The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

INSIDE

Kentucky families receive special gifts from Birmingham church

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Third in a series: Celebrating 200 years of Alabama Baptist missions and ministries

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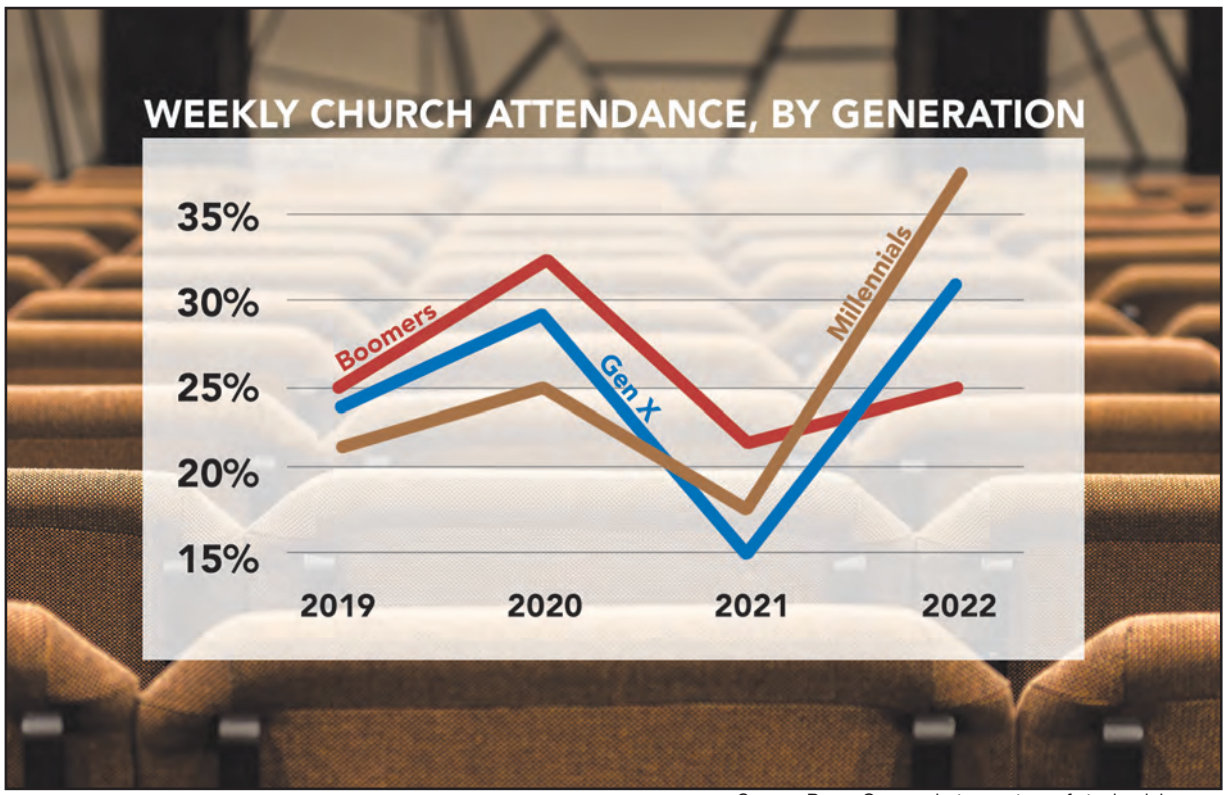

Source: Barna Group; photo courtesy of stock.adobe.com

A Barna survey of 13,349 U.S. adults shows that between 2019 and 2022, millennials represented the highest percentage of weekly church attenders.

Hopeful signs

Research points to generational shifts in church attendance

By Carrie B. McWhorter
The Alabama Baptist

Early church leaders may not have had to contend with contemporary quandaries like Sunday sports tournaments or debates about online versus in-person attendance, but apathy was a concern then and remains so today.

The author of Hebrews warns against "neglecting to meet together" (10:25), but research indicates both alarming declines and hopeful signs among younger generations when it comes to church attendance.

A recent Gallup poll of American adults found that more than a third of Americans have fallen away from attending religious services regularly.

Among those surveyed, 67% recalled attending a church, synagogue or other place of worship weekly or nearly weekly while growing up, but only 31% said they attend regularly today.

Religious footsteps

The Gallup results suggest adult children are not following in the religious footsteps of their parents, which means far fewer children today are attending religious services than did in the prior two generations.

However, research that hones in on Christian church attendance tells a more hopeful story.

About 70% of Americans still affiliate with a Christian faith, according to Gallup. And a recent Barna survey found that in 2022, regular church attendance was increasing, especially among nonwhite millennials.

Barna's survey found 45% of nonwhite millennials say they attend church weekly, compared to 35% of white millennials.

"When we first recognized the shift in millennial church attendance, we hoped to answer the question, 'What segment of millennials could account for this change?'" said Daniel Copeland, associate vice president of research at Barna Group. "We looked at millennials from various segmentations — including marital status, current employment,

(*See 'Consider,' page 13*)

HIGHLIGHTS

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Assimilating guests into church family

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

When Kevin Garrett became pastor of First Baptist Church Atmore in 2018, the church was ready for a fresh vision, a fresh fire.

They prayed fervently and engaged Auxano, a church consulting firm, to help map out what that could look like.

Over the next few months, a vision team began using the inspirational phrase "The steeple and the people" as a beginning point. They focused on building relationships, bringing people into the body of Christ and offering hope to the community.

As the journey went on, they laid out goals and details of the vision and came to the last area in their plan — assimilation, or helping visitors plug into church life and service.

Assimilation

"When I was working on my D.Min. project (at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) I was selecting my focus, and it hit me that we hadn't addressed assimilation yet as a church," Garrett recalled.

So he made it his project and enlisted the help of the FBC family. They assembled a strategy team — which eventually became an assimilation team — and began

(*See 'Atmore,' page 13*)

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The crossword puzzle can be found on page 10.

Facebook photo

We Sew Love volunteers in Birmingham gather items for a Christmas giveaway in Jenkins, Kentucky. Flooding devastated the area in July 2022.

Sewing groups help with Kentucky Christmas giveaway

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

In 2018, TAB Media shared the story of the people who make up We Sew Love at Huffman Baptist Church in Birmingham.

At that time they had been working for about a year and had already sent hundreds of clothing items made from old T-shirts to children in Uganda, Zambia, Haiti and other places around the world.

A growing ministry

But since then, Linda Jacobson — who got the idea for the group after sewing some clothes for her granddaughter — said they've grown more than she ever could have guessed.

"There are now sewing groups at four churches in [the Birmingham area]," she reported — Pawnee Baptist, Springdale Baptist, Huffman Baptist and Liberty Church.

Not everyone sews — many gather, collect and prepare the T-shirts for use. In December all four groups banded together to help families in Jenkins, Kentucky, who were affected by flooding that devastated the area in July 2022.

"Many families are still displaced, waiting for help to rebuild their homes," Jacobson said. "While We Sew Love doesn't have resources to do building projects, we are well able to gather and deliver hope.

"Once we were contacted in November about the needs of our precious neighbors, the scissors, sewing machines and knitting and crocheting needles in the We Sew Love volunteer network all began flying."

And their gatherers began gathering too. A 20-foot trailer left Birmingham on Dec. 9 loaded with clothing, warm winter gear, toys, books, bedding, linens and other items. We Sew Love volunteers even made new Christmas stockings for the families, Jacobson noted.

It's been humbling to see how God has expanded the reach of the group, she said.

"I feel so blessed to be a part of it."

Facebook photo

Volunteers help load a 20-foot trailer with clothing, warm winter gear, toys, books, bedding, linens and other items.

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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OPINION

RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

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

jrash@thealabamabaptist.org @RashionalThts

Sometimes the simplest concepts are the hardest to follow

Have you ever taken a shortcut you shouldn't have and found yourself starting over from scratch? Or at least backtracking a good bit to clean up the problem area?

Not only did the shortcut not help, but it also made the situation worse.

The project likely took more time than if you had done the task the way it should have been done in the first place.

As the late John Wooden, beloved UCLA basketball coach, said, "If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?"

I learned this lesson the hard way in college when I didn't take time to properly set up and save the document containing my mid-term research paper due the next morning.

I organized the research and note-taking steps carefully in the weeks leading up to the due date. I also blocked off plenty of time on the day saved for writing the final version of the paper.

Everything fell into place as I settled in for the final stretch.

It looked like I might even finish an hour earlier than anticipated.

With only a few paragraphs left to string together, I held my breath as the power flickered.

Then I stared in disbelief when the screen reappeared without my document.

Closing my eyes tightly for a few moments, I attempted to will the document back onto the screen.

After a frantic search and recruiting help from a friend to double-check me, I finally had to concede the document had vanished.

Automatic save functions were not yet a thing, and I had written tens of thousands of words over the course of several hours without ever slowing down to save the document.

Why I didn't ensure the document was saved along the way, I'm not sure. I chose to skip a vital step and paid a hefty price — an all-night second writing of the paper.

'Sinking feeling'

While I pulled the paper off in the end — and even achieved a high score on the paper — I've never forgotten the sinking feeling of that moment.

Believe me, I've been obsessed with saving documents frequently (like after every sentence) ever since.

Many times a costly mistake sharpens our ability to prevent it from happening again and might even lead us to excel in that particular area.

Some of my strongest abilities today exist because I made a major mess out of those areas early on. By holding on to the Lord and embracing the guidance of mentors, I improved.

How about you? Can you look back and see something similar?

Or do you happen to be in the middle of a mess right now, uncertain what to do next?

Take responsibility for the missteps, correct the issue and move forward.

News update related to Alabama Sexual Abuse Task Force ...

Craig Carlisle's concern since the day he became chair of the Alabama Baptist Sexual Abuse Task Force in November 2021 has been inertia — that nothing would change with churches.

As director of missions for Etowah Association, he also understands the pivotal role an associational leader plays in connecting with local churches.

"I'm sharing with my fellow directors of missions that 'if this doesn't become important to you, then it's not going to be important to your churches,'" he shared.

Carlisle and the full slate of SATF members are advocating for next steps following the report delivered during the November 2022 state convention annual meeting, a report compiled from a year of research and interviews with Cooperative Program-funded entities and auxiliaries in Alabama Baptist life.

'The work isn't done'

"I do not want that report to just go into the annals of history," he said. "The work isn't done. That was the beginning point and now it's time to take it seriously and get our churches equipped."

State Convention president Buddy Champion agreed and announced Jan. 6 his appointment of the same group to a new Sexual Abuse Advisory Task Force.

More details will be provided soon but "generally speaking the team members are available to help churches, answer questions and share what they have learned," Champion said.

For more information or to set up a time to talk with and/or meet with task force members, contact Carlisle at craigc@etowahbaptist.com or 256-328-5757.

(Jennifer Davis Rash)

OPINION

Your Voice

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

5-step process to make quality decisions

By George Yates
SBOM church health strategist

Sitting in my fourth meeting in a six-month period with a leadership group that I had been contracted to assist and evaluate, I began to look around the room for the actor Bill Murray.

I was looking for him because I knew I had to be in his movie "Groundhog Day." Every meeting I had attended was pretty much the same — lots of discussion on the same topic. Some discussion was good, some chased rabbits, but no decisions were being made.

While I am certain this leadership team thought they were leading their organization, in essence they had all abandoned the bridge and were gathering regularly in the galley to discuss the organization's needs.

Who was steering the ship?

I have seen this phenomenon in churches and organizations both religious and corporate.

On the DISC scale, it will drive people with a D or C personality insane. I know, as I am a C.

There are people in the room who want and need a decision to be made. The organization needs decisions to be made in order to move forward.

There are steps that can be implemented to move any organization or individual forward.

The following is a five-step process you can implement in your personal life and in your team or organization that will guide you in making good solid decisions for forward-moving progress.

1. Identify the issue to be addressed. Remember there are no problems, only opportunities. Seeing the issue as an avenue to greater opportunity will help you focus on the positive opportunity that lies ahead.

2. Gather the pertinent information. You need the information that will assist you in making the decision with the greatest potential for forward movement with the least amount of repercussions.

3. Identify all options that will lead to the highest impact with the least amount of negative implications.

4. Ask the following three questions about your top three decision options:

- If we make this decision, what is the absolute best that can happen?
- If we make this decision, what is the absolute worst that can happen to the organization?
- Are we willing and able to live with the answer to "what is the absolute worst that can happen?" Scratch out all options you cannot answer yes to.

5. Make your decision, take action and move forward. Looking back and second-guessing will only cause your organization to falter and languish in its efforts to succeed.

I've not known an organization yet that can say it has perfected the decision-making process. However, using a formula like the one above can propel your decision-making process into quantifiable action and effectiveness in the organization. Some have made extraordinary strides in their decision-making process.

What is your first step in improving your decision-making process? Don't put it off. Make a decision to begin today.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air ..." (Matt. 6:26). It is beneficial to do some spiritual birdwatching.

We can learn a lot from observing the behavior of birds. There are three characteristics of Canadian geese that are worth noting and imitating.

First, there is cooperation. The leader will hand off the lead position and take a break.

Second, there is consideration. Geese help out the ones who are sick or wounded so they can recover and return to the flock.

Third, there is communication. Geese honk with encouragement for the weary whether they are leading or lagging.

As the saying goes, "Birds of a feather flock together." Remember cooperation, consideration and communication are not just for the birds.

Franklin L. Kirksey
Robertsdale, Ala.

January gets its name from the Latin word for door. We stand at a threshold moment of new beginnings. Yet this hope goes way beyond a new year. We are in Christ through every season; it is never too late and there is always a threshold or door.

Phil Christopher
Consultant, The Center for Healthy Churches

We always keep the Great Commission as our marching order. ... The nations have come to us here, so let's welcome them with the gospel.

Richard Casebolt
Founder, RefugeKC
Kansas City, Mo.

Access to chemical abortion without proper medical oversight runs contrary to science and is not in the best interest of women's health.

Jeanne Mancini
President, March for Life

Like it or not, people watch us and notice what we do. You never know who is watching.

Pastor David L. Chancey
McDonough Road Baptist Church
Fayetteville, Ga.

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OPINION

> “Jesus is too real to me. ... His Scripture is true. Why should I not share this?”
>
> LATIF
> *Afghan church planter in Memphis, Tennessee*

“God just picked me up and took me to the altar. It was a beautiful moment,” said **Jaclyn Horine, a pastor’s wife at Friendship Baptist Church near Montalba, Texas**, whose decision to follow Christ this past spring prompted baptisms to multiply at the church.

“Love is an action. Love is a choice — not an emotion, not a feeling. There must be evidence of it. Otherwise you can’t claim it exists,” **said Kyle Hodges, pastor of First Baptist Church West Blocton,** of his church’s increased emphasis on outreach.

“It’s an interesting thing to be in a historic setting like Carnegie Hall ... possibly the most famous stage on earth ... and to be present when the Holy Spirit comes into an environment like that in a very powerful way,” said **Roy Hayes, president and artistic director of True North Presents and a former music minister**, regarding the performance of “Celebrate Life!” at Carnegie Hall.

God chose a handful of shepherds as the first human witnesses to the birth of the Lamb, revealing His glory through common means. He still uses common witnesses.

Professor Douglas K. Wilson
University of Mobile
Dec. 25 Explore the Bible Sunday School commentary
The Alabama Baptist

“No matter how many times you’ve read the Bible through, the next time you start you’re going to be in a different place in your life, and God’s word is going to say something different to you.” said **Lawrence Phipps, pastor at First Baptist Church Gulf Shores and author of “More Abundant Life: 100 Days to Start or Restart Your Christian Walk.”**

“There’s a lot of books talking about who you are and that you’re special. I wanted to make sure [my book’s message was], ‘God made you special,’ ” said **Dave Frey, author of “The Luckiest Star” and lead singer of the contemporary Christian group Sidewalk Prophets.**

From the Twitterverse

@brocraigc

Grateful for Sunday. Grateful for gathering. Grateful to worship with the saved and the lost who come. May the lost be saved, and may the saved be sent.

@WarrenWiersbe

When people are treating you like dirt, plowing criticisms over your back, remember God is preparing you for a harvest.

Plant seeds of revenge and malice, and it will be a bitter harvest. But plant the word of God, and it will be a harvest of blessing.

@shane_pruitt78

2023 will be a great year to:

- Worship God above all.
- Love your family.
- Read your Bible daily.
- Pray without ceasing.
- Tell people about Jesus.
- Bless a church plant/planter.
- Live on mission.
- Be discipled by someone.
- Disciple someone else.
- Love your neighbor.
- Have fun.

@macbrunson

The world seems to really struggle with how a loving God can send a person to hell, but it has no struggle at all with how a Holy God allows a rebellious sinner into His holy heaven.

@davideprince

Local SBC churches are in a voluntary cooperative relationship with the SBC. Thus neither has ruling authority over the other, and either side can choose to voluntarily end cooperation at any time.

@chasemjenkins

A dear older sister in Christ who had gone to be with the Lord wrote this next to Jesus’ teaching on anxiety in Matthew 6: “Worrying about tomorrow does not empty tomorrow of its troubles. It only empties today of its joy.” Trust God’s grace for tomorrow and walk in joy today!

@DianeLangberg

Given the numbers of suffering and traumatized people, the trauma of this world is one of the supreme opportunities before the church today. Worshipping God means in Jesus’ name we listen and attend to those who are suffering. We must enter the trauma of shattered humanity.

@ricklance

Don’t pray what should be in your heart. Pray what is in your heart. —C.S. Lewis

@revandyfrazier

The goal of the Christian life is not accumulating wealth to become comfortable, but giving your all so that Jesus may be magnified.

Buying back opportunities

By Pastor Todd Stiles
First Family Church in Ankeny, Iowa

Hanging on a wall in my office is a replica of the world’s first concept of a calendar. It was developed by the Egyptians and shows the intersections of the annual seasons, the 12 months and even the different weeks within those months. It’s quite fascinating!

It’s also quite convicting.

Every time I glance at that reproduction of an ancient timepiece, I’m reminded, sometimes even reprimanded, to invest in eternity instead of simply consuming in the moment. It is easy to spend time, even waste it.

We are called to something higher and greater when it comes to time — to “make the best use of it” (Eph. 5:16). One translation refers to it as “redeeming the time” and another as “making the most of your time.” In each rendering, the overwhelming sense of the text is that time is an asset not a liability. It can produce a return if used wisely.

This is precisely why Paul exhorts believers to “walk as wise” people who “understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:15, 17). The best investment of our time occurs when we pour it into God’s purposes, the things that are on His agenda and heart. When our calendars and clocks are aligned with God’s character and callings, we’re not just spending time; we’re buying back time and putting it to its greatest possible use.

As you travel through the rest of this day, think beyond a chronological sequence of numbers. Know what lies before you is a biblical opportunity to gain the greatest eternal return through the wise investment of temporal blocks of time. When we leverage all of our moments, hours, days and weeks to that end, we will be doing more than managing our time. We will be making the most of it. (BP)

NEWS

3 stories you should know

Photo courtesy of Morning Star News

In Nigeria, mourners at a Dec. 22 funeral for 40 Christians slain Dec. 18 in southern Kaduna State decried the ongoing violence in their country, even as the attacks continue. Another Christian was killed and 53 were kidnapped Dec. 25 in the same area. Fulani herdsmen and others attacked Angwan Aku village in Kaduna State on Christmas morning, area resident James Akawu said. Read more on the ongoing violence at tabonline.org/nigeria. (TAB)

Teen birth rate in US continues to decline

The number of U.S. teens giving birth decreased 75% between 1991 and 2021, according to data compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics.

In 1991, the rate of teen births was roughly 61.8 births per every 1,000 females ages 15 to 19. In 2020, it was 15.4.

Public health experts point to several factors that may be influencing the decrease.

A majority of teens (90%) report using birth control, according to a 2013 CDC poll, and a 2020 report by the conservative-leaning Institute for Family Studies found fewer than 40% of U.S. high schoolers were having sexual intercourse.

Abortion could be a factor, though the CDC reports the majority of abortions (57.2% in 2020) are obtained by women in their 20s. (TAB)

FDA says pharmacies can sell abortion pills

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Jan. 3 approved a plan to allow retail pharmacies to distribute abortion pills.

The FDA's decision enables FDA-certified pharmacies for the first time to carry and dispense mifepristone, the first drug in a two-step process commonly referred to as medical or chemical abortion.

Women also will continue to be able to receive the pills by mail.

Medical/chemical procedures as a percentage of all abortions have increased from 5% to 53% over the past two decades, the Guttmacher Institute reported Dec. 1.

In a newly updated page on its website, the FDA said mifepristone is safe but also acknowledged 28 reported deaths of women who took mifepristone between 2000 and 2022. (BP)

Baptist news

Bobbye Rankin, former missionary and wife of retired IMB president, dies

Bobbye Rankin — who spent 23 years along with her husband, Jerry, serving as a Southern Baptist missionary in Asia — died Jan. 2 at 78.

RANKIN

The Rankins shifted from the missions field in 1993 to International Mission Board staff housed in Richmond, Virginia, when Jerry was named president of the then Foreign Mission Board. The name changed to IMB shortly after he became president. They retired in 2010 to Mississippi.

She is survived by Jerry, two children (Russell and Lori), six grandchildren and two great grandchildren. (TAB, IMB)

McRaney lawsuit against NAMB appears one step closer to trial

A lawsuit filed by a former Baptist state executive director against the North American Mission Board appears to be headed to trial in June.

Will McRaney, former executive director of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware, contends NAMB and its officers defamed him and threatened to take away essential funding from the BCMD, which McRaney alleges led to his firing and subsequent loss of job opportunities.

McRaney won two procedural moves in late December, reported Baptist News Global. On Dec. 21, U.S. Magistrate Judge David A. Sanders denied a motion by the BCMD to quash subpoenas issued for testimony in the case. On Dec. 22, Sanders compelled production of discovery material that NAMB had asked to be excluded from public view. The documents in question appear to be nondisclosure agreements, BNG reported.

The case has national significance because NAMB has relied on an ecclesial employment exemption defense, though McRaney was not a NAMB employee, the report noted. (TAB)

67 Baptists among 88% Christian majority in US Congress

The 118th Congress counts 67 Baptists of various denominations, including approximately 20 Southern Baptists, among its members, according to a Pew analysis of the current legislative body.

At least 88% of Congress — 469 of the 534 members — identified as Christian in a poll gathered by Congressional Quarterly's Roll Call. More than a fifth of Congressional Protestants are Baptists. (BP)

NEWS ITEMS COMPILED BY CARRIE MCWHORTER AND LEIGH PRITCHETT

NEWS

Alabama news

OBITUARIES

▸ **Roy Cordle**, who served for more than 50 years as a pastor, many of those years in Alabama, died Dec. 31. He was 82.

Cordle, who was around 16 years old when he began to sense a call to ministry, preached his first sermon in August 1967 at the church where his father served as pastor, Mount Pisgah Baptist, Pell City.

He earned his bachelor of arts from William Carey College (now William Carey University) in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and bachelor of ministry from Florida Baptist Theological College (now the Baptist College of Florida) in Graceville. He also earned his master of ministry, doctor of ministry and doctor of theology degrees from Covington Theological Seminary in Rossville, Georgia.

CORDLE

Cordle served at a number of Alabama Baptist churches, including First Baptist DeArmanville, Anniston; Calvary Baptist, Oxford; and Louis Street Baptist, Gadsden. He also served at churches in Mississippi and Florida.

In 2008, he retired from the pastorate of Riddles Bend Baptist Church, Rainbow City, where he had served for nearly seven years. But five months after moving to Anniston, he accepted an interim pastor position at New Haven Baptist Church. He served there five years, then accepted the call to Refuge Baptist Church, Lincoln, which honored his 50 years in ministry in 2017.

Cordle is survived by his wife of 57 years, Joan, one daughter and one granddaughter.

BLOUNT CO. ASSOCIATION

▸ **Pleasant View Missionary Baptist Church, Holly Pond**, will host its regular third Sunday night singing Jan. 15 at 5 p.m. featuring Dry Creek.

MUD CREEK ASSOCIATION

▸ **Big Creek Baptist Church, Adger**, celebrated its 175th anniversary on Dec. 18. Pastor Matt Kimberly (right) preached, led the congregation in singing Christmas carols and shared some church history. Londa Limbaugh accompanied on the piano.

Photo courtesy of Joyce Peters

Joyce Peters (left) of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission presented a certificate to the church.

TUSKEGEE LEE ASSOC.

▸ **Elam Baptist Church, Tallassee**, celebrated its 150th anniversary Nov. 20 with pastor Joe Fain preaching, and Sherry Fain leading singing. Calvin Milford of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission presented a certificate.

OTHER

▸ **Kevin Blackwell** celebrates 10 years as **Ministry Training Institute** executive director at **Samford University** this month. MTI is Samford's historic extension division. He is also assistant to the president for church relations.

He holds a bachelor's degree from Samford and master of divinity and doctor of ministry degrees from New Orleans Seminary.

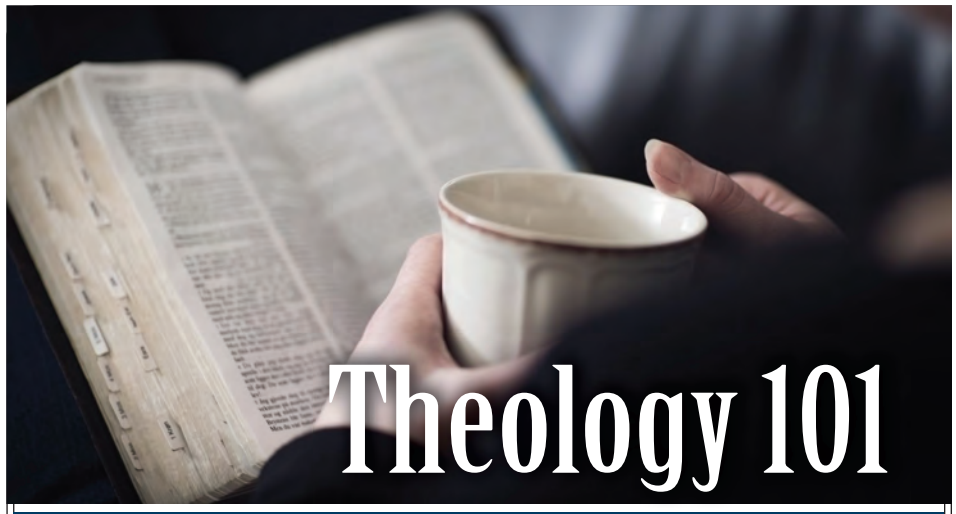
BLACKWELL

He also holds a master of theology degree from Midwestern Seminary.

Blackwell serves as disciple-making and teaching pastor of The Station Church, Bessemer, and has been in ministry for 29 years serving in various capacities.

Blackwell recently co-authored a book on disciple making with Randy Norris, pastor of The Station Church, and he is concluding work toward a Ph.D. from Midwestern Seminary. He is married to Lorrie and has four children.

ALABAMA NEWS ITEMS COMPILED BY DIANNA L. CAGLE AND DEBBIE CAMPBELL



BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Discipleship

Following after Jesus

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
The Alabama Baptist

This week we continue looking at the meaning of discipleship. We'll use the Bible's account of the original 12 disciples as a pattern to glean helpful ideals for our own discipleship.

Last week the emphasis was on the necessity of coming to Jesus as a basic qualification for discipleship. During His public ministry, the summons to come was repeatedly voiced.

With that as the beginning, this week our thoughts turn to the idea that we come to Jesus to follow after Him. The original Twelve found discipleship was not merely a quick trip to Jesus and then a return to their former way of life.

As it was for the Twelve, so it is for us. Their coming to Jesus was with a view to following Him the rest of their days.

Lifelong experience

Jesus invites people to come to Him in order to follow Him, not as a come and go invitation that leaves us to return to our former life, embracing its former values, pursuing our own interests or setting our own agendas.

For instance, take the two brothers Jesus saw casting their nets into the sea. He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (Mark 1:16–17). The choice to follow Christ is the doorway to a lifelong experience of becoming all God created us to be and to achieve.

In a similar manner, sometime later Jesus was walking in Capernaum. The record says, "As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' So, he arose and followed Him" (Mark 2:14–15). Thus another disciple embarked upon a lifetime commitment.

Bought with a price

Much later when Jesus had His full number of 12 disciples, the record tells us He went back to Nazareth, His own country. The account reads simply, "And His disciples followed Him" (Mark 6:1).

Throughout the remainder of His public ministry, Jesus was followed by the disciples. They came to Him in order to follow after Him. Like them, we who are Christians choose to come to Christ when He calls us. When we do, we embark on a lifetime of following Him with our lives.

From that time on, we are not our own; we have been bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

A very practical and important question to ponder at the outset of a new year is, "Am I wholly and permanently committed to being a Christ-follower?"

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.

THIRD IN A SERIES

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Evangelism central to Alabama Baptist life since its beginnings

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Sammy Gilbreath buckled his seat belt, and before the plane took off he was already sound asleep.

"I hadn't had sleep in days," he said. "I'd been in Venezuela preaching at evangelism crusades for a week, and I was physically and mentally exhausted."

But then a tap on his shoulder woke him up. It was a flight attendant, and she asked him what he had been doing in her country.

Immediately Gilbreath — who at the time served as director of the office of evangelism for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions — felt like God might be up to something. He told her the only reason he had been in her country was to tell people Jesus loved them. She asked if he could tell her about that too.

He said yes, and she led him to some empty seats at the front of the plane.

Photo by Doug Rogers

Sammy Gilbreath (center), who retired from his role as state evangelism director in 2020, shares his faith in Jesus with some new friends in Venezuela in 2001. After a week of evangelistic events, Gilbreath was able to lead his flight crew to Jesus on the way back to Alabama.

Sharing hope

"I shared the gospel with her, and she just cried and said, 'I want to do this more than anything in the world,'" Gilbreath said.

Before long he had shared the gospel with the whole flight crew one by one, and each one accepted Christ.

"When we landed, they got on the microphone and said, 'Thank you for flying with us today, but the crew you took off with is not the crew you landed with. Each of us [has] invited Christ into our lives,'" Gilbreath said.

The trip underscored something that had long been part of the fabric of Gilbreath's life and greater Alabama Baptist life as a whole — the need to share Jesus with others by all means possible.

From the beginning of the Alabama Baptist State Convention in 1823, evangelism was one of its core tenets, starting with protracted revival meetings.

By the 1980s, these meetings had grown to state crusades, inspired by the events that evangelist Billy Graham had been putting on for years.

Mass evangelism themes also dominated the landscape of Alabama Baptist life at the time. Harper Shannon, who became state evangelism director in 1985, said the highlight of his time in that role was a 1990 simultaneous revival emphasis called "Here's Hope. Jesus Cares." The emphasis grew into a personal evangelism theme five years later.

Concerted effort

"That was the first really concerted, simultaneous revival effort we'd had in many years, with advance preparation, materials and training," he said at the time of his retirement in 1997. " 'Here's Hope' showed that when you put that much concerted interest into evangelism, you always show increases in baptisms. It showed that if you keep promoting, keep training people and keep witnessing, then you will win people to Christ."

Reaching everyone

Gilbreath, who served as Shannon's successor, carried that idea on through the late 1990s and into the 2000s, organizing evangelistic meetings and training people to share their faith.

He also helped develop more evangelism themes, such as "Through Every Door," which taught people how to tell others about Jesus in their community, and the "Effective Evangelistic Invitation," which trained pastors how to invite people to follow Christ at the end of a sermon.

Gilbreath also developed and expanded the idea of creating evangelistic events that were geared toward specific segments of the population — for example, horse whisperer events where people who loved rodeo could come watch a gifted trainer talk about gospel truths while training a horse.

Gilbreath wanted to leave no group unreached. He helped develop events like turkey rodeos for hunters, tournaments for golfers and fishermen and car shows for car enthusiasts, creating places

where people could hear the gospel who ordinarily might not.

Roger White, pastor of First Baptist Church Arley, said he has seen events like this work well in his context. Over the years, the church has put on a number of car shows and turkey rodeos. White remembers story after story of people who have been drawn into the church through these types of events.

'More hooks'

In one situation a man's wife had been visiting the church and had been trying to get him to come with her, but she hadn't been successful. She was hoping he would come to the car show — he had an old Corvette.

"They pulled up at the car show just as we were wrapping up," White said, "and she came and introduced him to me, and he said, 'I see these people walking around in these T-shirts — how can I get one?' I told him I didn't think we had any more."

Facebook photo

FBC Arley holds a car show as a way to reach out to people in the community who might not ordinarily come to church.

But then White remembered he might have one in his office. White lightheartedly asked the man if he would be willing to trade a visit to the church for a T-shirt, if White could find one.

"He said sure, and I went and got the shirt," White said. "He put it on and said, 'I'll be there in the morning.'"

He was. He heard the gospel, and two months later, White baptized him.

"It was the car show that got him there," he said.

Daniel Wilson, who has served as state evangelism director since Gilbreath retired in 2020, said evangelism strategies and methods have changed over the years, but he said he would never point to any one of them and say it doesn't work anymore.

"As far as evangelistic efforts go, I think the more hooks you have in the water, the more fish you're likely to catch," he said. "As soon as I say, 'That method of evangelism doesn't work anymore,' I guarantee I'll come across someone in Alabama who's making it work. Different techniques work in different places and for different churches."

Wilson said no matter which way someone chooses to go about it, evangelism should be a way of life.

"It's not a once-a-week activity or annual event at the church," he said. "We sometimes treat evangelism as an event on the church calendar ... but evangelism is not something we schedule on the calendar; we live it everywhere we go."

Wilson said it's a personal responsibility that each follower of Christ should take on with integrity, humility and patience.

"Evangelism is hospitable rather than argumentative. While the truth of our message is of most importance, we must be sure to share it with a whole lot of grace," he said, noting it's important to listen as well as speak.

It takes time to provide the biblical framework for someone to understand their need for salvation, Wilson said. "It's absolutely important in today's world to approach lost people from a posture of humility. The only way our message is going to be believable to non-Christians is if we are living it with sincerity and transparency."

Whatever method a person uses, Wilson said he believes evangelism is important for Alabama Baptists because he truly believes "our hearts have been touched by God's love."

'It spills over'

"God's love has been poured out on us, and it spills over from us onto others around us," he said. "In its simplest form, evangelism is just living out the golden rule. If I were still lost in the guilt of my sin and hopeless without Christ, I'd want someone to tell me about God's wonderful love for me. Therefore, I'm going to share with others this awesome news that 'God proved His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'"

Photo courtesy of Samford Special Collection

A crowd gathers for a revival at Fairmount Baptist Church in Red Level around the turn of the 20th century. Protracted revival meetings were a big part of Alabama Baptists' evangelistic efforts in that era.

Photo courtesy of Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

Evangelist Billy Graham speaks at a crusade at Legion Field in Birmingham in 1972. Crusades like these grew in popularity in Alabama around that time and in the decades that followed.

SBOM photo

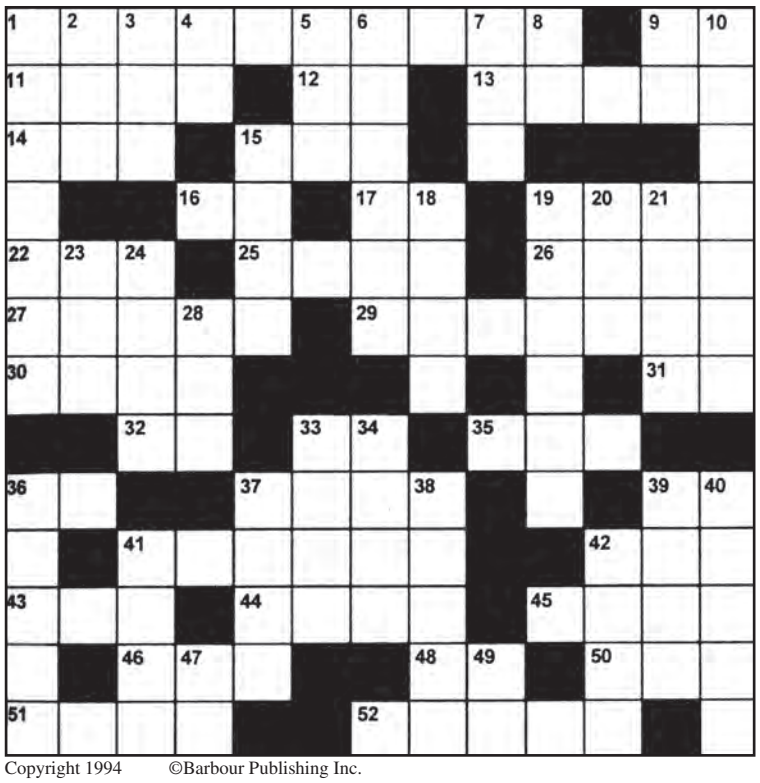
Paul Daily tames a horse during a horse whisperer event, which was created to get the gospel message to people who love rodeo.

Photo courtesy of Samford Special Collection

Photo by Doug Rogers

Above: From 1985 to 1997, Harper Shannon led Alabama Baptists to grow in training people for evangelism. **Left:** Daniel Wilson, state evangelism director, speaks during the Sharing Hope conference at Taylor Road Baptist Church in Montgomery in February 2022.

CHRISTIAN crossword



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ACROSS

1. Having to do with the Bible.
9. There ____ none good but One. (Mark 10:18)
11. The ____ of March.
12. ____ the money.
13. To utilize. (two words)
14. 1,400 in Roman numerals.
15. To drift off to sleep.
16. Your children ... received ____ correction. (Jer. 2:30)
17. Old Testament. (abbr.)
19. Whom the Father will ____ in My name. (John 14:26)
22. They ____ go the man. (Judg. 1:25)
25. Art not thou a ____? (2 Sam. 15:27)
26. One of the Great Lakes.
27. They came to Him from ____ quarter. (Mark 1:45)
29. Paul, a ____ of Jesus Christ. (Rom. 1:1)
30. To raise a child, or to ____ a child.
31. Sound of satisfaction.
32. Manuscript. (abbr.)
33. Dad.
35. The harvest is the ____ of the world. (Matt. 13:39)
36. ____ Abram departed. (Gen. 12:4)
37. The one who gets to the finish line first ____ the prize.
39. Alternating Current. (abbr.)
41. Israel assembled together at ____. (Josh. 18:1)
42. Policeman's Benevolent Association. (abbr.)
43. A tall, flightless bird.
44. Former talk-show host.
45. I will come down and ____ with thee. (Num. 11:17)
46. Hear my ____, O God. (Ps. 61:1)
48. They filled them ____ to the brim. (John 2:7)
50. Ye shall not ____ Me henceforth. (Matt. 23:39)
51. To ____ away our sins. (1 John 3:5)
52. A crown of 12 ____. (Rev. 12:1)

DOWN

1. Less complex.
2. Centers for Disease Control. (abbr.)
3. God led the people ... the way of the ... ____ sea. (Ex. 13:18)
4. God ____ a Spirit. (John 4:24)
5. Also.
6. Does, then ____.
7. I took the little book ... and ____ it up. (Rev. 10:10)
8. And, ____, the heavens were opened. (Matt. 3:16)
9. God ____ my strength and power. (2 Sam. 22:33)
10. And ____ rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:45)
15. Someone who can't mind his or her own business is ____.
18. "Star ____."
19. Fives, sixes and ____.
20. Equal Rights Amendment. (abbr.)
21. ____, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria.*
23. Adam's wife.
24. Go, ____, go!
28. Railroads. (abbr.)
33. I will even make the ____ for fire great. (Ezek. 24:9)
34. Most-quoted author in the world. (abbr.)
36. He made ... the pure incense of ____ spices. (Ex. 37:29)
37. Skilled at gaining an advantage.
38. All the people shall ____. (Josh. 6:5)
39. For God is ____ to make him stand. (Rom. 14:4)
40. They baked unleavened ____ of the dough. (Ex. 12:39)
41. He made him to ____ honey out of the rock. (Deut. 32:13)
42. As the flower of the grass he shall ____ away. (James 1:10)
47. About. (abbr.)
49. Dad.

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

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PASTOR
First Baptist Church Rogersville is in search of a senior pastor. Interested candidates may email their resumé to: seniorpastorsearch@fbcrogersville.com or mail a resumé to: First Baptist Church Rogersville, 222 College St., Rogersville, AL 35652, ATTN: Senior Pastor Search Committee.

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Ken Sande

Consider new opportunities for the future Church

(*continued from page 1*)
whether or not they have children in the home, etc. — and found that the most clear explanation for this shift sat with non-white millennials.

"Studying this data may help leaders recognize either an opportunity or a blind spot in their ministries. While over the past two years many leaders have anticipated church going 'back to normal,' maybe it's time to consider what ... new opportunities are in store for the future Church."

Gallup's data indicates the vast majority of nonreligious Americans (75%) say they are not interested in exploring religion in the future. But young adults with no religious affiliation are more inclined to want to explore religion than older adults without a religious affiliation.

Specifically, 18% of 18- to 34-year-olds with no religion are at least moderately interested in exploring religion, compared with 9% of nonreligious 35- to 54-year-olds and 6% of those 55 and older who are not religious.

Later in life

Still, finding faith later in life that didn't exist before is possible, as 16% of U.S. adults today who say they seldom or never attended church as children now attend every week or almost every week.

"It's important to remember that millennials are not the 'up and coming' generation anymore," Copeland notes. "Indeed, they currently make up the majority of the adult population and workforce. They are also the most racially, socially and culturally diverse generation in modern history.

Atmore pastor hopes book will help plug visitors into church life

(*continued from page 1*)
meeting to find better ways to help people get involved at the church, not just attend.

Two years later, not only did the congregation have a better strategy, they had something Garrett hoped would help others — a book called "You Belong Here: How to Help Your Church's Guests Become Family."

Each chapter explains a reason for assimilation or a way to go about it.

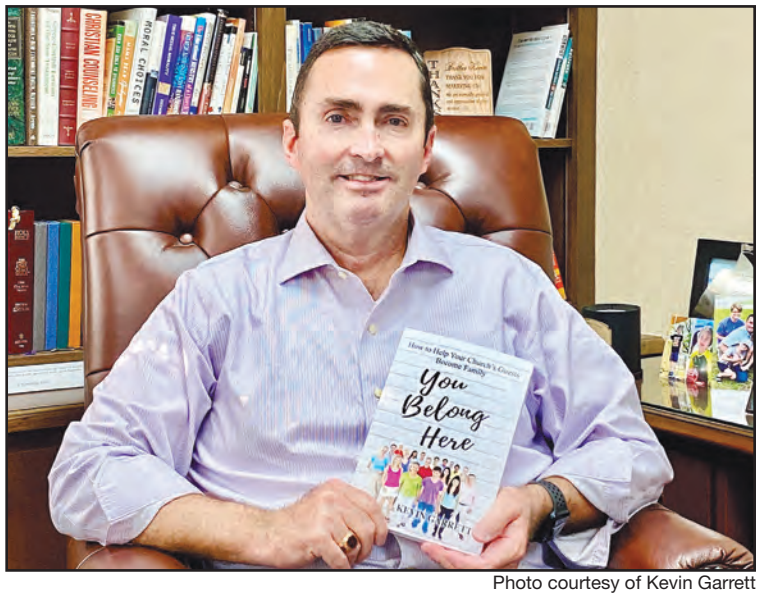

Photo courtesy of Kevin Garrett

Kevin Garrett hopes his book, "You Belong Here: How to Help Your Church's Guests Become Family," will help churches develop an effective process to turn visitors into active members.

Helping churches

"The desire is to help churches through the process of finding their own way to help guests become family members," Garrett explained.

FBC adopted a strategy that "won't be someone else's strategy," he clarified. But he hopes the strategy will help other churches know how to start an assimilation team that fits their needs.

"The process runs through our whole church, which is kind of cool," Garrett said.

"The book looks at those relationships and connections and next steps, and it's all broken up into bite-size pieces."

There's also an assessment tool churches can use to determine where each guest may fit within an assimilation strategy, to personalize it for every individual. The tool helps assess each person's sense of belonging and purpose.

Kevin Garrett is available to assist churches or speak at training events. Visit kevingarrett.org for more information.

"The goal is to help churches become healthier," Garrett said.

Rob Jackson, director of the office of church health for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, said the book is something churches need.

"Many churches I've seen don't have a strategy or process to move those who are guests to membership or to move those who are in membership to active involvement, using their gifts and talents in the church and then moving to a position of leadership," said Jackson, who was an external reader on Garrett's doctoral project. "He's done a very good job of letting people know, 'You belong here, you belong in the body of Christ. You belong in this local body.'

"What I see in Kevin's simple yet biblically sound book is a process to help churches move guests to active membership in the church."

Kevin Blackwell, executive director of the Ministry Training Institute at Samford University, said Garrett's book offers theological reasons why churches "ought to be the most welcoming place on earth."

Being effective

"He also shows practically how to make theological beliefs organizationally incarnational," Blackwell noted. "In other words, how can churches most effectively reach and keep people whom God deeply loves?"

The book is for any church that wants to "get serious about moving guests into fully assimilated members who are actively growing in their faith," Blackwell added.

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For January 15

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.
Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Mobile

PICK UP YOUR MAT
John 5:5–16

We continue our study of the Gospel of John with a lesson on Jesus' third miraculous sign.

John previously told of Jesus turning water to wine at the wedding in Cana. Jesus also healed an official's son long distance, with Jesus in Cana and the son in Capernaum. In that miracle, the father's faith was required. In the third miracle, a man's faith in Jesus was necessary for his own healing.

Compassion Expressed (5–9a)

Thirty-eight years is a long time to suffer. Jesus expressed compassion for a man hoping to be healed by a "miraculous" pool called Bethesda. Jesus simply asked the man if he wanted to be well. The man needed help to get into the pool, or so he thought.

Jesus responded by healing him and telling him to get up, pick up his mat and walk. Jesus met the man's desire for healing by requiring him to believe (act upon Jesus' words).

God's plan is not always physical healing. He sometimes receives greater glory by working through followers who are disabled.

Such is the case of Joni Eareckson Tada, a woman God has used to communicate His grace and glory through her testimony and her art.

At age 17, Tada was paralyzed from the shoulders down following a diving injury, but she has devoted her life to Christian ministry and advocacy for those in the disabilities community.

Such is also the case of Billy Graham, pastor of prayer and evangelism at Redemption Church in Saraland (formerly First Baptist Church North Mobile).

Though he was born legally blind and has never walked, Graham has dedicated his life to helping other people see Jesus and take those first steps of faith.

Legalism Exposed (9b–13)

Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath. What a great day to experience His healing hand!

After nearly four decades of suffering, he stood up, rolled up his mat and walked to the temple.

Consider what Scriptures may have come to his mind: "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice ..." or "Give thanks to the Lord for He is good ..." What Bible verses would have come to your mind?

The Pharisees then apprehended and interrogated the Sabbath lawbreaker for carrying his mat: "Do you know what day it is?" "Do you know carrying your mat breaks Sabbath law?" "Who gave you permission to do this?" The man didn't know Jesus' name or where He went.

Identity Exposed (14–16)

Jesus found him. He came to the man at the pool, and He found him again in the temple.

Jesus' counsel to the man was "live a life of repentance and do not allow sin to define your life." Are you grateful Jesus found you?

"Jesus did it. He made me whole." This was the healed man's response to the Pharisees. It is the only answer we can give to God's transforming work since we placed our faith in Jesus Christ.

In the passage following this section, the Pharisees confronted Jesus, who said God the Father is always at work (v. 17).

The Pharisees did not take kindly to this for two reasons.

First, Jesus justified healing on the Sabbath.

Second, He called God His Father. Jesus was equating Himself with God, a clear point of contention throughout John's Gospel (see 8:59; 10:31–33).

We may be unaware of the extent of God's work in our lives or surroundings, but He is at work.

Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said, "For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to His good purpose" (Phil. 2:13).

Bible Studies for Life

By Tyshawn Gardner, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Samford University

VALUED BY GOD
Psalm 139:1–10, 13–16

Psalm 139 inspires awe and worship. It is an echo of the most profound theological truth about God in all the Bible: God knows us. This psalm expands on the creation of man narrative seen in Genesis 1:26–27 by providing details that give the reader a glimpse into God's heart and the constitution of humanity.

One of the most pressing issues in our contemporary society is advocacy for life. Life begins at conception and should be regarded as valuable in every stage.

Every life is important and valuable to God. Christians are not just pro-life — we embrace a whole life position. God wants us to care for, value and advocate for all people, especially those who are vulnerable and marginalized.

Life is sacred because God values us. (1–6)

All human life is sacred. This passage affirms the sanctity of human life by calling attention to the value our Creator places on us. In verse one, the psalmist uses the Hebrew words for "search" and "know" to show the depths of God's intimate knowledge of us. He created us with precision, care and intentionality. He knows us, and we can know Him.

God created us through His infinite wisdom. He knows our words before they are formed in our minds.

God's imprint and His image is in every human being, so He values us infinitely. Humanity is the crown of His creation.

Regardless of our ethnicity, country of origin, age, talents, educational level or socioeconomic status, we are created in the image of God, and He values us.

We often make the mistake of placing our confidence in material possessions, feeling as though these external things improve our value. However, we have an inherent value.

Life is sacred because God is with us. (7–10)

The psalmist informs us God is with us. There are no depths or heights where we can escape His presence.

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded that God does not leave nor forsake His people (see Heb. 13:5, Deut. 31:6, 1 Chron. 28:20 as examples).

Paul repeats this theme as he enthusiastically writes, "Neither height nor depth, nor anything in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

Because God values us, He is close to us. He is with us through His Spirit who lives in us. Life is sacred because God is not only with us, but He is in us.

Life is sacred because God created us and has a plan for each of us. (13–16)

Like a masterful artist who uses the most precious material and takes years to create a perfect masterpiece that will be valued by millions, God created us, values us and wants us to value one another.

Believers can live in the confidence of God's love when we acknowledge the value He places on us and His perfect plan for our lives. Every person created in the image of God is also created to fulfill a purpose.

God's redemptive plan includes those He created. Life is sacred because His plan involves every person.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made by a Creator who cares for us and intentionally, meticulously places His imprint on us. His plans for us are reflected in the value He has in every human life.

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb."

Psalm 139:13

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Songwriter's heart for worship leads to career in music industry

One day when Jonathan Gamble was 14, he walked into the youth room at Iron City Baptist Church in Anniston and asked Lance and Terra DeMerchant a question.

"He came in with his guitar in his hand and said, 'Can I play something for y'all and get some feedback?' That was when we realized he could sing," Terra DeMerchant said.

The DeMerchants had recently started leading worship at the church, and they'd found great help in the middle schooler.

"He started coming with us to lead worship for the children and playing the drums and then the keys," Terra DeMerchant explained.

And then came the day when Gamble decided to ask them what they thought about a song he'd written.

Lance DeMerchant said he was in shock as he listened. "I told him I thought he needed to be leading and writing."

JONATHAN GAMBLE

Photo courtesy of Jonathan Gamble

Beginning of a journey

That moment began a journey for Gamble that led him to where he is now — a staff writer for Nashville-based Capitol Christian Music Group Publishing, the Christian music publishing division of Universal Music Group.

After that day in the youth room, the DeMerchants held a songwriting class at the church, and Gamble was front and center.

"Lance and Terra took me under their wing and taught me the basics of songwriting," Gamble said. "We would look at Top 10 worship songs and Top 10 pop songs and talk about the songs and how they were structured. I started to think about songs that way. We did that for years through high school."

Gamble loved it. When he went on to Jacksonville State University, he kept his music going. He served at Leatherwood Baptist Church in Anniston, and he started leading worship at Engage, the college ministry of First Baptist Church Jacksonville. He also continued to write and produce music and put it up on SoundCloud.

"I made some friends on SoundCloud, and we developed a small community of Christian writers and producers and wrote some music together," Gamble said.

Over time as he collaborated with others in the community, he developed more and more connections. Eventually, one of those connections was Jon Sell, who at the time was an artists and repertoire representative for Capitol CMG Publishing.

"I sent three or four songs to Jon, and he liked them," Gamble explained.

Sell invited Gamble to a meeting at his office.

To listen to "What He Didn't Do," visit tabonline.org/what-he-didnt-do.

Making contacts

Capitol didn't offer him a publishing deal that day, but he got his foot in the door, and he began sending more songs to Sell for feedback. Sell also introduced him to some producers in the area and continued sharing more ways to hone his craft.

The road was slow, but it seemed to be going somewhere.

"My wife, Sierra, and I had planned on moving to Atlanta because I had just graduated from JSU with a degree in marketing," he said. "Sierra had been making trips on the weekend to volunteer at Zoo Atlanta to make connections there, and we had been looking in the area of town where we wanted to live."

Change of plans

But when the two of them realized his songwriting dream might materialize into a career, they decided to scrap their plans and move to Nashville. In 2019, they moved into a small apartment, and Gamble began working part time for a mobile phone company and using his off time to write songs.

He began to meet and collaborate with more artists, and the songs he sent to publishing companies were met with more and more positive feedback.

In December 2021, Gamble signed with Capitol.

"This [past] year, I've gotten to write with a lot of amazing people, like Sidewalk Prophets and Jordan Feliz," he said. "The opportunities are a lot greater."

Gamble recently worked with Danny Gokey on a song called "Live Up to Your Name." He was also invited on the road with Tauren Wells and wrote three songs with him, including "When We Get There."

One song that came out of a season of struggle is called "What He Didn't Do," which Gamble's friend Landry Cantrell recorded.

Gamble said it captured something he had wrestled with at that time.

"Something I had been wanting to say in a song is 'Yes, God is good to make a way and move mountains and do miracles, but also God is still good when He doesn't do it,'" Gamble said. "It's still for our good."

EDITOR'S NOTE

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Life-changing

By Ashley Perham
Baptist and Reflector

Former Afghan Muslim reaching community, beyond for Christ

Latif, an Afghan Muslim man on his sixth pilgrimage to Mecca, wondered why God was mad at him.

He was a devoted follower of Islam and repented of his sin. So why didn't he feel peace?

"Why are you so far away from me?" he asked God.

The next day, though crying and fighting with God, Latif continued on his journey. A strange man approached him and asked where he came from.

Latif was confused and upset. His shaved head and clothes obviously indicated he was on a pilgrimage.

The man shared his salvation testimony with Latif, prayed for him and gave him an Arabic New Testament. The prayer touched Latif. It was like this man knew his struggle.

Back in Afghanistan in 2007, Latif and his best friend began to study the Bible every day, but not to become Christians. Instead, they compared the Bible and the Quran.

"We studied to find out which part they changed," he said.

Although Latif wasn't a Christian, his friend turned him in to the police, who found his Bible and beat him to the point of death because they thought he was a Christian.

Shown the love of Jesus

Upset at being falsely accused and angry at Christians, Latif fled to India. On Christmas Day, he attended church and slapped the pastor.

"Latif, we love you. God loves you," the pastor told him.

The next day, the pastor bought Latif food, clothes and shoes. He also prayed for Latif. Yet again, he found himself asking "Why?"

"Why is this man doing that?" he wondered.

IMB photo

A woman buys tomatoes in a busy market in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Through contact with Christians and the work of the Holy Spirit, Latif received Christ in India in 2008.

"Jesus, from tonight, from this moment, you are my Lord and Savior," he prayed.

And on that night, everything changed for him.

In 2010, Latif started a church in India. He didn't know anything about planting churches, but he modeled his after the church in the Book of Acts.

The church started meeting in his home and at the park. Throughout the week, small groups of two or three families would meet. On Sunday, people would share how they had reached other people and what they were learning from the Bible.

The church grew to 70 people.

In 2012, Latif moved to Indonesia where he started another home church. They baptized 62 people from Iran and Afghanistan.

He moved to Australia in 2015, where one house church he started has since grown to three in Sydney.

In 2017, Latif met Mark Morris, founder of Refugee Memphis, at a conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Morris asked him to pray about starting an Afghan church in Memphis, Tennessee.

Latif and his wife began to pray and felt peace to come to Memphis, and in 2020, the first Afghan church in Tennessee was started.

Culturally, Latif's churches are very different from traditional American churches.

They meet in homes, and the families bring food and eat and share together.

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Afghan refugees sometimes don't feel safe or comfortable in a traditional American church, he said.

Morris noted, "What we have to recognize is that their church is not going to look like our churches, but it's going to be a New Testament church."

Friends with refugees

In Memphis, there are around 75 Afghan families, most of them newly arrived refugees. Latif is in contact with most of them.

"We have a friendship. We invite them to our home. They invite us to celebrations. We share together," he said.

People that rejected the gospel two years ago are now really open, he said.

Twice a week, Latif broadcasts a gospel program to the global Afghan community. The program streams on Facebook, YouTube and satellite television.

Latif gets calls from people in Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Europe who want to know about Christ. Some of the callers can only talk for 10 minutes out of fear of the Taliban.

But the gospel is still spreading. In the last two months in Kabul, seven families have been baptized, he said.

Latif asks Baptists to pray for spiritual growth for the believers in his church.

He gives new believers the responsibility to read the Bible, to share with others and to report what they share. The busyness of American culture means Bible study isn't often a focus.

"Jesus is too real to me and to everyone who receives Christ. His Scripture is true," he said. "The word of God is true. Why should I not share this?" Latif said.

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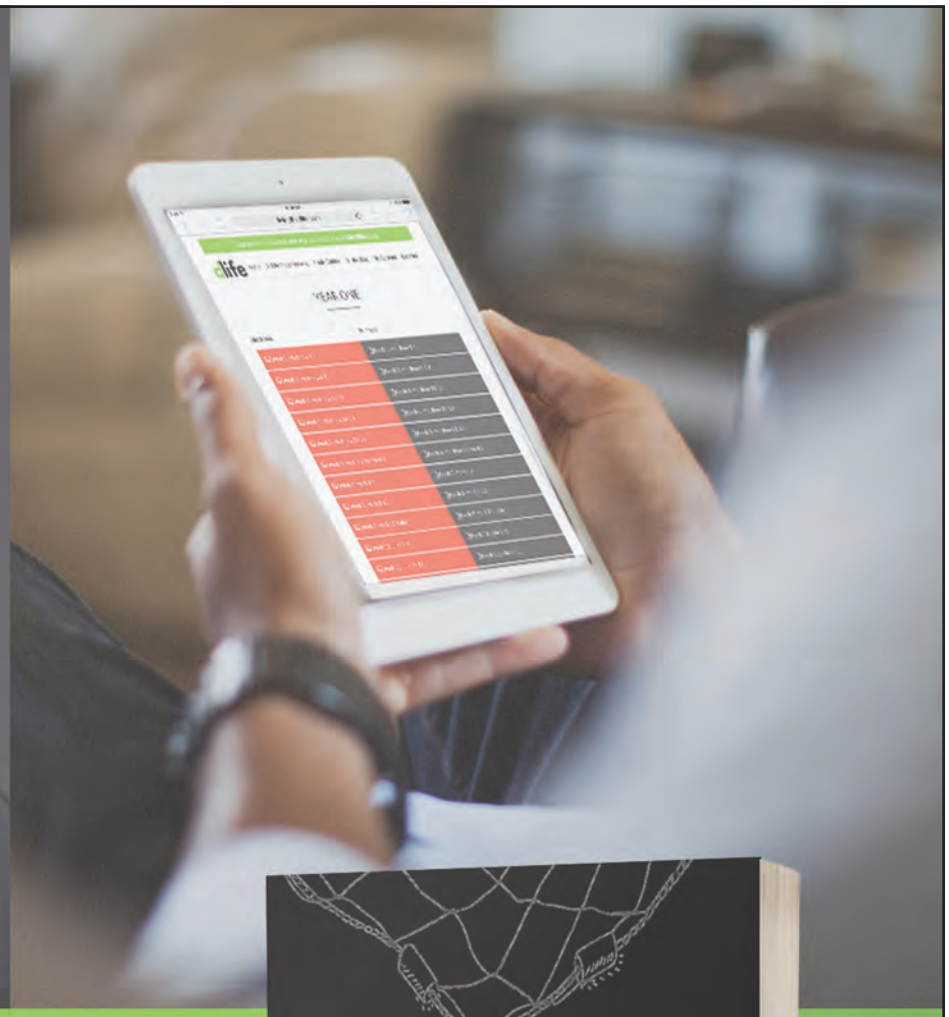

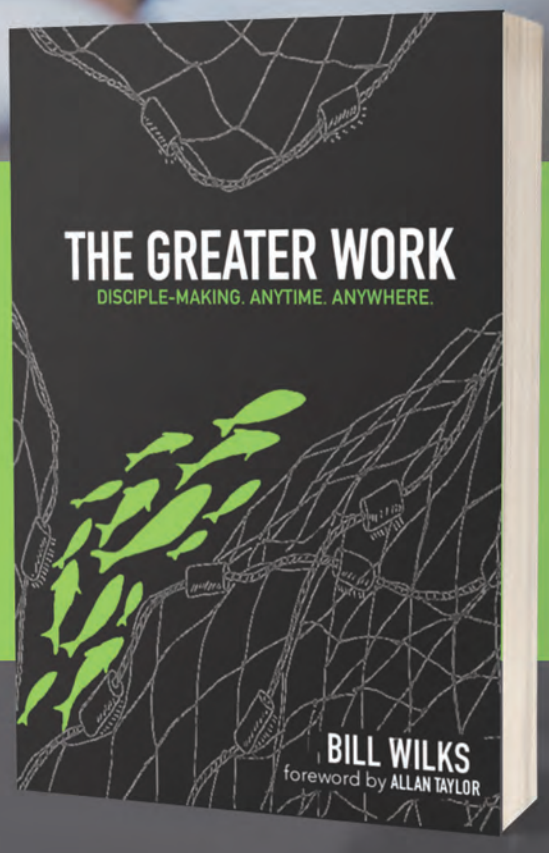

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Fresh fire

By Grace Thornton
The Baptist Paper

God multiplies missionaries among locals in Philippines

Jen Hagen knew from a young age that she wanted to give her life to something worth dying for.

When she was 2, God called her family to the Philippines to live with a tribe that had been headhunters.

The B tribe's "culture had dictated that a man was not truly a man until he had taken a head," Jen recalled. "No outsiders had ever survived contact with them, and the surrounding areas lived in absolute terror."

That was until the 1950s, when God "miraculously protected" the men who first brought the gospel to the B tribe, Jen said. Their lives were changed, and a church was started.

Three decades later Jen's parents were instrumental in continuing to disciple new believers and help the churches grow in maturity.

"Seeing the change the gospel had made in that people group, and knowing I wanted to give my life to something worth dying for, as I grew and matured and became an adult, to me there was nothing else worth giving my life for," Jen related. "I wanted to be used by Him to be a part of helping another people group."

Photo courtesy of Steve and Jen Hagen

Steve Hagen trains church members in the Philippines in order to help them become effective in sending out their own workers.

Front-row seat

Jen didn't know that one day God would not only allow her to be part of that, He would also let her have a front-row seat in mobilizing the B tribe to go as missionaries to other tribes.

She and her husband, Steve, moved to the Philippines as International Mission Board missionaries in 2005.

For him the path looked a little different.

"My sister died when she was really young," Steve recalled. "We knew she was a believer and had a very strong faith — God had used her for others to come to know Him, nurses and other people in the hospital — but what gripped me at that time was this: What if she had never heard?"

Much like Jen, from that point on he wanted to be part of helping make sure people everywhere had a chance to hear and respond to the gospel, even if they lived in the most remote places.

That's what he found in the Philippines: Sometimes they did.

Over the years it was normal for the family to hike several hours to get to a village where they would set up home base for a while. Jen said there was a period when they were raising their three children that their furniture lived in one place and they would just visit it sometimes.

"We were camping out in mountain villages for a couple of months at a stretch doing mobilizing, backpacking in with our homeschooling supplies," she explained.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT IMB.ORG/GIVE/PROJECT/EMPOWERING-TRIBALS-TO-REACH-TRIBALS.

While Jen taught young Mikayla, Zach and Ben, and as she cooked and washed clothes in the river, Steve would hike to surrounding villages, mobilizing believers to go out and share their faith and start new churches.

"You start realizing the truth of what Jesus said — if you leave father and mother and home, He'll replace it a hundredfold," Steve noted. "There were more than 100 houses that we could show up at at any point and say, 'Hey, we need a place to stay,' and they would receive us."

At the same time the Hagens were working among the B tribe, they also had been working among unreached A tribes.

They saw some fruit there, but Jen said there "were many barriers to us effectively reaching the A tribes."

During their second three-year term on the missions field, "God planted an idea in our hearts: How cool would it be if God would use the B tribe to reach the A tribes?"

Global strategy

The Hagens began to take steps toward that end. The B tribe had already sent out one missionary on their own, but with no support or training. So Steve and Jen began helping the B tribe learn how to pray through who to send and how to train and support them.

Through the process, the churches have seen their impact, and that's given them a fresh fire, Steve said.

The effort — called Tribals Reaching Tribals — fits right in with the IMB strategy of globalization, or helping other countries become more effective at sending out their own workers. Steve serves as the IMB globalization catalyst for his part of the world.

Jen requested prayer for the team and their partners as they work together to train new missionaries.

Among the A tribes "for there to be a church within an hour's walk of all the tribals in that area, we need 800 churches," Jen noted, "and right now we have around a dozen churches."

More resources also are needed to build up the tribal missionary training center and grow the tribes' sources of sustainable support.

"There are lots of opportunities for people in the States to come alongside us," Jen said.

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