

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

‘Policy affects our lives’

ALCAP’s Davis urges Christian leaders to get involved, use influence for good

By Michael J. Brooks
The Alabama Baptist

Policy affects our lives, and Christian leaders cannot ignore issues, isolate themselves or be intimidated by opposition,” said Greg Davis, president and CEO of Alabama Citizens Action Program. “Instead, we must use our influence for good.”

Sharing during the Jan. 30 ALCAP board of directors meeting, Davis said, “We want to be proactive in speaking out on moral issues.

“Churches and individuals have given generously to our ministry, and now I believe I can say ‘We can do it’ when people ask for our help.

“It’s all about relationships,” Davis noted. “I’ve been meeting church leaders around the state and making friendships in the State House. I want legislators to know we care about them no matter their political party.”

Davis also reported his 2024 activities during the board meeting.

“I represented ALCAP in churches for

24 Sundays and spent 70 nights away from home,” he said. “We



Photo by Doug Rogers
Rep. Scott Stadthagen of Hartselle shares updates with ALCAP’s board of directors.



Photo by Doug Rogers

Bill Johnston, interim pastor of Cropwell Baptist Church in Pell City, stepped in as the new chair of the ALCAP board of directors, beginning Jan. 30.

sponsored 13 prayer breakfasts for legislators, and I’ve spoken at numerous political meetings about issues of moral importance.”

Davis also invited Rep. Scott Stadthagen, a homebuilder and member of First Baptist Church Hartselle, to share with board members.

Stadthagen, who was elected in 2018 and now serves as majority leader in the Alabama House, urged board members to get to know their state senators and representatives and pray for all who serve in government roles.

Also, during the meeting, Chris

Crain, executive director of Birmingham Metro Baptist Association, concluded his five years of service as ALCAP board chair.

Business items

Bill Johnston, interim pastor of Cropwell Baptist Church in Pell City, is the new board chair.

Johnston, who previously served as the board’s finance committee chair, reported ALCAP is in a healthy financial position but continues to need more churches to consider adding ALCAP to their budget.

Board members also met Todd Russell, bivocational pastor of Mountain Hill Baptist Church in Lapine, who recently retired from a position with the state of Alabama and joined the ALCAP team as a legislative liaison.

ALCAP leadership includes (l to r) immediate past board chair Chris Crain, current board chair Bill Johnston, president and CEO Greg Davis and bivocational pastor Todd Russell, who recently joined the ALCAP team as legislative liaison.



Photo by Doug Rogers

Spotlight
on Christian **Higher Education**

See the special section

A dream revived

Birmingham food, financial assistance ministry opens 2nd site after merger

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

John Gibson said Serving You Ministries in Birmingham — which offers food and financial assistance — has been looking toward opening a second site for a couple of years now.

That dream became a reality Jan. 1 when The Grace Place in Bessemer merged with Serving You to become Serving You Ministries @ The Grace Place.

Gibson said it was a natural fit. “The boards (of both organizations) are likeminded; we do a lot of similar stuff,” said Gibson, Serving You executive director. “We’re continuing to do the exact same thing.”

Both sites will offer food and financial assistance to families in need, as well as adding a couple of new components to their greater umbrella of ministry. For one, The Grace Place has a clothes closet, which Serving You doesn’t have.

“It will be nice to offer that to our families as a place they can go for clothes,” Gibson said.

Serving You also has a service called ELI Thrive, which helps families find safe and sustainable housing as well as create budgets, make goals and develop their work skills.

Gibson said they will add ELI Thrive coaches to the offerings of The Grace Place sometime midyear.

Thinking outside the box

The whole idea for the second site started two years ago when the leadership of Serving You began working toward a second location in Ensley, but things “came to a halt.”

That dream was revived a few months ago when Gibson got the



Vern Fallin unpacks a box of food at The Grace Place in Bessemer. On Jan. 1, The Grace Place merged with Serving You to become Serving You Ministries @ The Grace Place. Both sites offer food and financial assistance to families in need.

call from the leadership of The Grace Place.

Morrell Dodd, who at the time was chair of the board for The Grace Place, said they had been praying and looking for a new director to lead the 10-year-old ministry. They struggled to find someone who would be able to take it on as a part-time role, so they began looking toward what it would take to make it a full-time position.

Dodd said they reached out to Gibson to ask some questions about what that might involve based on how Serving You did it. But when they did, Gibson suggested they consider thinking outside the box, and he floated the idea of a merger.

“They had been looking for a ministry location on this side of town for about two years, and it became very obvious to us that God was leading us to join them,” said Dodd, a member of Hunter Street



Facebook/The Grace Place

Baptist Church in Hoover. “We’re absolutely convinced this is going to be a good thing.”

Gibson agreed and said he is grateful for the faithful volunteers who keep The Grace Place running, meeting tangible needs and praying with people who come in.

“It’s a good place, and we’re looking forward to renovating and expanding it even more in the future,” he said.

The Alabama Baptist

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

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JENNIFER DAVIS RASH
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF


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The crossword puzzle
can be found on page 11.



Rashional Thoughts

By Jennifer Davis Rash
President and Editor-in-Chief

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Attempting to understand the full scope of Send Relief

When the compassion ministry partnership between the International Mission Board and North American Mission Board — Send Relief — was announced five years ago (Feb. 18, 2020), I'm guessing the leaders never dreamed their first assignments would be in response to a global pandemic.

But with Bryant Wright, founding pastor of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia, installed as president March 2 of that year, Send Relief officials were able to get right to work.

Wright has focused mainly on public relations and fundraising for Send Relief, and his position is funded by IMB and NAMB, each providing 50% of his salary.

While Wright reports directly to both IMB president Paul Chitwood and NAMB president Kevin Ezell, two vice presidents oversee the ministry efforts — one for national work and one for global work. But beginning April 1 the vice presidents will continue their work without a president. Wright is wrapping up his role March 31.

According to a NAMB news report released Feb. 3, "Wright's

retirement marks a new season in Send Relief's partnership between NAMB and IMB. Ezell and Chitwood will give leadership to Send Relief while (the two vice presidents of Send Relief) will be overseeing the team members from each mission board."

We've asked NAMB officials to share more about what "a new season" in the partnership means and will report back when we have those details.

Back in 2020 Ezell described the organizational structure of Send Relief "like a bow tie." "The Send Relief president is the knot while Paul is at the top of one corner and I'm at the top of the other corner, and the vice presidents are at the bottom corners," Ezell explained.

USAID funds

As Send Relief receives a wardrobe update and no longer sports the "bow tie" look, it now faces questions related to funds it received through World Relief in 2024 — funds that originated from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The \$70,000 was used to assist in refugee resettlement efforts at the request of World Relief and

was only used in legal situations, a NAMB spokesperson said Feb. 10.

It has been reported throughout the past five years that Send Relief was set up to be able to receive funding from a variety of sources such as the government as long as no restrictions came with the funds.

It's similar to how Southern Baptist Disaster Relief partners with FEMA, and how Samaritan's Purse receives USAID funds. The money is distributed to trusted groups who can assist with needed humanitarian efforts, especially in crises.

Ministrywatch.com reported in early February that USAID funds for Samaritan's Purse were not part of the money recently frozen while USAID is being investigated.

The ministry organization run by Franklin Graham has reportedly received more than \$90 million in USAID during the past four years, according to ministrywatch.com, quoting research by brookings.edu.

If this report is accurate, then Graham has deemed the acceptance of humanitarian-related funds connected to the U.S. government as acceptable and not a compromise of their faith-based mission. It seems logical to think other faith-based groups, such as Send Relief,

would be granted the same courtesy. Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense for Send Relief leaders to compromise any part of their mission for such a small amount of funds.

Not worth the risk

More than \$43 million was reported in donations in 2023 (official 2024 financials have not yet been released), so \$70,000 wouldn't be worth the risk of losing the trust of Baptists.

Is it true that information related to Send Relief has been difficult to decipher? From our experience, yes, but some days I can understand why NAMB and IMB leaders hesitate to share more details.

If the result of providing specifics leads to unfair reports by some, then those experiences have likely conditioned the people in power to pull back for self-preservation, which in turn hurts all involved.

Those of us who strive for the highest of journalistic ethics and work to present calm, fact-based, fair reporting become collateral damage because of a few who choose to weaponize and manipulate pieces of information for personal gain.

Your Voice



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

First person: The danger of false positives

By Pastor Adam Dooley
Englewood Baptist Church

Though it's been several years ago now, I still remember one of the more exciting trips to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital with my son during his battle with childhood leukemia.

Back in those days we lived in Mobile, Alabama, requiring us to fly for weekly chemotherapy in Memphis. Over a three-year period, we made 128 consecutive trips in order to jump-start and protect my son's remission from cancer.

Misleading consequences

While passing through security on our return trip, a Ziploc bag containing a bottle of medication tested positive for a small amount of glycerin, which can be used to make explosives. Quickly, TSA workers surrounded us with a bomb sniffing dog. They pulled us aside and began a battery of tests. Thankfully, our faces were familiar, and employees recognized us. My son's glistening, bald head gave away our recent trip to the hospital.

Still, it was only after several minutes of awkward suspicion and investigation that we were allowed to pass through the security checkpoint. Turns out it was a false positive caused by a melting icepack that was cooling the medication. The whole ordeal got me thinking about the misleading consequences of false impressions, which can leave us happy or scared depending on what they report.

For example, you might be overjoyed initially only to be disappointed later if a pregnancy test falsely reveals that the child you've prayed for is on the way. Or you might be immediately frightened when airport security suspects foul play as you travel, even if you are able to laugh about it afterward. The problem, though, is that neither reaction is trustworthy. False positives are dangerous because they invite us to live outside of reality based upon something that is not true.

Unfortunately, American Christianity has its share of false positives.

Many Bible teachers are anxious to assure their listeners that God's primary goal is our personal happiness. Others insist that hell cannot be real because a loving God would never allow anyone to go there. Notions of remaining in sin while following Jesus is the most damning false positive of all. These untruthful assertions are usually received with enthusiasm, but they create a false narrative about WHO Jesus is and WHAT He came to do.

The historical reality that God would sacrifice His Son to deal with our sin problem is insulting to some and downright barbaric to others. Retired Methodist theologian William Willimon fairly critiqued, "If you listen to much of our preaching, you get the impression that Jesus was some sort of itinerant therapist

who, for free, traveled about helping people feel better."

Thankfully, Jesus had a way of turning our temporal ambitions on their head in order to focus on what we really need. Take, for example, the familiar story of Jesus healing the paralytic (Matt. 9:1-8). Without question, this man's burdens were significant. He could not walk, eat or bathe without the help of others and, by consequence, he was an outcast in society. We can hardly blame his friends for attempting to help him.

Rather than heal the man immediately, though, Jesus said to him, "Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven (Matt. 9:2)." By doing so, Jesus reminded us that our temporal burdens are merely symptoms of our greatest needs. He is not a Savior who came to improve the quality of our lives (though He often does), but who came to forgive our sins. Yet popular false positives deceive us into believing that God solving our earthly problems is more important than His addressing our eternal condition.

God's authority

Because the scribes accused Jesus of blasphemy (Matt. 9:3), He immediately exposed their blindness with a piercing question. Is it easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or "Get up and walk (Matt. 9:5)?" Amazingly, Jesus chose to heal the paralytic in order to demonstrate His authority to forgive sins, not distract

from it (Matt. 9:6). The real goal was much bigger than the man's physical healing. In fact, had Jesus only forgiven the paralytic's transgressions it would not have solved his greatest threat.

Eternal health

I am not suggesting that we should not seek God's intervention when trials come. During my son's fight against cancer, I repeatedly begged the Lord to heal him. Yet we often equate our present comforts as an indicator of our eternal health.

Our desperation for temporary relief from earthly troubles often far exceeds our concern about spiritual matters. Even worse, we sometimes reduce God's faithfulness to His meeting our immediate needs:

God, show me a miracle and prove you're real.

God, answer this prayer and prove you're real.

God, give me what I want and prove you're real.

God, heal me and prove you're real.

God, open this door and prove you're real.

Tragically, expressions of temporary grace often grip us more than eternal realities. Our need for forgiveness though is so urgent that we ought to be willing to lose this life entirely in order to receive it from Christ (Matt. 16:24-27). Nothing is more necessary and nothing is more remarkable than the glorious truth that Jesus would come to seek and to save the lost.



DOOLEY

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EDITOR'S NOTE — Adam Dooley is pastor of Englewood Baptist Church in Jackson, Tennessee.

OPINION

“It is against the backdrop of adversity and darkness that we most often recognize the presence of God in our lives.”

PASTOR BOBBY MCKAY
Mississippi

“Besides seeing people getting saved, my favorite part of our ministry experience is the fact that everyone gets to play on the obstacle course,” noted four-time contestant on the reality TV show “American Ninja Warrior” and youth speaker **Jared Greer**. “There are usually several moments where people cannot beat an obstacle on the first or even third, fourth or fifth attempt, but they persevere. The crowd encourages them to keep going, and they eventually conquer the obstacle. It’s such an awesome life lesson.”

If your Christianity causes you to be offended by someone asking the most powerful person in the country to be merciful towards the powerless, then you have profoundly misunderstood the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Benjamin Cremer
@brcrer.bsky.social on X

Apathy is one of the greatest enemies of godly leadership. The temptation to withdraw from the challenges of the world is strong, but it is not an option for those who follow Christ.

Craig Carlisle
Etowah Baptist Association

Being a good dad carries far beyond discipline.

Being a good dad means identifying, cultivating and nurturing the good gifts that the Heavenly Father has already placed in our kids.

Daniel Ritchie
@DanielRitchie on X

“We must understand that our goal as believers is to seek what we can do to please God, not what He can do for us.”

Charles Colson
political adviser

“Childhood is such a brief period of time. You cannot go back and create the time of childhood. We as parents must use and find opportunities to teach children Christ-like values and Bible stories in the short period they are children,” writes **Carolyn Tomlin** on helping children grow in Christian values.

“Last year, our budget for the baby pantry was \$600, but we gave away over \$60,000 worth of diapers, \$30,000 in wipes and \$50,000 in formula. It’s just an incredible testimony to what the Lord can do with five fish and two loaves of bread. ... When you operate on faith and the Lord is behind

you, you’re going to see fruit,” says **Becky Delisio**, director and founder of a monthly baby and toddler pantry — supplying hundreds of families with free diapers, wipes, formula, clothing and other necessities — with Jessup Baptist Church in Maryland. In addition, partnering with a YoungLives group, the church also has a quarterly pantry for teen moms.

“The Bible is a very convicting book,” said 88-year-old **Margurette Robison**, who lives near Tupelo, Mississippi. She spent three-and-a-half-years writing out the Bible word-for-word. She completed her task Jan. 14. “I’d memorized Scripture before, but as

far as knowing the background of the Scripture, my daughters knew much more about it than I did. Doing this was convicting. It’s been such a blessing ... it was like having a good devotional every day.”

“It’s fun to get awards. It’s awesome to hear my songs being played on Christian radio,” writes singer-songwriter **Micah Tyler**. “But at the end of the day, my first calling is to be a husband and a dad. Those are the moments I’m looking to in the future — the things that God started when I took these kids home from the hospital and while serving with my wife of 20 years — to see what the next steps are going to be.”

“It’s a great feeling of unity and recognizing that the legislative issues matter,” said **Greg Davis**, president of Alabama Citizens Action Program. “It’s important when things matter that we pray about those things.”

“No one drifts toward evangelism,” said evangelist **Scott Dawson**. “You have to be driven toward it. The gospel changes lives. Preach the gospel. Jesus can change anybody’s life.”

“God is constantly pursuing the people on your prayer list. He may make a way for you to have a gospel conversation with them yourself, or he may send someone else. Perhaps you may have the privilege of being the answer to someone else’s prayer for their loved one. God is the great Shepherd who leaves the 99 to pursue the lost one out of His great love. Don’t stop praying!” said Coast Guard veteran **Jennifer Smith**, who serves as leader of the missions team for Lincoln Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Illinois, and shared about her missions trip experience to Greenland.



3 stories you should know



Photo by Grace Thornton/The Alabama Baptist

Baptist Health Foundation, a faith-based nonprofit, announced Feb. 3 it has a new logo that reaffirms its commitment as a partner to Baptist Health System, which was founded to further the healing ministry of Christ and provide a Christian environment for clinical education and practice. The new redesigned logo honors the foundation's legacy of Christian ministry by keeping the signature "Baptist Blue" cross featured prominently in the new design, while also incorporating parts of the new Baptist Health logo.

Convicted killer of Texas pastor executed

Texas executed Steven Nelson on Feb. 5 for the 2011 murder of Clint Dobson, pastor of North-Pointe Baptist Church in Arlington.

Nelson was sentenced to die after a jury found him guilty of capital murder for beating and suffocating the 28-year-old pastor in his church office during a robbery attempt.

Church secretary Judy Elliott also was beaten severely and left for dead but survived the assault. She died last September.

Dobson earned his undergraduate degree from Baylor University and his master of divinity degree from Baylor's Truett Theological Seminary, where he was named 2008 Preacher of the Year.

Nelson's spiritual adviser Jeff Hood was in the death chamber when Nelson received a lethal injection. (Texas' Baptist Standard)

Retired missionary dies following attack in home

Family, friends and others in the Orlando community are mourning the loss of 85-year-old Lucy Pat Curl, a retired missionary and long-time pastor's wife who died after being attacked Jan. 31 during a home invasion. She died Feb. 5.

Curl served alongside her husband, Bill, who worked in pastoral care ministry at First Baptist Church Orlando. The couple previously were missionaries with the International Mission Board.

Ronald D. Davis, 55, has been charged with first-degree murder after allegedly attacking Curl while her husband, Bill, was away working. Davis also faces home invasion robbery with a weapon, aggravated battery on a person over 65 with great bodily harm and aggravated battery with a weapon. (The Baptist Paper)

Faith Moments: *The joy of giving*

By Rob Jackson
Director of evangelism and church revitalization, Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions



The older I get, the more joy I find in giving to the Lord. I am profoundly grateful God allows us to make a meaningful financial difference through our local church. The privilege and discipline of giving are essential aspects of the Christian life and vital to a healthy church.

Here are a few insights into the joy of giving:

1. God owns everything (Ps. 24:1). Our giving is simply returning a portion of what He has entrusted to us.

2. We are called to be faithful stewards. God holds us accountable for how we manage the resources He provides. Luke 12:48 states, "To whom much is given, from him much will be required."

3. We give because we love God. A good question is, would you still give if no one ever

knew? Some people love "the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:43). True generosity, however, is rooted in love for Him, not recognition from others.

4. We give the best and the first to God. The Bible speaks of offering your "first fruits" to God (Prov. 3:9). It makes sense. God deserves our best. An important note is that Christians give to God through His church. You don't give to the church. I have known people who give to the church stop giving to the church when they don't get their way.

5. A good starting point is 10%. Some argue that tithing was part of the law and no longer applies. However, Abraham gave a tenth to Melchizedek — a priest who foreshadowed Christ — long before the law was given (Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5–7). By the way, a heart that loves to give never argues about a "minimum."

6. Giving is an act of worship. It pleases the Lord when you give. It was the poor widow's gift that caught the attention of Christ (Mark 12:41–44). It's not the amount but the sacrifice that honors Him most.

7. The church is a channel to bless others rather than a storehouse. My father pastored a church with a large financial reserve when I was young. I remember seeing many leaders fidgeting in the pew as he boldly reminded the congregation that "we are in the Kingdom-building business, not the banking business." This statement doesn't mean churches shouldn't have financial reserves, but hoarding wealth instead of using it for God's work is unbiblical.

8. Guard your heart against the love of money. "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap" (1 Tim. 6:9–10), so we are to guard our hearts "against the love of

riches" (Prov. 4:23). John Wesley reportedly gave away money as soon as he received it, fearing it might take hold of his heart.

9. Make giving a primary objective in obtaining wealth. Proverbs 23:4–5 warns against chasing riches for their own sake. God gives, in part, so that we can give. Years ago, a friend promised to give God 50% of the money he received. Today, he gives an astronomical amount from his 1,000 oil wells.

May we all embrace the joy and privilege of giving, trusting that God will use our generosity for His glory. Join me in asking God for more resources to further His Kingdom.

OBITUARIES

DON BENNETT

Don Bennett, a former pastor and Baptist campus minister at the University of Alabama (1981 to 1990), died Feb. 5. He was 84.

He also served as a campus minister for North Georgia College and Georgia College as well as pastor of Little Sandy Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, Highland Baptist Church in Gordo and Mount Hebron East Baptist Church in Eclectic.

He was the husband of Mary Sue, who for 16 years served as special assistant to Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. Mary Sue also assisted Lance during his time as pastor of First Baptist Church Tuscaloosa.

The Bennetts married in 1967 after meeting at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Bennett held a bachelor's degree from Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and a bachelor of divinity and master of divinity from Southern Seminary.

He is preceded in death by his granddaughter, Mary Catherine. He is survived by his wife; son, John; daughter, Susan; and four grandchildren.

WILLIAM THOMAS
"TOM" ESPY

William Thomas "Tom" Espy, an International Mission Board missionary emeritus who served in the United Kingdom, died Dec. 13. He was 87.

Espy, who was born in Gadsden, received a bachelor of arts from Howard College (now Samford University) in Birmingham and a master of theology from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

He came to faith in Christ as a child and felt the call to full-time Christian service as a teen. Before attending Howard College, he joined the U.S. Army, serving for two years.

During a seminary chapel, he heard a missionary speak and

felt impressed by the needs of the world.

After seminary, he served as pastor for several churches in Mississippi and Alabama. In 1992, on the December cover of The Commission magazine, he saw the question, "Can you really say: Lord, I'm willing to go ... if all the while you're planning to stay?"

In 2000, the IMB appointed Tom and Ann missionaries to Wales. They had already served in Wales for two shorter terms.

Tom is survived by his wife of 62 years; two sons, Terry and Todd; a daughter, Amy; 14 grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

JAMES EDWARD
GIBSON JR.

James Edward Gibson Jr., who served in ministry in Alabama for nearly 20 years, died Jan. 31. He was 87.

Gibson attended Baptist Bible Institute (now Baptist University of Florida) in Graceville, Florida, before transferring to New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

He served as pastor of several churches in Mississippi as well as a brief pastorate in Toledo, Ohio, before serving at Bethel Baptist Church in Robertsdale from 1990 to 2005. He then served as senior adult minister for First Baptist Church Birmingham from 2005 to 2009.

Following his role at FBC Birmingham, Gibson served as pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Meridian. He retired in 2013 and moved to Bessemer.

Gibson is preceded in death by his wife of 65 years, Bettye, and son, Jim. He is survived by his daughter, Debbie; son, Mark; six grandchildren; and 11 great-grandchildren.



ESPY



BENNETT



GIBSON

Alabama news

CLARKE

► Tyler Hayes is the new pastor of Midway Baptist Church, Thomasville.

He previously served at Coffeeville First Baptist Church. Hayes and his wife, Raegan, have three children.



Facebook photo

COOSA RIVER

► Garry Wyatt is the new pastor of Patton Chapel Baptist Church, Lincoln. He previously served as pastor of Oak Grove Baptist Church, Munford, and other churches in



Photo courtesy of Garry Wyatt

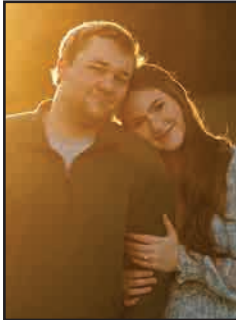
Alabama, Georgia and Indiana. Wyatt has been in ministry over 40 years and

holds a bachelor of science degree in Christian ministries from Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, Indiana. He and his wife of 55 years, Faye, have one daughter.

TENNESSEE RIVER

► Mitchell McKenzie, shown here with his wife Jenna, is the new youth pastor of Woodville Baptist Church. He

holds a bachelor's degree in secondary education from University of the Cumberlands, Williamsburg, Kentucky, and is a teacher and coach at Woodville High School.





Submitted photo

BIRMINGHAM METRO

► Event for grandparents at Shades Mountain Baptist Church (Feb. 21-22). For more information, visit legacycoalition.com/summit.


ALABAMA NEWS ITEMS COMPILED BY KRISTI ENT AND DEBBIE CAMPBELL



Celebrating
75 Years of Ministry

CIRCLEWOOD BAPTIST CHURCH
February 23, 2025 | 10:30 AM

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with Dr. Gil McKee as guest preacher

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Birthing new hope

Revitalized church in Leeds celebrates 10 years of God's faithfulness, goodness

By Tracy Riggs Frontz
The Alabama Baptist

Eden Westside Baptist Church in Pell City recently celebrated the 10th anniversary of its River Campus in Leeds, having been revitalized from Cahaba View Baptist Church that closed its doors in 2013.

Jacky Connell serves as pastor of Eden Westside Baptist, which is one church with two locations. The main campus is in Pell City, and its service is livestreamed to the River Campus each week.

During the Jan. 12 anniversary event, the sanctuary was packed with a joy-filled church family watching a presentation of memories, celebrating those who had been baptized there and remembering how it all began.

Unexpected meeting

On Nov. 14, 2014, Connell's assistant told him he had a meeting he needed to attend but didn't know details other than who it was with — Larry Fine and a former mayor of Leeds, Jack Courson.

After some small talk in Connell's office at Eden Westside, Connell asked why they were there.

"I didn't know what this was all about. Sitting on the couch in my office, Larry was crying — a 70-something-year-old man crying. He looked at me and said, 'God sent us here to talk to you. Our church in our community shut down and locked its doors. God sent us here to ask you if you would come and pastor that church.'" Connell said.

Courson had bought the old church's property "for pennies on the dollar" and wanted to get the church going again.

After Connell got over the shock of the offer, he reminded them he was currently pastor of a church.



Photo by Tracy Riggs Frontz/The Alabama Baptist

Eden Westside Baptist Church celebrates the 10th anniversary of its River Campus in Leeds after having been revitalized from Cahaba View Baptist Church that began in 1939 but had closed its doors in 2013.

However, after thinking about it, he proposed three actions he could take. First, he could do nothing. Second, he could connect them with someone who helps with church revitalization. Third, he would be available for them to call anytime to ask for advice, saying that he knew what not to do.

Fine started crying again and said that wasn't what God told him. Courson said he was preaching anyway and asked if they could "satellite" him in, also offering to pay for everything needed until Easter.

If no one came, they would lock it back up. If people started coming, then they could take over the mortgage.

Just before Christmas in 2014, Eden Westside's leaders met at the church and prayed, dedicating it to the Lord. Then, with the help of the deacons and members, they got the

musty building ready to open by the second Sunday in January 2015.

On that Sunday while church leaders were making final preparations for the service, a man pulled up in the parking lot and asked what they were doing.

Mickey Pinson, chair of the deacons, led the man to Jesus in the parking lot — even before the church officially opened its doors.

Since that day, Eden Westside River Campus has had 80 people join, with 15 baptized there. Connell said the River Campus is birthing new hope for other churches struggling to continue.

He shared four things that are necessary for revitalization:

1. Commitment — Not giving up on God and recommitting to the mission of God's calling, shown through service.

2. Change — Embracing the change that is a part of growth (not doctrine or the biblical message but the methods used).

3. Church — Believing that God can get life back into the church.

4. Continuation — Persevering and knowing that if the church dies, there are people who then won't hear about Jesus.

The anniversary celebration closed with Chris Crain, executive director for Birmingham Metro Baptist Association, giving the church a plaque with an official resolution for 10 years of ministry.

Crain shared how, when he was a volunteer moderator for the association in 2013, he heard when Cahaba Baptist closed.

"I remember the feeling that a lighthouse had gone out in this community. When I started in my role now, in 2019, I remember being invited to that (5th anniversary) celebration here. I'll tell you folks, I really couldn't believe what God had done to this place. I was just blown away," Crain said.

The story of Eden Westside encouraged Crain to start an office of revitalization in the Birmingham Metro Association.

Earlier in the service, Rick Earnest, teaching pastor of Eden Westside, summed up the sentiment of the day.

"It's not buildings that make churches. It's people. You know when those folks who had been baptized stood up, there's something that struck me.

"Even more so than the thankfulness I feel seeing the lives that have been changed by the love of Christ — those same people who stood up are serving in this church. They are not just people who God saved and are sitting. They're serving. They are being the Church."



Photo by Travis Frontz/The Alabama Baptist

Eden Westside Baptist Church leaders Jacky Connell (left) and Rick Earnest help celebrate the 10th anniversary of the River Campus.

Gilbreath: Gospel invitations need ‘urgency’

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Sammy Gilbreath said if a pastor woke up on Sunday morning and God told him, “Today is going to be Joe’s last Sunday,” he bets the message and invitation “would have a sense of urgency about it.”

“Because we don’t know who will be back, approach every invitation with that

kind of urgency,” said Gilbreath, retired director of the office of evangelism at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

Six tips

Gilbreath suggests six aspects of an effective invitation:

1. **The invitation has got to burn with compassion.** “I want you to look them

straight in the face and be compassionate.”

Gilbreath suggested taking the timing of both the message and the invitation into consideration when planning the service.

When you do this, you can afford to be patient and give people time to respond without the congregation getting restless because you’re running over time, he said.

Be patient, plan the music and lower your voice when transitioning to the invitation, he added.

Gilbreath also cautioned against doing the invitation the same way every time — people may tune out what you’re saying.

2. **The invitation has to be bold because of consecration.** “I can’t give an invitation because I’m perfect, but I can give it because I’m clean,” Gilbreath said.

It [should be] perfectly clear to them.”

4. **The invitation should be born out of claiming others to be saved.** Gilbreath said when he gives an invitation, he also often asks people to come forward to pray for someone they know who doesn’t know Christ yet.

“What I’ve done is set the table for the next Sunday and the next Sunday,” he said. “Your invitation needs



Photo by Dianna Cagle/The Alabama Baptist
SAMMY GILBREATH

- “How am I going to preach on the sanctity of marriage if I’m being unfaithful to my wife?”
- Sin is alive and well, and “Satan is trying to destroy us,” he said. “If he destroys our preaching and our credibility, we can’t give that invitation.”
3. **The invitation has to be beautiful because of clarity.**

Gilbreath said evangelist Billy Graham would start giving his invitation the moment he stood up to speak.

“He would say a dozen times, ‘in just a moment I’m going to ask you to get up out of your chair and come down here,’” Gilbreath said.

Everyone there knew what was coming and what they would be asked to do, he said. “Clarity is so, so important. Make sure that you have prepared ahead of time what you want to emphasize in that invitation and how you’re going to emphasize it.

to be building for weeks to come as they’re praying for those people who are lost.”

Claim others in that invitation time, Gilbreath said.

5. **The invitation should be a time backed by counselors.** Gilbreath said even though he chose the word “counselors” here, churches shouldn’t call them counselors because they aren’t licensed professional counselors — these are deacons, Bible study leaders or others trained in evangelism.

Congregations can get in legal trouble if they call their leaders “counselors,” he said.

But enlisting church members to be ready to help at the invitation is vital, Gilbreath said.

6. **The invitation has to be bathed in celebration.** Make sure the invitation has a place to celebrate what God has just done, Gilbreath said.



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UPCOMING EVENTS

sponsored by the State Board of Missions

One Day Event Prepares Students for Summer Missions

One Mission Students is the mobilization arm of Collegiate & Student Ministries for the State Board of Missions.

OMS works to connect students with missions personnel and train and equip them to be better prepared to serve as they go. On Feb. 8, students gathered at Anchor Church

in Tuscaloosa for One Day — a day where students were interviewed, given an overview of the process and explored next steps in service through OMS. Over the next several weeks more than 100 students are expected to apply for summer missions service through OMS to be sent to the ends of the earth to make the name of Jesus known.



Photo by Maya Thompson



Photo by Maya Thompson

Will you pray with us?

- For students to be bold in committing to God's call to go
- For parents and family to encourage students as they go and send them well
- For the right students to be placed on the right projects

► For the hearts of those they will serve this summer The Lord is using students to make His name known not only on campuses across our state, but also alongside ministry partners in Alabama, the U.S. and around the globe. Pray with us as these students seek to follow the Lord's call to go and make disciples!



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PASTOR

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PASTOR

Cave Spring Baptist Church, Priceville, Alabama, seeks a full-time pastor. We are prayerfully seeking a man whose life aligns with 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and has a heart for seeking the lost and discipling the saved. Deadline to apply: April 5. Email: CSBCpastorsearchcommittee@gmail.com for more information and job description.

PASTOR

Seeking a pastor for Broadway Baptist Church in Rainsville, Alabama. Please send resumes to: Pastor Search Committee, Broadway Baptist Church, P.O. Box 766, Rainsville, AL 35986. Or email resumes to: g.chapman192@gmail.com.

PASTOR

Pisgah Baptist Church, Sipsey, Alabama, is searching for a full-time pastor. pisgahbaptistal@gmail.com

PASTOR

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Enon Baptist Church, located in Wilcox County, Alabama, is prayerfully seeking a bivocational pastor. Send inquires/resumes to: enonbccamden@gmail.com or mail to: Enon Baptist Church, ATTN: Search Committee, P.O. Box 4, Camden, AL 36726.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR

First Baptist, Dadeville, a dynamic Southern Baptist church located in the heart of downtown Dadeville, Alabama, is seeking God's person to fill the position of associate pastor for children

and family ministries. Full-time job in a growing church with a competitive salary. If interested, contact John Wilcox, search committee chair, at jwilcox1014@gmail.com. <https://tinyurl.com/FBCDadeville>.

FULL/PART-TIME MINISTER OF WORSHIP

Parkview Baptist Church of Decatur is seeking a servant of God to direct our choir/praise and worship team and structure a God-honoring worship set for Sunday morning worship. Email searchcommittee@parkviewdecatur.org for more information or to submit resumes.

OTHER POSITIONS

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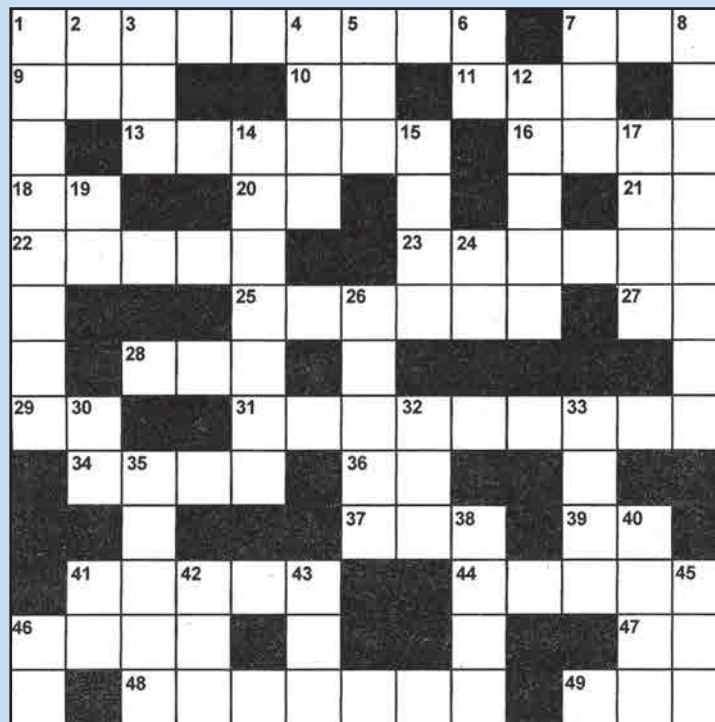
CHRISTIAN Crossword



UPCOMING EVENTS
sponsored by the State Board of Missions

ACROSS

1. Johoiada was leader of the ____.
(1 Chron. 12:27)
7. A serviceman who did not return from war may be one of these.
9. To forbid.
10. Learn to ____ well.
(Isa. 1:17)
11. Abraham would be called this today.
13. Remember what ____ did. (Deut. 25:17)
16. A wise guy. (2 words.)
18. Speak unto ... Israel, that they ____ forward. (Ex. 14:15)
20. He will ____ a wild man. (Gen. 16:12)
21. Familiar form of you in German.
22. ____ the son of Ner. (2 Sam. 3:25)
23. Parts of a play.
25. Sons of Zeruiah: Joab, Abishai and _____. (2 Sam. 2:18)
27. Saint. (abbr.)
28. Extol Him ... by His name _____. (Ps. 68:4)
29. Compass direction.
31. All the ____ and strangers. (Acts 17:21)
34. Judah, and _____. (Jer. 9:26)
36. For example. (abbr.)
37. Thou shalt not ... _____. (Lev. 19:13)
39. Elevation. (abbr.)
41. The name whereof is called _____. (Ezek. 20:29)
44. ____ and Caiaphas being ... high priests. (Luke 3:2)
46. Captains over _____. (Deut. 1:15)



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47. 1,001 in Roman numerals.
48. Carried them captive to _____. (2 Kings 15:29)
49. From ____ even to Beersheba. (Judg. 20:1)

DOWN

1. Belonging to Nabal's wife. (1 Sam. 25:3)
2. Anti-aircraft. (abbr.)
3. Ribonucleic acid. (abbr.)
4. Not working.
5. Upon the great ____ of their right foot. (Ex. 29:20)
6. South America. (abbr.)
7. The sound a kitten makes.
8. A decree from Caesar _____. (Luke 2:1)
12. The beginning of his kingdom was _____. (Gen. 10:10)
14. Sarah died ... and ____ came to mourn. (Gen. 23:2)

15. King Saul's father. (1 Sam. 10:21)
17. Fruit drinks.
19. Obstetrician. (abbr.)
24. Chemical Engineer. (abbr.)
26. And Leah ... called his name _____. (Gen. 30:13)
30. ____ are labourers together with God. (1 Cor. 3:9)
32. ____, id, superego.
33. The young men of _____. (Ezek. 30:17)
35. Made silver shrines for _____. (Acts 19:24)
38. Passing through the valley of _____. (Ps. 84:6)
40. An Eastern monk.
41. To ____ or not to be.
42. Manuscripts. (abbr.)
43. The ____ is withered away. (Isa. 15:6)
45. Which taketh away the ____ of the world. (John 1:29)
46. Their cry came up un__ God. (Ex. 2:23)

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

Learn how you can pray for and encourage campus ministers

Anyone that looks across our state can see that college campuses are packed with students from across the globe ... literally. Most would agree that the college campus is perhaps one of the most diverse mission fields in the state with estimates of 300,000 college students across Alabama being unreached by the gospel.

The Office of Collegiate & Student Ministries seeks to partner with local churches through Baptist Campus Ministries (BCM) and church-based collegiate ministries to reach college students. BCM is funded and made possible by gifts from Alabama Baptists through the Cooperative Program in partnership with the local Baptist association of churches. Because of those gifts, the State Board of Missions is able to employ and support 17 state missionaries who serve as campus ministers on college and university campuses across our state. (For a complete list of those campus ministers and their locations, visit bcmlink.org/bcm.)

BCM is student-led and campus minister-directed in order to reach students with the gospel of Jesus Christ, grow faithful Christian disciples and involve students in missions and ministry. This is accomplished through ongoing

evangelism efforts, weekly worship, Bible study and fellowship opportunities as well as special statewide and national student events. BCM works directly with Alabama Baptist churches and seeks to connect students with a local church while on campus.

Another way you can support BCM and campus ministers is through Alabama WMU's Cultivate emphasis. The purpose of Cultivate is to undergird our BCMs through prayer and encouragement, while becoming more aware of how God is using this vital ministry.

'Pause and Pray'

By visiting the site AlabamaWMU.org/bcm, you'll learn how you can more effectively pray for and encourage our campus ministers in very practical ways. You can sign up for "Pause and Pray," a weekly prayer prompt directly from a campus minister providing updates about events, needs and prayer requests.

Or you might be interested in adopting a campus minister, perhaps one who serves in your part of the state, and learning how you can encourage him or her through prayer and provision of needs.

It only takes a moment to sign up but it can make an eternal difference. For more information about Cultivate, contact Laura Glass at 334-613-2223 or lglass@alsbom.org.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Sunday School Lessons

By Nathan Harris, Ph.D.
Vice President for Strategic Initiatives, University of Mobile



For February 23

HOLY LIVING Leviticus 26:1–13

When I survey the wondrous book of Leviticus, I see Jesus in every section. Jesus is greater than the holy offerings of chapters 1–7. He is greater than the holy priests of Leviticus 8–10. He brings greater healing that makes for a holy camp. Jesus is our once-for-all atonement from sin, so He is greater than every once-a-year holy Yom Kippur sacrifice. Finally, Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the holiness code in chapters 17–27, demonstrating His love for Jews (His neighbor, 19:18) and Gentiles (the alien, 19:34) while living in holy obedience to the Father (Heb. 5:7–10). Because Jesus is holy, those who walk in covenant relationship with Him are called saints (or holy ones).

Faithfulness (1–2)

Salvation has always been a matter of faith, trusting God and taking Him at His Word (Heb. 11:6). Faith is more than ritual obedience; it is relational obedience. Faithfulness refers to walking by faith in actions and attitudes. Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses — they all took God at His Word and walked in obedience to the covenant relationship established by God.

The people of this covenant at Mount Sinai were called to be faithful. They were prohibited from idolatry because Yahweh was their God. They were to take Sabbath rests and honor the sacredness of the sanctuary because Yahweh set that day and that place apart to be wholly devoted to Him.

Blessings (3–8)

From the time Israel left Egypt until they entered the promised land, God provided them food sufficient for their survival. Once they settled into their inheritance, they were dependent upon the land for fruit and vegetables. The first blessing promised for covenant faithfulness was provision

— rainfall, plenty of grain, fruit from the trees (olives, figs, etc.) and grapes from the vine.

The second blessing was protection. When Israel walked in covenant faithfulness, Yahweh granted them victory over their adversaries. He would rid the land of wild animals so their livestock would be safe. He would also protect them from traveling marauders and neighboring nations.

Leviticus 26:14–17 warns of the judgment that would come from disobedience to God’s instructions. This entire generation of Israelite adults died in the wilderness because they failed to trust Yahweh. As a result, the same warnings had to be given to the second generation in Deuteronomy 28 prior to their entry into the promised land.

Fellowship (9–13)

Living by faith produces faithfulness. Faithfulness leads to fruitfulness. Fruitfulness is accompanied by fellowship with the Maker of the covenant. Fellowship is the intended result of covenant faith.

Freedom was the added bonus of walking in fellowship with Yahweh. He reminded Israel that He was Yahweh, the One “who ... enabled you to live in freedom.”

Covenant obedience led to blessing, and disobedience led to judgment. The passages that follow warn of the dire consequences of disobedience. Having a relationship with God can be painful when not walking in fellowship with Him. We invite God’s judgment upon us when we fail to trust God or obey His clear direction. Walking in covenant relationship leads to fellowship with God and with one another (1 John 1:7, 9).

EDITOR’S NOTE
— This lesson was written by Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D., Professor of Biblical Studies at University of Mobile.



For March 2

OUR INHERITANCE 1 Peter 1:3–12

It does not take long to find that the purpose of 1 Peter is to encourage believers to hold fast to the faith while enduring suffering and trials in this life.

In fact, it is the very hope they have in Christ through His resurrection that strengthens believers as they face suffering, knowing that their salvation is secure and held by God.

Though Christians may live as exiles in a hostile world where they are persecuted for their faith, 1 Peter reminds us that we have a living hope and a guaranteed inheritance in heaven as our future. Suffering will come, but that is only temporary. Our hope and salvation in Christ is eternal.

Joyous Praise (3–5)

Right from the start, Peter orients Christians to the proper posture for life: praise. Peter blesses God the Father for His magnanimous mercy and grace in giving us His Son, Jesus Christ.

This is a call to praise! We praise God the Father because He showed mercy to us by giving us new life through our faith in the death and resurrection of His Son, and now we are recipients of an inheritance that is undefiled, unfaded and held in heaven for us.

And it is through faith that God guards believers for salvation. For that, as Peter says, we bless God. Because of our salvation in Christ, we experience a life marked by joyful praise.

Strong Faith (6–9)

But joyful praise isn’t just our response when life is good. We don’t just bless God on the mountaintops of life, but we bless Him even in the lowest of valleys. We rejoice in our salvation and God’s mercy

even as we face suffering, trials and persecution. Why? Because our faith is tested and refined in the fires of suffering, which results in praise, glory and honor given to the Lord.

It is faith, rooted in the saving work of Jesus Christ, that causes us to persevere in the storms of life while producing in us a life that praises the Lord for His goodness. Even though we don’t see Christ now, our faith in Him causes us to rejoice in our suffering because we know that the goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls.

Promised One (10–12)

Concerning our salvation, Peter further encourages believers to rest in the reality that the Promised One — Christ — has come. What was once prophesied about and longed for is here and available for those who in faith trust in the work of Christ.

As we learn in this passage, the prophets of the Old Testament wrote to serve us — those who would receive the blessing of Christ’s finished work on the cross. What the prophets foretold and longed to experience was now proclaimed as the central message of the gospel — that through faith in the work of Christ on the cross, we experience the fullness of salvation.

Peter’s main point is that Christians are blessed to live in the time when the Promised One has come, and we no longer anticipate Christ’s first coming but joyfully await the Second Coming.

The prophecy of the Promised One has been fulfilled, and therefore believers then — and now — can place their faith in God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

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

“He has caused us to be born again ... to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading ...”

1 Peter 1:3–4

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sunday School Lessons

By Bobby McKay

Pastor, New Liberty Baptist Church in Morton, Mississippi



For February 23

THE GATHERING FOR WORSHIP Hebrews 10:19–25; 13:12–15

The audience of the Book of Hebrews is facing challenges and persecution for their faith, likely from government officials.

Though they have yet to suffer to the point of shedding blood, they have at least faced verbal abuse, the loss of status within their cities and the confiscation of their property.

It seems this persecution has led some to consider abandoning their Christian faith to return to previous forms of religious devotion — perhaps paganism or Judaism.

One of the ways the author seeks to speak to this temptation is to demonstrate the great superiority of the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus to all others, Jewish or pagan. The author draws on the priestly, sacrificial system of the Old Testament and casts it as a mere shadow of a greater heavenly reality.

The tabernacle was a shadow of heaven, the priest and sacrifices a shadow of the future Christ and the Holy of Holies a shadow of God's heavenly dwelling. It is against this background that these verses must be read.

Jesus made it possible for us to come to God. (10:19–22)

The author shows here that Jesus' blood has opened the heavenly curtain that once stood shut between God and humanity and because of this work of Jesus, we can now enter the sanctuary of God — the true Holy of Holies — with confidence. We can do this because we have a Great High Priest who has offered Himself once and for all and stands before God on our behalf.

As we see in verse 22, the blood of Jesus does not only allow us access to God, but it also cleanses our hearts from an evil conscience. In other words, the blood of Jesus truly transforms our character into that of Christ.

We are to encourage each other in our walk with Christ. (23–25)

The author declares how these believers should live in light of what Christ has done. They should hold fast to this hope that has been described, regardless of the persecution they face. They must also find ways to motivate each other to love and good deeds — the work of the Kingdom in the world. They need each other and will be more successful together.

He exhorts them not to neglect meeting together as some have begun doing, likely because of a fear that their gathering will be found out or persecution might come from being known as one who meets with Christians. However, they must continue to meet for the sake of encouraging each other in this difficult journey.

We are to praise and confess Christ together. (13:12–15)

The author encourages the community to join in the suffering of Jesus. As He suffered outside the city of Jerusalem, so they should leave the worldliness and comforts of their own cities behind.

If their faith costs them status, property or wealth, so be it. They should remain faithful because their hope is not in the benefits their earthly cities provide but rather in the heavenly city to come. With the hope of this future, the author encourages his audience to offer a sacrifice to God — not of animals but of praise, doing good deeds and sharing with each other.

These are the sacrifices that God now desires of His people and the way His people are to live in light of what Jesus has done for them.

EDITOR'S NOTE
— This lesson was
written by Adam
Winn, Ph.D., Chair
and Professor, De-
partment of Bibli-
cal and Religious
Studies at Samford
University.



For March 2

THE SIGN OF HIS GLORY John 2:1–11

Social media and its effect on our society is immeasurable. A measure of good can be found online, but it seems to get lost in the shuffle of the meaningless, lewd or ridiculous. The hope of instant stardom is the bait many cannot avoid. "Influencers," as they are referred to, seek attention and a following. The goal is to be seen, believed and liked. The influencer may or may not be qualified or an expert in a given field or profession, but that does not mean they won't disperse information. The number one objective of the influencer is self-promotion.

Now, take Jesus as an example. Jesus' miracles, ministry and mission were to point others to the Father and the atonement He provides. The source of many of our personal troubles and church struggles is when we desire undue attention for ourselves. God does not share in His glory with anyone. Consider how much we do with the possibility of recognition or personal pleasure. Therein lies our prideful nature and impure motives. God's glory is for His good and our redemption. There are no selfish or sinful reasons behind any activity by God.

Throughout the Gospels, we read of various signs performed by Christ. They serve as markers, pointing to Jesus' messiahship. Without these signs, we would be lost in our search for a meaningful relationship with God.

Trust God to work in His timing. (1–4)

Every one of us could benefit from a dose of patience. It may be as small as waiting at a traffic light to change or, more importantly, medical results. I have discovered that when I need patience, it is instant, not later on. This is when we must

trust God's timing.

The challenge we face as impatient people is being assured that God is at work even when it may not be visible with our physical eyes. In this instance, Jesus was informed by His mother at a wedding celebration of the need for more wine.

She was inclined by her belief that Jesus could remedy the situation. Jesus informed His mother that He was on a divine schedule and would not be forced by anyone. He was not showing disrespect to His mother by His words.

Do what Jesus tells you to do. (5–8)

How much more blessed would our lives be if we obeyed Jesus? Obedience to God and His word demonstrates trust and love.

These verses are central to this story and key to a proper relationship with Christ. Our culture is constantly bombarded with voices and noises vying for our attention and loyalty. Only the voice of Jesus will lead us to true and lasting fulfillment. Could it be you need to revisit the most recent time Jesus told you to do something and follow through?

See Jesus' glory through what He does. (9–11)

Jesus' power and glory are not dependent upon our obedience. In His grace, He chooses to use us as instruments. In this case, He used the servants at the wedding as an avenue for a miracle. It is important to note that all miracles performed by Jesus are to point to His power and glory, not the miracle itself.

So many want the miracle, not the Messiah who can perform supernatural work. Our lives, churches and obedience should point to the glory and beauty of Christ. Anyone we come in contact with, we can influence. The question is, will our influence point them closer to Christ or further away?

**"This, the first of His signs, Jesus did at Cana
in Galilee, and manifested His glory."**

John 2:11

WORD search

- ARK
BAPTISM
BEAUTY
BLESSING
CHRIST
CONSCIENCE
CREATOR
EVIL
FAITHFUL
FEAR
FLESH
- FORGIVE
GENTLE
GLORY
GOSPEL
HOSPITALITY
HUSBANDS
JUDGMENT
LOVE
NOAH
OBEDIENT
PEACE
- PERSECUTION
PETER
PRAY
PREACHED
QUIET
REJOICE
SAVE
SERVE
SPIRITS
SUFFERING
WIVES

B N M Z Q B T D D Y N P T R R
F J F D N U L X P L E Q C T E
X L U M P P I E D R G O X E J
X E E D Y B Q E S X N C Y C O
P V Q S G M N E T S T T L A I
F R M P H M C G C R I U N E C
O E R L W U E I M L F N H P E
R S M N T N E N A H C L G L T
G T P I T N N T T S H V N L L
I T O L C R I I T D R N P N O
V N E E E P A I G Z I R H L V
E L M T S F R N R W S M Z C E
L E E O Q I O M V I T P R A Y
S P H G P A S M B V L E V A S
U S L S H I W K V E L M P H D
F O R K T W K Z K S Q Z R L H
F G G P F E A R R O T A E R C
E B A L W H N M A R R M A Y T
R B K I L P B E A U T Y C N V
I T J V Y R O L G C K L H G X
N T N E I D E B O J V L E F N
G M R N H U S B A N D S D R X

“Above all, maintain constant love for one another,
since love covers a multitude of sins.”

1 PETER 4:8

Lass WORDS

BY KEN LASS
The Alabama Baptist



DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

The puzzle of life

I love crossword puzzles. I’ve been doing them every day for as long as I can remember. There’s nothing quite like the joy and satisfaction you get from tackling a challenging puzzle, and conquering it.

In recent years the unwritten rules of creating a crossword have become blurred. What I consider “cheating” has become widely accepted. For example, if an answer contained multiple words it used to be that the clue had to say so.

Recently I encountered a puzzle that displayed a 15–letter word. The clue was “Doesn’t listen.” I stared at it for hours, unable to come up with anything.

After working around it, the answer turned out to be, “Falls on deaf ears.” Four words! That used to be cheating.

Foreign words

Now they’re also using a bunch of foreign words. The clue says something like, “A river in Versailles.” If you don’t know what country Versailles is in, or if you don’t speak French, you have no chance.

Many times I will agonize over a clue. Eventually, I give up and put the puzzle down for a while. Then when I pick it up again, often the answer will come right to me. Of course! So simple! Why couldn’t I see that before? I just had to clear my

mind, take a fresh view of the possibilities.

Have you noticed that life can be like a difficult crossword puzzle? You get little clues and hints, but you just can’t figure out the answers. What makes it more exasperating is that just like those crosswords, the unwritten rules of our culture seem to be changing. What used to be unacceptable is now widely approved and even promoted. Life can be so confusing and frustrating.

Ask God for help

If you relax, take a deep breath, clear your mind and ask God to help you find the solution, it will often come to you. Of course! It was right there all along. You just couldn’t see it.

And when you figure it out, you will feel the relief and peace only God can provide. It’s even better than filling in the last word of that crossword puzzle.

What’s a five-letter word that means, “The answer to most of your questions”? I’ll give you a hint. It starts with “J.”

MEET THE AUTHOR

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



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US News



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Chesed Turner crowned Miss University of Mobile

Miss University of Mobile 2025 Chesed Turner was crowned on campus Jan. 31.

Turner, a junior musical theater major from Niceville, Florida, aims to grow the program of Miss UM and her platform, "Created to Create."

Her platform focuses on bringing different outlets of expression and creativity to both the campus and its students.

Besides the mental and physical benefits the act of being creative brings, Turner also highlights how interwoven it is into humanity.

"We know that God is our Creator, but we often forget

that He is creative," Turner said. "And to have Him as our Creator, to be created in His image, means that we are creative ourselves. That

is a part of His very nature, and therefore, it's a part of ours."

Also earning honors were:

Jaycie Tungett of Mississippi was first runner-up and won the People's Choice Award.

Caitlyn Ozee of Illinois placed second

runner-up. Kennedy Bradford of Alabama placed third runner-up.

Allegra Fuller from Mobile won the Talent Award and Miss Congeniality. (UM)



UM photo
Chesed Turner is crowned Jan. 31 by Miss UM 2024 Anna Katherine Bell.



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CONNECTING WITH OTHERS AT CHURCH

5 ways to ignite engagement with your congregation, community this year

By Mark MacDonald
The Alabama Baptist

A new year brings fresh opportunities to engage your congregation and community more effectively, especially if they've had less engagement and apathy after the interruption of Christmas and the New Year. People are looking for connection, meaning and purpose. Your church should be where they find it.

Practical ideas

Here are five practical ways to increase engagement in 2025 for the sake of the gospel.

1. Simplify your church communication.

If people are confused, they disengage. Make it easy for them to know what's happening and why it matters to them.

Instead of overwhelming your congregation with too many announcements, focus on the one or two "next steps" they should take each week.

Use clear, action-driven language on stage, in emails, bulletins and social media. Segment your information based on demographics and their needs.

Can't do it all? Then only do what you can until you can do more. Excellence must go hand-in-hand with simplifying.

2. Use digital channels effectively.

People interact with your church beyond Sunday. Your website, social media and email list are perfect opportunities to engage throughout the week. Update your website to ensure it's search engine optimized, mobile-friendly and easy to navi-

gate. Post relevant, encouraging content on social media — less about church events and more about how faith connects to their everyday life.

3. Enhance your worship experience.

First-time visitors and returning members need a compelling reason to stay engaged. Audit your worship experience. Ask, how's the flow? Is your messaging clear? Are new visitors welcomed intentionally?

Ensure the service runs smoothly, feels personal and offers practical, biblical application. And yes, a warm, enthusiastic greeting team still matters. First impressions lead to lasting impressions.

4. Make serving the new normal.

Engagement jumps when people do something. If you want people to stay connected, give them a purpose. Instead of asking, "Who wants to serve?" make serving the default expectation. Provide easy on-ramps for people to get involved, whether greeting, teaching kids or local outreach. Highlight serving stories regularly to inspire participation. Be known for participation and changing things.

5. Create a culture of invitation.

Engaged people bring others with them. Along with church advertising, equip your congregation to in-

vite friends and family. Teach them how to extend a personal invitation, whether it's for a Sunday service, small group or community event. Make it as simple as, "Hey, would you join me?" and watch engagement grow.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Mark MacDonald is a communication pastor, speaker, consultant, bestselling author and church branding strategist for BeKnownforSomething.com empowering thousands of pastors and churches to become known for something relevant (a communication thread) throughout their ministries, on their church websites and social media.



The Alabama Baptist

February 20, 2025 | tabonline.org

SPECIAL SECTION

*Spotlight
on
Christian*

Higher Education

FIRST PERSON

Why attend a
Christian college

FINANCIAL AID

Annual FASFA
update

UM CHAPEL

Finding contentment
in Christ

Photo by tonodiaz on Freepik

Christian education allows students to grow into God's calling for their lives

BY CARRIE B. McWHORTER • THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

More than 150 colleges and universities enrolling more than a half million students worldwide have Christian higher education as their vision and mission.

Those figures from the 2023–2024 annual report of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, an organization that advocates for institutions of Christian higher education, highlight the commitment of leaders and faculty members to investing in the next generation of young Christians as they grow into God's calling for their lives.

Balancing act

All students experience the challenge of balancing academics with other aspects of young adult life — social, mental and physical. Christian colleges encourage students to tend to their faith as well.

Ben Mandrell, president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources,

summed up this difference while speaking during a Nov. 6 chapel service at the University of Mobile.

Both religious and non-religious people can have a calling, but there's a difference in discovering you have talent and giving that talent to God, Mandrell said.

"Far more important than your talent, your skill or your degree is the purity of your heart before God. If you have talent and heart, God can do incredible things through you," he said.

Many Christian higher education institutions are enrolling historic numbers of students who are seeking academic-faith-life balance.

Last fall, for example, Samford University in Birmingham marked 16 consecutive years of record-breaking enrollment with 6,101 students enrolled for fall semester.

Christianity Today reported that increases in enrollment were seen at



UNIVERSITY OF MOBILE

UM photo

several Christian colleges, including Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky; and Colorado Christian University in Lakewood, Colorado.

But like many secular institutions,

16
consecutive
years of
record-breaking
enrollment

Samford University

some Christian colleges and universities are facing an uncertain future. Total undergraduate enrollment has been on a downward slide over the past decade. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, between fall 2010 and fall 2021, undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting post-

secondary institutions decreased by 15%, from 18.1 million to 15.4 million students.

Secular private colleges have been hit hard, but so have some Christian colleges. Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, Massachusetts, shut down last year. Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota; and Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington, all made difficult cuts, according to reporting by Christianity Today.

Though undergraduate enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities is projected to increase by 9% to 16.8 million students between fall 2021 and fall 2031, many institutions may not weather the financial challenges of slowed enrollment coupled with retention rates after the first year of just around 76%, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

The future of Christian colleges and universities will depend on a number of factors. In its latest report, the CCCU notes several advo-

cacy priorities accomplished during the past year, including a favorable ruling in a court case that threatened religious freedom, specifically related to beliefs on gender and sexual morality, at Christian institutions.

The CCCU also filed several comment letters to the Department of Education and Congress "pushing back against proposed legislation and regulations that frame the value of higher education through a purely economic lens."

Measuring rewards

The rewards of Christian higher education cannot be measured purely by financial cost and vocational outcomes, institutional leaders emphasize.

Jason Black, Samford's vice president for enrollment management, noted: "Our academic programs continue to attract students, and those students continue to stay engaged by the rewards derived from a Christ-centered Samford education."

Speaking to new students, Charles Smith, president of University of Mobile, urged students to take hold of the opportunities provided at UM.

"Your first mission field may be your own heart. How might God be calling you to trust and follow Him? How might this season serve to strengthen your faith?" he asked.

The work of Christian colleges and universities is "always grounded in biblical truth and enduring faith," wrote David Hoag, CCCU president.

"For Christ and His Kingdom, we continue to advance the cause of Christian higher education, fully assured that Christ-centered colleges and universities stand beside generations of Christians, supporting them as they grow into God's calling for the betterment of our world."



SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

SU photo

INTENTIONALLY CHRIST-CENTERED

BY CHRIS GEHRZ • BETHEL UNIVERSITY

First person: Why should students consider a Christian college?

The range of religious colleges in the United States is vast, from small Bible schools that prepare graduates for ministry to elite research institutions that have shed most of their founding Christian heritage.

Some liberal arts colleges are still “church-related” and require a religion class or two, but they live out their Christian mission and values with religiously diverse faculty teaching religiously diverse students.

Then there are “Christian colleges” like the one where I work — Bethel University. These schools are academically rigorous and send their graduates out into a wide variety of careers, but they remain intentionally Christ-centered. They require Bible and theology courses, seek to integrate faith and learning in all fields of study and hire only committed Christians as faculty.

3 reasons

I’d still recommend that Christian high school students consider other kinds of institutions — including state schools. But here’s why Christian teenagers should consider a Christian college.

1. Christian colleges help young adults make their faith their own.

While it offers opportunities for worship, prayer, fellowship and ministry on campus and off, the Christian college is not a church. The Christian college’s goal is not to indoctrinate students but to help them to make their faith their own.

Many of our students come from Christian families and grew up going to church. They build on those



Photo courtesy of Shannon Hughes

A team of students from Auburn University serves in Cincinnati, Ohio, during a school break. While there, they served alongside a church planter and gained experience in outreach that they brought back to their campus.

experiences when they come to college. But authentic Christian faith must be chosen, not inherited or imitated. So the Christian college has to be a space where young adults come to know Jesus more fully, as the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), and decide for themselves to follow Him. Our faculty have already made that choice and confess Jesus as Lord, but it’s essential we help our students encounter multiple points of view as they seek their own answers to questions of faith, truth, justice, identity and purpose.

2. Christian colleges relate faith to learning of all kinds.

Of course, a key part of that exploration takes place in Bible and theology courses and in the work of campus ministry. But distinctively

Christian colleges seek to integrate faith into learning in every field of study. Mentored by spiritually mature faculty, students ask what difference their faith makes to the study of everything from biology to business, English to engineering, and health care to history.

Gospel lens

In my courses, for example, students use the tools of history to better understand the causes, course and consequences of 20th century wars. But we also ask what it means for followers of the Prince of Peace to take part in violent conflict: whether war can be just, the role of the church in relationship to a warring state, how we can love our enemies and how we can build peace into something more than the tem-

porary absence of strife. Meanwhile, students in the art studio are learning firsthand what it means to be made in the image of a Creator God (Gen. 1:26–27), while those taking a social work course one building over are considering how the same verses compel Christians to protect the dignity of the impoverished and the rights of the oppressed.

3. Christian colleges care for students as ‘whole persons.’

I’m a professor, so I tend to emphasize the academic tasks of the Christian college: taking every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) through teaching, learning and research. But as our college’s founder wrote in the late 19th century, Christian higher education is about spiritual and character formation, not just intellectual growth. We like to say that we are forming “whole and holy persons” — students who learn to love God with mind, but also heart, soul and strength, and their neighbors as themselves (Mark 12:28–34).

Such holistic work takes more than just professors. Coaches, campus pastors, resident life staff, work-study supervisors and even peers are educators at a Christian college.

That kind of “high touch” model of education can be expensive. But we need to weigh the cost of college against its value. And as a parent of teenagers, I see enormous value in the Christian college’s approach to forming “whole and holy persons.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — Reprinted with permission from churchleaders.com.

FINANCIAL AID

BY CARRIE B. McWHORTER • THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

Annual FAFSA submission helps students, parents, institutions determine needs

A new streamlined FAFSA application is available for students planning to pursue higher education after July 1, 2025.

The U.S. Department of Education uses the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), available at studentaid.gov, to assess a student's financial need.

Students are required to submit the FAFSA form each year they're in school to stay eligible for federal

student aid. Colleges, career tech schools and other organizations use the FAFSA to determine a student's eligibility for federal grants (Pell Grants), work-study jobs, student loans and need-based scholarships and grants. Deadlines for consideration vary by state and institution, so students are urged to complete the form as early as possible.

In recent years, the FAFSA has been revised in hopes of making it more user-friendly. A new term, “contributor,” is now used to refer to anyone required to provide information on a student’s FAFSA form. Contributors could be the student, a biological or adoptive parent or a married student’s spouse.

Contributors will need

**For more
information,
visit [studentaid.
gov](http://studentaid.gov) or call 800-
433-3243.**

to create an account with studentaid.gov in order to provide federal tax information on the form, but being a contributor does not obligate anyone to pay for a student's education.

Information needed

Before beginning the FAFSA form, applicants should have personal and contributor Social Security numbers, federal income tax returns, W-2 forms and other financial information.

The more information the applicant has, the faster the form can be completed.

Many high schools and colleges host FAFSA nights to help students and their parents or guardians complete the application.

Help also is available via the resources on studentaid.gov or through the Federal Student Aid Information Center, which has live chat, email and phone options (800-433-3243).



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Ivey proposes record General and Education Trust Fund budgets

By Trisha Powell Crain
Alabama Daily News

Gov. Kay Ivey is proposing record budgets for both the General Fund and education budgets in fiscal 2026 with increases for Medicaid, state employees and teachers' retirement systems and health insurance.

But state finance officials warned lawmakers that recent revenue growth is slowing and an economic downturn may be ahead.

Ivey proposed a record \$9.9 billion in regular education spending — a \$600 million increase over the current year's education budget — for the 2026 fiscal year, and \$3.7 billion in spending — a \$300 million increase over the current year — for the General Fund, which funds non-education entities.

'Sugar high is over'

State Finance Director Bill Poole presented Ivey's budget to lawmakers Feb. 5, telling them "the sugar high is over," with respect to the large amounts of tax revenue Alabama has collected in recent years.

One big factor behind growth in the General Fund is unprecedented earnings from interest on state deposits. Where interest on state deposits brought in \$10 million to \$60 million each year between 2015 and 2022, in 2023, interest revenue jumped to \$404 million and rose to \$557 million in 2024.

Despite the high interest earnings, Poole warned the windfall is temporary.

"We know and have to anticipate a return to historical norms, and that is going to be a big challenge," Poole said, cautioning lawmakers to keep that in mind as they consider future General Fund budgets.

RIISING COSTS AFFECT COLLEGES

BY TRISHA POWELL CRAIN • ALABAMA DAILY NEWS

Alabama Commission on Higher Education requests budget

The Alabama Commission on Higher Education has proposed a \$2.6 billion budget request for all two- and four-year colleges and universities along with other higher education-related programs in fiscal year 2026.

That is a \$145 million, or 6% increase over the \$2.4 billion budgeted in fiscal year 2025.

Under the proposal presented Feb. 5 to state legislators, two-year colleges would receive \$485 million, which is \$27 million or 5.9% more than this year's \$458 million. Four-year universities would receive \$1.8 billion, which is a \$106 million or 6.4% increase over this year's \$1.7 billion.

The commission held budget hearings in November for colleges and universities and said most of the proposed increases are due to rising personnel costs, including insurance, retirement benefits and mandatory contributions to PEEHIP, the state's educators health insurance program.

Commissioners also approved a \$77.9 million budget request for the agency and related programs for the 2026 fiscal year. The agency rolled over \$25 million in unspent funding from recent years and supplementary appropriations, resulting in what appears as a decrease in the total budget from last year to this year.

Within that request, the agency asked for funding for the following programs:

► **\$500,000** in increased funding for each of three student financial assistance programs, for a total of **\$1.5 million**: The Alabama Student



Wikipedia photo

Assistance Program, the Alabama Student Grant Program and the Alabama National Guard Scholarship Program.

► **\$200,000** increase for the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries to expand materials focusing on workforce and economic development.

Returning to college

► **\$2 million** for the (Re)Engage Alabama initiative, which offers financial help for adults who have some college credit but want to return to complete their degrees. Funding for (Re)Engage Alabama was previously included in supplementary appropriations, but the agency is including it as part of the regular budget request.

► **Historically Black Colleges and Universities Consortium: \$650,000.** This funding was part of the agen-

cy's regular budget in FY23, but was covered by supplemental appropriations for the past two years.

Other requests within the proposed budget would fund recruitment of teachers in STEM subjects, access to healthy foods for college students, literacy and numeracy education, and scholarships for rural students pursuing education degrees.

Alabama's community colleges have approved a separate \$694 million request, and four-year institutions approve their own individual budgets as well.

State law requires ACHE to consolidate community colleges and universities into one higher education budget request. The request was presented to Gov. Kay Ivey and then to members of the Finances and Budget Committee, a permanent joint interim committee of the Alabama State Legislature.



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STEP SING

BY GRACE THORNTON • THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

Samford University’s ‘unique tradition’ of sing-and-dance show marks 75th year

Lauren Taylor said if you’ve never been to a Step Sing performance at Samford University, it’s “hard to describe.”

“It’s a unique tradition,” said Taylor, Samford’s associate vice president of student affairs.

Putting in the work

It’s singing, and it’s choreography. It’s 19 groups of students, each putting on a five-minute produc-

tion that they’ve practiced for weeks. It’s 1,500 students total performing on stage and working behind the scenes.

And for this year’s competition — held Jan. 30–Feb. 1 — it was also a celebration of Samford’s 75th year of Step Sing.

In four sold-out shows, students, alumni and friends of Samford cel-

ebrated the event’s roots.

Taylor said Step Sing started in 1951 as a sing-along on the steps of Renfroe Hall on the East Lake Campus of Howard College, Samford’s home before it moved to Homewood in 1957 and changed its name in 1965.

Over the years, Step Sing added props, cos-

For more information, visit samford.edu/events/step-sing.



Facebook/Samford University

Phi Mu wins the Sweepstakes Award, reclaiming the title it won in 2023. Before that, Phi Mu’s last win was in 1991.

tumes, emcees and themes. As competition got more serious, the university enforced time limits for the productions and for the practices.

Massive undertaking

From there, Step Sing evolved into the massive undertaking that it is today, Taylor said, noting that its rich history was woven throughout this year’s event.

Each year, teams com-

pete for the Sweepstakes Award for overall best score as well as first runner up, second runner up, excellence in music, excellence in choreography, excellence in creativity and several additional awards.

This year, Phi Mu won the Sweepstakes Award, reclaiming the title it won in 2023. Before that, Phi Mu’s last win was in 1991.

All of the judges this year were Samford alumni.



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'SPIRIT-DRIVEN'

BY MICHELLE WORKMAN • SOUTHWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Robert Smith Jr. addresses need for heart and mind in Christian education

Christian education must bridge the space between listeners' hearts and minds in order to effectively change them for Christ, longtime preaching professor Robert Smith Jr. said during Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's chapel on Feb. 6.

"Eighteen inches from head to heart," Smith pointed out. "From the cranial to the cardiological, from taught truth to lived truth, from exegesis to experience, from learned truth to felt truth. And to hold those inextricably together, so that we present the message that is convincing, that's Christological, that's Spirit-driven and is God-glorifying."

Smith explained that he came to speak about the heart of Christian education as part of the International Alliance of Christian Education's sixth annual meeting that was hosted by Southwestern Seminary. But he proposed that the issue of Christian education is not a lack of knowledge but a need to deepen that knowledge so it is not just superficial but a true understanding and experience of God. And that change needs to begin in the Church.

"I think the church today needs to be admitted into God's 'General Hospital,'" Smith said. "Where it can undergo a period of redemptive observation and have a blood transfusion because an ill church cannot really minister to an anemic world

and a world that is afflicted and is at best on life support system."

Preaching from Luke 24, Smith spoke of when Jesus, after His resurrection, spoke to two disciples who were traveling to Emmaus.

Calling them slow of heart initially, Jesus walked them through the Scriptures that addressed Christ and

His need to suffer and die. Later those disciples announced they felt a burning in their hearts.

That is the same change teachers should pursue in their students, Smith said.

In the realm of theological education, he said there is still often a debate between the importance of the

head and knowledge, and the heart and feeling. Some students are only interested in feeling, inspiration and experience and not in being filled with knowledge of God, he said.

Conversely, he said others do not bring their heart to the task of learning, "ever-learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth."

Head, heart together

"The head alone is not enough in Christian education, and the heart alone is not enough in Christian education," Smith said, pointing out the great command to love the Lord with all of one's heart, soul, mind and strength.

"They both must be evenly brought together as we present our work to the Lord."

Just as Jesus first taught the Scriptures and the disciples felt that

burning in their hearts, Smith said theological teachers must teach the sufficient and profitable Word of God, extensively in some cases, before it becomes desirable for the listeners.

"It may not be palatable initially," Smith said. "It is always profitable."

Glorify God

Smith said there should also not be any distance between teaching and worship, as the very purpose of everything taught is to glorify God from a place of joy found only in Him.

The third stage of the two disciples was a yearning to respond to Jesus, be with Him and tell others about Him. This point of education, Smith pointed out, is not up to the educators at all but is a result of God's work in their hearts.

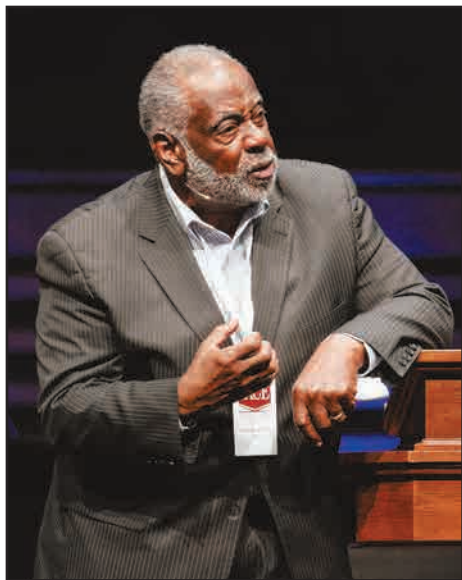
"I don't get upset because no one comes down the aisle, because I preach and preach my heart out, no one came," Smith said.

"And I don't pat myself on the back because 30 people joined the church. Transformation is God's work and not my work."

In the meantime, Smith said those teachers must instruct with patience, not giving up because one never knows when or how God might work in the lives of those hearing.

"The heart of Christian education is a Christ-centered message presented by convicted presenters ... that is filled with the Spirit and preached to the glory of God, so that those who hear it and believe it, live it out in their daily lives, day by day."

View Smith's entire message at tabonline.org/heart-of-ce.



ROBERT SMITH JR.

SWBTS photo

Union to dedicate new building

Union University will dedicate a new academic building, The Ethos Forum, on March 21.

The facility will house Union's McAfee School of Business and the computer science and engineering departments.

Union President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver said the word "ethos" means "character" in Greek, and the building name complements the name of Union's library, The Logos.

"The 'logos' is the Word, and it represents our beliefs," Oliver said. "Ethos represents how we live out our beliefs as we go about our daily lives, as we enter places of business and as we go about our work. The idea of this building is that we're living out our faith as we create, build, market and sell."

In ancient times, while the "agora" was the marketplace, the forum was the traditional place where ideas were exchanged and where the community came together, Oliver said.

'Live out our faith'

"This is the place where we come together and live out our faith and express our faith, where it moves through our minds and hearts to our hands and how we go about life in this world," Oliver said.

The Ethos Forum will feature a makerspace, a business incubator and numerous learning spaces designed to foster creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation and academic excellence. (Union University)



Caden Greene


Murfreesboro, TN
PharmD Student

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TRUE LIBERTY

BY LEANN CALLAWAY • THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

Andrew Walker encourages students to find contentment in following Christ

During the Jan. 29 chapel service at the University of Mobile, students were encouraged by Andrew Walker to find true liberty and contentment by walking in the Word of God and pursuing His precepts.

Walker is associate dean of the school of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He also serves as an associate professor of Christian ethics and public

theology and contributes to a number of publications.

Speaking on Psalm 119:45, Walker reminded students they must take ownership for their faith.

“When I was at a Christian college back in 2004. I was wrestling with questions like, ‘What is the point of this Christian faith, or what am I hoping to get out of this for myself?’

“Here’s my one-sentence answer to that — the pursuit of holiness through obedience to God’s Word produces an unmatched contentment that will hold you steady through the turbulence of life.

“Liberty in our culture today means to do whatever you want.

Some of us in this room think if we have liberty we have it all, without regard to

living for something more important. When we abuse our liberty our liberty ends up being a source of misery, which is in contrast to Psalm 119:45.”

Walker emphasized that “the blessing of obedience to God’s Word produces the greatest level of satisfaction. ... That’s where true contentment and the ultimate satisfaction is found.”

“What I’m most interested in at the age of 40 is less

about my resumé and more about contentment.

“The question for all of us is, where do you go to make sense of this life we have been given? Are you living for your own desires, or do you place your hope in the glory of Christ? True liberty will come from submission and obedience to God’s Word.”

See a video of Walker’s message at tabonline.org/Walker.



UM photo

Andrew Walker, associate dean of the school of theology at Southern Seminary, speaks at UM’s chapel service Jan. 29.

A full lineup of this semester’s chapel speakers is available at tabonline/UM-chapel.



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'THERE TO LISTEN'

BY TESSA SANCHEZ • INTERNATIONAL MISSION BOARD

Education consultants serve needs of MKs, support missionary families

Meeting needs and supporting families are some of the most rewarding parts of missionary kid education, according to Doreen, the International Mission Board's director of education for missionary kids (MKs). The goal of education is supporting IMB families so they can thrive as a family and in the ministry God has called them to, Doreen shared.

Doreen was a special education teacher for seven and a half years before serving with her husband, Jon, in Asia for 27 years. Before their retirement, Doreen was a regional MK consultant.

Educational needs

In her current role, she is responsible for the global team of education consultants who facilitate educational needs for IMB families, whether it's finding the best homeschool curriculum to fit a child's specific needs or vetting national or Christian schools.

Consultants walk alongside families whose children need additional help with educational testing, special needs and any other educational needs.

Doreen's team also provides care for young adult MKs, through events like Thanksgiving retreats and an app to promote communication. Her team works preemptively with families to meet their children's needs.

"We are working on earlier intervention and trying to get the services families need to help address needs early on," she said.

Much of the work is educating families to look for educational or developmental challenges in their children. For families with students who have learning needs,



A missionary kid in Mozambique does his homework. The IMB's educational consultants support IMB families so they can thrive as a family on the missions field.

the consultants collaborate with the family to create a support plan with appropriate strategies. The consultant meets with the family periodically to monitor progress and assist as needed.

For children who have special needs, the team creates an individual education plan and collaborates with the family to select strategies. They meet with parents for periodic assessments.

Helping parents

"A lot of what we do as consultants is listen to the parents. We're there to listen to what they're going through and provide encour-

agement," Doreen said. She meets with some parents almost monthly to hear how things are going with their children and provide a listening ear.

Feeling supported

"I think families have felt really supported by our company and by the consultants working with them."

She recalls a recent phone call with a family. She listened, explained what she understood the issues to be and assured them she would get back to them by the end of the week with a plan of action.

The mother was overwhelmed

and thankful for the clear explanation, quick response and follow-up plan.

"Things like that are certainly rewarding. We don't do it for the pats on the back or anything but knowing that you've given somebody some peace of mind and that you're on their side and you're helping them is really a tremendous benefit. That's what it's all about. We want to be able to serve families."

IMB missionaries and their families are supported by giving through the Cooperative Program and to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering.

Praying for the persecuted church

Judge's ruling returns daughters to Christian parents in Pakistan

A judge's ruling returned to Christian parents their three girls, who were illegally detained by employers and forced to say they had converted to Islam.

On Aug. 15, a Lahore High Court justice remanded to Naveed Masih and Mina Naveed their three daughters — ages 16, 13 and 9. In court, the girls said they had converted to Islam and wanted to remain with their Muslim employer families, report media outlets Christian Daily International and Morning Star News.



Photo courtesy of Morning Star News

However, when the judge let them talk to their parents, the girls recanted and also said their employers were abusing and brainwashing them, stated an official of Christians' True Spirit, an advocacy group that assisted the parents in the case.

Haleema Bibi, a Muslim woman, placed the girls as domestic workers in Pakistan's Punjab province in September 2023 because their impoverished family needed additional income.

But when the parents requested their daughters' return, Bibi refused, the news services state. Bibi also said one employer wanted a \$1,077 (300,000 rupees) "security deposit" for the return of the oldest girl.

Pakistan is No. 7 on Open Doors' 2024 World Watch List of places most difficult to be a Christian. (TAB)

Police save Christian mom from mob, charge her with blasphemy

Police saved a Christian mother from a mob ready to lynch her, but then they succumbed to mob pressure and charged her with blasphemy.

On Aug. 7, police rescued Saima Masih, 32, from a Muslim mob seeking to kill her in Kathore village of Pakistan's Punjab province, report media outlets Christian Daily International and Morning Star News.

She had been accused of desecrating pages of the Quran, said attorney Akmal Bhatti of Minorities Alliance Pakistan.

The accusation against Saima came from Muslim neighbors with a vendetta, Bhatti said. As news spread of the blasphemy accusation, nearly 300 Muslims gathered on the main highway and blocked passage.

Pressured by the mob, police charged Saima

under Section 295-B of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Such a charge could result in a life sentence, Bhatti said. (TAB)

Five arrested for telling Muslims about Jesus in a railway station

A Christian woman who was charged along with four other people with blasphemy for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ has said she will not relent.

Saba Boota of Islamabad was arrested Sept. 4 for telling Muslims about Jesus in a railway station, report the media outlets Christian Daily International and Morning Star News. Rawalpindi Railways Police arrested her and four members of her evangelistic team — Anita Boota, her sister; Adeel Shamaun; Zubaeyen Samson; and Jonathan Howard, a Briton.

They were charged under Section 298 of Pakistan's blasphemy law ("hurting religious sentiments"), Section 120 of the Railways Act ("committing nuisance on a railway") and Section 34 of the penal code ("criminal act done by several persons with a common intention"). They were granted bail Sept. 5.



Photo courtesy of Morning Star News

"I am working for the Lord, and I'm prepared to pay the price for this service." (TAB)

Cuban alliance denounces country's religious freedom violations

The Alliance of Christians in Cuba denounced human rights and religious freedom violations in the country during its 2024 meeting. The ACC, a multi-denominational group of 60 Christian leaders, called for the release of religious prisoners and prisoners of conscience, citing Cuba's commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This marks the ACC's third statement on the issue since its founding in 2022. The ACC specifically highlighted the case of Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, imprisoned since July 2021 for participating in peaceful protests. International organizations, including the U.S. State Department and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, have joined calls for his release. (Baptist Press)

UN committee slams Pakistan for human rights violations

Authorities in Pakistan have failed to curb a

range of human rights violations, including a sharp increase in blasphemy-related violence, the U.N. Human Rights Committee recently noted.

Abductions of girls who are then forced to convert to Islam, arbitrary detentions, disappearances and crackdown on political dissent were among the violations, members noted during the second review of Pakistan's human rights record at the 142nd session of the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva, Switzerland, on Oct 17–18.

Pakistan ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2010, and the first review took place in 2017. (Morning Star News)

Three Christians granted bail on blasphemy charges

Three Christians facing blasphemy charges in Pakistan have been granted bail.

Saima Masih, a widow, was granted bail Sept. 10 after being accused of throwing papers that allegedly bore verses from the Quran. On Oct. 23, Chand Shamaun — charged with terrorism and insults to Islam and jailed since June — was released on bail. His attorney said the decision came from a two-judge panel.

In addition, Zimran Asim was released on bail Oct. 30 in the third blasphemy case brought

against him. He had been accused of desecrating the Quran and writing blasphemous content on three occasions in 2023. (Morning Star News)



Photo courtesy of Morning Star News

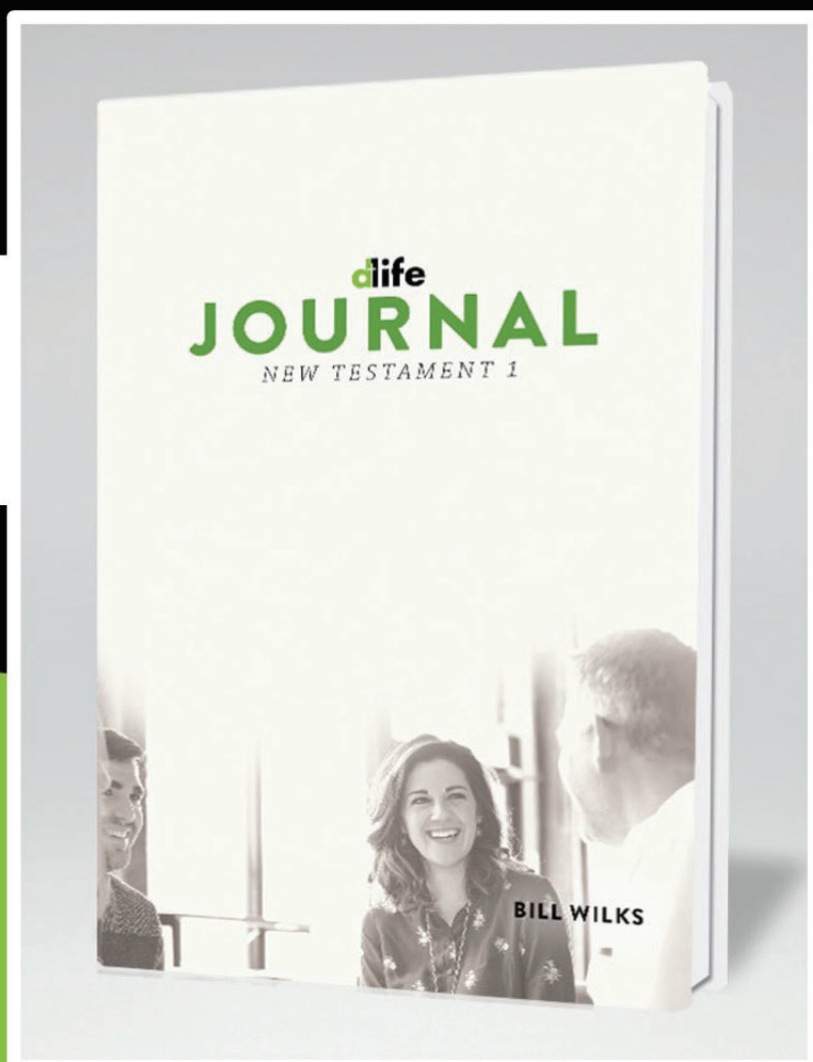


A note on Cuba

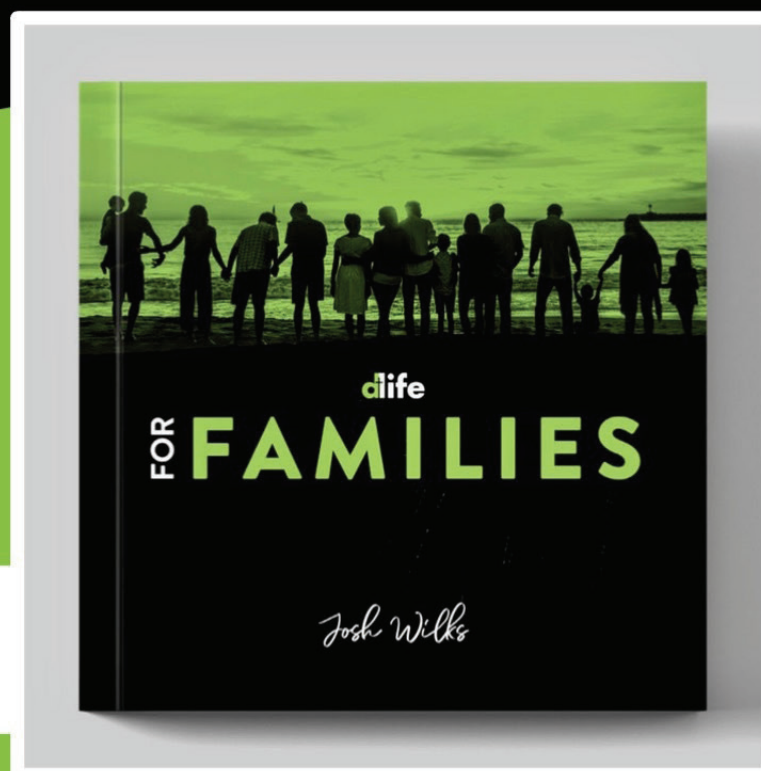
Religious persecution is reportedly rising in Cuba, with 657 documented violations in 2022, compared to 272 the previous year. The U.S. has labeled Cuba a "country of particular concern" for its religious freedom violations.

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International collegiate week

By Chris Doyle
International Mission Board

IMB uses event to encourage students toward missions work

How important is Collegiate Week to the International Mission Board? It's important enough that 25 IMB personnel attended the most recent event, with half being overseas missionaries.

At the beginning of August 2024, more than 1,700 students and college ministry leaders from across the U.S. and Canada met at Falls Creek Baptist Conference Center, near Davis, Oklahoma. Collegiate Week is known for helping college students be equipped to live Christ-centered lives as they prepare for the new school year and beyond.

This was Andy Pettigrew's third Collegiate Week to attend. He leads IMB NextGen Mobilization which serves youth, college students, young adults and their leaders toward engagement in the Great Commission. His team was prepared to cultivate relationships with both students and college ministry leaders and promote the many missions opportunities IMB provides.

"When you have more than a thousand people in one place, particularly students, what an incredible opportunity it is for us to walk that journey with them," Pettigrew said. "As students engage in biblical teaching and discovery of ways to be on mission, leaders from across the country bring their students to provide the right boost before the school year begins. This week provides us the opportunity to say to those leaders, 'We are here to serve you.'"

Living room atmosphere

The mornings during Collegiate Week were filled with worship services and breakout sessions.



More than 1,700 students had the chance to explore diverse foods and cultures from all around the world at the IMB International Bazaar. Students were immersed in sights and sounds from around the world.

Afternoons offered free time, when students could visit the IMB Missions Cabin.

The living room atmosphere provided free snacks but, more importantly, space for students to talk with IMB missionaries and staff. The cabin featured a casual college apartment vibe with rugs, pillows, low couches and chairs and lots of cushions. Students moving through gathered around small tables for conversations and left with IMB memorabilia, as well as NextGen materials and prayer guides.

One student attended the Call to Ministry breakout on Monday morning, which featured a panel of IMB missionaries speaking to people who indicated a specific ministry calling. The student was eager to hear more and came to the Missions Cabin to meet with Stephen

Alexander, IMB Europe student strategist, who was on the panel.

"We have missionaries serving all over the world who know the importance of Collegiate Week and will engage students this week," Pettigrew said. "Our field personnel are here to help students and develop partnerships with leaders to help them 'connect the dots' in their place in God's mission."

Pettigrew said numbers have increased among college students and young adults who are serving in the different missions pathways the IMB offers. Eight opportunities for 2025 were promoted exclusively at Collegiate Week, representing all the IMB affinity groups. Pettigrew said these trips were designed to challenge students to "go, no matter the cost."

Emma Cook has been an IMB

Journeyman for a year and a half and came to Collegiate Week this year to help college students who are going through a similar experience of figuring out their call to ministry.

Cook, a former campus missionary with the Baptist Collegiate Ministry at Middle Tennessee State University, attended Collegiate Week a few years ago with a group of BCM leaders and students.

Praying about it

That week she met Lauren Ulmer who serves with the IMB in Quebec among French speakers. Ulmer told Cook, "You should pray about coming to Quebec." Cook replied, "I guess I can't say no to prayer."

Over the next year Cook prayed about serving in Quebec, as well as other places. She started the Journeyman process soon after and credited that experience at Collegiate Week for where she is now, serving the Québécois people as part of a ministry team.

"The province of Quebec is the most unreached place in North America," she said. With a population of 9 million, Quebec has a low percentage of Christians.

"Being at Collegiate Week is a great opportunity for meeting people from all over. God can work at building amazing connections. Having an IMB presence here is so worth it. Students need to see that the IMB cares about those who have this calling in their life from God to help reach the nations."

EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was written by Chris Doyle and originally published by the International Mission Board.

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MEDIA REVIEWS

By Tracy Riggs Frontz
The Alabama Baptist

New dystopian sci-fi book finds inspiration in Book of Judges

The Book of Judges includes a lot of violence and can be hard to understand. However, Alli Prince and Brad Pauquette have shed some light on it through their fictional work, “Lawless.”

“Lawless” is a science-fiction novel that bases each chapter on a passage from Judges. Each is penned by a different author, with 14 total contributing to the undertaking.

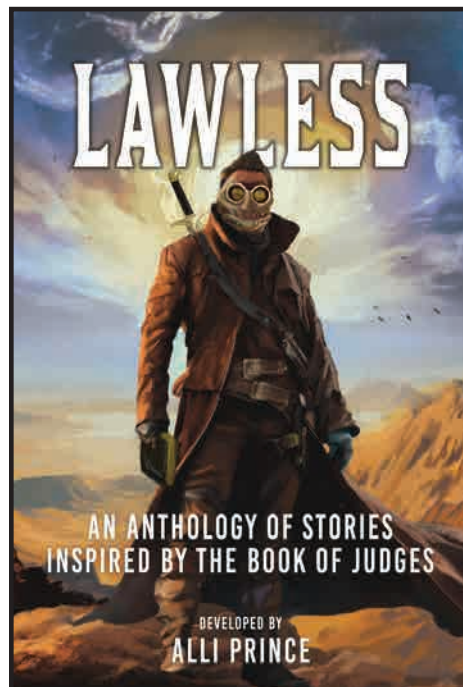
The idea originated from Pauquette, who is director of The Company, a writing and publishing apprenticeship program.

“God is so much richer than what we see in the fiction section of the Christian bookstore,” Pauquette wrote in the foreword of the book. “Here at The Company, we’re ready to invest in something different — something hard, something risky.”

“If the Bible talks about hard stuff in real life and asks difficult questions, why are we so reticent to do the same?”

Piecing things together

Set in the fictional world of Covenant, Prince describes the book as a “post-apocalyptic, dystopian earth” with a “mysterious deity called Donumdonair.” The entire anthology is an attempt to answer



the question, “What would it really be like to live in a time when every man did what was right in his own eyes?”

Initially, Pauquette and Prince read carefully through Judges twice and watched a Bible commentary. Prayer and listening to God’s guidance led to the choice of passages.

Having 14 people working together on any venture can be daunting. Those included in “Lawless” only had a meeting in the beginning to introduce themselves. It was Prince who brought all of the stories together.

“[Brad and I] prepared a packet of information about [the world of Covenant] and its people groups before the authors were assigned their stories,” she explained.

“Then, I met with each author and carefully guided their stories. We extensively edited each short story until it became one cohesive piece of fiction but most importantly, each author prayed and asked the Lord to guide their process.”

Prince’s writing life began at

her dining room table while being homeschooled. But she was shy, and it took a while for her to disclose this passion to others.

“I’ve only started to share my writing with others in the past year and a half,” she said.

Though Prince had a major role in developing every interpretative story in “Lawless,” she identifies most with the very last chapter, “The Stars Stand Witness.”

“This story brought hope to an awful and dark situation and was a great example of how Christ meets us in our darkest moments,” Prince said.

Challenge

“The Stars Stand Witness” was written by Drake McDonald, who considers himself a storyteller, not simply a writer. He makes videos, creates art, composes poetry and songs and writes both fiction and nonfiction.

“I try to incorporate storytelling into all of my endeavors. I think our brains are wired to understand stories, and the best way to communicate is through story,” McDonald said.

Unlike Prince, McDonald wasn’t shy about sharing his work. He wrote his first novella in eighth grade and worked on a novel in 10th. With the encouragement of his English teachers and the confidence from winning writing contests, he majored in creative writing in college.

McDonald found out about the project after deciding to take a free novel class taught by Pauquette in 2020. He stayed in touch by attending various workshops and learned about “Lawless” during one.

“Alli and Brad had both submitted their chapters to the workshop for feedback, and after that ses-

sion they announced that they were looking for writers to adapt the other stories from Judges. I submitted an application as soon as I could,” he said.

He was accepted as one of the writers but could hardly believe it when he found out his chapter was Judges 19. It was so violent that it “made his stomach turn,” but he laughed and told himself that he accepted the challenge.

“It’s one of those stories that just kind of makes you scratch your head and go, ‘Huh. ... I’m not sure what to do with that.’”

“It’s a story about senseless sexual violence and unlike most of the other stories in Judges, God doesn’t really figure into it. He’s not invoked in the text. There’s not really a moral to the story. There are no angels or prophets or voices calling in the night,” McDonald said in an article published in The Pearl, a nonprofit literary magazine that publishes content with a Christian worldview.

Connecting to Jesus

Without giving spoilers, McDonald did say that there is a strong connection between these events and the story of Jesus.

“[It] was truly eye opening for me,” he said.

McDonald enjoyed working with Prince to complete “Lawless.” They, along with Pauquette and the other writers, all worked hard to make it the best it could be.

Prince said that God loves stories, and He loves creativity.

“Christian fiction has a reputation for being overly preachy and poorly written,” Prince said. “However, we have the best Storyteller as an example.”

“Lawless” can be purchased on Amazon.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Reviews of films, books, music or other media that appear in The Baptist Paper 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 Group.