The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.



Photo by Caleb Oquendo on Pexels

For the first time in two decades, church attendance in America is up. It has been a long time since there has been any uptick, said Scott Thumma, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

Worship shift

Study shows signs of renewal, recovery in church service attendance in the US

The past 25 years have been rough for American churches and other houses of worship.

The median worship attendance dropped by more than half. Church closures and the rise of the nones — those who claim no religion — have grabbed all the headlines. And faith in institutions like organized religion has plummeted.

Yet a new report from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research shows signs of a shift — for the first time in two decades, attendance is up. More people are volunteering, and there also seems to be a renewed sense of optimism among pastors and other clergy.

Story of resilience

"The headline finding is cautious optimism," Alison Norton, co-director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, told reporters at the annual conference of the Religion News Association, meeting in Atlanta. She added that the data showed a story of resilience and recalibration.

"Across a range of indicators, there are signs of recovery and, in some cases, renewal," the study's authors wrote in a report released April 24, which surveyed a representative sample of leaders from 7,453 congregations between September and December of 2025.

Median in-person attendance, which dropped from 137 in 2000 to 45 during COVID-19, is now at 70 adults, which is higher than numbers reported in a similar 2020 survey. That report found that the median attendance was 65.

Researchers said the attendance growth, which is self-reported by

(*See 'Coming,' page 12*)

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SCAN ME

State Board news

Trustees approve helping IMB center, new budget goal

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

Alabama Baptists are joining South Carolina Baptists in donating $1 million to the International Mission Board to be used for renovation of missionary housing at the International Learning Center. The ILC is IMB's campus in Rockville, Virginia, where new missionaries are trained and where missionaries return during stateside assignments.

The money is coming from the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions' capital improvement fund and was approved by SBOM trustees May 14 during their regularly scheduled quarterly meeting.

Rick Lance, SBOM executive director, said, "IMB's work is at the heart of what we do. ... We have 400-plus missionaries who claim Alabama as home ... and $1 million should cover the cost of one full dormitory."



Photo by Doug Rogers/Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions

Executive director Rick Lance shares about the opportunity to assist with the IMB learning center renovations during the May 14 afternoon meeting of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions trustees in Prattville.

The dorm covered by Alabama Baptists will be marked in memory of Alabama's own Martha Myers, who was martyred in Yemen in 2002. "She was one of a kind," Lance said.

"I happened to be on IMB's board when the ILC was built, and it hasn't been touched since it was built in 1985," he added.



Photo by Doug Rogers/SBOM

Buddy Champion reports on the transition and search team status during the May 14 SBOM trustees' meeting.

Other state conventions are assisting financially with the quad housing upgrades ($300,000). The IMB is seeking commitments from as many state conventions as possible.

Also approved during the SBOM trustee meeting May 14 is a 2027 Cooperative Program allocation budget goal of $38.5 million, which is $1 million over the 2026 budget and slightly under the nearly $40 million received in 2025.

"It's reachable and responsible," Lance said, noting SBOM staff anticipates a 3% decrease in receipts from 2025 to 2026, so they wanted to find the appropriate mark for 2027, especially with a new executive director taking the helm after the budget is set.

In other news, the longstanding state convention education commission was deactivated by vote of the trustees since CP funds only go to one institution of higher learning now (University of Mobile). Its main role was to monitor the allocations of CP funds to the original three schools (which included Judson College and Samford University until recent years) along with the A. Earl Potts Scholarship.

The workload has decreased substantially, and it can be handled by the SBOM staff, Lance said.

Latest from search team

Trustees also heard a report from the executive director transition and search team.

Buddy Champion, chair of the team, said, "The stable is full of some really good thoroughbreds. We realized we are not lacking for talent but of God's direction."

Asking for continued prayer, specifically each Thursday at 2:30 p.m. when the team meets together virtually to work through the next steps, Champion shared the weight of the pressure he and the others feel as they seek God's direction for the next executive director.

Trusting God

"We pray God will lead us and guide us and direct us, and we are so appreciative of all your prayers."

Champion also noted the team seeks to stay on the initial schedule outlined if all falls into place. The steps in front of them are to make their selection and launch a thorough investigative phase on the person's background and credentials.

If all continues going well, the team would then present a candidate to the SBOM trustees in August. And if approved by trustees, the candidate would have several months to work alongside Lance, who is set to retire Jan. 31, 2027.

"There will be a lot of work that needs to take place, especially when we find that person, to make this transition so seamless and smooth and God-honoring and that's our prayer."

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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JENNIFER DAVIS RASH
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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The crossword puzzle can be found on page 11.

OPINION



Rashional Thoughts

By Jennifer Davis Rash, President and Editor-in-Chief
Email: jrash@thealabamabaptist.org / Social media: @RashionalThts

Pondering how to understand the coming 'truth and unity' SBC amendment

Let's chat about Al Mohler's "truth and unity" amendment coming to the floor of the SBC Annual Meeting in Orlando in June.

By the time we meet again on the pages of the print edition of The Alabama Baptist, the amendment will have either passed or failed, so we won't have an opportunity to discuss all the angles here ahead of time.

If you are attending the meeting and planning to vote as a messenger, I encourage you to read the amendment's wording carefully and consider all aspects of what it means before casting your vote.

Also, be cautious about the title because many times messengers are fearful of looking rebellious if they vote against something labeled like this amendment is. The first time I recognized a marketing strategy behind the name of a particular item to be voted on by SBC messengers was in 2009 related to the Great Commission Resurgence Task Force.

Think about how hard it would be to raise your ballot against something labeled as the Great Commission. Others have mentioned the same concern through the years.

Mohler, longtime president of Southern Seminary, announced his intent to propose his "truth and unity" amendment May 18 through a video posted on his YouTube page.

He is proposing an amendment to the SBC Constitution related to further defining how a cooperating SBC church functions.

The amendment as it currently reads states a cooperating church "does not act to affirm, appoint or endorse a woman serving in the office or function of a pastor/elder/overseer, such as preaching to the assembled congregation."

Many state the goal is to prevent women from serving as senior pastors of Southern Baptist churches, while others are concerned the wording takes it much farther.

Could the wording Mohler is proposing provide ammunition for SBC leadership to step into a role contradictory to our local church autonomy heritage?

Could it give leverage for interpretation to be used according to an individual's preferences at the associational, state convention and/or national level?

Why include "endorse" and "function," and how should those be interpreted? Does "preaching" include speaking, sharing a testimony or leading a large group Bible study?

Escalating fear

Why has such fear of ministry service by women escalated in recent years? How many Southern Baptist churches are led by women senior pastors?

How many of the existing items defining cooperation are consistently enforced (see sidebar)?

If Mohler and others believe it's vital for "truth and unity" to include a note about women in the constitution, then shouldn't the previously inserted criteria such as "the regular filing of the annual report" be considered a stipulation for continued fellowship within the SBC as well?

Apparently messengers in previous years saw that as vital to cooperation, but it's obviously not been enforced because the SBC database always has missing information. Associational, state convention and SBC Executive Committee leaders spend lots of energy begging churches to turn in their reports each year — some are faithful to do so while others pick and choose when and how much to report.

As far as the "truth and unity" label for the amendment, are the descriptions fair when a nearly 200-year-old convention has not needed such a restrictive statement nor sought to micromanage individual church bodies in this way?

Excerpt from current SBC Constitution

Article III. Composition: ...

1. The Convention will only deem a church to be in friendly cooperation with the Convention, and sympathetic with its purposes and work (i.e., a "cooperating" church as that term is used in the Convention's governing documents) which:

1. Has a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention's adopted statement of faith. (By way of example, churches which act to affirm, approve, or endorse homosexual behavior would be deemed not to be in cooperation with the Convention.)

2. Has formally approved its intention to cooperate with the Southern Baptist Convention. (By way of example, the regular filing of the annual report requested by the Convention would be one indication of such cooperation.)

3. Has made undesignated, financial contribution(s) through the Cooperative Program, and/or through the Convention's Executive Committee for Convention causes, and/or to any Convention entity during the fiscal year preceding.

4. Does not act in a manner inconsistent with the Convention's beliefs regarding sexual abuse.

5. Does not act to affirm, approve, or endorse discriminatory behavior on the basis of ethnicity.

OPINION

Your Voice

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

Ideas for Christians to celebrate Independence Day

By Carolyn Tomlin
Special to The Alabama Baptist



Photo by Freepik

Christians need to celebrate this Independence Day with an emphasis on God. Our children need to grow up in a nation where God is over our lives.

Whether your family plans to journey to other areas or enjoy a stay-at-home Alabama holiday, these educational, fun and creative activities will make this a time to remember. Celebrate family, faith and patriotic community events this Independence Day.

▸ **Plan to attend church as a family group.** Pack a pew with your clan. Join in singing patriotic music and worshiping together. Perhaps you could return to the small church of your childhood — the place where your ancestors worshipped together. Matthew 18:20 says, "For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them."

Flag pledges

▸ **Salute the Christian flag as well as the American flag.** Check with your pastor in advance for this part of the service. Teach children the words to this salutation. If a Christian flag is not available, ask if your family can donate one for the church. Perhaps this could be given in memory or in honor of a beloved relative. Teach that as Christians, we pledge our allegiance to God before our country. Both pledges can be found at tabonline.org/pledges.

▸ **Plan an Independence Day parade.** Is your church near a nursing home or assisted-living facility? If so, ask parents in your church or neighborhood to bring their children and their tricycles, bicycles or strollers to the church parking lot. You could use any paved area nearby that is safe. Decorate the vehicle in patriotic colors with crepe paper streamers. Dress children in the traditional red, white and blue. Give out small American flags for children to wave. Include dogs — on leashes.

▸ **Attend a patriotic music event in your community.** Many small towns sponsor community choirs that perform patriotic music on Independence Day. These events provide interaction with your community and a time of fellowship with other Christians. Enjoy the great songs that encourage love of God and country. Hopefully, the march music of John Philip Sousa will be part of the program. Dress your family in patriotic colors of red, white and blue. If the program is outside, bring a picnic basket and lawn chairs or a blanket for sitting on the ground. Events are usually free.

The Bible tells us to be joyous and to sing. Psalm 98:1 reads, "Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things."

Family picnic

▸ **Plan an old-fashioned family picnic.** Ask an older member of your family how they observed the Fourth of July. Chances are they had family and church picnics. Food probably consisted of hamburgers and hot dogs on the grill, slices of cold watermelon, hand-squeezed lemonade in gallon containers with hand-chipped ice and homemade ice cream made in a hand-cranked freezer.

▸ **Participate in games and activities from another era.** Put away the latest technology and interact with your family with games of yesterday. Pitch horseshoes, throw washers (available at a building supply store), set up a badminton court and play tug-of-war and "I Spy." If no one remembers the rules, google the term — as the one concession to using technology for the day.

▸ **Visit a pioneer or early American village.** Check with the Alabama Tourism Department for places to visit across our state. Before you visit, talk with your children about how life has changed since the first celebrations of the holiday. However, the family has the same needs as years ago. We need to love and respect each member, honor God and be grateful to live in America.

▸ **Celebrate with patriotic music.** You'll find some of these familiar songs in the Baptist Hymnal and on YouTube:

- God Bless America
- America the Beautiful
- God of Our Fathers, Whose Almighty Hand
- My Country, 'Tis of Thee
- Battle Hymn of the Republic
- The Star-Spangled Banner
- The Stars and Stripes Forever
- Other marches by John Philip Sousa

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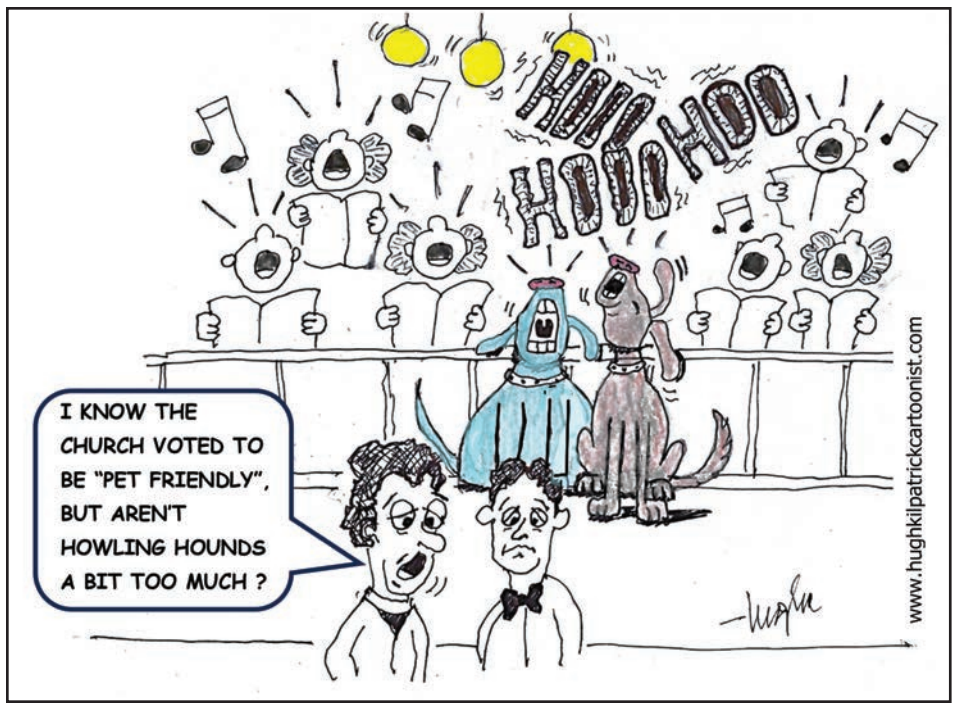
> "Once you know what God wants you to do now, you are in a constant state of disobedience until you do it!"
>
> RICHARD BLACKABY
> *Author, Bible study leader*

"It was incredible. I saw the power of words and photographs and how they come together to tell stories of how God is working in the world. That's when I began to sense a call to Christian communications, letting God use what I think had been my gift since I was a teenager to embrace that calling and use my gifts to serve Him," reflected longtime Baptist communicator **Margaret Dempsey Colson**, who officially retired in April after a distinguished 46-year career in Southern Baptist communications. She shared about developing a love for writing and faith-based media at an early age, recalling reading the former Southern Baptist Home Missions magazine when the publication arrived at her home.

"Choosing to move our bodies can be an act of stewardship — honoring God by caring for the vessel He's given us," according to the **Christian Mental Health Initiative**. "Psalm 139:14 says, 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' Moving our bodies in gratitude and worship reinforces this truth and aligns our physical rhythms with spiritual rest. ... You were made to move, breathe and live freely in the joy and strength of Christ. Let movement become a part of your mental wellness toolkit."

"Speaking the truth in love should not be hard for people who follow Jesus. Love without truth is not real love, and truth without love is not real truth. We absolutely must be known as a convictional people who don't see political and social adversaries as our enemy, but as our neighbors and as a mission field," said **Willy Rice**, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Clearwater, Florida, leading up to being nominated for SBC president at this year's annual meeting in Orlando.

"I believe it is vital that our messaging reflects our convictions and true priorities, but we do that by a rhetoric that consistently bears the fruit of the Spirit; if we are to cooperate, we must not treat fellow believers as enemies, but be examples of humility and gentleness. I hope to assist in being a calm, steady voice in the SBC," said **Josh Powell**, pastor of Taylors First Baptist Church in Taylors, South Carolina, leading up to being nominated for SBC president at this year's annual meeting in Orlando.



Lass WORDS



BY KEN LASS
The Alabama Baptist

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

Mad at God?

Several years ago, I received a very sad text from a friend in another state. His 16-year-old son, their only child, had been killed in a car crash. I knew that boy meant everything to my friend and his wife, and the young man's death just crushed their world.

I told him I was praying God would bring peace and comfort to them during this terrible time, and that's when he responded that he no longer believed in God — that a loving and merciful Lord would not have allowed this to happen.

My friend had lived the life of a good Christian, a solid believer. I knew he was devastated by this tragedy, that he was feeling a mixture of anger, sadness and depression. Denying God's existence in its wake made the trauma even more sorrowful.

Desperate attempt

I couldn't help thinking my friend hadn't really lost his faith. He was just mad at God. Proclaiming his disbelief was some sort of desperate attempt to get back at Him. All of us go through times when we are tempted to get mad at God. Even some of the prominent people of the Bible got upset with the Lord.

Certainly Job was unhappy when God allowed Satan to rob him of all his blessings. David questioned God's love and protection as he was forced to flee from King Saul's attempts to kill him. We're only human. When life beats us down, it's understandable that our trust might be shaken.

So what do you say to someone who tells you they no longer believe in God?

'God is still there'

My mind raced to come up with something profound to tell my friend, but I came up blank. This was no time for a debate. I just told him I understood his anger, but I was convinced God is still there, and that somehow, some way, he would get through this loss. I assured him I was available if he needed to talk.

We still communicate from time to time, but we avoid the subject of his faith. I do pray that he has found his way back to God. You can't stay mad forever at someone you love, and who loves you back. David got past his doubt and wrote, "I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever" (Ps. 52:8).

We should too.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Ken Lass, an award-winning columnist for numerous publications and websites, is a retired Birmingham television news and sports anchor.

NEWS

Alabama news

AUTAUGA ASSOCIATION

▸ **Calvary Baptist Church, Prattville**, is having Rainforest Falls VBS June 12, 6–8 p.m.; June 13, 9 a.m.–2 p.m.; and June 14, 9:45 a.m.–noon. A pizza lunch for families of VBS children will be served at noon on the final day (June 14). VBS is open to preschool through grade 6 and special needs of all ages. To preregister, call 334-365-5213. Mike Watts is pastor.

BARBOUR ASSOCIATION

▸ **Emmanuel Baptist Church, Ariton**, celebrated its 50th anniversary May 3. Randall Johnson, a former pastor, was the guest preacher and musician. The church history was shared by member Catherine Phillips. During the service, Jane Hughes (left), a commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a commemorative plaque, with pastor Randy Campbell (right) accepting on behalf of the congregation. A luncheon was served following the service.



Photo by Ellen Dewberry

BIRMINGHAM METRO ASSOCIATION

▸ **Hunter Street Baptist Church, Hoover**, will host a reception June 14, 8 a.m.–2 p.m. before and after the morning worship services, honoring pastor Buddy Gray, who has announced his retirement. Gray has served as senior pastor for 40 years. The reception will be held in the gym, and the worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. in the sanctuary. Everyone is invited.



GRAY

CLARKE ASSOCIATION

▸ **Bashan Baptist Church, Thomasville**, celebrated its 125th anniversary May 3, beginning with a pre-worship service at 10:30 followed by the morning service. Rick Skelton, deacon chair, recognized former pastors and families and shared future plans for the church. The history of Bashan was recounted by member Rex Rush. The church received a commemorative plaque from Susan Walker (right), a commissioner for the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, with Phillip Godwin, interim pastor, accepting on behalf of the church. Scott Slayton, a former pastor, was the guest preacher. Theresa Rush Novem directed the choir accompanied by Runelle Reid, the church pianist. Members of Elam Baptist Church and Witch Creek Baptist Church, both in Thomasville, also attended the service. Many of the ladies wore long dresses and bonnets or hats, and men were dressed in overalls and long-sleeve white shirts.



Photo by Sandra and Kenny Counselman

COFFEE ASSOCIATION

▸ **Kaleb Wimberly** is leaving his position as associate pastor of **First Baptist Church Enterprise** in July to become principal of the grammar school for Providence Christian School, Dothan. He served on staff at FBC for 10 years. He and his wife, Lindsay, have four sons. Ben Bowden is pastor.



WIMBERLY



JOHNSON

COLBERT-LAUDERDALE ASSOCIATION

▸ **Kevin Johnson** has announced his resignation from **First Baptist Church Florence**, where he has served for more than 33 years in various staff positions, and for the last 13 years as senior pastor. Johnson is looking toward a new season of ministry. "My future is uncertain, but our God is always certain," he said.

DALE ASSOCIATION

▸ **Van Clack** is the new associational mission strategist for **Dale Baptist Association**. He has served in various staff positions for churches in Alabama, Florida and Georgia, including two roles in Dothan: assistant to the pastor and outreach minister at Bethel Baptist Church and pastor of Heritage Baptist Church for 10 years. He holds a bachelor's degree in theology from Florida Baptist Theological College and a master of divinity from New Orleans Seminary. He and his wife, Marcie, have three children.



CLACK



Facebook photo

▸ **Zackary O'Neal**, who has been serving as pastor of **Pinckard Baptist Church**, is making a major geographical move to become pastor of Montana Creek Baptist Church, Talkeetna, Alaska. He and his wife, Hayley, have one son.

ETOWAH ASSOCIATION

▸ **GraceWay Baptist Church, Rainbow City**, formerly Twelfth Street Baptist Church, held a special dedication May 17 to honor the past and cast a vision for the future. Special music and testimonies were a part of the service. Current pastor Jacque Snow preached, and Craig Carlisle, Etowah Baptist Association's director of missions and a former pastor of the church, led in prayer.

FAYETTE ASSOCIATION

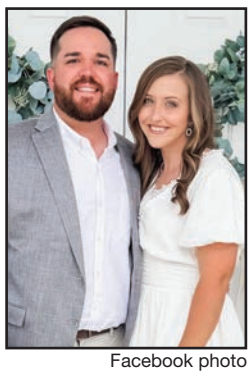
▸ **New River Baptist Church, Eldridge**, celebrated its 200th anniversary May 3. In 1871, it was one of the founding churches of Fayette County Baptist Association, formerly known as New River Southern Baptist Association. Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, was the guest speaker. Marlin Mayfield, who has served as pastor for more than 10 years, welcomed everyone and recognized former members in attendance. Special music was provided by Freddy and Rudell Walters, the children and Jeanie Killian. The church's history was recalled by Chase Rutledge and Addie Beth Johnson. The church received three recognitions from Lance, representing SBOM; David Nelson, a commissioner with the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission; and David Oswalt of Fayette Association. Three deacons and the pastor are pictured with the plaque presented by Nelson — (l to r) Rutledge, Mayfield, David Box and Greg O'Mary. John Killian, director of missions for Fayette Association, led the prayer of benediction. A reception and memory slideshow was held in the fellowship hall following the service.



Photo by David Nelson

GENEVA ASSOCIATION

▸ **Josh Knight** is the new worship leader for **El Bethel Baptist, Chancellor**. He and his wife, Hannah, have two daughters. Don Chancellor is pastor.



Facebook photo

▸ **Fortify Men's Ministry** held its first meeting with a steak dinner in April with 172 men in attendance. Former NASCAR engineer and crew chief Andy Pugh was the guest speaker with music provided by musician Shane Owens. This ministry provides an environment where men can gather and be encouraged to connect with Christ and grow in their relationship with Him. The vision for the ministry and the board began in October 2025 through the inspiration of the Iron-Sharpens-Iron program in Coffee County. The board is composed of representatives from four churches in Geneva County and one in Coffee County (First Baptist Church Coffee Springs, FBC Enterprise, FBC Geneva, Maple Avenue Baptist Church, Geneva, and Samson Methodist Church, led by Dustin Wise, an ordained Baptist pastor). Pictured are (l to r) Brad Tindol, the chef; Owens, guest musician; Jason (Bubba)



Submitted photo

Thrash, president; Scott Elmore, board member; John Carroll, vice president; Pugh, speaker; and board members Lance Dixon, Lee Watson, Jeff Howell and Wise. The next meeting will be June 2. You can find this ministry on Facebook at Fortify Men's Ministry or contact them by email: fortifymensministry@gmail.com. Geneva Association helps sponsor the ministry. Tim Bedsole is the associational leader.

MADISON ASSOCIATION

▸ **Travis Collins**, senior pastor of **First Baptist Church Huntsville** for more than 10 years, recently retired after 40 years in ministry. Along with serving as a pastor, Collins and his wife, Keri, also previously served as international missionaries in Nigeria and Venezuela. The church honored the Collinses with a celebration of ministry service May 3, and he preached his final sermon May 10. Collins serves as a consultant with the Center for Healthy Churches. The couple has three adult children and eight grandchildren.



Submitted photo

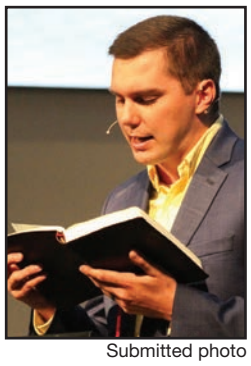


HEARD

▸ **Robert Heard** is the new pastor of **New Salem Baptist Church, Owens Cross Roads**. Previously he served seven years as senior pastor of Carrollton Baptist Church. He and his wife, Kim, have three children.

MOBILE NETWORK

▸ **Austin Lovette** is the new pastor of **Haven Woods Baptist Church, Semmes**. Previously he served as the teaching pastor at Wilmer Baptist Church. He and his wife, Anna, have two children.



Submitted photo



WARREN

ST. CLAIR ASSOCIATION

▸ **Josh Warren** is the new interim pastor of **Sulphur Springs Baptist Church, Trussville**. A recent graduate of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, Warren also serves as an intern for St. Clair Baptist Association. He is married to Randi.

▸ **Greensport Baptist Church, Ashville**, celebrated its 175th anniversary April 26. Special guests included Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, who was the guest speaker, and Danny Courson, St. Clair Baptist Association's mission strategist. The oldest members and family of former members were recognized during the service. Member Teresa Sanders shared the history of the church along with slides showing the previous church buildings. Special music was provided by Vince Hocutt, Cassie Patton, Tom Sanders, Gary Hanner and One Heart, Jan Pitts, Jeremy Watson, Ashley Mills, Mark Sanders and Emily Hanner. The church was honored with presentations by Lance and Bridgett Junkin, a commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, with pastor Michael Mills accepting the plaques on behalf of the congregation. Photos of former pastors and choir directors were displayed in the sanctuary. Lunch was served following the service.



Submitted photo

TALLAPOOSA ASSOCIATION

▸ **John Sparks** began serving as interim pastor of **Jackson's Gap Baptist Church** on May 3.

TENNESSEE RIVER ASSOCIATION

▸ **Matt Beard** is the new pastor of **First Baptist Church Scottsboro**. He grew up in Tennessee and has been in ministry for over 20 years, serving the last 10 years as a pastor in Tennessee. He and his wife, Whitney, have three children.



Facebook photo

TUSKEGEE LEE ASSOCIATION

▸ **Gary Hollingsworth** began serving as interim pastor of **First Baptist Church Opelika** on May 3. He is pastor emeritus of First Baptist Trussville and recently served as interim president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.



HOLLINGSWORTH

▸ **Union Grove Baptist Church, Opelika**, will host the Imani Milele Children's Choir from Uganda in concert May 16 at 6 p.m. The event is free. A love offering will be taken. Jacob Burdette is pastor.

WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION

▸ **Fairhope Baptist Church, Tibbie**, celebrated its 125th anniversary May 3. Scott Myers, a former interim pastor, was the guest preacher. Music was provided by The Grants and a solo by member Rebecca Dearman. The church was honored with a special presentation given by Jim Lambert (right), a commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission. Pastor Larry Darden (left), accepted the plaque on behalf of the congregation. Historical artifacts from the past were displayed throughout the church, including contents from a time capsule dating back to 1962. Following worship, Darden held a brief memorial service in the church cemetery. A fellowship lunch was served.



Photo by Sherri Bush

Forestdale's Westwood dedicates new location in Adamsville

Members of Westwood Baptist Church, Adamsville, held a dedication service and ribbon cutting for their new church facility May 17.

They purchased the property from Victory Christian Fellowship earlier in the year. Guest speakers from Birmingham Metro Baptist Association included Josh Cook, church revitalization specialist, and Chris Crain, the association's executive director. Pastor Steve Potts accepted a framed certificate, presented by Crain, on behalf of the congregation.

Special music and a drama feature were provided by the choir and drama team. Following the service, everyone gathered outside for an official ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Potts held the ribbon as longtime member and chair of the future planning committee Marilyn Rowell cut it. The celebration concluded with a reception and fellowship.



Photo by Debbie Campbell/The Alabama Baptist

The church was established in 1947 on a site in Forestdale, and in 2025 the facilities and property were purchased by Love City Church. Westwood relocated temporarily to Adamsville at Crumley Chapel United Methodist Family Life Center before moving to the present location. (The Alabama Baptist)

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


TAYLOR DIVNEY
Director of Admissions
NEW ORLEANS
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UM honors Lance during spring graduation

The University of Mobile Class of 2026 celebrated graduation as more than 300 graduates received degrees ranging from associate to doctoral at the ceremony held May 9.

UM President Charles Smith congratulated graduates on this important milestone and welcomed guests.

"At the University of Mobile, graduation is not the finish line — it is the starting point of a life on mission," Smith said at Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile where the ceremony — usually held outdoors on campus — was moved due to rain.

Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, delivered the commencement address based on Philippians 3:13–14, that reads, in part: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." He urged graduates to follow the instructions of the Apostle Paul in the race of life, likening life to an Olympic race.

"In the race of life, in trying to be an Olympian in life, the first thing you need to keep in mind is stay in the race. You are going to hit some rough times. It's often human nature to give up and quit, because life can be difficult and it's often a struggle. But stay in the race," Lance said.

"Second, set the pace in the race of life. Third, seek God's face."

Finally, he said, show God's grace.

"This is the starting point," Lance told graduates. "Run the race. Stay in that race. Set the pace of life in accordance to your abilities and the leadership of God. And along the way, make sure and show God's grace."

On behalf of the university's board of trustees, Smith awarded Lance the doctor of humane letters.



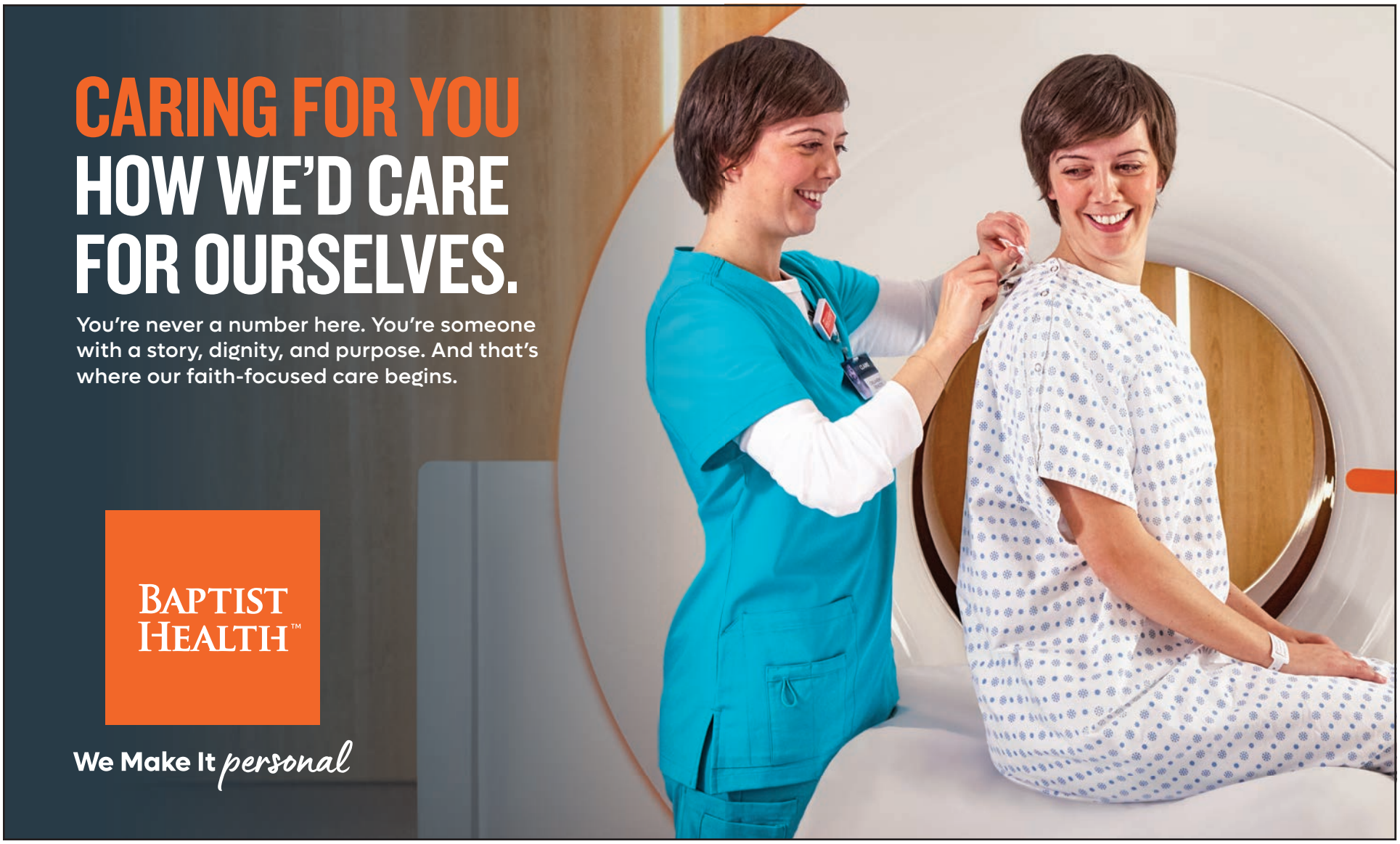
UM photo

Rick Lance (left) receives the doctor of humane letters from University of Mobile. UM President Charles Smith (right) awards the honor to Lance on behalf of the UM board of trustees during the May 9 graduation ceremony.

Awards

- Faculty of the Year award: Kathy Dunning, professor of accounting and dean of the Grace Pilot School of Business.
- Dr. Lonnie Burnett Alumni of the Year award: Jeff Jones (class of 1996), former drummer with Big Daddy Weave, a Dove Award-winning Christian band that started on the university's campus in 1998.
- William K. Weaver Jr. Excellence Award: Samuel Marshall Werry, bachelor of science in biology.
- Annie Boyd Parker Weaver Excellence and President's Scholastic awards: Madison Rose Lipke, bachelor of science in business administration. (UM)

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NEWS AND INFORMATION
sponsored by the State Board of Missions

New Baptist campus ministers are heading to UAB, UNA

Two college campuses in the state are getting new campus ministers ready to lead their Baptist Campus Ministries into the next season.

Bryant Gobble will be serving as the Baptist campus minister at the University of North Alabama, and Daniel Richardson will be serving at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

For Gobble, the UNA BCM isn't brand new. While a student from 2018 to 2022, he was on the BCM leadership team, eventually serving as its president. While in college, he also met his wife, Sarah.


BRYANT GOBBLE


DANIEL RICHARDSON

'Excellent leader'

From 2020 to 2022, Gobble also served as a collegiate/youth ministry intern at Woodmont Baptist Church in Florence, then as associate pastor of students at Forest Hills Baptist Church until 2025.

For more information about Baptist Campus Ministries, visit bcmlink.org or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.

"Bryant will be an excellent leader at the North Alabama BCM," said Ben Edfeldt, director of the office of collegiate and student ministries at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. "He's thoughtful, teachable and has demonstrated a passion for reaching and discipling university students. His established connections at UNA and with the local churches will serve him well. The students at UNA and the churches in the Shoals will benefit from Bryant's leadership."

Richardson has also served with the UAB BCM since 2024, planning and leading Bible studies and gatherings. Before that, he served as a camp pastor and camp director for CentriKid in Nashville. He also served as a ministry intern at First Baptist Church Temple, Texas, and as a lead team member of his Baptist Campus Ministry at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas.

Edfeldt said Richardson has already made an impact on the UAB campus.

"As a campus missionary this past year, Daniel helped the UAB BCM engage more freshmen," Edfeldt said. "As a result, the UAB BCM has experienced growth in student participation and students engaging other students on campus."

Reaching students

He said Richardson has "demonstrated a passion for reaching students" that began with his time as a student at Mary Hardin-Baylor.

"While a student at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University, Daniel reached out to the UAB BCM about helping them reach university students," Edfeldt said. "I'm excited to see Daniel grow as a minister and partner with Bill Morrison as they engage students at UAB and across the Birmingham area."

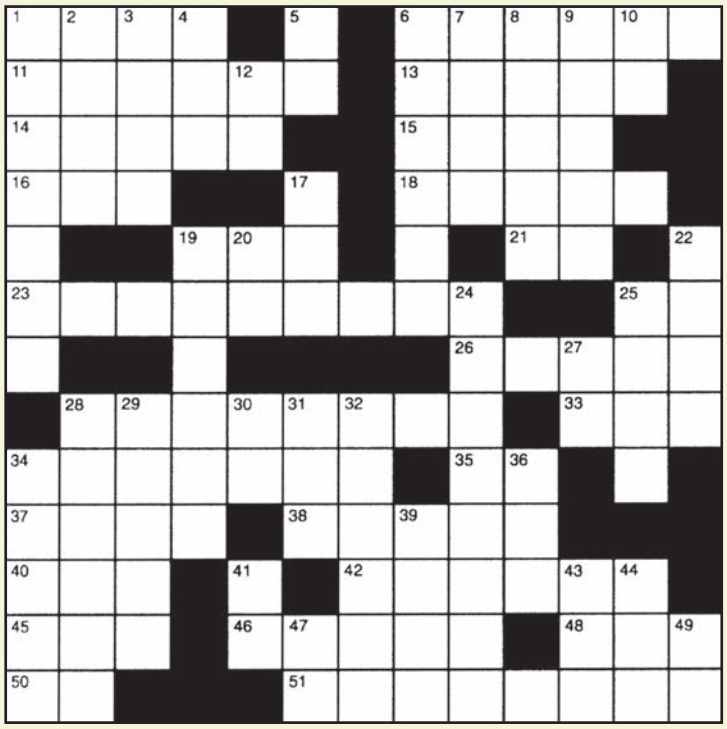
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[Jesus] said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."
JOHN 6:20

CHRISTIAN crossword



By Joann Horn Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.

ACROSS

1. To request earnestly.
6. Except ye ___, ye shall ... perish. (Luke 13:3)
11. What ___ thee, Hagar? (Gen. 21:17)
13. Daybreak.
14. To cook.
15. Talking horse.
16. Army Transport Service. (abbr.)
18. The ___ of Kish ... were lost. (1 Sam. 9:3)
19. Could.
21. Father of Jr. (abbr.)
23. As the ___ cometh out of the east. (Matt. 24:27)
25. Greeting.
26. Sackcloth and ___. (Luke 10:13)
28. Neither be ___ of other men's sins. (1 Tim. 5:22)
33. He ___ the more afraid. (John 19:8)
34. Disturb.
35. Middle French. (abbr.)
37. Medicinal plant.
38. Person afflicted with sores.
40. The serpent beguiled me, and I did ___. (Gen. 3:13)
42. Avenge.
45. TV brand.
46. Ready for sudden action.
48. The disciples ___ and drink. (Luke 5:33)
50. Interject to express uncertainty.
51. Thy brother ___ against thee. (Luke 17:3)

DOWN

1. Moral story.
2. Children not accused of ___. (Titus 1:6)
3. Exclamation of sorrow.
4. Opposed to "no."
5. ___, thou that destroyest the temple. (Mark 15:29)
6. My joy might ___ in you. (John 15:11)
7. Having itching ___. (2 Tim. 4:3)
8. I ___ toward the mark. (Phil. 3:14)
9. The ___ shall serve the younger. (Rom. 9:12)
10. New York. (abbr.)
12. Tea time. (abbr.)
17. No room ... in the ___. (Luke 2:7)
19. He rode upon a ___. (Ps. 18:10)
20. Yesterday ___ the seventh hour. (John 4:52)
22. Holy ___. (Rom. 16:16)
24. Robes.
25. Cure.
27. Housewife. (abbr.)
28. ___ the word. (2 Tim. 4:2)
29. Artery in the heart.
30. Lung disease.
31. Christ is ___. (Col. 3:11)
32. Guard.
34. Thither.
36. Day of the week. (abbr.)
39. Keep thyself ___. (1 Tim. 5:22)
41. Mom.
43. Red or Dead.
44. Whereas thou ___ been forsaken and halted. (Isa. 60:15)
47. Lieutenant. (abbr.)
49. Technical Sergeant. (abbr.)

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

UPCOMING EVENTS

sponsored by the State Board of Missions

2026 Missions Adventure Camp

There's still time to get in on three different Mission Adventure Camp (MAC) experiences in June at WorldSong Missions Place! Each one includes missions-related activities and outdoor activities like canoeing, archery and a low ropes course.

For more information about Mission Adventure Camp events, visit worldsongretreat.org/camp or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.

▸ MAC for Girls and Teen Girls, June 15–19

Get the full, week-long camp experience just for girls, featuring everything WorldSong Missions Adventure Camp has to offer. Girls get the whole campus to themselves! This session features activities for all ages, as well as special activities specifically crafted for each age level.

▸ Mom and Me (MAC for Mothers and Daughters), June 19–20

This session is an awesome time for moms and daughters to spend one-on-one time growing closer to God and to each other, and it's a great opportunity for first-time campers to get to know WorldSong.

▸ MAC for Boys, Girls, and their Leaders, June 22–26

This session is a great camping experience for girls and boys. Leaders are welcome to attend with their campers; however, they are not required. Leader space is limited. Each group will be allowed up to 2–3 leaders.

Campers will be assigned a cabin and participate in traditional MAC under the supervision of MAC Cabin Leaders. Church leaders will bunk in a separate leader cabin and have the opportunity to observe camper activities (and take pictures), have their own quiet time and adult Bible study, participate in Cabin Capers and more!

Going to the SBC Annual Meeting in Orlando?

If you're making plans to be at the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting and Pastors Conference June 7–10 in Orlando, be sure to stop by the State Board of Missions booth in the exhibit hall, pick up a free gift and visit for a while.

Our booth space is 319, which you'll find toward the front of the hall to the left of GuideStone. Come see us.

Coming out with ‘greater clarity’

Congregations moving past survival mode, ready to plan for future ministry

(*continued from page 1*)
the surveyed congregations, is not enough to reverse years of decline. Still, said Scott Thumma, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, it has been a long time since there has been any uptick.

Thumma said researchers had expected to see continued decline and withdrawal, so they “were pretty surprised when [they] saw the 2025 data.” He added that for many congregations, this might be the first sign that the trajectory of decline might be shifting. As the report noted, “this is the first positive gain in median attendance in 25 years.”

Catholic and Orthodox congregations had the highest reported median attendance (200), in part because those traditions have fewer parishes than Protestants.

The median evangelical congregation reported 75 worshippers, while the median mainline church reported 50.

Just under half of the congregations (43%) said they grew by at least 5%, while a similar number (46%) reported declining by at least 5%. The rest said they were stable. “For the first time in decades, more congregations are stabilizing or growing rather than shrinking,” the authors wrote.

Thumma said that larger congregations are more likely to grow, while smaller churches are more likely to decline.

Sense of recovery

“After years of constraint, even modest gains can feel like recovery for these congregations,” Thumma said at the Religion News Association conference.

The report is part of a long-term study of congregations during the COVID-19 era and beyond. The survey asked about attendance, giving, volunteers and demographics, as well as how church members and leaders felt about the future of their congregations. About half of the congregations were in the South, with the rest split between the Midwest, West and Northeast.



Photos by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

Members of Raleigh Avenue Baptist Church in Homewood started praying specifically in January regarding a kids ministry. In less than three months, the church went from ministering to one under 13 to at least seven. Pastor Michael Ent shifted from showcasing empty children’s chairs during prayer gatherings to leading an excited group of youngsters in fun worship songs.

Earlier studies by Hartford showed that at first, congregations responded to the pandemic by adapting quickly to streaming and finding ways to minister when they could not gather in person. Then there was a lull as the pandemic stretched on and churches went into survival mode.

Now that period seems to be over, said Charissa Mikoski, an assistant professor at Hartford Institute for Religion Research, who also worked on the study.

And the churches that are growing, said Mikoski, are implementing the lessons of resilience they learned during the pandemic. “This is not just recovery, it’s adaptation and experimentation,” Mikoski said.

‘Feeling better’

When the data showed attendance was up, researchers were skeptical.

“We did go back and check very thoroughly,” Mikoski said. Other groups, like the Pew Research Center, have shown that the decline of religion in the U.S. has stabilized, at least for now, she said.

The study also found that fewer clergy are thinking about leaving the ministry.

“It’s not too surprising if the congregations are feeling better and more volunteers are showing up, the clergy are going to start feeling better,” said Thumma.

Thumma suspects the pandemic acted a little bit like a wake-up call for churches. They could no longer pretend that everything was OK and had to start making changes for the future.

One other positive coming out of the pandemic? Giving is up, in large part because of a growth in online giving, said Thumma.

“People no longer need to be physically present or even remember to give in the moment,” said Thumma.

Median income grew from $120,000 in 2020 to $205,000 in 2025. The number of churches offering online giving rose from 58% in 2020 to 76% in 2025. As of 2025, about 40% of revenue came from online giving. Evangelical and non-Christian congregations were most likely to report a surplus. Mainline churches were more likely to report deficits. Thumma also noted that church expenses — especially for insurance and other building expenses — have grown.

Thumma said that it will take time to know if this growth will continue. The institute is planning for a major survey of congregations in 2030 that may shed more light.

The authors of the report were quick to say there’s no major revival in Christianity. The longer trajectory of decline remains in place, they noted. But congregations do seem to be moving past survival mode and planning for the future.

“What it is not is a story of revival or return to a previous era of sort of congregational glory in the United States,” said Norton. “Congregations have been through an extraordinary period of disruption, and though it has taken a while, many have come out of it with greater clarity about who they are and what they’re called to do. That’s showing up in the data in ways that are genuinely encouraging.” (Religion News Service)

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Pine Hill Baptist Church, Pine Hill, Alabama, is seeking full-time pastor. Average congregation size: 55–60. Pastorium provided. Submit resumés to: victoria.collins10@gmail.com or call/text 334-455-9833.

PASTOR
Full-time pastor — Jasper, Alabama. Pastor retired. Prayerfully seeking a pastor to preach the inerrant Word of God and shepherd our flock. (SBC) Resumé: northsidebaptistchurchjasper@gmail.com

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR
Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, Cordova, Alabama, seeking bivocational pastor. Resumés accepted through May 20. Submit to: mountcarmelcordova@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR
Southside Baptist Church, Talladega, is searching for a bivocational pastor. Please send resumés to: sbctalladega@gmail.com.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR
Stapleton Baptist Church is seeking to hire a full-time associate pastor to oversee all aspects of worship ministry and age-graded ministry under the direction of the senior pastor. The ideal candidate would meet the biblical qualifications of a pastor, have a passion for families, missions, evangelism and possess the necessary musical abilities to lead worship. Please submit resumés or direct questions to: daniel@stapletonbaptistchurch.org.

MUSIC MINISTER
Part-time music minister position. Montevallo First Baptist Church, Montevallo, Alabama. Blended service. For more information, contact pastor@montevallofbc.com.

OTHER POSITIONS

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS
The Baptist Churches in Lawrence County, Alabama (Muscle Shoals Baptist Association), are currently seeking resumés for the position of director of missions. The deadline for submission of resumés is June 22. Please send resumés to: Muscle Shoals Baptist Association, P.O. Box 485, Moulton, AL 35650-0485 or email them to: msbamoulton@bellsouth.net.

OPERATIONS MANAGER
Etowah Baptist Missions Center, located in Gadsden, Alabama, is a faith-based poverty-alleviation organization looking to hire an operations manager. Candidates must be a member of a local church and preferably reside in Etowah County. The role will include facilitating daily processes to run the center, administrative duties, monitoring resources, volunteer oversight and scheduling. The role requires organization along with strong leadership and problem-solving skills. Questions can be directed to the executive director, Lance Hughes, at 256-295-7531 or by email at jobebmc@gmail.com. A more detailed job description will be provided upon submission of resumés.

MINISTRY ASSISTANT
Palmerdale Cross Baptist Church is prayerfully seeking a part-time ministry assistant to provide administrative and financial support to the pastoral staff and church leadership. This position helps ensure smooth day-to-day office operations, assists with financial processes and supports the church's overall mission and ministry with professionalism, confidentiality and a servant's heart. Send resumés to: dholley@palmerdalecross.org

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~A resource for congregational vitality~

Are congregations spiritual organisms or religious organizations?

Is your congregation more like a living, ever-changing spiritual organism or a religious organization in danger of institutionalization? Your answer makes a tremendous long-term difference in the vitality and vibrancy of your congregation and its Christlike witness.

Ray Skimpkins, pastor of the Mill Valley congregation, led a dialogue on this issue during a recent leadership retreat. He asked the congregational staff present not to weigh in on this issue, as he needed to hear from the lay leaders.

For Ray, the answer was clear and straightforward. Nevertheless, he understood Mill Valley, much like other congregations, had members who viewed the issue from different perspectives.

He had already guided the staff through this dialogue. They crafted some statements that expressed the difference.

If their congregation were like a living organism, it should focus on its vibrant life centered on God.

If they were an organization, they should focus on guiding the congregation's vital program structure, helping everything run more smoothly and with greater harmony.

Ministry-focused structure

This had not been an easy dialogue. The staff generally focused on highly visible programs, ministries and activities, as well as their ongoing management.

Leah, who heads the women's ministry, was the first to speak, sharing her perspective the congregation functions largely like an organization. In her area of ministry, women become members of the program.

They make certain time, talent and financial commitments. Without a strong organizational structure, she felt her ministry would not exist. She also felt that was true in other areas of the congregation.

Speaking for the lay-led care ministry within the congregation, which supports and extends the pastoral care efforts of the staff ministers, Ted indicated their focus was on seeing everyone as a person of worth, created in the image of God, who desires love and support.

He was not sure about the word organism but felt something would be missing if they saw what they did as an organization.

Jim and Joanna, who lead the children's ministry on Sundays, mentioned that if parents felt like they were just part of an organization, they might be less likely to keep coming to Mill Valley. They come because they enjoy the experience through various programs, ministries and activities, rather than seeking membership in an organization.

Besides, more than one-third of the families with children under 12 have never joined the congregation. This concerns Jim and Joanna. Parents are looking for love, care, support and a strong Christian spiritual foundation. So, if they have only two options — an organism or an organization — Joanna and Jim choose organism.

Either/or or both?

Numerous others spoke up. Many expressed similar viewpoints. No vote was taken, but an informal hand raising revealed a 60% to 40% split with the most raised hands choosing the congregation as organism. Wrapping up the dialogue, Ray indicated the staff at first had the same split between organism and organization. He was not surprised by the lay leaders' responses.

His perspective is that every congregation is some of both. Yet his desire is that the congregation is more an organism than an organization.

As an organism, he believes God's empowering vision and the growing and deepening relationships people have with God and one another are of the highest importance.

Still, the organizational functions of programs and management must undergird the ongoing ministry of the congregation.

Ultimately, the focus must be on God's empowering vision and the disciple-making processes. This fits the idea of a living, breathing, ever-changing spiritual organism.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Bullard spent five decades in Baptist congregational and denominational ministry. His ministry roles included three churches, three associations, three state conventions and one national entity. In 2022, he began writing as a columnist for TAB Media Group's publication The Baptist Paper. Bullard continues to serve as a strategic thinking mentor for Christian leaders through his ForthTelling Innovation ministry. TAB Media Group is the publisher for his ForthTelling Innovation book series — available on Amazon.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Sunday School Lessons

By Jay T. Robertson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Mobile



For June 7

STRONG AND COURAGEOUS
Joshua 1:1–11, 16–18

The Book of Joshua bears the name of the newly appointed leader of Israel. After Moses' death, Joshua was chosen by God to secure and sustain Abraham's seed and to lead the Israelites into the promised land known as Canaan.

Born into slavery in Egypt around 1484 B.C., Joshua lived to be 110 years old. He lived 40 years in Egypt, 40 years in the wilderness and 30 years in the promised land.

The opening words indicate both the historical starting point of the book and the theological crisis with which it deals. Moses' death, described at the end of Deuteronomy, concludes God's judgment on the generation that came out of Egypt. What's next now that Moses has died and the people of Israel have fallen under the judgment of God? Chapter 1 introduces the answer to this question.

God's Promise (1–5)

"Now that Moses is dead, what are we going to do?" This had to have been the foremost question on the minds of the Israelites. Their great lawgiver who had led them for 40 years was dead. Their mediator, liberator and miracle-working prophet was dead. God buries His workers but never His work.

God's purposes do not change. People change. All the people 20 years and older who came out of Egypt with Moses had died in the desert. It was a new generation that would enter the promised land. Leaders change. Joshua replaced Moses. But God does not change. God is the same and so are His purposes that He has established for His redeemed people.

The continuity between the patriarchal period and the period of Jewish conquest — established on the character and will of God — is focused on the written Word of God. At this time in the storyline, God's written Word consisted of the first five books of the Bible — the Pentateuch.

God commissioned Joshua to lead His people into the promised land with confidence in His presence and with knowledge of His promises. God encouraged Joshua by promising that He will be with him just as He was with Moses. He also encouraged Joshua by emphasizing that He would give His people the land. The Israelites would settle the land not because of their military ingenuity or great abilities but because He was giving them the land.

Joshua's Assignment (6–11)

The Lord challenged Joshua to be strong and courageous as he led the people of Israel into the land He had promised to the descendants of Abraham. The Lord also made clear the importance of studying and obeying His commands. Faithfulness to the Word of God was necessary if Joshua and the nation of Israel were to be successful in taking the land of Canaan.

Joshua's words to the people needed to be saturated with the words from God's law. God's book of instruction was not to depart from Joshua's mouth as he instructed the people.

Joshua was to know God's Word, talk about God's Word, meditate on God's Word and obey God's Word. You can no more teach what you do not know than you can come from where you have not been.

Israel's Response (16–18)

The people of Israel pledged their support to Joshua. They promised to obey everything he commanded them to do as they had obeyed everything Moses had commanded them to do. They assured Joshua that they would hold each other accountable and encouraged him to be strong and courageous.

EDITOR'S NOTE — The Sunday School lesson outlines are provided by Lifeway.

For June 14

AMAZING GRACE
Joshua 2:4–21

Last week our study ended as the nation of Israel began a three-day period of preparation to cross the Jordan River and enter the land of Canaan. The fascinating story of Rahab is intertwined with the story of Joshua sending two spies to scout out Jericho just as Moses had sent out 12 spies to scout out the land of Canaan 38 years earlier. Perhaps Joshua dispatched only two spies because in the earlier scouting mission, only two of the 12 returned with a faithful report.

A Bold Act (4–7)

The king of Jericho was told that two Israelite men had come to investigate the land and that they were hiding in Rahab's house. He immediately sent men to her house to apprehend the spies.

Although it put her in danger, Rahab hid the two spies on her roof under stalks of flax and told the king's agents that the spies had already departed from her house. The king's agents hastened to chase after the spies.

Rahab clearly lied to the king's agents. Rahab's deception presents us with an ethical dilemma. It is significant for us to note that the writer of Joshua did not justify or condemn Rahab's deception, although her actions saved the lives of the two spies.

Lying is sin to God (Ex. 20:16) for He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). God commended her faith (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25) as expressed in verses 9–16, not her lie. God never condones any sin, yet none of us is without some sin (Rom. 3:23), and thus we all need God's forgiveness. But God also honors true faith, as small as it is, and imparts saving grace (Ex. 34:7).

A Kind Action (8–13)

In these verses, Rahab revealed why she had welcomed the spies into her home and protected them from the king of Jericho.

She used the personal and covenantal name of God as she spoke with the spies. Rahab shared that she knew Yahweh had given the land to the people of Israel. She acknowledged that her people were all terrified of them and were panicking because of them.

God's reputation had preceded the arrival of the spies. They had heard how Yahweh had dried up the waters of the Red Sea when He guided them out of slavery in Egypt.

They had also heard that Yahweh had enabled them to destroy Og and Sihon, the two Amorite kings. Rahab and her people understood that the God who defeated these kings could destroy any king of the land.

Rahab pleaded with the spies to show her and her family kindness because she had shown kindness to them. She confessed that their God, Yahweh, is the God of heaven and earth.

A Daring Escape (14–16)

The spies agreed to show kindness and faithfulness to Rahab and her family if she remained faithful and did not expose their mission. She helped them escape by letting them down through a window in the city wall.

She directed the spies to flee toward the hill country for three days to evade capture before returning to their camp.

A Firm Assurance (17–21)

The spies confirmed the details of their agreement with Rahab. When they entered the land, she had to have the scarlet cord they gave her hanging out her window. The spies promised that everyone in her house would be delivered from the wrath to come.

"For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you ..."

Joshua 2:10

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sunday School Lessons

By Scott Bush, D.Min.
Executive Director, Ministry Training Institute, Samford University



For June 7

MEETING NEEDS
Luke 5:12–16, 27–32

Isolation during illness can cause loneliness, anxiety and depression, but our worst experiences rarely compare to the plight of lepers described in the Bible. A person infected with leprosy, which could refer to a number of inflammatory skin diseases, was required to live apart from friends and family and was banned from participation in community activities, including worship (Lev. 13).

Beyond the physical stigma, leprosy was also a reminder of the effects of sin. Ugly blemishes and open lesions recalled the disorder of the broken world, far from the beauty and blessing before the fall.

Disfigured and ostracized, it's not hard to see how a leper might feel cursed by God.

Be willing to help people when you can. (12–16)

While ministering in the towns and villages of Galilee, Jesus encountered just such a man. Perhaps the leper was aware of the miracles Jesus had already performed (4:40), or maybe he had heard about Jesus' synagogue sermon featuring the healing of Naaman, a Syrian with leprosy (4:27). Whatever his reasons, he came to Jesus, desperate to be healed. The leper's words — "if you are willing" — may reflect his sense of unworthiness. Having been rejected by so many, he must've wondered if Jesus would even care to help. What happened next surely shocked the man and anyone else watching.

Jesus touched him! Jesus extended His hand to one whom others regarded as untouchable. As followers of Jesus, we're called to do the same. We must extend genuine, fearless compassion to people who are stigmatized in our society — those thought to be unclean, unsafe, unlovely, undesirable or even unforgivable.

As you help, invite people to follow Jesus. (27–28)

The leper was not the only outcast in Galilee. Jesus encountered a tax collector there named Levi, also called Matthew (Matt. 9:9). Tax collectors were social pariahs, seen by their Jewish countrymen as agents of a corrupt government and traitors to their own people.

Some became rich by exploiting taxpayers through intimidation, backed by the powerful Roman government (Luke 19:1–10). But the life Levi chose would be turned upside down with only a word. Jesus saw him in the tax office and called to him, "Follow Me."

In the same way that the spoken word of God brought the world into existence, Jesus' words transformed an empty, misdirected life as Levi left everything behind to follow Him. As we encounter hurting people, we can be sure that what they need most is faith, and faith comes by hearing the message of Jesus (Rom. 10:17).

Don't limit your help and invitation to the "right" people. (29–32)

Rejected by "polite society," Levi spent his time with other tax collectors and shady types. When he decided to host a party for Jesus, that's exactly who attended. Sharing a table with such notorious sinners was distasteful to the Pharisees. For them, table fellowship was reserved for the "right" people — those they thought would share in the heavenly feast one day. But Jesus cleverly explains that He did not come to rub elbows with the righteous but to embrace those in need of forgiveness, to bring them to repentance and faith and to give to them His own righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). We have a place at His table not because we deserve it but because He loves us, and He calls us to love and serve others no matter who they are or what they've done.

For June 14

MAKING OTHERS A PRIORITY
Luke 7:36–48

When my wife and I moved to our current home, we found that the previous owners had left a full-length mirror hanging on the wall in our bedroom. We planned to take it down, but then we learned that the mirror has a delightful quirk. Due to some defect, it makes the person standing before it appear to be much thinner than he or she actually is. We decided to keep the mirror for fun, but we also determined to never believe it.

Failure to see ourselves as we truly are can have serious consequences. In Luke 6, the chapter before today's lesson, Jesus warns that a blind man who tries to lead another blind man will only injure himself and his follower. They'll both fall into a pit! He compares the self-deceived person to a man with a log in his eye trying to remove a speck from the eye of another — hypocritical, deluded and dangerous.

In this week's passage, Jesus encounters a man who is unaware of his need and a woman who is all too aware of hers. He shows compassion for both.

Reach out to the religious and arrogant. (36–39)

Jesus dined with a Pharisee named Simon in one of several meals recorded in Luke's gospel. The Pharisees were very religious, priding themselves on knowing and keeping the law found in the Old Testament. They resented Jesus for many reasons, not least that He questioned whether their obedience was only an appearance and because He embraced people they thought were particularly unrighteous.

We don't know why Simon invited Jesus to a meal, but we do know that the host failed to extend common courtesies and was secretly critical of his guest. Jesus knew exactly what Simon was thinking but, rather than reject Simon for his insolence and doubt, Jesus engaged him with a parable about forgiveness. Arrogant people can be the hardest to love and forgive because they don't see their need for either. We often feel justified in avoiding such people but Jesus saw the need — even when Simon didn't — and met it.

Point to God's gracious forgiveness. (40–43)

When a disreputable woman entered the room and began to weep at Jesus' feet, Simon was shocked. Jesus answered his unspoken cynicism with a parable about two debtors whose debts were forgiven.

Simon correctly responds that the one forgiven the greater debt will have the greater love for his benefactor. Jesus isn't suggesting that Simon's "debt" is less than the sinful woman's. He's trying to help Simon see his need for forgiveness and God's willingness to forgive. When we see our need and how God has graciously met it, we will respond in love. Our lack of love reveals our blindness.

Reach out to the sinful. (44–48)

The woman kissed and anointed Jesus' feet, which was her expression of love and worship. Her lavish devotion was a response to the great forgiveness she had received. As with the leper in chapter 5, Jesus' contact with the sinful woman was scandalous to many in His day, but for those who follow Him, it's a reminder that no one is beyond His reach or His love.

When we imagine that our sin is less serious than others, we're only looking at a distorted image. When we truly see the depth of our sin and the cost of our redemption, we will love Him well and reach out to others who need to know His love.

"Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven — for she loved much."

Luke 7:47

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