor of FBC Pelham, concluded the conference with a look at Philip in Acts 8.



Photo by Tracy Riggs/The Alabama Baptist

Ministers’ wives enjoy time together during the Sharing Hope conference at FBC Cullman. Alabama WMU hosted gatherings at each of the four locations.

Videos of the Sunday evening sessions of the four conferences are available on the Facebook page of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

“Philip began his work in Samaria,” Watkins said. “Who are the Samaritans in our lives? These may be people of a different skin pigment, voting record or lifestyle, but we have a message to share.”

Cullman

At the fourth and final event at FBC Cullman March 13–14, Ed Litton, Southern Baptist Convention president and senior pastor of Redemption Church in Saraland,

spoke to a contemporary challenge facing many churches — members who have simply stopped coming since the pandemic-related pause on in-person church services. He quoted

Canadian pastor Carey Nieuwhof: “Many former regular church attenders aren’t mad nor are they afraid. They’re just indifferent to whether they come back to church or not.”

That is one reason a personal lifestyle of sharing the gospel one-on-one is critical, especially for pastors, said evangelist Ronnie Hill.

He encouraged pastors to take advantage of divine encounters and to consistently call people to a decision on salvation.

Though it may not be “trendy” to give invitations after a sermon, Hill said, it could be the only time

for someone to give their lives to Christ.

Tim Beougher, pastor of West Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, offered attendees some practical ways of engaging others with the gospel — what he called evangelism “bridges.” He is also professor of evangelism and church growth for the Billy Graham School of Missions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

For more information and resources on evangelism, visit the website of the state evangelism office at evangelizeal.org.

Beougher, author of “Overcoming Walls to Witnessing,” noted several questions that can lead to a gospel conversation, including:

▶ Where do you go to church?

▶ What do you think about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, religion, the meaning of life, being a true Christian, etc.?

▶ How can I pray for you?

▶ That’s an interesting tattoo.

What’s the story behind it?

Tom Richter, pastor of FBC Cullman, concluded the conference with a look at the work of the Holy Spirit based on Genesis 24 and the unnamed servant sent by Abraham to find a wife for his son. He noted that God the Father has a name — Yahweh; God the Son has a name — Jesus; but God the Holy Spirit is unnamed, like Abraham’s servant.



RICHTER

“You have an unnamed servant in the Holy Spirit who issues forth from Father and Son to win for the Son a bride,” Richter said. “When the unnamed servant [in Genesis 24] shows up, he doesn’t talk about himself. He said, ‘Let me tell you about my master.’

“Isn’t there still an unnamed servant who issues forth, who brings gifts ... to capture for Himself a bride? The Holy Spirit is at work. He’s the servant who is still in the world, still touching hearts,” Richter said. (The Alabama Baptist)



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Social media, Zoom help share faith

By Denise George
The Alabama Baptist

Evangelism is the act of sharing the message and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Two millennia ago, Jesus told His followers to go into the world and preach the gospel (Mark 16:15).

The disciples shared their faith on foot, surely never imagining how large revivals, radio, television and the internet would forever change the face of evangelism.

In his recent Barna Highlight, researcher George Barna noted “over half of churching Christians (52%) report posting online is a very important way they share their faith.”

The history of evangelism shows how proclaiming God’s word has changed in drastic ways over recent years.

Diana Severance writes: “Until 1865, the churches in North America tended ... to seek an outpouring of revival from God.”

Great Awakening

Jonathan Edwards led one of the first revivals of historic significance in Northampton, Massachusetts (1734–1742).

George Whitefield’s dynamic revival preaching in Philadelphia in 1739 added fuel to the fire of the Great Awakening.

The invention of the radio

drastically changed the way Christians shared their faith. Another momentous change in evangelism came in 1939, when television was introduced to Americans.

Although it didn’t gain a foothold until after World War II, by 1950 only 9% of Americans owned a TV; 10 years later the number jumped to 89.5%.

TV specials

Billy Graham pioneered the early use of TV specials in the 1950s.

Just as radio and television changed methods of evangelism, no one could have imagined the coming digital explosion that would bring faith-sharing to a whole new level.

Digital evangelism is a concept of sharing the gospel through digital media, including social media, websites, and mobile apps and devices.

Some effective types of internet evangelism include social media, email, video, blogs and podcasts.

As of January 2021, more than 4.66 billion people worldwide actively use the internet, 59.5% of the global population.

Experts agree one of the best platforms for online evangelism and connection is Zoom, an option that allows one to capture and keep data, track attendance and create small discussion groups in an interactive environment.

TAB CLASSIFIEDS

Place a classified ad for \$1 per word. For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 102.

CHURCH POSITIONS

SENIOR PASTOR

Shiloh Baptist Church, Hartford, Ala., is searching for a full-time pastor. Please mail resumés to: Shiloh Baptist Church, P.O. Box 326, Hartford, AL 36344 or by email to: SBCHSearch@gmail.com.

PASTOR

First Baptist Church of Floral, Ala., is seeking a full-time pastor. Send resumés to: 23593 Fifth Avenue, Floral, AL 36442 or email resumés to: fbfloralapsc@yahoo.com.

PASTOR

Union Baptist Church seeks a full-time pastor. Resumés will be received through March 31 by mail at: Pastor Search Committee, Union Baptist Church, 5251 Grand Bay Wilmer Road South, Grand Bay, AL 36541, or by email at: admin@ubcgrandbay.org.

PASTOR

Pathway Baptist Church in Dothan, Ala., is seeking a full-time pastor. For details and qualifications, please email questions or forward resumé to: avpbcdothan@gmail.com, ATTN: Pastor Search Committee, or mail to: Pathway Baptist Church, ATTN: Pastor Search Committee, 3551 Flowers Chapel Road, Dothan, AL 36305.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Paden Baptist Church, Gadsden, Ala., is prayerfully seeking a bivocational pastor. Please submit resumés to: padenbaptistchurch@yahoo.com or to: Paden Baptist Church, 900 Padenreich Ave., Gadsden, AL 35903.

MISSIONS/DISCIPLESIP MINISTER

Woodmont Baptist Church in Florence, Ala., is searching for a missions/discipleship minister. We are searching for someone to develop and grow our missions and discipleship ministry. Minimum five years ministry experience. College degree required, seminary degree preferred. Strong interpersonal and communications skills needed. Please go to woodmontbaptist.org to submit resumés by April 15.

MINISTER OF MUSIC

First Baptist Church of Birmingham is seeking someone to lead a strong, blended, Christ-centered worship ministry. The individual should have experience working with choral worship and be prepared to lead gifted instrumentalists and orchestra. The minister of music will join the

pastor and ministry staff in offering comprehensive ministry to the congregation. Resumés may be sent to: jcooley@fbcbbm.org.

MINISTER OF MUSIC

First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ala., is seeking a full-time or part-time candidate to lead our worship ministry. Please submit resumés to: office@fbcwoodstock.org.

STUDENT MINISTER

First Baptist Church Stevenson is seeking a full-time student minister. Direct questions to the church office at 256-437-8530. Please send resumés to: RMNamanny@gmail.com.

CHILDREN’S MINISTRY DIRECTOR & BIVOCATIONAL YOUTH MINISTER

Macedonia Baptist Church in the Coats Bend community of Gadsden, Ala., is prayerfully seeking a children’s ministry director and a bivocational youth minister. Please send resumés and/or questions to: Ken Blakney at ktblakney@yahoo.com.

PART-TIME YOUTH MINISTER

First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ala., is seeking a part-time candidate to lead our youth ministry. Please submit resumés to: office@fbcwoodstock.org.

CHILDREN’S MINISTER

North Shelby Baptist is seeking a full-time children’s minister. We are a church that values tradition and is conservative in theology, while seeking to be liberal in love. For more information, visit northshelbybaptist.org/childrens-minister.

BIVOCATIONAL CHILDREN’S MINISTER

East Highland Baptist Church, Hartselle, Ala., is prayerfully seeking God’s choice for a bivocational children’s minister who will lead the children’s ministry program. Applicants should subscribe to the doctrinal statement of the Baptist Faith & Message. See additional information under the announcements tab at ehbc.church. Please send resumé to: cmcsc@ehbc.church.

PART TIME CHILDREN’S PASTOR/DIRECTOR

Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Moulton, Ala., is prayerfully seeking God’s person to fill the part-time position of children’s pastor/director. All inquiries can be sent to: info@pgbcmoulton.com. Resumés can be sent to the same email address or mailed to: 11450 AL Hwy 33, Moulton, AL 35650.

OTHER POSITIONS

EMPLOYMENT

Job opportunities. Details at wmu.com/about-wmu/employment.

SIGNS

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MISCELLANEOUS

LOOKING FOR A MISSION HOUSE

Grace Covenant Worship Center is looking for a moderately priced house in the western section of Birmingham for the purpose of missions. Michael Frazier, pastor, 205-923-3304 (o), pagfelton@gmail.com.

PODCAST

STORIES SEASON 5: MISSIONS WIDOWS

Valleys can be difficult, but unexplainable things can happen there. Season 5 shares the stories of three women who experienced losing husbands while on the missions field and kept going. Listen to the “Stories” podcast at tabonline.org/stories.

Express genuine concern for abuse survivors

By **Rod Campbell**
Pathways Professional Counseling

You and your church leadership must have a good plan in place in the event an allegation of sexual abuse occurs. Having an advance plan is critical because without one, everyone may become overwhelmed.

Outlined below are suggestions to consider as you prepare a proper response, seek appropriate counsel and provide training that shows care for the one who has been abused, as well as all who are affected.

1. Plan

Review policies and procedures to ensure your church is safe for children and adults. Reach out to experts to help ensure appropriate safeguards are in place to prevent children from being harmed.

All allegations should be taken seriously and handled with care and concern — every time.

The initial goal is not to prove or disprove, but rather to hear what is being shared and make sure the survivor feels safe telling his or her story.

It is difficult to understand how emotionally taxing it can be for a survivor of abuse to come forward.

Many are not believed or are made to feel they must prove the allegations beyond any doubt before they are taken seriously.

Listen well, empathize with them and offer support. Then follow the plan your church leadership has in place.

If allegations should be proven false later, the situation can be handled as needed at that time.

2. Understand legal steps

Once an allegation has been made, it is important church members and leadership understand Alabama Mandatory Reporting Law

for minors. It reads in part: "... members of the clergy ... or any other person called upon to render aid or medical assistance to any child, when the child is known or suspected to be a victim of child abuse or neglect, shall be required to report ... immediately."

Making a report to the Alabama Department of Human Resources may seem like a difficult decision, but

churches must lead out in taking this important step toward justice and away from any form of secrecy.

3. Train

Training of ministers, staff and volunteers is vital so everyone understands their responsibilities if they receive a report of abuse or neglect of a minor.

Each person should know the role they need to fulfill when allegations of abuse are made.

It is imperative non-trained church staff, parents, friends, volunteers or any other well-meaning individuals avoid questioning the survivor.

Without specialized training, questioning them will likely result in more harm.

If a DHR report is necessary or if the survivor wants to talk to the police, questioning should wait until those meetings occur.

We recommend referring the survivor to a professional counselor who has specific training in working with survivors of abuse.

As church leaders and staff, you can listen, offer supportive resources, pray for them and let them know this should never have happened. Let the survivor know you are there and want to provide the best help possible.

4. Prepare for support

The church also has a

"Listen well, empathize ... and offer support. Then follow the plan your church has in place."

Rod Campbell
Pathways Professional Counseling



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vital, ongoing role to play in supporting an abuse survivor. Anyone who has been deeply wounded knows the importance of having a robust support system.

Difficult emotions

The person will likely need tremendous amounts of acceptance and empathy. Depending on the age and developmental stage of the person involved, a wide variety of difficult emotions or behaviors may result from the abuse.

Small children often have outbursts of anger, or cry easily.

Older kids or teenagers may harm themselves or behave in ways that seem to make the situation worse.

Other symptoms, no matter the age or stage of the survivor, can include depression, anxiety or self-harming behaviors.

Abuse survivors also are highly skilled in covering their hurt and pain and may look fine on the outside.

Once a survivor decides to come forward, they need the support necessary to

deal with any emotions or memories they have been holding secret for so long.

Being admonished to "get it together," "get over it" or "just move on" is not helpful and can cause the person to feel victimized again.

Messages of love and support that communicate the person is not alone and is heard, valued and cared for are of upmost importance.

Outside of reporting the situation to authorities, church members need to understand the story is not theirs to tell. If it did not happen to you, avoid any temptation to talk about it with others.

It is important for the survivors to feel safe and comfortable as they share their story.

Provide love, support

For those close to the person affected, avoid asking lots of questions. Anyone who has been through a disclosure, report, forensic interview and investigation has been asked a plethora of questions.

What survivors need from those closest to them is something along the lines of "I'm here for you if you want to talk."

They need ownership of their story, and they need control over who they talk with about it.

Knowing they are loved and supported is essential to help them begin their journey toward healing.

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Church branding expert Mark MacDonald urges congregations to eliminate perception barriers within communities around the church building.

‘Be known for love’



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Community influence starts with acknowledging Baptist church perception

By Mark MacDonald
The Alabama Baptist

Baptist church perception matters. What you’re known for is critical if you want people to pay attention to you, engage with you or believe what you say.

You can control church perception. It’s called marketing. No, it’s not evil or sinful. It’s not about getting profits or gaining power.

Instead, it’s about influence, as you take a product to a market in a way they’ll receive it. We, as Christians, should want to influence our congregation and community for Christ. But perception can become a barrier.

In John 13, Jesus taught the disciples about positive perception: “All people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 35). How should people perceive Christ-followers? By love.

Those not following Christ have a church perception, but it’s not about

love. Instead, it’s about what we’re against. It’s always easier to be known for what we’re against than what we’re for.

Known for baggage

Often, when “Baptist” is added to church perception, there’s heavy baggage attached: legalism, greed, politics and more. Being known for those could keep people away from our churches.

It’s one thing for the world to not desire spiritual matters, but let’s eliminate church perception barriers that would keep interested people from pursuing the gospel and our ministries.

Baptist church perception can and should be controlled, but here are three cautions to consider:

1. Baptist church perception usually starts from reality. Many believe marketing is getting someone to believe what isn’t true. Instead, start with Baptist church perception in your area and understand how it

started. Is there something you need to change to become more biblical? Do it right away.

2. Baptist church perception isn’t about dropping “Baptist.” Many believe dropping “Baptist” from their name will improve everything. I’m not convinced we’re fooling anyone by changing nomenclature.

Most who pursue a local church want to know what it believes. A denominational name can actually answer those questions. Many nondenominational churches must overly explain doctrinal beliefs to establish who they are. If you believe “The Baptist Faith and Message,” are structured like a Baptist church and give through the Cooperative Program, you’re a Baptist church. Say it.

Understanding community

3. Baptist church perception change starts with understanding community. For most local churches, change the perception, not the name. Become known for

something relevant and needed. Investigate needs, concerns and goals in your community. Because you’re known for love, become their experts by helping them discover solutions and paths to their goals. This will be perceived for what it is — love.

And because you’re a church, build on that temporal engagement, and point them to the transformational power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Be known for love.

EDITOR’S NOTE — Mark MacDonald is a communication pastor, speaker, consultant, bestselling author, church branding strategist for BeKnownforSomething.com and executive director of the Center for Church Communication, empowering 10,000+ churches to become known for something relevant (a communication thread) throughout their ministries, websites and social media. His book, “Be Known for Something,” is available at BeKnownBook.com.

Romanian-American calls pastors to pray for new churches

By Michael J. Brooks
The Alabama Baptist

Mark Hobafcovich said he’s excited that he, a native Romanian, is part of mobilizing pastors and churches for church planting through the North American Mission Board.

“I’m now an American citizen and a citizen of

heaven,” Hobafcovich told a group of Birmingham-area pastors. “I’m happy to meet pastors and other leaders and ask them to pray for new churches to bring people to Christ.”

Hobafcovich hosted a luncheon at Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham March 7, noting NAMB uses this type of gathering to cast a vision

about lostness and opportunity in North America. He will host 37 similar events this year.

Consider planting

“Many in America and Canada have never heard the gospel,” Hobafcovich lamented. “We at NAMB come and go, but the state conventions, local associations and the churches

remain. We want to build and strengthen relationships with these groups,” he asserted. “We encourage them to pray for new churches around the nation and to consider doing new church plants themselves.”

NAMB has asked local congregations to consider linking with church planters in North America as prayer partners. A website,

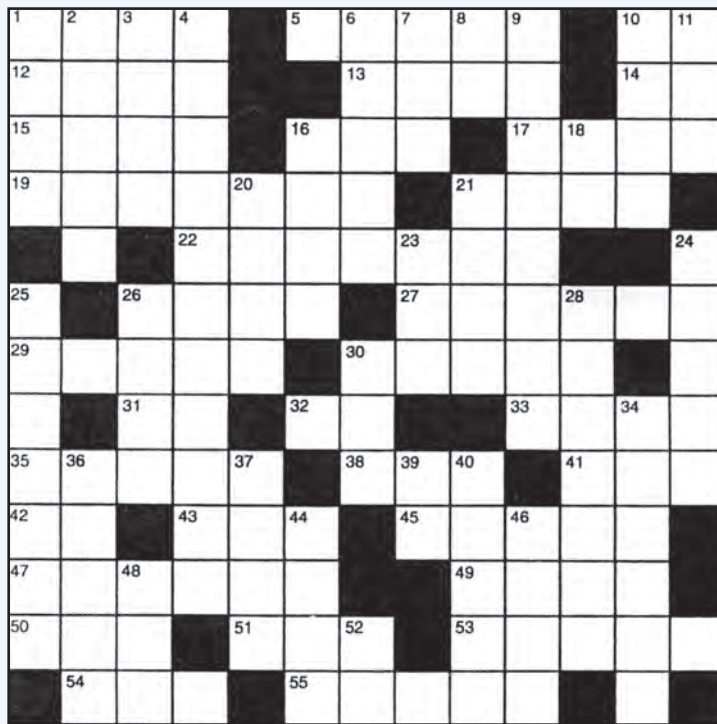
prayforplanters.com, identifies church planters and their locations, and individuals and churches can commit to pray for specific workers.

George Wright, senior pastor of Shades Mountain, was keynote speaker at the luncheon. He shared of his calling to do a church plant as a college student.

CHRISTIAN CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1. In the uttermost parts of the _____. (Num. 11:1)
5. A son of Shemaiah. (1 Chron. 3:22)
10. And she said, Yea, for ____ much. (Acts 5:8)
12. A son of Eliphaz. (Gen. 36:11)
13. The legs of the ____ are not equal. (Prov. 26:7)
14. Used before a noun.
15. Speck.
16. And ye shall eat the ____ of the land. (Gen. 45:18)
17. A ____ bearer revealeth secrets. (Prov. 11:13)
19. But love ye your _____. (Luke 6:35)
21. Where moth and ____ doth corrupt. (Matt. 6:19)
22. Paul sent him into Macedonia. (Acts 19:22)
26. The 12th month of the Jewish sacred year. (Esther 3:7)
27. A son of Shashak. (1 Chron. 8:22)
29. Youngest son of Jesse.
30. A son of Joktan. (Gen. 10:29)
31. Extraterrestrial. (abbr.)
32. Desired ____ him letters to Damascus. (Acts 9:2)
33. I will divide Shechem, and ____ out. (Ps. 108:7)
35. The last one.
38. As a thread of ____ is broken. (Judg. 16:9)
41. Why is thy spirit so ____? (1 Kings 21:5)
42. The word of the Lord ____ with him. (2 Kings 3:12)
43. A drink made from leaves.
45. To open before him the two-leaved _____. (Isa. 45:1)
47. Mountain city of Judah. (Josh. 15:52)
49. His clothes shall be _____. (Lev. 13:45)
50. In ____ season we



By Glenn G. Luscher Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.

16. And ye shall eat the ____ of the land. (Gen. 45:18)
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 45. To open before him the two-leaved _____. (Isa. 45:1)
 47. Mountain city of Judah. (Josh. 15:52)
 49. His clothes shall be _____. (Lev. 13:45)
 50. In ____ season we shall reap. (Gal. 6:9)
 51. Will men take a _____. (Ezek. 15:3)
 53. When they ____ in at the gates. (Ezek. 44:17)
 54. Abraham set seven ____ lambs. (Gen. 21:28)
 55. Neither shall he ... eat ____ grapes. (Num. 6:3)
- ## DOWN
1. ____ near, ye nations, to hear. (Isa. 34:1)
 2. Why seek ye the living ____ the dead? (Luke 24:5)
 3. Companion.
 4. Take no thought ... neither do ye _____. (Mark 13:11)
 6. A sea of ____ mingled with fire. (Rev. 15:2)
 7. No man ____ fruit of thee hereafter. (Mark 11:14)
 8. God said unto Moses, I _____. (Ex. 3:14)
 9. Son of Dedan. (Gen. 25:3)
 10. No fountain both yield ____ water and fresh. (James 3:12)
 11. Be not ignorant of this ____ thing. (2 Pet. 3:8)
 16. I will not ____ what man shall do. (Heb. 13:6)
 18. Let him be ____ the younger. (Luke 22:26)
 20. Son of Enoch. (Gen. 4:18)
 21. Can the ____ grow up without mire? (Job 8:11)
 23. Put it upon the ____ of the right ear. (Lev. 14:25)
 24. Until they have ____ all my harvest. (Ruth 2:21)
 25. The churches ... were _____. (Acts 9:31)
 26. Inhabitant from the plain of _____. (Amos 1:5)
 28. ____ yourselves before the Lord. (1 Sam. 10:19)
 30. I punished them _____. (Acts 26:11)
 34. Ye have ____ that the Lord is gracious. (1 Pet. 2:3)
 36. Her ____ in her flesh be blood. (Lev. 15:19)
 37. Rejoice ye in that day, and _____. (Luke 6:23)
 39. Defeated king of Bashan. (Deut. 3:3)
 40. Cast forth the _____. (Jon. 1:5)
 44. City northwest of Judah. (Josh. 15:50)
 46. He sat in the ____ door in the heat. (Gen. 18:1)
 48. ____ down the tree. (Dan. 4:14)
 52. Negative reply.

Game day prayer case has broad implications

A high school football coach in Washington state says he should be allowed to pray on the 50-yard line after football games.

The Bremerton School District disagrees.

How the U.S. Supreme Court rules on the case of coach Joe Kennedy, an 18-year Marine veteran and assistant coach for the Bremerton High School varsity football team, could have implications for prayer in school sports across America.

Kennedy's case "goes to the heart of the First

Amendment," said Paul Clement, an attorney with First Liberty Institute, a religious liberty legal firm representing the former coach.

Kennedy's saga goes back to 2008, when he began coaching football at Bremerton

(Washington) High School. After each game, he knelt on the field and prayed for 15 to 30 seconds. Eventually, players asked to join and Kennedy consented, according to FLI's case summary.

Policy violation

In 2015, an employee of another school mentioned the practice to a Bremerton High administrator, triggering a letter from the superintendent claiming Kennedy's actions violated school policy.

Officials placed him on paid administrative leave and barred him from coaching until he ceased "public

and demonstrative religious conduct while still on duty as an assistant coach," according to a Q&A released by the district.

Kennedy sued in 2016, and the case has made its way to the Supreme Court, with oral arguments anticipated this spring.

The issue of "school football prayers" is "still pretty open," noted Eric Johnston, president/general counsel of the Southeast Law Institute, a conservative, nonprofit firm in Alabama.

Despite court rulings that public school students have the right to pray and hold

Bible study at school, "there are still issues to be adjudicated when it comes to school football prayer."

Is kneeling to pray on a football field an unconstitutional use of school assets to promote Christianity over other religions?

Greg

Davis, president-elect of Alabama Citizens Action Program, an interdenominational ministry engaging cultural issues in Alabama, says it's a protected form of acknowledging God in the public square. For some a game prayer "may be the first step in their pursuit of knowing God."

Many schools "allow students to pray over the speakers" at games, Davis noted.

"When we can empower our students to step up and do those things in the public school setting, that's really the most effective way to go about that and it's good for them." (David Roach)



Photo courtesy of First Liberty Institute School officials at Bremerton High School fired football coach Joe Kennedy because he prayed after football games.



WHY I BELIEVE IN THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

BY BEN CURLEE, lead pastor of Lineville Baptist Church

Alabama Baptist brothers and sisters: I believe in, participate in and thank God for the Cooperative Program.

The CP is personal for me because I am the pastor of an SBC church but also because my father has been an SBC pastor for more than 40 years.

I learned at an early age the value of cooperating with our sister churches. Stories of missionaries during Mission Friends, Lottie's Tea Cakes, Vacation Bible Schools like StarQuest and Amazon Outfitters — these moments pointed us to our shared heritage of missional cooperation.

While a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, my tuition was subsidized by faithful brothers and sisters across our convention who gave through CP. This great cooperative work left an indelible mark on my life.



BEN CURLEE

Our CP is rooted in what Jesus called us to do. The Great Commission is clear: "Go make disciples."

Almost 100 years ago, our fathers and mothers in faith moved with wisdom to set up a mechanism that would bolster Gospel work. Churches of many sizes and from many contexts lock arms when we give through the Cooperative Program. "Great Commission Baptists" are convinced that we can accomplish more when we partner together.

Missionaries, church planters, six world



Photo by Marc Lewis

Super Summer Alabama, an event made possible by Alabama Baptists' gifts through the Cooperative Program, provides hundreds of students each year with the opportunity to be discipled in a fun environment.

class seminaries, resources for our churches and tools to reach our communities — these are all benefits of cooperating together.

Alabama Baptists benefit directly from this cooperation too. When Shelby and I experienced a difficult season last year, Dr. Rick Lance and our State Board of Missions staff were among the first to reach out with encouragement and concern. Our CP giving affords Alabama Baptists the best staff of any convention in the SBC.

If you've ever gone to Shocco Springs for a weekend retreat, sent your youth to Super Summer or called Alabama WMU for Annie Armstrong materials, you received tangible return on your CP investment.

At Lineville, we partner with NAMB church planters in Las Vegas and IMB missionaries in Dublin, Ireland. Faithful CP giving makes these partnerships possible. How else could a church in rural east Alabama connect with the nations in such an active way?

With joy, I commend the Cooperative Program to you and trust your faithful giving will continue. May our cooperative work and witness grow for the glory of God and the reaching of the nations through the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ben Curlee serves as a trustee for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. He is the lead pastor of Lineville Baptist Church in Carey Baptist Association.

'Love Thy Neighbor' emphasis focuses on dialogue

By **Jennifer Davis Rash**
The Alabama Baptist

Is it possible a routine emphasis week on a university campus could shift the current cultural norms of divisive verbal attacks taking place across many segments of society?

Samford University Provost Mike Hardin is counting on it. "Love Thy Neighbor: A Week-Long Emphasis on Civil Discourse" began March 21, and he believes this could be the start of a renewed Christ-centered style of leadership as students embark on the world after graduation.

"We can't talk to each other. We can't dialogue any longer, and I see this as a point of pain," he said. "We need conversations, not to throw rocks at each other. We need to truly see each other as made in the image of God.

"How do you step into a

nation divided and help them come together? It can't be what we have right now with throwing word rocks at each other."

The "Love Thy Neighbor" initiative came out of Hardin's commitment to his definition of a Christian university: "a community of Christian scholars bound together by an ethic of agape love."

"Love is a decision, a commitment that we make to each other," he said. "As Christians, that's how we were first known — they were known by their love."

'Soul of America'

One of the presenters — Pulitzer-Prize winning author and noted presidential historian Jon Meacham — became a featured lecturer for this emphasis after receiving pushback last fall.

Initially invited to participate in inauguration events

for Samford President Beck Taylor in early November, Meacham was rescheduled after a group of students, parents and community leaders vocalized concerns over him speaking at a Planned Parenthood fundraiser in Texas in October.

Taylor assured those concerned that having a guest on campus does not mean Samford endorses the perspectives or viewpoints of the speaker. And Meacham's lecture was not about sanctity of life versus abortion-rights issues, Taylor said.

Meacham's topic focused on "The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels" — the title of his book that debuted at number one on the New York Times Best Sellers list.

Prior to the emphasis week, Hardin noted

Meacham would apply what he has researched from other pivotal moments in history to the current state of civility and discourse.

"He sees we can't talk to each other and will provide insight in how to come together in a divided nation ... that there really is something we share together, the better angels of our nature.

"We can disagree with him on many issues, but that doesn't mean we have to discount the insights he has in this area," Hardin emphasized.

"The spirit here is to be loving and informative and try to bring forth out of what we have in the nation and world — a battleground — to seeing the difference being a Christian can make," he said.

Lisa Hogan — executive

director of Birmingham-based Sav-A-Life, Inc. — was one of those originally concerned about Meacham's invitation.

'No judgment' zone

"Even though I personally disagree with Jon Meacham on a lot of levels, I understand what the event is about and, in theory, understand what they are trying to accomplish," she said. "We live out 'Love Thy Neighbor' every day here at Sav-A-Life. We meet the women and men we serve right where they are ... no judgment, no condemnation, just unconditional love and respect. Wouldn't the world be a better place if we all practiced that?"

Several others are sharing during the week including a panel of spiritual leaders who discussed "Living Christianity in a Polarized, 'Us Against Them' World."



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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For March 27

Explore the Bible

By Ben Stubblefield

Visiting assistant professor of Christian studies, University of Mobile



ENCOURAGED 1 Thessalonians 3:4–13

Although Paul and his companions did all they could to prepare the Thessalonians for the inevitable trials and persecutions to come, they were not entirely confident in the church's durability.

They knew their enthusiasm when they first received the gospel, but they did not quite yet know how their zeal would hold up under Satan's assaults.

Distressed (4–5)

Note the heart of Paul and his companions. He says, "When we could endure it no longer" (v. 1). It was a great risk to venture back into hostile territory to visit with the Thessalonians.

These men were persona non grata in this particular region. Yet the bonds of friendship were too strong to ignore, and they dispatched Timothy to investigate and invigorate the faith of their friends.

Note also Paul's concern for the integrity of the faith of the Thessalonians. Paul knew, as Jesus taught, that just because someone appears to begin well in Christian living doesn't mean they will end well.

Paul wants to see what kind of seed took root in the Thessalonians: In good soil, bearing fruit? Or rocky soil, withering in the sun?

Certainly, this love and concern for our friends are familiar to every ministering church member.

We can empathize with Paul and his friends because, like them, we want to discover how God has used the labors of our ministry to help the people we so deeply love.

Rejuvenated (6–10)

My wife's grandfather was shot down over the Indian Ocean in World War II and was presumed dead.

In fact, the military sent the family a notification letter that he was

killed in action. But later the family received an unusual and unofficial letter from a stranger in New York stating he was actually alive.

You can imagine the complex range of emotions. Should we dare to hope? Should we investigate further? What are we supposed to believe?

And you can also imagine the feeling of "really living," as Paul puts it, when some time later the man called to tell his parents he was alive and coming home!

The news from Timothy, that the Thessalonians not only were standing firm in their faith but also full of affection for Paul and his companions,

meant the world; so much that they would say, "Now we really live."

Paul says the report brought fresh intensity to their prayers as they interceded now "night and day most earnestly" to see their friends again and help build up — "complete what is lacking in" — their growing faith.

Focused (11–13)

Paul offers a prayer that reconnects to his opening words in 1:2–3.

This is unusual, because he typically thanks his audience and offers prayer in the opening words of his epistles. But in this case, the prayer serves as a conclusion to the narrative in chapters 1–3 and a preview of his exhortative material in chapters 4–5 (holiness in 4:1–8; love in 4:9–12; the Second Coming in 4:13–18 and most of 5:1–11).

What a wave of encouragement this must have been for the church at Thessalonica and Paul. They are discovering their work for the Lord and love for each other have not been in vain. What a special joy it is in Kingdom work to see the fruit of our labor. What a good reminder this passage is to be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

*"May the Lord
make you increase
and abound in love
for one another
and for all, as we
do for you."*

1 Thess. 3:12

Bible Studies for Life

By Will Kynes

Associate professor of biblical studies, Samford University



A LIFE OF LOVE John 15:9–17

On the border of the Promised Land, Moses speaks his final words to the ragtag assemblage of formerly enslaved people he led out of Egypt and through the wilderness. The theme of the message is: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (see Deut. 6, 7, 10, 11, 30).

What should that love look like? Moses doesn't describe it as fuzzy or mystical but as keeping and teaching God's commandments. He repeatedly associates loving God with keeping His commandments.

In these verses, Jesus is speaking His final words to His ragtag assemblage of disciples, formerly enslaved to sin, who have followed Him throughout the challenges of His ministry. His message is the same: Remain in the love He shares with the Father, and do so by obeying His commandments.

However, Jesus emphasizes an aspect of that love and obedience not explicit in Deuteronomy: They will be expressed and result in love for others.

Remain in Jesus' love and experience His joy. (9–11)

The love between the Father and the Son in the Trinity is perfect and complete. Jesus has expressed that same love to the disciples and now invites them to "remain" (CSB, NIV) or "continue" (KJV). He associates this love with complete "joy," but the two are linked by a surprising concept: obedience to divine commands. We tend to think of commands as an obstacle to both love and joy — they enter a relationship when the natural incentives of love and joy are missing. However, Jesus claims, as Moses had, that obedience fosters love and leads to joy.

Love calls for personal sacrifice. (12–14)

The command Jesus asks His disciples to obey is both simple and radical: "Love each other as I have loved you." When Jesus is asked to

choose the greatest commandment in the law, thereby summarizing its purpose (Matt. 22:36–40; Mark 12:28–31), He chooses two: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Deut. 6:5) and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).

Similarly, Jesus pairs vertical love between humans and God and horizontal love among humans, though He emphasizes His love for the disciples and not their love for God. The love to which Jesus calls us is the self-sacrificing, life-giving love He has demonstrated for us. Though this love will require great sacrifice, it also will lead to greater joy — "complete" joy (v. 11).

Produce spiritual fruit by loving others. (15–17).

Though He had called them "servants" earlier that night (John 13:16) and Moses also referred to God's people as His servants (Deut. 32:36), Jesus now calls them "friends" because He has revealed His Father's will to them. He has chosen these friends to bear lasting fruit through loving each other. Jesus' promise that the Father will give them whatever they ask in His name comes in this context, suggesting that prayers to this purpose are assured of positive responses.

In Deuteronomy, Moses envisions future generations asking about the meaning of God's law (6:20–25). When they do, he instructs parents to answer that the Lord delivered former slaves from Egypt by His might to give them the land He had promised and then commanded them to obey His instructions so they might prosper, find life and be righteous.

Here Jesus tells how through His death He has delivered the disciples from slavery to sin (John 8:34–35), and gives His command to love each other so they might prosper, find life and be righteous. Does the Lord's deliverance motivate you to obedience expressed in love? Is that connection clear to your children and others who see your life?

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Tracy Riggs
The Alabama Baptist

Author shares how God can turn pain into ‘Something Beautiful’

Disappointment, loss, insecurity and rejection are common aspects of life. But Amber Edwards tries to counteract the pain by showing the love of Jesus to those who are hurting.

One way she has done that is through her book “Something Beautiful: Why Settle When Life Can Be Beautiful?” co-written with Jackie Tinkler. In the book the women share about the joys of life amid its twists and unexpected turns.

For Edwards this included dealing with divorce, first with her parents when she was young and then later her own divorce. She remarried and enjoyed a decade with her husband until his tragic death from COVID-19 in 2021. Through all of it, Edwards has embraced opportunities to share her story and show the love of Christ by volunteering.

“People look at me and think I’m super-confident and super-happy and say I radiate joy,” Edwards said.

“It’s because I have the joy of the Lord. But life has not been easy — starting from a young age.”

Working through pain

Her ministry is a result of God working through pain, she said, explaining her father wasn’t very involved in her life.

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.



AMBER EDWARDS

While Edwards grew up Southern Baptist, she knew Jesus but didn’t have a real relationship with Him. She needed to fill a void and ended up getting married and having children at a young age.

She didn’t realize her marriage was toxic and was adamant she wouldn’t divorce until she learned her husband had committed adultery for years.

She found herself divorced and struggling as a single mom after 16 years of marriage. Sometimes she had to search for change to buy milk.

The struggles, loneliness and dating in a less-than-godly world led her to the Cross.

“My prayer for 2011 was, ‘OK, Lord, if this is what You have for me — being single and being a single mom — please make that the desire of my heart.’ I felt this peace from the Lord. Eighteen days later I met an amazing man.

“We got engaged after six months and married just three months later. He was everything I ever could have hoped or imagined. I felt so blessed.”

Blessing bags

And for the first time Edwards was in a position financially to bless others.

“God started sparking something in me: ‘I’ve done so much in your life,’” Edwards recalled. “‘These blessings — you need to share with other people.’ So in 2012, I started what I called the ‘Medwards Blessing Bag Project,’” combining her children’s last name and her new married name.

The first outreach involved making bags full of useful items and distributing them at shelters, under bridges and anywhere homeless people gathered.

Starting with about 25 bags the first year, she was distributing around 200 when COVID-19 hit.

As the ministry grew, God spoke to her about ministering to women with similar experiences to hers.

One Christmas Eve, she had about 30 bags left.

Having heard good things about the WellHouse, a safe haven for female victims of human trafficking, and knowing those rescued often arrived with only what they were wearing, Edwards contacted the shelter.

“I talked to the woman who runs the administrative offices and asked if they would be interested in these bags.”

Edwards began helping with more projects for the WellHouse and recalled delivering a gift box to an

18-year-old rescued from trafficking the day before.

Edwards’ daughter also was 18. She tearfully remembered thinking, “‘Wait. That could be my daughter!’ It just broke my heart; it broke me.”

At about the same time, Edwards met Tinkler, and they found they had similar stories.

The book “Something Beautiful” and the ministry “Something More” are products of a desire to share how God can use struggles to bring beauty. “Something Beautiful” — part memoir, part devotional — includes their life experiences and thoughtful questions about how God can help through trials.

“It’s written more for the application: ‘This is how I thought my life was going to look. It completely derailed, but God can still bring some-

thing beautiful from it, even when things don’t go as planned,’” Edwards said.

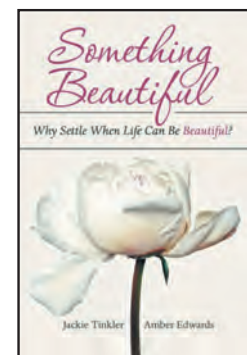
“A friend asked when I was preparing Valentine’s bags for the WellHouse, ‘How do you have time for all of this? You work full time; you have two kids; you’re leading at church. How do you do all this?’”

Kingdom investment

“My response to her was, ‘You know what?’

“This is all that matters. This is an investment in the Kingdom — how we make people feel, how we serve them, how we love them — is what it’s really all about. So how can I not do it?”

“It’s something that makes me feel alive and gives me a sense of being whole again in the midst of a devastating season.”



“Something Beautiful” is available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and [westbowpress.com](https://www.westbowpress.com).

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