

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

INSIDE



Playground project helps church reach families in community

◆ Page 8



Birmingham pastor explains the value of 'talking about race'

◆ Page 12



OASIS worship, music, comedy tour offers encouragement from familiar faces

◆ Page 13



Christian men pray together in Ukraine where the war sparked Bible engagement, according to YouVersion Bible app.

VERSE OF THE YEAR

**"Do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be afraid, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you; I will help you;
I will hold on to you with My righteous right hand."**

ISAIAH 41:10

IMB photo

'Do not fear'

Popular Bible app reports increased engagement in Ukraine last year

By Carrie B. McWhorter
The Alabama Baptist

Anxiety. Healing. Love. 2022 was a difficult year in the United States and across the globe, but these search terms and others tracked by the YouVersion Bible app once again show how God's word provides hope and help in times of trouble.

Each year, YouVersion dives into the Bible app's top data trends. In 2022, Ukraine provided one of the most interesting Bible engagement stories.

Following the Feb. 24 invasion of the country by Russian forces, Bible engagement rose in Ukraine by 55%. As Ukrainian people fled the war and relocated to other European countries, YouVersion

saw Ukrainian-language Bible engagement across Europe increase by 76% when comparing year-over-year third-quarter data.

Significant rise

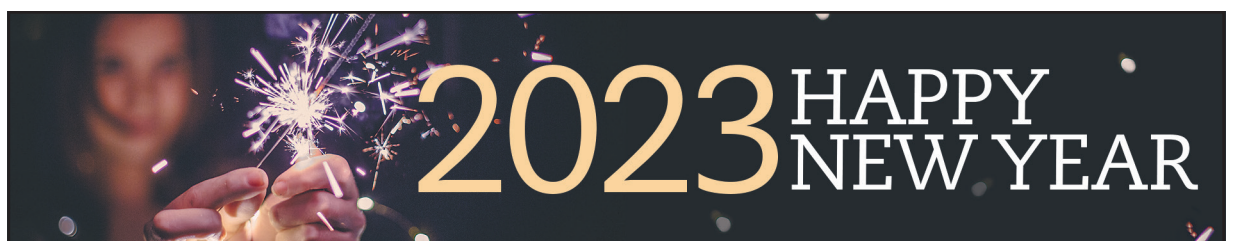
In several countries, Ukrainian-language Bible engagement increased by triple digits. For example, Poland saw a 241% increase and Germany

saw a 733% increase when comparing third-quarter data from 2021 and 2022.

At the beginning of the war, YouVersion searches in the Ukrainian language nearly doubled compared to the previous month. Initially, trending search terms were words like war, fear and anxiety. As time passed and the war (See 'Impact,' page 10)



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The crossword puzzle
can be found on page 13.



Some studies suggest ADHD is frequently misdiagnosed as other mental health conditions in women and girls because they don't typically display the disruptive external symptoms often associated with ADHD.

Adults and ADHD focus of upcoming seminar

Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder is often associated with children, but by some estimates, three-quarters of adults ages 18 to 44 living with ADHD were never diagnosed as children.

Morris Murray Jr., a health care management specialist, therapist and minister, wants to help others better understand not just the diagnosis and treatment of adult ADHD, but also how to manage the symptoms and live well in spite of it.

"Health challenges are just as common among Christians as among non-Christians, and ADHD is no exception," Murray said.

Murray will lead a seminar, "ADHD for Adults," on Tuesday, Jan. 17, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. at The Alabama Baptist building in Homewood. Lunch will be provided.

According to a recent AARP article, people who have ADHD may experience the following symptoms:

- ▶ Easily distracted.
- ▶ Leaving tasks unfinished.
- ▶ Disorganization.
- ▶ Inability to focus.
- ▶ Physical, verbal and/or emotional hyperactivity.
- ▶ Losing things.
- ▶ Forgetfulness.
- ▶ Trouble relaxing.
- ▶ Poor time management/lateness.

- ▶ Difficulty starting a task.
- ▶ Interrupting others.
- ▶ Mood swings.
- ▶ Difficulty prioritizing tasks.
- ▶ Trouble multitasking.
- ▶ Extreme impatience.
- ▶ Impulsivity or recklessness, with little or no regard for personal safety.

Causes, interventions

Though ADHD is typically diagnosed in boys more often than in girls during childhood, adult women with the disorder may notice their symptoms grow worse with the hormone fluctuations of perimenopause and menopause, according to Kathleen Nadeau, author of "Still Distracted After All These Years: Help and Support for Older Adults with ADHD."

During the seminar, Murray will discuss these factors and more.

"We will look at the main features of ADHD and its diverse causes, prognosis, different ways to intervene and some possible ways to prevent it," he said.

The "ADHD for Adults" seminar is free, but registration is required. Call 205-870-4720, ext. 122, or email jingram@thealabamabaptist.org to register.

Murray also offers free Bible study resources through email at morrismurrayjr42@gmail.com. (The Alabama Baptist)

The Alabama Baptist

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

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OPINION



RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

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



jrash@thealabamabaptist.org



@RashionalThts

Are the 'do not fear' reminders from God's word helpful?

Before I saw the result of the YouVersion Bible app's 2022 Verse of the Year recap (see story, page 1), my mind was circling around the concept of fear and how we let it control us on so many occasions.

When I realized Isaiah 41:10 was YouVersion's most shared, bookmarked and highlighted Scripture verse, both in the U.S. and around world, last year, I knew I should dig into the topic.

The verse says, "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold on to you with My righteous right hand."

The words are straightforward, as are several other passages scattered throughout the Bible.

Joshua 1:9 challenges us to "be strong and courageous," while Psalm 27:1 says, "Of whom shall I be afraid?"

Psalm 23:4 says, "I will fear no evil," and Psalm 34:4–8 notes, "He delivered me from my fears."

Psalm 56:3–4 says, "When I'm afraid, I trust in You."

Two of my favorites are Psalm 46:1–3, "God is our refuge and our strength," and John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you. ... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Of course, we are all familiar with Psalm 23:4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

More assurances can be found in Matthew, Isaiah, Romans, Philippians, 1 Peter, 1 John, 2 Timothy, Deuteronomy, Chronicles, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews and many of the Psalms.

With so many references from God's word, why do you

think we sometimes fail to trust Him? Why would we ever allow anything else to supersede His promises?

Reflecting on the past year, what decisions did you make — or avoid — out of fear?

Can you look back now and find situations where you responded in a way you might not have if you could have known the outcome in advance?

I'm not talking about being cautious related to health concerns or even phobias such as a fear of heights.

We all should be aware enough of ourselves physically, mentally and emotionally to avoid pitfalls and problematic circumstances.

We also should be prudent and plan for various conditions, especially within the context of potential crises.

Thinking around a situation provides clarity and readiness for next steps.

But that's different than unmerited panic and exaggerating information to stir up others in the process.

Please know how much we appreciate your steadiness and ability to think carefully and critically.

It truly makes a difference for all of us within the Alabama Baptist family, and I'm confident we can rub off on others as we turn the corner into this new year.

We believe a central communications hub, like you have with The Alabama Baptist newspaper and all its digital counterparts, provides a calming effect

while keeping you appropriately informed, resourced and encouraged.

Even more important is consistent engagement with God's word.

See page 11 for a State of the Bible 2022 report from the American Bible Society.

ABS describes engagement as reading the Bible frequently, applying its teachings to our decisions and making it central to our faith.

Let us know if you agree with the findings that "people live better lives when they engage with the Bible."

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."

Psalm 46:1–3

Your Voice



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

Get comfortable being uncomfortable

By Rick Lance

Executive director, State Board of Missions

For many, the Navy SEALs have become the gold standard as elite special forces operators. They have their own unique culture, learned from their training and shared among their fellow SEALs.

For those not acquainted with the Navy SEALs, their specialized training covers preparations for combat and rescue operations at sea, on land and in the air.

Motivational words

Their training is so challenging and rigorous that only a fraction of those who start the training regimen complete it.

I have grown fond of some of their motivational sayings, such as “The only easy day was yesterday.” That speaks to their constant effort

to be prepared for the unexpected and for the most challenging experiences which lie ahead.

They are known for their “all in, all the time” and “you are never out of the fight” maxims. These statements represent the resolve to never be halfhearted or unfocused. When on a mission, you are all in, all the time — and you stay in the fight until the task is done.

One of their prominent sayings has been reverberating in my mind and heart recently: “Get comfortable being uncomfortable.”

This expression is intriguing to me.

In the past, I heard pastors and others talk about being in or out of their comfort zones. This was a way of saying how they feel about times when decisions have to be made or directions set which make them uncomfortable or comfortable depending on the situation.

Thankfully, I have not heard these expressions lately. I always felt uncomfortable hearing them. We all have moments when we are uncomfortable and those when we feel more comfortable.

We all know that ministry, or the Christian life in general, is not about how comfortable we feel but rather about our mission, the Great Commission, being fulfilled. Our responsibilities are to help that mission become a reality.

Nowadays, I don’t talk about being comfortable or uncomfortable with

situations but rather seeking to be at peace with what I face.

This paradigm has allowed me to be uncomfortable about decisions and directions and yet to be at peace with them too.

In this world we will never really be comfortable, and we should not seek to be. Rather, after praying for wisdom from God which gives godly discernment, we make the decisions and set the directions that our Lord has impressed upon our hearts.

I have come to love more and more the words of Jesus in John 16:33: “In the world you will have tribulation, but be encouraged: I have overcome the world.”

The expression used by the Navy SEALs, “Get comfortable being uncomfortable,” is an apt description of what the elite warriors must do in order to accomplish their mission. For Christians, the maxim can remind us to seek to be at peace with what the Lord is leading us to do to fulfill our mission. That kind of peace is far superior to being comfortable.

Pray for peace

As I pray for Alabama Baptists and, yes, all evangelical Christians, I pray that all will seek to be at peace with what they face.

This is an uncomfortable world in which we live. Pray to be at peace with the Lord we serve so we can experience the peace that passes all human understanding.



LANCE

To be like the blessed people described by the psalmist in Psalm 1, we must first avoid the pitfalls of following the world.

Next, we should desire God’s word and embed it in our being so that we live it out.

Finally, we must trust God and allow Him to bless us instead of struggling to make our own way in the world using the world’s methods and mores.

If we do these things, we will be blessed, both in this world and in the next.

Otis Corbitt

Director of Missions

Covington Baptist

Association

corbittcomments.blogspot.com

We must live the gospel in politics with empathy, listening, principles and patience as we envelop truth in love for the sake of God’s name and others.

Peter Jackson Link

Associate professor of

Christian studies

Charleston Southern

University, North

Charleston, South Carolina

“We must make ourselves fitting recipients of God’s word.

Rather than being characterized by anger, a quick tongue or wickedness, we should be meek and humble as we receive the Word,” said **Rony Kozman**, assistant professor of biblical studies, Samford University.

Seeking God

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6–7).

“For God is not the author of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33).

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“It is impossible to run from God. God will ultimately get His way.”

ROBERT OLSEN

Associate professor of Christian studies, University of Mobile

“No one need aspire to leadership in the work of God who is not prepared to pay a price greater than his contemporaries and colleagues are willing to pay. True leadership always exacts a heavy toll on the whole man, and the more effective the leadership is, the higher price to be paid.” —J. Oswald Sanders

Chris Crain
Executive director
Birmingham Metro Baptist
Association
via LinkedIn

Are you living for money? Are you living for ease? Are you desirous of “the good life”? Repent from that today and be rich in God. Build a retirement fund and then retire to the service of others. Use manmade

systems for accumulating wealth to be generous with your time and money, goods and services.

That is what it means to be rich toward God: Knowing and hoping — a sure hope — in the promise that despite all the turns our earthly existence may take, He will never leave you.

James Hammack
The-scroll.com
“The eternal treasuring of Christ (Part 1)”

“You can’t avoid breaking. That’s going to happen — that’s inevitable. But you can do what I call break open. That means you’re still open to God and open to keep going and open to healing,” said **Jacob Armstrong**, author of “**Breaking Open:**

How Your Pain Becomes the Path to Living Again.”

Psalm 51 shows us what true repentance is about. David humbled himself before God. Obviously, he made that public since we have the psalm. His sin was known publicly, and so his repentance was public as well.

Dave Miller
sbcvoices.com

“Do not rush major decisions. Allow the dust to settle. Bathe the entire process in prayer. Receive advice from people inside and outside of your church family,” said **Ken Allen**, **Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions**, on when disaster strikes a church.

Focus on Jesus, grow as a disciple

Do you remember the days prior to autofocus cameras? The photographer twisted the lens this way and that until the picture became clear.

Jesus used signs, daily living, verbal teaching and prophecy to sharpen the disciples’ focus on Him and His purpose.

In the first sign, He turned water into wine at a wedding. The sign contrasted the old way of Judaism with the new way of salvation through Jesus.

The Jews were selective in who they accepted. Jesus reaches out to all.

John the Apostle explained the purpose of all Jesus’ signs as the revelation of His glory (John 2:11). This revelation disclosed His redemptive love. The miraculous acts conveyed deep spiritual meanings.

The Cana sign showed God’s power at work as the divine Jesus. The disciples had believed and followed Jesus, and this sign took their belief a step further.

Discipleship is a process of growing daily in faith. As the disciples walked with Jesus, they drew closer to Him.

At His resurrection, Jesus’ words became another building block in the disciples’ faith journey. Their commitment level advanced. Others saw Jesus’ signs and believed, but He saw through their superficial faith that carried no commitment.

What Jesus said and did brought reverence for God. The twists and turns of Jesus’ life always served to sharpen the focus on God.

Darryl Wood
Commentary on Lifeway’s
Dec. 18 Explore the Bible
lesson, **The Baptist Paper**

EDITOR’S NOTE — Find weekly commentary on Lifeway’s Explore the Bible and Bible Studies for Life series at tabonline.org/ss-lessons and tbponline.org/ss-lessons.

From the Twitterverse

@Dawson_Church

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).
#morningencouragement

@bellevuepastor

Jesus changed the judgment seat into a mercy seat.

@MusingsOnChrist

Would you please continue to pray for @SWBTS? Pray that it will fulfill well the mission for which it was established by B.H. Carroll, George W. Truett, Baptists in Texas and Southern Baptists. They had a passion for reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ!

@daneortlund

Small ways to encourage your pastor during the preaching event:

1. Sit near the front.
2. Keep Bible open.
3. Eye contact.
4. Whatever nonverbal and verbal feedback you can muster, befitting your culture and personality.
5. Phone silenced and away.
6. Stifle yawns.
7. Stay put.

@DustinBenge

“I fear that for the most part people are worshipping worship rather than worshipping God.”
—A.W. Tozer

@hbcharlesjr

“If Paul saw the church in America, we’d be getting a letter.” —Chad Bailey

@larrydrobertson

“Lord, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But You offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear You”

(Ps. 130:3–4). God’s forgiveness isn’t a “get out of jail free” card, but an opportunity to learn from failure. We must never take it for granted.

@DustyMcLemore

The mariners tried to keep rowing against God’s will for Jonah. When you realize you cannot row yourself out of life’s storms, put down your oars & experience God’s grace!!

@isickadams

Christian, we’re one day closer to heaven.

@DanielDickard

Most churches rightly elevate the person and work of Jesus, but some churches wrongly minimize the person and work of the Holy Spirit. There is a desire for Jesus to be the ultimate sin bearer, but there is little desire for the Holy Spirit to be the ultimate burden bearer.

3 stories

you should know



IMB photo

Medical volunteer Anna Leigh Breedlove plays with a toddler in the pediatric ward of the Baptist Medical Centre of Nalerigu, Ghana. Health care missions give access to the unreached, allow for intimate conversations, meet needs, make disciples and empower the church. Your gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions supports the work of 3,550 International Mission Board missionaries like Breedlove around the world.

Jordan launches plans for Jesus' baptism site

Jordan has launched a \$100 million master plan aimed at attracting 1 million Christian pilgrims to celebrations of the second millennium of the baptism of Jesus in 2030.

A not-for-profit foundation created by the Jordanian government intends to develop the Bethany beyond the Jordan area, on the east bank of the Jordan River, long venerated as the place of Jesus' baptism.

First-phase plans include a biblical village theme with "glamping"-style lodging, local foods and other elements to create an atmosphere like that of the Old City of Jerusalem. A second phase will include more contemporary elements.

The Baptist World Alliance is one of nine faith organizations that have been granted the opportunity to build a place to welcome pilgrims to the baptism site. (RNS)

Ukrainian women use skills to help families

Even as they cope with inflation, power outages and other issues, Ukrainian women are crocheting angel ornaments to say thank you to those who have helped them.

As many as 20 Ukrainian women are paid a small fee to make the ornaments. The money helps them support their families and the war effort.

The ornaments are being given to churches and other partners who have sent aid to Ukraine following the Russian invasion of the country in February 2022.

The effort is a partnership between Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary and Missouri-based Ukrainian Partnership Foundation.

UPF will display and distribute ornaments at the national Woman's Missionary Union board meeting in Birmingham Jan. 7-9. (BP)

SBC's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force releases update

Members of the SBC's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force are four months into their assignment and are "working diligently ... to advance the priority items," according to task force chair Marshall Blalock.

Blalock, pastor of FBC Charleston, South Carolina, released the task force's second report Dec. 22 following its third in-person meeting Dec. 12.

Task force members were appointed in August and held their first meeting Sept. 5. During that initial meeting, the group established three priorities for the first phase of its work. They are:

► "The retaining of an individual or firm who is qualified and trauma-informed to receive reports of abuse or mishandling of abuse, determine the proper entity, association or church to respond to that report and communicate this report to the relevant parties."

Update on status: Still considering the best long-term option while the original hotline and



Photo by Van Payne/The Alabama Baptist

Marshall Blalock, chair of the SBC's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, speaks in June.

email notification system remains active — 202-864-5578, SBChotline@guidepostsolutions.com.

► "The creation of the Ministry Check database, which will house the names of those credibly accused of sexual abuse in order to ensure

thorough information flows throughout the convention and better resources churches to protect their congregations."

Update on status: Still researching how it should function and how to create it, then will need to identify "a capable and qualified database administrator." Several essential details must be considered for a database of this kind, Marshall noted.

► Helping the Credentials Committee retain a qualified firm to assist in processing and performing factual inquiries related to sexual abuse.

Update on status: Identified numerous outside groups to assist, but the list has not yet been narrowed down for recommendations.

The task force also has a new website, which contains its reports, member information and other resources: abusereformtaskforce.net.

The original sataskforce.net site also remains active. (Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist)

Alabama news

OBITUARIES

► **Timothy “Tim” Dane Cearley**, an International Mission Board missionary emeritus who shared the gospel in Zimbabwe, Portugal, Mozambique, South Africa and Botswana, died Nov. 5, 2022. He was 68.

A North Carolina native, Cearley was a graduate of North Carolina State University and Southwestern Seminary. He served as a Journeyman in Rhodesia, now called Zimbabwe.

He and his wife, Charlotte, were appointed in 1982 to serve with the Foreign Mission Board (now International Mission Board) in Zimbabwe.

The couple served as regional leaders for Sub-Saharan Africa, serving 600 missionaries in multiple countries. They also served in South Africa and Botswana before retiring after 33 years of service as a couple.

After retirement, Cearley directed the community ministries of First Baptist Church Montgomery, which included prison ministry and English as a Second Language.

He is survived by his wife; three children, Matt, Joy, and Sarah; and his parents, Robert and Bonnie Cearley.



CEARLEY

COLBERT-LAUDERDALE ASSOCIATION

► **Tim Akers** is the new missions and discipleship pastor of **Woodmont Baptist Church, Florence**. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of North Alabama and a master of divinity degree from Mid-America Seminary.

He previously was pastor of Crossroads Baptist Church, Rogersville, and was an International Mission Board missionary in Ukraine for 16 years. He also served as youth pastor at various churches for 10 years.

He and his wife, Donna, have three children and four grandchildren.

ELMORE ASSOCIATION

► **Greg Gosselin** is the new preschool and children's pastor of **Crossroads Community Church, Elmore**. He holds bachelor's degrees in church ministries and Bible from Miami Christian College and a master of arts degree in religious education from Southwestern Seminary.

He has more than 35 years of experience in preschool and



GOSSELIN

children's ministry across Texas, Florida and Alabama. He and his wife, Karen, have three children.

► **Good Hope Baptist Church, Eclectic**, celebrated its 175th anniversary Nov. 20 with long-time pastor Kenny Hill (left) preaching and Tim Lawrence, minister of worship, leading congregational singing.

Special music was provided by Lawrence, Kathy Stewart, Karen Carter and Donald Warren as well as the children's choir, a church ensemble and the church choir.

Certificates were presented by Ralph Foster (right) of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission; Scotty Goldman of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions; and Ray McKenzie, director of missions of Elmore Baptist Association. The church held an afternoon service after lunch featuring the youth praise band.

In the six Sundays leading up to the celebration, the church highlighted the congregation's history.



Photo courtesy of Ralph Foster

FRANKLIN ASSOCIATION

► **Aaron Fisher** is the new pastor of **Mount Zion Baptist Church, Russellville**. He also works at G&G Steel in Russellville.



FISHER

He holds an associate's degree in applied science from Northwest-Shoals Community College in Muscle Shoals and a bachelor's degree in biblical studies from Blue Mountain College in Mississippi.

He received his ministry license through Calvary Baptist Church, Russellville, and has served as youth minister of First Baptist Church Littleville and Amaziah Baptist Church, Myrtle, Mississippi.

He and his wife, Christine, have one child.

► **Adam Pharr** is the new pastor of **South Side Baptist Church, Russellville**.

He holds a bachelor's degree in education from Athens State University and is pursuing a master of divinity degree from Southern Seminary.

He previously served as pastor of Gravel Hill Missionary Baptist Church, Phil Campbell, and Red Bay First Baptist Church.

A teacher at Red Bay High School, he is married to Lexy.



PHARR

NORTH JEFFERSON ASSOCIATION

► **Kelsey Queen** is the new administrative assistant of **North Jefferson Baptist Association**.

She has a bachelor's degree in exercise science from Central Baptist College, Conway, Arkansas.

She and her husband, Robert, have one child and are members of Haig Missionary Baptist Church, Morris, where they lead a prayer team and co-lead Bible study for young adults.

► **Al Elmore** is the new pastor of **First Baptist Church Mount Olive**.

Elmore surrendered to the ministry at age 17 at his home church, First Baptist Church Gordo. He holds degrees from the University of Mobile and Southwestern Seminary.

He previously served churches in Lima, Ohio; Mobile, Alabama; Boaz, Alabama; Pensacola, Florida; Jackson, Mississippi; and Grapevine, Texas.

Elmore was also an adjunct professor at UM through the School of Leadership Development.

He and his wife, Lori, have two daughters and one grandchild.

SOUTHEAST ALABAMA ASSOCIATION

► **Tony Deese** is the new discipleship and small groups pastor of **Watermark Church, Ashford**.

He holds a bachelor's degree in ministry studies from the Baptist College of Florida and a master's degree in discipleship from New Orleans Seminary.

He is currently pursuing a doctor of ministry degree in discipleship from Liberty University.

He and his wife, Jenna, have been married seven years.

TALLAPOOSA ASSOCIATION

► **Don Ward** is the new pastor of **Russell Farm Baptist Church, Alexander City**.

He also is a quality control technician for Vulcan Materials. He previously served as pastor of Beulah Anna Baptist Church, Westville, Florida.

He and his wife, Brandi, have three children.



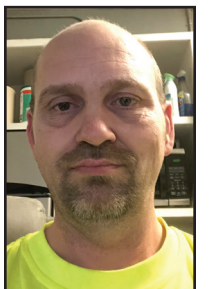
QUEEN



ELMORE



DEESE



WARD

'Families are important'

Church playground project sends positive message to community

By Lanell Downs Smith
The Alabama Baptist

Bethel Baptist Church in Robertsdale sits atop a hill with no tree cover, just 20 miles from the Alabama coast on the Gulf of Mexico.

When Hurricane Sally came inland Sept. 16, 2021, the church sustained damage that rendered more than half its buildings unusable, especially the children's wing.

"It was just a bad combination," reflected Bethel's pastor, Harvey Earls. "[The storm] put holes in our roof, soaked our sanctuary, ruined our offices and messed up our children's wing. We had several hundred thousand dollars in damage. We went over a year without a sanctuary."

While the church conducted a major rebuild to restore the damaged spaces, one young member who felt called to serve approached Earls with a particular project.

Leadership development

Savannah Morgan participates in the Christ-centered character and leadership development program



Photo courtesy of Savannah Morgan

(L to r) Bree Taylor, Mikaya Mann and Abby Mann help refurbish Bethel Baptist Church's playground equipment.

American Heritage Girls. The group's Stars and Stripes award teaches girls perseverance, self-respect and a strong feeling of satisfaction through planning, leading and implementing a project meant to bless the community.

Meeting a need

Earls said the church's playground needed refurbishing and was a bit of an eyesore even before Hurricane Sally hit.

Morgan, who wanted to earn the Stars and Stripes award, developed a plan for funding and implementation to provide a nice playground for the church and community.

"They really needed a new playground," Morgan recalled.

"I just wanted to help the kids have a nice, safe place to play and enjoy."

Morgan, who helps with Vacation Bible School and children's church, enjoys serving God by serving children.

"They have so many different personalities," she explained. "They're just a joy to be around."

To qualify for the award, Morgan had to shoulder responsibility for the project from conception to completion, Earls noted. Her plan included drawing up designs, securing materials, fundraising, scheduling and accomplishing the work and presenting the final product.

"We brought it to the deacons and the church," Earls recalled. "They were excited about it — flat-out impressed. I think they gave her an ovation before she started on the work."

Morgan has completed several other projects but said the Bethel playground, which cost around \$3,000, was the largest. Her parents, John and Linda, assisted when needed, along with other local American Heritage Girls and members of the community.

The congregation helped with raising the money, Morgan said,



Photo courtesy of Savannah Morgan

Volunteers test the swings at Bethel Baptist Church in Robertsdale. After Hurricane Sally damaged the church, Savannah Morgan enlisted the help of community volunteers to rebuild and refurbish the equipment.

holding lasagna dinners and dessert auctions. Jason Underwood, manager at Lowe's in Daphne, helped her secure donations of most of the materials.

Morgan and other volunteers refurbished the equipment and built a new wooden ship structure. They also installed a new fence around air-conditioning units and the playground's perimeter.

A safe place

"I just felt it was important for the kids to have a place where they would be encouraged to play and also be able to learn about the Lord," Morgan said.

"And during Sunday School, I wanted them to have a fun environment where they can learn about how to serve Him."

According to Earls, Morgan worked on Saturdays to complete the project and underwent major surgery around the same time. But that didn't slow her down, he said.

"She did a fantastic job. And now we have a brand new, renovated playground that looks nice. The kids love it. They're out there all the time now."

Earls said Morgan is an inspiration, and the church has had new visitors thanks to the effort. The



Photo courtesy of Savannah Morgan

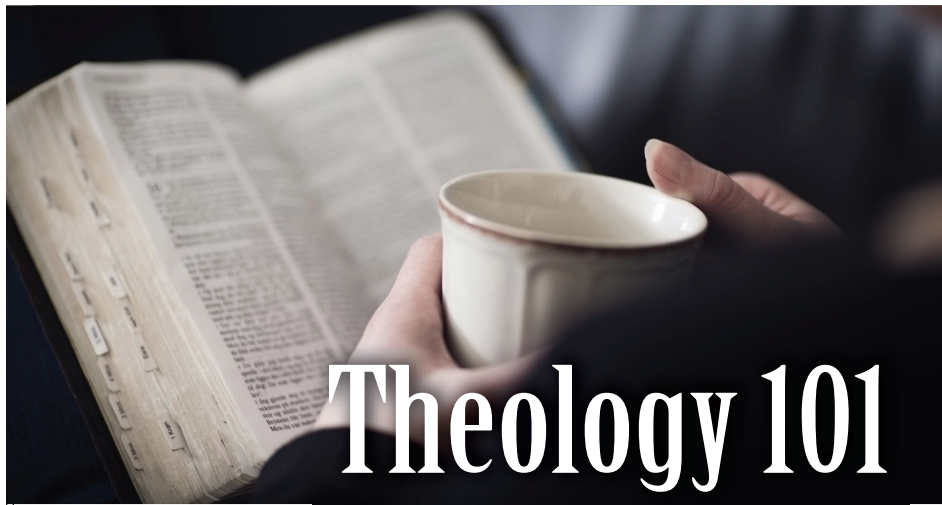
Savannah Morgan and her dad, John, work together to set the framework for new playground equipment.

new playground sends a message to the community, he explained — that families are important.

'A God thing'

"When Savannah came to us with this project, it fit hand in hand with our vision," Earls recalled.

"We had all this great stuff in the new children's wing and a busted-up playground outside. She came alongside what we had done and were doing. It was just a God thing."



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Discipleship

Coming to Jesus

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
The Alabama Baptist

The biblical account of Jesus and His disciples offers us a helpful pattern for our own Christian discipleship.

The disciples were so important to Jesus that He spent a night in prayer before choosing them.

After the night of prayer, Jesus summoned a group that He had been gathering around Himself, and from that group He chose the Twelve (Luke 6:12-13).

What role were these men to fill? The list would include them being learners whom He would teach and train, being prayer partners at crucial moments, becoming helpers and partners in His public ministry and being models for future followers.

From the example set by Jesus in His relationship with the original Twelve, we can learn some important aspects of about being Christ's followers.

Easily understood

The basic invitation to Christian discipleship is expressed in a single word: come. It is a simple, easily understood word.

Young children understand its meaning. We say to a youngster, "Come," and the child crawls or totters toward us. Jesus uses the same word for sophisticated adults. His invitation is always the same. If we would be His disciples, we must come to Him.

Andrew was told to look upon Jesus as the Lamb of God. Upon asking Jesus where He was staying, Jesus said simply, "Come and see" (John 1:39).

On another occasion, Jesus declared to a reluctant crowd that chose to give Him no place in their lives, "You are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:40).

Looking upon people who were weighed down with life's difficulties and burdens, Jesus said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

Drawn by the Spirit

Later, Jesus was speaking to an audience of Jews, telling them that He was Bread come down from heaven. He then gave them a warning word, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44).

At a crowded feast day, Jesus stood and cried out to the people, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink" (John 7:37).

Over and over again, Jesus emphasized that being His disciple involved "coming to Him." This is the word He has left with us.

We who comprise His Church are to speak it to our world: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts say, 'Come!'" (Rev. 22:17).

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.



Your church communication strategy checklist for 2023

By Mark MacDonald
The Alabama Baptist

A communication strategy checklist for the new year could be very long for most churches. In fact, trying to get communication correct is a customized, difficult task. Why? Because every church's audience is quite different, with different needs. Combine that with the multiple ministries you can offer, and it's difficult to effectively create all the pieces.

For your 2023 church communication strategy, let's concentrate on foundational areas. What does that actually mean? It means you're communicating

well with your congregation, while also reaching out and making your community aware of your ministries, events and the gospel message.

It's not a simple thing, so here are the basic areas you need to understand:

► **Define personas.** For your 2023 church communication strategy checklist, personas are critical since everything builds

on them. Define stereotypical groups within your congregation and community that you desire to communicate with.

Start with the demographics of your community and compare the information to your membership. Create primary and secondary groups that encompass most of these characteristics. Concentrate on their needs, concerns and goals.

► **Ministry solutions.** Now get their attention. Call your personas by name — ones they'll recognize, like "young parent" or "senior adults." Speak about their pains and then offer ministries that solve their issues or help lead them to a desired goal to get them to engage.

The majority of your ministries and events need to connect as a solution. It may be time to eliminate some struggling ministries.

► **Communication tiers.** Every ministry can't have the loudest

voice — that's just noise. Based on how many need to hear about the event, create tiers:

Tier 1: Events in which 85% or more of the congregation should be interested.

Tier 2: Events in which 85% or more of the church's individual ministries should be interested.

Tier 3: Events which will reach less than 85% of the church's ministries.

Give priority to tiers one and two; limit tier three. Or prioritize announcements from tier one to tier two and then tier three.

► **Unified calendar.** Set up

one calendar that someone oversees. Ensure those creating events have access. Make sure all church and community events are on the calendar since they all affect your audience.

► **Limited channels and tools.** Determine the tools and channels you need to get your message out. Your website must have all event and ministry details, but every

other channel and tool (social media, email, print) doesn't need all the content. Less is more.

► **Enough team members.**

Most local churches need a team to pull a communication strategy checklist off without dropping the ball. It can be volunteer based, but you need someone to lead the team.

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



Unsplash.com

Impact of the Word of God

Bible readers who attend small groups more likely to be peacemakers

(continued from page 1)

progressed, the top search term in Ukrainian became love.

“These [Ukrainian] families are going through something most of us can’t imagine. In the middle of what’s likely the most difficult time of their lives, they’re turning to the Bible for comfort, peace and hope,” said Bobby Gruenewald, founder and CEO of YouVersion. “It’s an honor that we get to be a part of making God’s word available to His people in their greatest moments of need.”

Top spot

The verse people in Ukraine engaged with most in 2022 is the same verse the global YouVersion community shared, bookmarked and highlighted the most.

Earning the top spot as YouVersion’s 2022 Verse of the Year is Isaiah 41:10: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold



Photo courtesy of YouVersion

People engaged in small group Bible study on a weekly basis are more likely to be serving in their churches and communities and also more likely to be engaged in spiritual disciplines, says Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research.

you with My righteous right hand.”

In a year where news of political unrest, financial instability and natural and humanitarian disas-

ters were all too common, it’s not surprising a verse highlighting God’s presence, strength and help emerged as the most popular.

“The popularity of this verse speaks to our desire to be reminded that even when we feel like we’re alone in our struggles, we’re not,” Gruenewald said. “As this verse says, God is our strength, and He’s always with us.”

Among global YouVersion users, Cuba stands out as the country with the greatest increase in Bible engagement with an increase of 76% compared to 2021. The fastest regional growth for Bible engagement is in Europe and Africa.

In the U.S., Isaiah 41:10 was the Bible verse shared, bookmarked and highlighted most often in the YouVersion app during 2022, followed by:

2. Jeremiah 29:11
3. Romans 8:28
4. Philippians 4:6
5. John 14:27
6. Joshua 1:9
7. John 16:33
8. 1 Peter 5:10
9. 2 Timothy 1:7
10. John 3:16

Choose from a variety of plans to read through the Bible in 2023

As January approaches each year, pastor Lawrence Phipps encourages his congregation at First Baptist Church Gulf Shores to engage daily in God’s word.

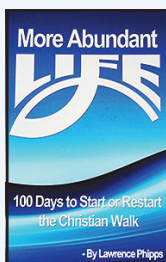
Reading through the Bible is a habit Phipps began more than 20 years ago.

“It changed my life. It changed my ministry. It changed my preaching,” Phipps said. “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.”

A few years ago, Phipps wrote a book, “More Abundant Life: 100 Days to Start or Restart Your Christian Walk,” distributed through It’s Life Ministry. Now in its 5th edition, the book aims to help believers grow as disciples with a focus on priority time with God, which includes reading the Bible and memorizing Scripture.

Phipps said he looks forward to Jan. 1 each year because he knows it’s the start of one more trip through the Word.



“I know God’s going to show me things I’ve never seen before,” he said. “That’s how rich the Holy Spirit is when you’re willing to commit to time with Him.”

Many resources

For those who want to begin a daily Bible reading habit or perhaps read the Bible through in 2023, many resources are available to help.

There are chronological reading plans that take readers through the story of the Bible in the historical order of events. For instance, using a chronological plan, you will read the psalms

David wrote in context of what was happening in his life, and chapters from Chronicles and Kings are paired because each provides a different perspective on Israel’s history.

The Bible Recap, a popular Bible reading podcast from D-Group, uses a chronological plan. So does Lifeway’s CSB Day-by-Day Chronological Bible, one of several study Bibles that take this approach.

A variety of other plans break Scripture into manageable chunks for daily reading. Plans for 5, 10 or 15 minutes each day are

available, as are plans for daily readings or for reading just five days each week. Several New Testament-only plans are available too.

The Bible app is a good place to start if an app-based plan suits your schedule. Lifeway also

offers several Bibles that include daily reading plans.

For more information about Phipps’ “More Abundant Life”

book and itslifeministry.com, contact him at lawrence.phipps@itslifeministry.com. (TAB Media)

For more resources, go to [tabonline.org/read-the-bible](https://www.tabonline.org/read-the-bible).

Bible Gateway, another popular Bible reading app, reports similar results for 2022. John 3:16 continues to be the most popular verse on Bible Gateway, with verses from Psalm 23 dominating the site's Top 10 list.

YouVersion's 2022 analysis shows millions of users are engaging with Scripture via the app. Last year, 2.3 billion verses were highlighted, bookmarked or shared.

But Bible readers are engaging with Scripture in others ways too.

Top podcasts

Though podcast numbers are harder to pin down, the team at toppodcast.com reports that two of the top three most popular podcasts in the religion and spirituality category are daily Bible reading podcasts: The Bible in a Year (with Father Mike Schmitz) from Ascension and D-Group's The Bible Recap hosted by Tara-Leigh Cobble.

While surveys continue to show a low percentage of American Protestant churchgoers engaging with the Bible daily, any increase in regular reading will have positive results, according to Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research.

In an interview with the Southern Baptist Texan, McConnell noted that people who are in Scripture on a regular basis enjoy

it more and see a greater impact of God's word on their lives.

"We continue to see that Bible engagement is predictive of walking closer to Christ, so knowing that spending time in His word has an impact definitely gives us confidence to encourage others and to want to be in God's word ourselves," McConnell said. "In this day and age, we have so many options for how to do this."

The speed at which one reads through the Bible seems to be less important than reading it regularly, he said, noting the value of reading plans and Bible study communities, whether Sunday School or other small groups.

Statistically speaking, he said, people who are engaged in small group Bible study on a weekly basis are more likely to be serving in their churches and communities, but there are other positive benefits as well.

'Growing closer to God'

"They're more likely to be giving to their church. They're more likely to be engaged in spiritual disciplines. They're more likely to have friends at church and relationships with others at church."

"They're more likely to be peacemakers at church," McConnell said. "So many ways that we want to be growing closer to Christ happen when we study God's word in community."

Top 10 ministry insights from State of the Bible 2022

Scripture engagement improves life in all areas except financial wealth, but Bible use continues to lag behind levels seen before the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Bible Society said in recapping key findings from the 2022 State of the Bible.

"People live better lives when they engage with the Bible — reading it frequently, applying its teachings to their decisions and making it central to their faith," ABS reported.

"Personally, they experience less stress, less anxiety and more hope."

A rise in curiosity about Jesus and the Bible might be the key to encouraging more Scripture engagement, ABS suggested.

"Decades ago, Americans were well-versed in the biblical story, whether they believed it or not. Now, for generations who have never heard it, our content is new and fresh," ABS said in its Dec. 15 release. "So let's present the Jesus of the Bible with all His surprises. Allow the fresh from the oven aroma of the Bread of Life to waft through our lives and our churches."

In its final 2022 report, ABS noted a few interesting points gleaned from its survey.

► Apps increase daily Bible use.

► Scripture-engaged people want to be good neighbors.

Gen Z insights

► Gen Z shows high levels of stress, anxiety and depression, but those who are Scripture-engaged report fewer symptoms.

► More than two-thirds of people 57 and younger who

consider themselves committed Christians don't attend church at least monthly.

► Nearly a third of American adults — 80 million people — regularly share Scripture with others.

Following a schedule

► Scripture-engaged Christians tend to read entire Bible chapters or stories at one sitting, read Scripture at the same time each day and follow a reading schedule, plan or program.

► Scripture-engaged adults gave an estimated \$145 billion in charity in 2021.

The findings open ministry doors, ABS said, including:

► Targeted outreach to members of Gen Z who are more likely to suffer anxiety, stress and depression

from the lingering disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

► Reaching out to nonpracticing Christians, listening to their stories and wooing them back to church as applicable.

► Approaching digital technology as a new ministry field, adapting Bible translations to determine the dynamic equivalence of the Bible in the digital context.

In its 2022 State of the Bible, ABS col-

laborated with the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center to survey a nationally representative group of American adults on topics related to the Bible, faith and the church.

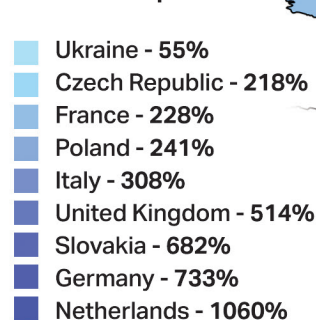
In its 2023 State of the Bible, ABS will focus on faith in motion, persevering hope and spiritual vitality and styles, among other topics. (BP)



Photo courtesy of YouVersion

Shifts in Ukrainian Bible Usage

As Ukrainian people fled the war and relocated to different countries, YouVersion saw surges in Ukrainian-language Bible engagement across Europe.



Data measures the percent increase between Q3 2021 and Q3 2022.

Graphic courtesy of YouVersion

For the full report, visit sotb.bible/#forms.

Birmingham pastor explains the value of 'talking about race'

By Lanell Downs Smith
The Alabama Baptist

Isaac Adams, pastor of Iron City Church Birmingham, spoke recently about how Christians can pray for and think about racial strife.

During a TAB Amplify podcast, Adams recalled a memorable childhood experience when he realized color really matters.

"In fourth grade it didn't matter," he reflected. "But in fifth grade something changed. And I remember it."

Adams, author of "Talking About Race: Gospel Hope for Hard Conversations" and founder of United? We Pray, a ministry devoted to praying about racial strife, is comfortable talking about the subject.

Childhood memories

The book, he explained, relays many experiences — not all his. But one in particular does belong to "Little Isaac."

"This young black boy is looking at his classroom door," Adams recalled.

"It's an election year, and some kid made a sign that said, 'Who are you voting for?' and put it on the door."

"All his white friends were on the Republican side, and most of his black friends were on the Democrat side."

"I remember that so clearly. It was Bush and Gore. It [happened] all of a sudden. In fourth grade we were all cool. In fifth grade it was like, 'You hang out with your own. Black kids hang with [black kids], white kids hang with [white kids].'"

"And I was kind of caught between because my friends were white and I was like, 'What's happening all of a sudden?'"



Photo courtesy of Iron City Church

Isaac Adams, pastor of Iron City Church in Birmingham, shares his experiences with racial divisions in his book, "Talking About Race: Gospel Hope for Hard Conversations."

Adams said he didn't want to sign the paper, not wishing to choose between his friends. That's the moment he realized colors and race make a difference.

People learn early in life, Adams noted. Friendship, dating and friend groups invade early on, and children encounter barriers that are a product of their parents' past experiences.

"Racial hierarchy and categorizing are just the way our minds work," Adams asserted. "It's just a part

of the American psyche, how we think about organizing ourselves."

Progress has been made since the days of Jim

Crow laws and segregation, Adams acknowledged, but the impact lingers in predominantly white or black neighborhoods, schools and even churches.

'House is burning'

"The match (of segregation) has been blown out, but the house is still on fire," he lamented. "And regardless of whether or not you put the match to the house, the house is burning. We've just gotten so accustomed to seeing things on fire. It's just kind of normal to us."

"We need to keep talking about this because we never are exempt from the call to love our neighbors," Adams declared. "It's something our church very imperfectly is trying to think about — that lots of churches are trying to think about. If we could fix it overnight, it would have been fixed already."

According to Adams, striving not to be racist can actually become a "me-oriented" goal.

'Christ over comfort'

Instead, he said, a more positive, other-oriented goal is to seek to be "a Christian who pursues justice and mercy and love."

Some believers, and often the Church, avoid open conversations about race to avoid appearing racist, Adams noted — but healing can only begin when the masks come off.

"As Christians, what we need to do is pick Christ over comfort," he declared. "It's not that comforts are wrong, but Jesus said, 'You will pick up a cross daily' and crosses are uncomfortable."

"My preference is to be in a Christ-displaying community. There's more going on in and through church than what kind of coffee you like."

TAB CLASSIFIEDS

CHURCH POSITIONS

PASTOR

Crossroads Baptist, Elgin, Alabama, is searching for a full-time/bivocational spiritually led pastor. To apply or ask questions, email us at crossroadsbcelginal@gmail.com or visit crossroadsbcelginal.com.

PASTOR

Parkway Baptist Church, Creve Coeur, Missouri, seeks a full-time senior pastor to lead our church into the future. Parkway Baptist is located in an increasingly diverse area of West St. Louis County, Missouri. Please visit our website at <https://www.parkwaybaptist.net> for more information about the church. Send resumé and cover letter to: pastorsearch@parkwaybaptist.net or Senior Pastor Search Committee, 12465 Olive Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63141.

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.

PASTOR

Newbridge Missionary Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina, a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, prayerfully seeks a man who will preach the inerrant word of God and has a heart for missions. Email resumé to: NewbridgePST@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Stowers Hill Baptist Church of Attalla, Alabama, is in search of a bivocational pastor. Please send resumé to email address stowershillbaptist@gmail.com or mail to 407 9th Ave. SW, Attalla, AL 35954.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Liberty Baptist Church in Morris, Alabama, is seeking a bivocational pastor who will preach God's word, pray for God's leadership and have a heart for missions. Send resumé to: garrettm2@bellsouth.net.

WORSHIP PASTOR

Seeking someone to lead all aspects of musical programs of Linden Baptist Church. This is a full-time position and will also have other responsibilities as an associate pastor. For full job description and to apply for the position, visit <http://www.lindenbaptist.org> and click on "associate pastor application." You may contact the church directly at 334-295-4278 or by mail at P.O. Box 480776, Linden, AL 36748.

WORSHIP LEADER

Calvary Baptist in Tuscumbia, seeks bivocational worship leader. Mail resumé to: 601 North Main Street, Tuscumbia, AL 35674, or email to: lynndaleh@gmail.com.

OTHER POSITIONS

RETREAT CENTER DIRECTOR

Marshall Baptist Retreat Center (on Lake Guntersville in North Alabama) is looking for a visionary who can help take this ministry forward, who has the ability to lead, delegate and manage association resources for God's glory with a keen attention to detail and organization. Above all, we want a person who has a heart for Christ and for the church. Our association offers a salary along with a freshly renovated home. For a complete job description, visit marshallba.com and click on "About Us" and then documents. Please send resumé to: apply@marshallba.com by January 31, 2023.

DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS

Coffee Baptist Association is seeking a director of missions. Resumé must be received by January 31, 2023. Please send resumé to: P.O. Box 127, New Brockton, AL 36351. For further information, please call 334-894-6411.

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To hear the podcast, visit tabonline.org/Isaac-Adams.

Renewal and refreshment

Oasis worship, music, comedy tour offers encouragement from familiar faces

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Frank Jones said it's the strangest thing, and he wasn't expecting it — it just came out of the blue.

On a Thursday afternoon in July, he was behind the keyboard — a familiar place for the gospel pianist — putting on an event at First Baptist Church Trussville.

He was with vocalist Guy Penrod, who's best known for his 14 years as the lead singer of the Gaither Vocal Band, and Mickey Bell, a Christian comedian and pastor of Grace Church in Bessemer.

And much to Jones' surprise, around 1,300 people were there.

"When we got done that day, I was having a personal conversation with Guy, and [he] thought this kind of thing could ... fit a niche," he said.

And that's how Oasis was born. The event — featuring Jones, Penrod and Bell

— is tailored for seasoned adults, and they're open to visiting any church that asks.

"Mickey will do a set of comedy, I'll do a set of music from the piano and Guy will do a longer set of hymns," Jones said. "We try to make it a lot of fun. It's not heavy. That's the reason

I chose the name Oasis — an oasis is a place of refreshment, renewal and encouragement. They're going to hear the songs they've loved all their lives."

The first Oasis was Nov. 1 at Woodridge Baptist Church in Mobile.

"We had a great day," Jones said.

The next will be Jan. 26 at Alice Drive Baptist Church in Sumter, South Carolina.

Jones said he also will continue to take bookings at churches as well as hosting Oasis events, like an upcoming worship concert at Unity Baptist Church in Marbury on Jan. 29. He will follow that with the Ala-



Photo by Tracy Riggs/The Alabama Baptist

Mickey Bell, a Christian comedian and pastor of Grace Church in Bessemer, engages the audience at Oasis.



Photo by Tracy Riggs/The Alabama Baptist

Dove and Grammy award-winning singer Guy Penrod sings at an Oasis event held at FBC Trussville. Penrod is best known for his 14 years as the lead singer of the Gaither Vocal Band.

bama Baptist State Evangelism Conference set for Jan. 29–30 at Lakeside Baptist Church in Birmingham.

'Act of faith'

To make space for this new phase of music ministry, Jones stepped away from his role as music asso-

ciate at Hunter Street Baptist Church in Hoover.

"It's an act of faith to leave what I was doing there, but I think the Lord will bless that," Jones said. "It's given me an opportunity to connect with other churches."

Bell said he is excited about being a part of Oasis.

"When you have an event that is geared toward a particular segment of people, and in this case it's seasoned adults,

we're able to really hone in and reach them and encourage them at a level that speaks directly

to them," he said.

"So these events allow us to laugh, they allow us to worship and enjoy some great music," he noted. "But at the end of the day, we want these individuals to be able to leave knowing that they have had individuals on stage who were there just for them, to speak into their lives right where they are. It's just really a fun time."

For more information, visit frankjonesministries.org/oasis.



Photo by Debbie Campbell/The Alabama Baptist

Pianist Frank Jones plays a favorite hymn for the crowd at the first official Oasis event Nov. 1 at Woodridge Baptist Church in Mobile.

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Pastor shares value of empowering others

By Tracy Riggs

The Alabama Baptist

About a year and a half into his pastorate at First Baptist Church West Blocton, Kyle Hodges loves sharing about the momentum shift within the congregation.

The renewed energy and level of ownership also gives Hodges confidence to continue following the path he knows God set out for him.

“Personally [this] has taught me the value of empowering other people. It’s taught me the value of leadership through delegation, through extension,” he said. “I don’t have to put everything on my shoulders.”

“This church can do far more when people are empowered and given opportunity.”

It all started in early 2022 when Hodges sensed God urging the church to develop an outreach effort and to start by raising up four volunteer leaders.

Step of faith

Hodges was hesitant at first, noting West Blocton averages 70 in Sunday morning worship and is primarily made up of six multi-generational families.

When they go on vacation in the summer, few are at church, so he was concerned about participation during that time.

However, he decided to trust God and go with the plan, praying until God gave him the four leaders’ names. He continued to pray as he went to each and asked if they were willing to join in.

None of the leaders agreed immediately, but eventually all four decided to commit to the challenge.

Hodges had spent most of his first few months as pastor preaching how a Christian’s identity is rooted in Christ and everything flows from that identity.

He didn’t know it at the time of preparing and shar-



Photo courtesy of members of First Baptist Church West Blocton
Members of First Baptist Church West Blocton participate in one of the initial 16 outreach service projects for the community. The new year-round ministry was launched in June 2022.

ing the sermons, but they would be used to plant the seeds for developing the outreach process.

“I think the people were really spurred on by the idea that if our goal is to love as He has loved, to walk as He walked, you can’t do that sitting in a church,” Hodges said. “You must do that through external activity.”

“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.”

Once the leaders were in place, Hodges encouraged members to sign up for one of four teams, designated by color. He didn’t tell them what was going to happen until the first week of June.

Recruiting volunteers

Hodges had ideas for what the teams could do but wanted to empower each one to make their own choices. The goal was for each team to accomplish one outreach activity during the summer.

“The church received it well,” Hodges said. “The leaders ran with it. They got excited and started going after it.”

“God gave them some really cool ideas, and right off the bat we had a project ... all four teams joined together on,” he noted.

“I think that was the catalyst for the momentum for the rest of the summer because they had a good time

and developed community.”

Hodges said the team leaders loved putting their own spin on what their teams would do.

The groups ended up completing 16 outreach projects, including a prayer tent at their July 4 festival, provid-

ing water at the local high school’s summer band camp, community-wide street cleanup, renovating the local library and yardwork for the elderly.

Community service

Recipients of the service projects were mostly non-members. The teams encouraged those who attend church to continue doing so and invited those who don’t to give church a try.

The teams continue to look for opportunities to serve, Hodges added. They have completed more service projects since the initial launch and plan to continue year-round.

He said he can hardly believe how it is not only changing the community, but the members.

“Hands down, my ... favorite part is the fact our church members [are no longer] happy just sitting in a pew on Sunday morning,” Hodges said. “They want to get involved. They want to do something. Now they have an avenue to do it.”

The Alabama Press Association proudly salutes our newspapers for their commitment to community journalism.

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We wish you continued success in the coming year.

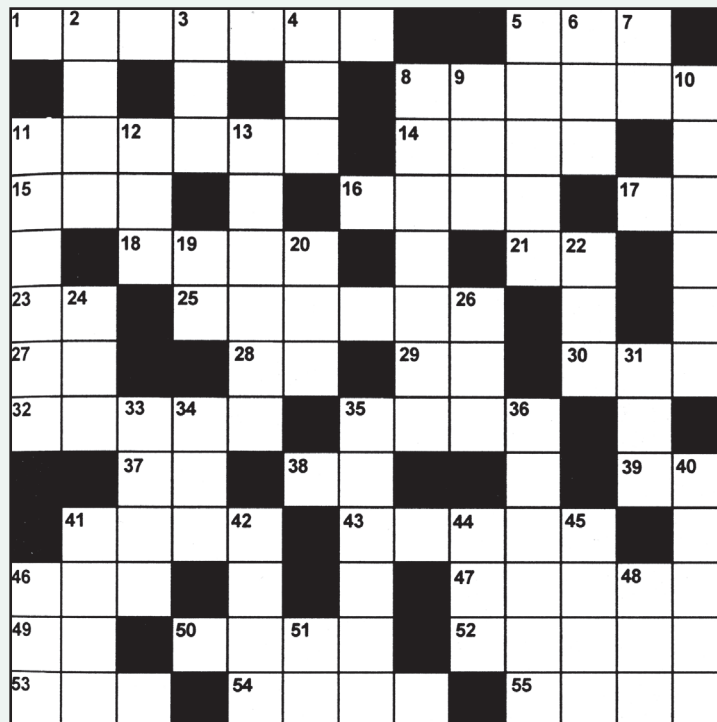
* The Alabama State Study, 2022; Conducted by Coda Ventures



CHRISTIAN crossword

ACROSS

1. Jonathan ____ up upon his hands. (1 Sam. 14:13)
5. Automobile.
8. The Philistines took the ark ... unto _____. (1 Sam. 5:1)
11. Belonging to the son of Jephunneh. (Num. 13:6)
14. Lizard, snail and ____ are unclean. (Lev. 11:30)
15. Much ____ about nothing.
16. He is up ____ good. (2 words)
17. Printer's measure.
18. Sea bird.
21. Prefix meaning into.
23. Mother.
25. Thou hast followed _____. (1 Kings 18:18)
27. For example.
28. Duty every soldier hates.
29. Take thy neighbor's raiment ____ pledge. (Ex. 22:26)
30. National Football League. (abbr.)
32. Good ____ are not everything.
35. Bela the son of _____. (Gen. 36:32)
37. Hello.
38. Fe, ____, Fo, Fum.
39. To exist.
41. The strong hold of _____. (2 Sam. 24:7)
43. To offer a great sacrifice unto ____ their god. (Judg. 16:23)
46. It holds up a golf ball.
47. To surprise someone.
49. I am. (contr.)
50. There was a marriage in ____ of Galilee. (John 2:1)
52. He killed Goliath.
53. A meat offering baked in a _____. (Lev. 2:5)



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54. Ancient wisdom.
55. Rulers of _____. (Ex. 18:21)

DOWN

2. I ____ in the way of righteousness. (Prov. 8:20)
3. Curley and ____.
4. Emergency Medical Service. (abbr.)
5. By them which are of the house of _____. (1 Cor. 1:11)
6. A sweetened fruit drink.
7. Rosemary. (abbr.)
8. Thy father was an _____. (Ezek. 16:3)
9. This is My beloved _____. (Matt. 3:17)
10. Spoken of by ____ the prophet. (Matt. 24:15)
11. The excellency of ____ and Sharon. (Isa. 35:2)
12. ____ sat in the gate of Sodom. (Gen. 19:1)
13. Belonging to the son of Abinoam. (Judg. 4:6)
19. Ebenezer. (abbr.)
20. Just a little rest.
22. Prefix meaning "not."
24. Lost three days _____. (1 Sam. 9:20)
26. What a cow says.
31. Fabulous.
33. ____ of little faith. (Matt. 6:3; 2 words, var.)
34. The king ... carried the people captive to _____. (2 Kings 16:9)
35. Said Jehu to ____ his captain. (2 Kings 9:25)
36. Joseph and Mary looked for a ____ an inn. (2 words)
40. Belonging to Gaal's father. (Judg. 9:30)
41. Son of Ishmael. (Gen. 25:13, 15)
42. Joshua built an altar ... in Mount _____. (Josh. 8:30)
44. Moses gave ... even to the children of _____. (Num. 32:33)
45. Part of a cathedral.
46. Given for good service.
48. Ye rebelled ... in the desert of _____. (Num. 27:14)
51. Not "yes."

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

Famous Christians from previous centuries

Heroes of the Faith

Swiss reformer contributed to 16th century theology

Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) was a Swiss reformer who succeeded Huldrych Zwingli as head of the Church of Zurich. He was one of the most important writers and theologians in the Reformation movement.

Bullinger was born July 18, 1504, in Bremgarten, a Swiss town near Zurich. He was the youngest of seven children born to priest Heinrich Bullinger Sr. and his common-law wife, Anna Wiederkehr.

Their marriage was formalized in 1529, when his father became a Reformer.

Bullinger was sent to St. Martin's Latin school in Emmerich, where he studied classical literature. In his mid-teens, he attended the University of Cologne.

The next year he was exposed to Reformation teaching. By 1522, he believed that salvation came through God's grace.

After receiving his master's degree, he became a teacher at a Cistercian mon-

astery. He taught the monks from the New Testament and introduced them to Reformation teaching.

He married Anna Adis-chweiler, a former nun, in 1527. They had five daughters and six sons.

In 1523, he became friends with Zwingli. Zwingli died in 1531 in the Second War of Kappel, a war between Catholics and Reformers.

Bullinger was head of the Zurich church in late 1531 until his death. During his ministry, he preached about 7,500 sermons. They became the basis for his commentaries, which covered all the New Testament.

Significant book

One of his most significant books was "Decades." It consisted of 50 sermons which served as a systematic theology.

In 1536, the "First Helvetic Confession" was composed by Bullinger and other Swiss delegates to overcome differences with Martin Luther on the Lord's Supper. He wrote the "Second Helvetic Confession of 1566" after he contracted the plague. That work discussed the Trinity, Scripture, sacraments and other beliefs of the Reformers.

During the plagues of 1564–1565, his wife and two daughters died. Although he survived, his health was poor until his death in 1575.



BULLINGER

By Joanne Sloan

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

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MARK YOUR CALENDARS

Event and location are followed by SBOM contact person and extension. For more information on these events, call 1-800-264-1225 or (334) 613 plus the listed extension, or visit alsbom.org/events.

JANUARY

- 1-7 **January Bible Study**, Daniel Edmonds, ext. 2285
- 5 **Church Tax Conference**, SBOM, Prattville, and ONLINE, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 11 **Church Tax Conference**, First, Silverhill, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 12 **Church Tax Conference**, First, Decatur, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 13-14 **Student Missions Weekend**, WorldSong, Cook Springs, Kathryn Helms, ext. 2325
- 15 **Sanctity of Human Life Sunday**, Keith Hinson, ext. 2289
- 17 **Intentional Leader Series: Person**, SBOM, Prattville, Reka Baker, ext. 2263
- 19 **Family Discipleship Partnering With Parents To Teach Bible Skills**, ONLINE, kidzlink.org, Belinda Stroud, ext. 2255
- 19-21 **Youth Ministry Conclave**, Chattanooga Convention Center, Jessica Palmer, ext. 2262
- 25 **Church Tax Conference**, First, Headland, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 26-27 **DNA Annual Gathering-Making Disciples Through Great Groups**, First, Montgomery, Steve Layton, ext. 2221
- 28 **Bible Skills and Drill Retreat**, Shades Crest, Birmingham, Belinda Stroud, ext. 2255
- 29-30 **State Evangelism Conference**, Lakeside, Birmingham, Lori McGough, ext. 2245

FEBRUARY

- 1-4 **Deaf Pastors Gathering**, Shocco Springs, Kristy Kennedy, ext. 2311
- 4 **Bible Skills and Drill Retreat**, First, Montgomery, Belinda Stroud, ext. 2255
- 7 **Ministers Tax Conference**, SBOM, Prattville, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 11 **VBS Live 2023**, FBC of Level Plains, Enterprise, Patty Burns, ext. 2312
- 12 **Racial Reconciliation Sunday**, Keith Hinson, ext. 2289
- 14 **Ministers Tax Conference**, First, Decatur, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 14 **Ministers' Wives Connection**, ONLINE, Alabama WMU.org, Cindy Wilson, ext. 2225
- 15 **Ministers Tax Conference**, First, Silverhill, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 17-18 **Experiencing God Weekend**, SBOM, Prattville, Rob Jackson, ext. 2343
- 18 **VBS Live 2023**, Northbrook, Cullman, Ramona Noah, ext. 2312
- 19 **Hunger Sunday**, Lori Lockett, ext. 2304
- 19 **Focus On WMU Day**, Kathryn Helms, ext. 2325
- 21 **VBS Live 2023**, First, Fort Payne, Ramona Noah, ext. 2312
- 21 **Great Commission Conversations**, ONLINE, Alabama WMU.org, Cindy Wilson, ext. 2225
- 22 **Ministers Tax Conference**, Southeast Alabama Baptist Association Office, Dothan, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 23 **MinistrySafe Awareness Training**, Calvary, Dothan, Lee Wright, ext. 2304
- 23 **VBS Live 2023**, First, Robertsedale, Ramona Noah, ext. 2312
- 23-26 **Deaf Women's Gathering**, Children's Harbor, Alexander City, Kristy Kennedy, ext. 2311
- 24-25 **Bivocational Minister/Spouse Retreat**, Shocco Springs, Ken Allen, ext. 2208
- 24-25 **Pursue**, First, Montgomery, Ben Edfeldt, ext. 2276
- 25 **VBS Live 2023**, Glynwood, Prattville, Ramona Noah, ext. 2312
- 28 **VBS Live 2023**, Westmeade, Decatur, Ramona Noah, ext. 2312

MARCH

- 2-3 **Ministry Evangelism Retreat**, Shocco Springs, Kristy Kennedy, ext. 2311
- 3-4 **Complete**, Northpark, Trussville, Kathryn Helms, ext. 2325
- 3-4 **Alabama Conference of the Deaf**, Shocco Springs, Kristy Kennedy, ext. 2311
- 3-5 **Children's Honor Choir**, First, Prattville, and Crossroads Community, Prattville, Cindy Parris, ext. 2230


Happy New Year

from the
State Board
of Missions

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

As 2023 begins, we are so grateful for Alabama Baptists' generous support of missions and ministry through the Cooperative Program. What a great time this is for each of us to renew our commitment to Great Commission Ministries!

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Sunday-5:30 pm, Monday-8:30 am

Lakeside Baptist Church, Birmingham



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This event is made possible by gifts of Alaba
through the Cooperative Program.



Mac Brunson
Pastor, Valleydale
Church, Birmingham

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For January 8

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Executive Director of the Center for Christian Calling, University of Mobile



BUT WHOEVER DRINKS John 4:11–26

Jews and Samaritans of the first century had ethnic animosity centuries in the making. After the northern tribes split from Rehoboam, Jeroboam created idolatrous royal sanctuaries in Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:26–33).

Ahab and Jezebel initiated further idolatry in Samaria, championing pluralism (1 Kings 16:30–33). After Samaria's fall, the Hebraism of the north had a new dialect, a distinct alphabet and a separate theology adhering only to the Samaritan Pentateuch. They rejected Jerusalem as God's established place of worship, adhering to Mount Gerizim instead.

Jesus was compelled to travel from Jerusalem to Galilee through Samaria. Our passage picks up during a midday encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at the well outside Sychar.

Why would a woman go to the well alone at noon? Why not go at daybreak or dusk with the other women?

Why would she miss out on the gossip unless she was its subject? Why would a self-respecting rabbi engage in conversation with this marginalized woman?

Thirst Quenched? (11–15)

"Why are you talking to me?" From a cultural perspective, this was a legitimate question. Jews and Samaritans didn't converse. Unmarried men were careful not to dishonor a family by being with a woman without her father, husband or another male family member present.

"Where do you get this living water?" In Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13, God Himself is called the living water Israel has forsaken. Zechariah also refers to living waters flowing from Jerusalem (14:8). Samaritans rejected the biblical contents of the Hebrew prophets and the writings, so they would not be familiar with these passages.

"Are you greater than Jacob?" I'll answer that one for Jesus. Yes!

Sin Exposed (16–20)

"I don't have a husband." She made an honest but not entirely truthful statement. Jesus exposed the truth — five ex-husbands and a live-in boyfriend.

"I see you are a prophet, so I have a spiritual question for you." Since my earliest days at the University of Mobile, students have asked questions to change the subject from convicting topics. Some questions are easily answered. Others deal with personal conviction. Still others mean to justify immorality. We often change the subject when our sins are exposed.

True Worship (21–24)

"You Samaritans worship whom you do not know." The Samaritan Pentateuch adds a paragraph to Exodus 20:17 saying Israel was to build a worship altar on Mount Gerizim. In the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 11:29 and 27:12 mention Gerizim only symbolically as a mountain representing God's blessing.

"Worship God in spirit and in truth." The place for worship is insignificant since Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for sin. Samaritans worshipped in spirit, holding fast the traditions of their past. Jews, particularly the scribes and Pharisees, held to the unchanging truth of God's word.

The born-again follower of Jesus who adheres to Scripture worships God in spirit and in truth, wherever he or she is.

True Faith (25–26)

"I know Messiah is coming." Promises in the Pentateuch said God would send the Anointed One (Messiah, Christ) to redeem a people for Himself.

"I, the One speaking to you, am He." This woman searched for a relationship to quench her thirst and satisfy her longings. She remained thirsty until she met Jesus, the Anointed One who quenched her soul's thirst. As soon as she believed, she introduced her neighbors to Jesus.

Bible Studies for Life

By Tyshawn Gardner, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Samford University



JOY IN PLACE OF FEAR Zephaniah 3:9–20

God will remove fear from those who humble themselves before Him. (9–13)

Zephaniah promises stability and hope for the humble. Humility is a trait many followers of Christ fail to embrace.

There is an important lesson believers can learn from small football players who play the cornerback position. These very fast but often small defensive players are tasked with tackling running backs and tight ends much larger than they are.

The cornerback must get low in order to bring down those much larger opponents. The defensive back does not have to fear being run over by the much larger receiver, running back or tight end because he is able to get low.

Humility means getting low. Much like the small but courageous defensive back, believers who humble themselves can bring down problems and circumstances that are too big to handle on our own. When we get low and humble ourselves before God, we won't be destroyed.

Humility is not only getting low, however. It is also the acknowledgment of our limitations while also accepting our responsibility. God will remove fear from those who humble themselves before Him.

Zephaniah says, "on that day" we will face a larger opponent than we have ever seen. He is speaking ahead to the last days.

If we have lived humbly before God, we won't have to fear when the Lord returns. Earlier, Zephaniah issues a word of rebuke to the rebellious and defiled, those who oppress the weak and marginalized (v. 1). He also issues this rebuke to those who refuse to humble themselves by not "accepting correction" (v. 2). However, he gives a word of assurance to the humble (v. 12).

God's presence delivers His people through all harm. (14–17)

The Lord is mighty and sover-

eign. Zephaniah encourages the people to rejoice in and praise the reality of His

power and presence. Because the Lord is mighty to save and because His presence is always with His people, we should never fear potential harm. Zephaniah's words, "The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst," points ahead to the assurance Jesus gives His followers in Matthew 28:20, when He said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Because of the ever-abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, believers are reminded that no matter the foe or enemy, God's presence will deliver His people through all harm.

Just as Zephaniah encouraged Judah, the word of God brings us peace when we are reminded we too are His people. He longs to protect and deliver us from all harm.

We will experience eternal restoration in God's kingdom. (18–20)

Zephaniah's word came to Judah centuries before Christ, yet his words are prophetic to us. There will come a day when we will no longer have to fear any potential threats or enemies. We will experience eternal restoration.

Both Israel and Judah had experienced the destruction of their kingdoms. The Assyrians destroyed Israel and conquered God's people in 722 B.C. In 586 B.C., the Babylonians conquered Judah.

Although God promises a return to their homeland, complete and final restoration has not taken place. Though the Babylonians and the Assyrians have been defeated, God's people still yearn and wait for the final restoration and redemption of all things.

As believers in Christ, we know we will experience eternal restoration in God's kingdom at the return of Christ, the Messiah and Lord. We do not have to fear that sin, pagan nations, evil people or oppressive systems will have the last say. God will redeem and restore all those who have faith in Him.

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Tracy Riggs
The Alabama Baptist

God's masterpiece: Children's book author explains story behind 'Beloved'

Seven years after Dove Award-winning artist Jordan Feliz wrote a song to share God's love with his daughter, a book based on the song is sharing the message with a new audience.

Author Jess Woller wrote "Beloved," based on Feliz's song of the same name, because Feliz wanted to bring the song's message new life, to reinforce to his daughter and all of us that we are beloved, regardless of accomplishment or circumstance.

Feliz said he wrote and recorded "Beloved" as a prayer for his daughter.

"It is my deepest desire that you would never forget [your worth is found in Him]," Feliz said he told his daughter, Jolie. "Now it is a prayer that we get to proclaim over our entire family and the world!"

"Beloved" is Woller's second book. Though she has used writing as "a creative and emotional outlet" since she was a child — and even as a kindergartner knew she wanted to be an author — she discovered

as an adult that it wasn't her main goal after all.

She and her husband taught English in China for two years and once hitchhiked across the border into Thailand.

In perspective

"It was amazing," Woller remembered. "It was very eye opening. It really helped me put my worldview in perspective and appreciate other cultures and thought processes. It was good to help me think more about my life and what's important."

She now has four children, is a school secretary, Sunday School teacher, PTO president and evangelism volunteer, and she is working on a graduate degree in clinical mental health counseling.

"I like to be busy. I like to be useful," Woller said. "I like to allow God to work through me to help out whatever way I can."

While staying busy and useful, God began working in a new way in her life, Woller recalled — writing.

"I have always loved writing. I have always, always loved the magic of words and the catharsis that comes along with creating a story."

She started with blogging, then her first children's book, "Miraculous Debut," was published in 2019.

Woller didn't seek



Photos courtesy of Jess Woller

Jes Woller now has four children, is a school secretary, Sunday School teacher, PTO president and evangelism volunteer, and she is working on a graduate degree in clinical mental health counseling.

out involvement with "Beloved," she noted, but God used what she had done with blog posts and "Miraculous Debut."

After Feliz and Kory Henkel at Centricity Music decided to turn the song into a children's book, Henkel found a web post Woller

wrote for "Holy Hen House," a blogging group, and asked her to submit a manuscript.

"[Feliz] had written a little overview of why the song was important to him and his family, what it meant to him as a father to write it to Jolie and all of the significant elements that

he wanted brought into the book," Woller noted.

She was one of many who sent in ideas. When months went by and she heard nothing, she assumed her idea wasn't chosen. She got the news of her selection while on vacation.

"I was camping with my family at the time. ... I was just on cloud nine. I think I was like, 'This is it!' I don't think I've ever been so happy in all of my life!"

Being chosen didn't mean the work was over. Woller had to make changes until the manuscript was finished. The entire process took more than two years.

A lesson in patience wasn't all she learned personally, she said. The experience also helped her overcome feelings of insecurity.

"I might not have the readers or the agent or ... published experience other than my one small book, but they were willing to work with me anyway, and we came up with this beautiful book."

Created for His work

"It's something that I'm very proud of that's been a wonderful gift — to feel that God can use me even though I didn't feel qualified," she said.

One of Woller's favorite Scripture verses is Ephesians 2:10, which speaks of people being God's masterpiece, created for His work.

"That one has always been meaningful to me — that I am God's masterpiece. We used it in the book, and it has always been a favorite."

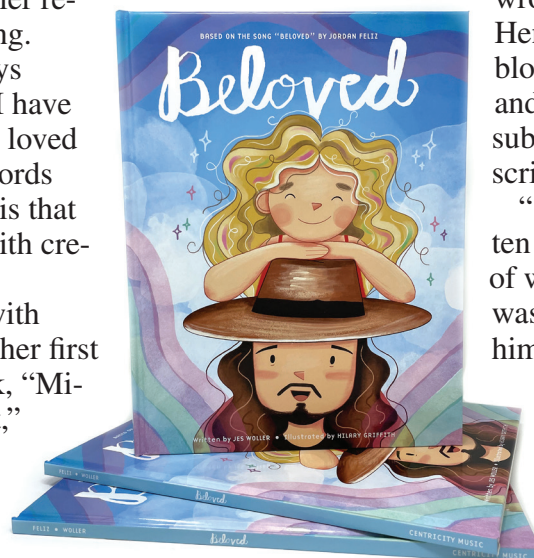
"Jolie is God's masterpiece, and I am God's masterpiece and you are God's masterpiece. It's such a privilege and we have work to do in this world — so let's get to it."

To learn more about Jordan Feliz's music and his upcoming tour, visit jordanfeliz.com.

To purchase the book "Beloved," visit jordanfeliz.com/BelovedBook.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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



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The Wellness Kitchen

"Nature is God's Wellness Kitchen where Food is Medicine."

By Pat Terry
The Wellness Kitchen

POMEGRANATE, CRANBERRY AND BRIE BRUSCHETTA

Makes 16 servings

INGREDIENTS:

3/4 cup pomegranate seeds	2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1/2 cup fresh or frozen chopped cranberries, thawed	1/8 teaspoon ground pepper
2 tablespoons sugar*	1 (8 ounce) wedge or 1 (6 ounce) log brie cheese, cut diagonally into 16 slices
1 tablespoon orange zest	1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh basil
1 dash salt	
6 ounces baguette-style French bread, cut diagonally into 16 slices	

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Combine pomegranate seeds, cranberries, sugar, orange zest and salt in a small bowl. Cover and chill up to three days.
2. To serve, preheat oven to 350 F. Place bread slices in a parchment paper-lined half sheet pan (18-by-13 inch). Lightly coat both sides of bread with olive oil, sprinkle with pepper. Bake 8 minutes, turning once. Top with cheese. Bake 4 minutes more or until cheese is softened.
3. Stir basil into pomegranate mixture and spoon on top of bruschetta. Serve warm.

*If using stevia, 1/2 teaspoon equals 2 tablespoons sugar

Adapted from eatingwell.com

What's in season right now? Pomegranates!

Pomegranates were probably native to the area around present-day Iran and Northern India and then spread to the Mediterranean, where they have been cultivated for thousands of years. Many of the world's oldest religions revered the pomegranate, and it became part of the art, architecture, folktales, literature and cuisine of many cultures. The cultivation and use of pomegranates moved on to China, Indonesia, Africa and Europe. By the 16th century, Spanish sailors brought the fruit to the new world. As a nutrient dense fruit with many health benefits, it was also used medicinally for thousands of years. A fall-winter fruit, pomegranates begin to ripen in September, just in time for the holidays.

Peak time: October to January

Average price: One whole for \$1.98 or 8 ounces of seeds for \$5.98

Nutritional highlights: The pomegranate is an amazing fruit. It is high in vitamins C and K as well as B vitamins, copper, magnesium, potassium and zinc. Pomegranates are high in phytonutrients that have antioxidant, antibacterial and antifungal properties. Research has shown that pomegranate compounds can potentially protect against several kinds of cancers. Pomegranate seeds are also an excellent source of dietary fiber and a good source of protein. However, if taking blood thinners or statins, pomegranates could interfere with these medications.



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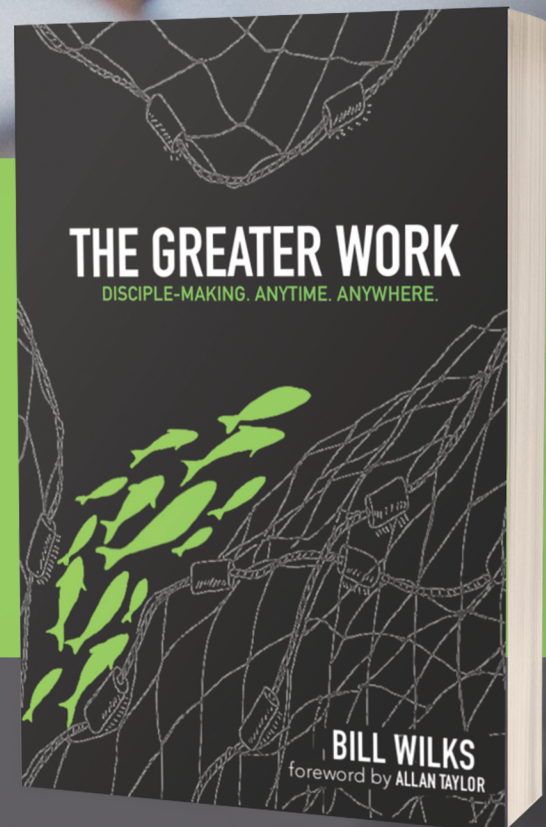
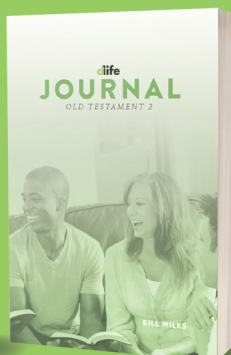
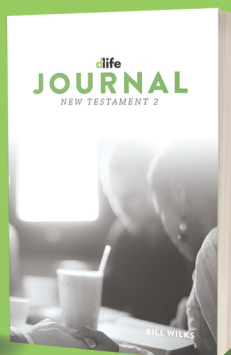
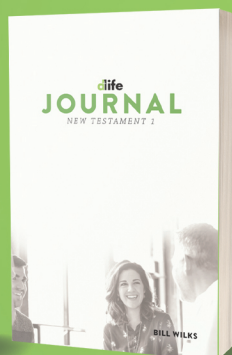
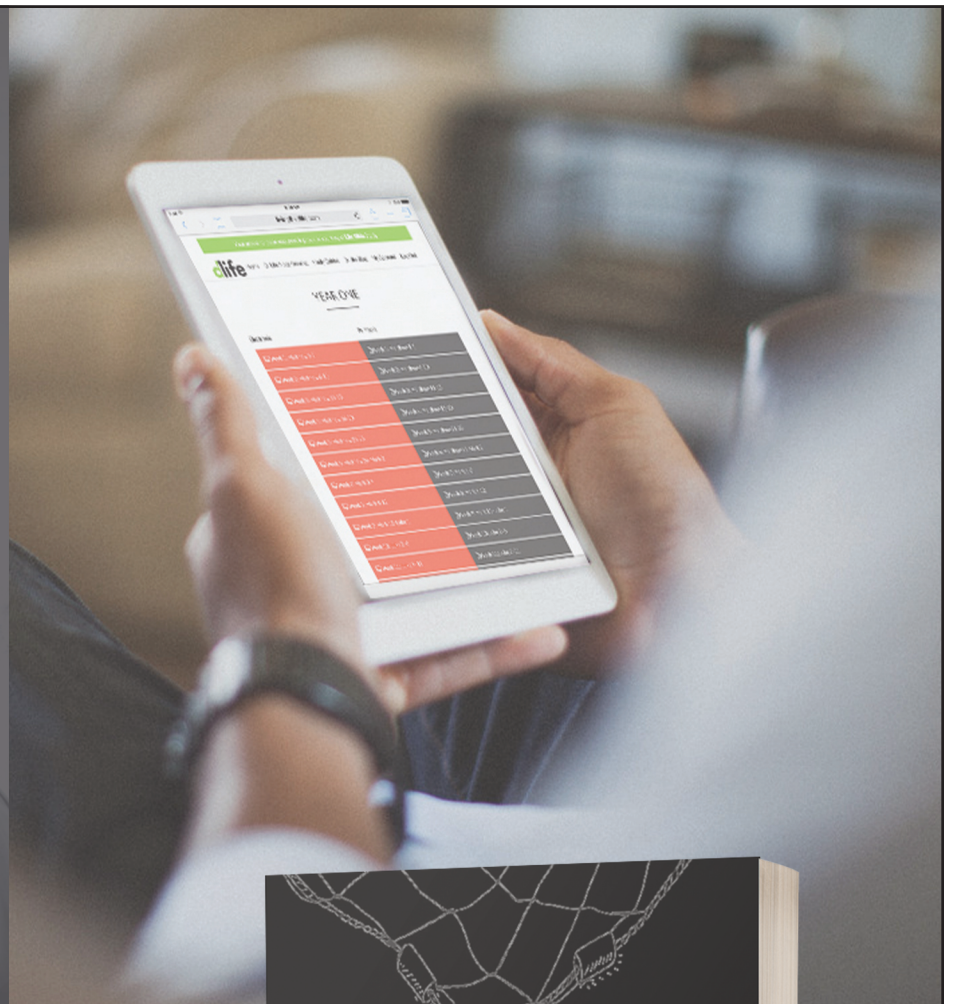
Pat Terry started The Wellness Kitchen as a way to share the knowledge she's acquired over the 30 years she served as a professor of nutrition and dietetics at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. Prior to her work at Samford, Terry was the first nonclinical dietitian appointed by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to serve overseas. Visit her website at thewellnesskitchenrd.com.



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Church growth

By Bonnie Shaw
Texas Baptists

Small changes make big difference for Texas church

When guests visit Coulter Road Baptist Church in Amarillo, Texas, they are greeted with clearly marked parking and a diverse welcome team.

Following their first visit to the church, guests are contacted by pastor Michael Dickey, who thanks them for attending and asks if they have any questions. From the moment visitors walk in, they have an easily understandable path to get involved and join the church.

This was not always the case though, Dickey explained.

In fact, Coulter Road Baptist has spent recent months intentionally simplifying and modifying their strategy for church visitors.

This was done in part through a partnership with Jonathan Smith, director of church health strategy with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, who meets with churches across Texas to evaluate all aspects of their church and ministry and identify room for growth.

Welcoming visitors

For Coulter Road Baptist, one of those growth areas was welcoming visitors.

Smith and the church worked to simplify the initial visitor experience with a focus on creating intentional connections with new guests.



Photo courtesy of Texas Baptists

Coulter Road Baptist Church in Amarillo, Texas, has spent the last months intentionally simplifying and modifying its strategy for church visitors.

Now when a visitor arrives, they are asked for their name and phone number.

The next day, guests receive a text message from Dickey asking if they have any questions about the church.

On guests' second visit, they are connected with a group of people in similar life stages, and on the third visit, they are plugged into a small group.

Dickey explained that Coulter Road's strategy changed to focus on what people really need when they arrive at a new church.

"Jonathan taught me something that I think I'd heard before, but it didn't stick," he explained. "He said there are three things people want: They want to find a friend, they want to find a future and they want to meet staff. And so we've really made it a point to do that."

Since introducing their new streamlined visitor system, they have had 10 new family units join their congregation.

Dickey has been surprised at the things that have drawn in new people.

One couple who had not been to church in a while was driving past the church on a Sunday when they saw the church's visitor parking signs. Even though they had not been planning on attending church that day, the signs attracted their attention, so they

stopped at the church and joined the worship service.

Above all, though, is Coulter Road's commitment to sharing the gospel with the people who walk through its doors. By late summer, the church had reported seven baptisms since January, more than double the number they baptized in 2021.

Encouraging others

Dickey encouraged other churches looking to analyze and re-vision their outreach strategies to get in touch with Smith and other members of the BGCT staff.

"I've really tried to become an advocate in our churches and say, 'Hey, reach out. If you have an issue, they have an answer.' It's made a huge difference," Dickey said.

As the church has honed its strategy for greeting and evangelizing new guests, they are now looking for ways to attract more members of their community.

Dickey explained they are not looking for members of other

churches, but to reach people who have no church home.

This summer, the church hosted a Vacation Bible School with 105 kids in attendance.

Even after the week ended, members have been following up

with the families and creating lasting bonds. They are also launching a Mother's Day Out program to get to know local families.

"We are not there just for the people already in the pews. We're there for those that aren't here yet," Dickey said. "It's all about including those that aren't here yet and reaching those that are lost."

"IT'S ALL ABOUT INCLUDING THOSE THAT AREN'T HERE YET AND REACHING THOSE THAT ARE LOST."

PASTOR MICHAEL DICKEY
COULTER ROAD BAPTIST CHURCH IN AMARILLO, TEXAS

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Speaking truth

By Marilyn Stewart

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

NOBTS student finds RV campgrounds a fertile missions field

Traveling by RV with her husband had been a long-time dream for Karla Rossi-Gonzalez. When her dream came true a year ago, she discovered something surprising about RV campgrounds.

“[RV campers] are very open, much more so than in the secular world. ... People are just willing to talk,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez is a Caskey Center for Church Excellence scholarship recipient and a Leavell College student in women’s ministry.

She and her husband, Henry Gonzalez, a New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary graduate and pastor of a Hispanic church in their hometown, Lafayette, Louisiana, have shared the gospel and ministered to many in RV camps as they travel.

As a Caskey student, Gonzalez is required to share the gospel weekly. At the campground, meeting that requirement is easy, she said.

“There’s something different about being in the RV park,” Gonzalez said.

“They’re friendly. It’s easier to open yourself, and they open themselves and allow you to talk.”

The full-tuition Caskey scholarship for qualifying NOBTS and Leavell College students provides



NOBTS photo

Karla Rossi-Gonzalez is a Caskey Center for Church Excellence scholarship recipient. As a Caskey student, she is required to share the gospel weekly. Gonzalez and her husband, Henry, a NOBTS graduate and pastor of a Hispanic church, have shared the gospel and ministered to many in RV camps as they travel.

financial assistance allowing students to serve on church staffs and engage in weekly evangelism while earning their degrees.

‘True transformation’

Recently, Gonzalez saw a woman camper come to faith in Christ who feared her marriage was ending.

Gonzalez recounted the woman’s story that as newlyweds

the husband had been faithful to church, but gradually stopped going as he adopted his wife’s secular, party-centered lifestyle.

“She felt guilty,” Gonzalez explained, and recounted the wife regretted how their lifestyle had disintegrated their marriage.

“I told her how God heals our hearts and that He’s the one who can do the true transformation of a person’s heart,” Gonzalez said.

“You can’t do that, but when you give your life to Christ, He does the transformation.”

Gonzalez credited a book required in one of her Caskey classes, “Making Friends for Christ” by Wayne McDill, for helping her

see how friendship can open doors for the gospel.

“I took that to heart,” she said. “I need to be friends with them so they can see Christ in me.”

Blake Newsom, Caskey Center director, said believers are often fearful about starting gospel conversations, and seminary students feel the same way.

Typical starting point

For Caskey students, fear and inexperience is the typical starting point.

“We assume they’re afraid. We assume they’re less bold than they need to be,” Newsom said. “And we want to help them in that.”

Most students coming into the Caskey program want to be better at sharing the gospel, Newsom explained, adding that practice and accountability are key to gaining confidence.

“More often than not, we see them realizing the benefit of sharing weekly and growing more comfortable in sharing the gospel,” Newsom said.

Whenever Gonzalez and her husband now travel with their RV, doors open where they can minister, counsel, encourage and lead others to faith in Christ.

As campers realize the couple is willing to listen, their “hearts open like layers they are peeling away,” Gonzalez said.

“God has used us while we’re in this little RV,” Gonzalez said, adding she is humbled at “the magnitude of the fact that God uses you no matter where you are.”

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KARLA ROSSI-GONZALEZ
CASKEY CENTER STUDENT