

# The Alabama Baptist

Toll free 800-803-5201  
www.thealabamabaptist.org

January 22, 2026

Vol. 191, No. 2  
Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.



Photo courtesy of Ricky Hall

The volunteer team at Maple Avenue Baptist Church in Geneva serves at various local events. While assisting the community, they also share the gospel.

## Here to **serve**

### Getting Christians out of the building: Volunteer team helps local community

By Rachel Seale  
The Alabama Baptist

Members of Maple Avenue Baptist Church in Geneva are going outside the church building to serve the community.

Ricky Hall, the church's senior pastor, said his congregation created a serve team a few years ago to assist the community with events while spreading the love of Jesus.

Hall said that in 2022, God put

it on his heart to focus on getting people out of the church and into the community. He said Matthew 20:28 inspired him and his church to be like Jesus, who came to serve, not to be served.

#### Outside the church walls

"We need to figure out a way to get the Christians out of the church building," Hall said. "We were running missions teams and doing all of that, but we didn't have anything in

our community as far as us reaching our local town."

Hall said between 30 and 40 church members make up the volunteer team. The team serves at various community events, including Friday night football games, fall festivals and the town's Christmas parade. They also hosted a car show in the church's parking lot.

Hall explained that while the team assists the community, they also share the gospel.

"It gives us an opportunity to talk to people who don't know the Lord or people who don't go to church anywhere," Hall said. "It gives us the opportunity to build relationships with them."

The team handed out about 1,000 cups with Scripture and the church's name on them at a high school football game. Hall said that during the Christmas parade, the team gives out Scripture candy bags that also  
*(See 'Servanthood,' page 2)*

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# Servanthood

## Maple Avenue Baptist members find ways to engage

*(continued from page 1)*  
 have church information in them. Hall said that sometimes people come to the church to ask for the team's assistance, but he also reaches out to community members when he knows a special event is being planned.

Typically, all 30–40 members don't serve at once. Hall said that after asking the local elementary school principal if the school needed any help with its fall festival and carnival, he rotated smaller groups out every few hours of work.

"Our school system has really been easy to work with," Hall said. "They always need volunteers, so it's a win for both of us."

The current serve team consists of adults.

However, Hall said the church is in the process of starting serve teams with both students and children.

"We're trying to figure out how they could serve in our church or in our community for short amounts of time with their parents," Hall said.

The ministry is still evolving, and Hall said there is a strong possibility of other churches joining his church's serve team in the coming months.



Photo courtesy of Ricky Hall

The serve team of Maple Avenue Baptist Church in Geneva consists of 30–40 members. Ricky Hall, the church's senior pastor, says, "It's about just getting Christians in the community."

"It's not just about Maple Avenue (Baptist)," Hall said. "It's about just getting Christians in the community."

### 'Incredible ministry'

After attending the Alabama Baptist State Convention annual meeting, Hall said some pastors were curious about establishing their own

serve teams at their churches. He said there's no expense to starting a volunteer service team. The only cost for Maple Avenue's team was the shirts the group ordered to wear while serving others.

Hall said the team members decide which events they can be of service for, and then the group meets to go over a schedule of each event they plan to assist with.

"It's an incredible ministry, and I don't know how many other churches are doing it," Hall said.

Hall said the community has had a positive response to the serve team even though the area has never seen anything like it before.

He said volunteer groups exist in Geneva but not any with a Christian foundation and purpose.

"From a Christian perspective, from a church perspective, we're the only ones doing that, and the community's very welcoming of that," Hall said.

There has been church growth, and many people have been saved as a result of the team's presence in the community.

"God really just brings people to us because of our servanthood," Hall said. "I just believe the Lord rewards that. I really do."

## Fayette County Baptist Men build ramps



Facebook/Fayette County Baptist Association

A group from Fayette County Baptist Men's Ministry of Fayette County Baptist Association builds ramps in Jesus' name for people in need. The group does it at no cost for the homeowners.

## 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

(ISSN 0738-7741; USPS 011-080)  
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is published every other week by The Alabama Baptist, Inc., at 3310 Independence Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209. Phone: 205-870-4720. Statewide phone: 800-803-5201.

Website: [www.thealabamabaptist.org](http://www.thealabamabaptist.org)

Email: [news@thealabamabaptist.org](mailto:news@thealabamabaptist.org) or [subscribe@thealabamabaptist.org](mailto:subscribe@thealabamabaptist.org)

Periodicals postage paid at Baton Rouge, La.

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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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## What's your capacity for other people's difficulties? When should we respond?

**C**almness, intentionality and awareness may indeed be the key — the key to how we respond to what's coming up next or whether we see the opportunities the Lord places in our paths.

As I reflect on the past 30 years serving with The Alabama Baptist, I'm encouraged by the growth I've experienced (and continue to seek) as well as how our team digs deep, adapts as needed and strives to work out our ministry calling with excellence.

### Hold on to Jesus

Even when we can only see the next step in front of us, we choose to take that step in confidence, holding on tightly to

Jesus and keeping your needs in mind.

Wouldn't it be freeing to move along in all parts of life with that kind of courage?

Sure, we need to fully evaluate many situations we encounter, but sometimes we assess to the point of becoming paralyzed.

Think about a time you sensed you should participate in something outside your comfort level or noticed someone and learned of a need they had.

Were you calm, or did you become anxious? Did you make intentional efforts toward the next logical step, or did you pull back? Were you excited the Lord had blessed your awareness with

the opportunity, or did you silently begrudge the expectation to act?

We certainly can't solve every problem we encounter nor meet every need, but we can do something every single day. It might be as simple as a smile, an encouraging word or a hug.

### Prayer and openness

It definitely should include prayer and an openness to follow where the Lord leads without fear, hesitation or pouting.

I am told my great-grandmother had limited capacity for other people's pain. "I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm just not able to worry about it," she would say and go about her business.

Through the years, I've heard people (sometimes even church folk) say, "I'm sorry that's happening, but it doesn't impact me, so I'm not interested."

Pain, disappointment, poor life choices, broken relationships, addiction, mental health struggles, loneliness, exhaustion and more are leading to extremely difficult life circumstances for many individuals and families all around us.

And for a massive number of people in countries such as Iran, Venezuela, Nigeria, Ukraine and many other areas, the living conditions are beyond what we can even comprehend.

When and how should we as Christ followers rally to respond?

## 30 for 30: Celebrating three decades of partnership, friendship

**H**elp me celebrate my 30th anniversary as a full-time staff member of The Alabama Baptist, Inc.

It's easy. I'll list 30 suggestions, and you pick your favorite.

The goal is for each of the 30 items to be contributed by at least 30 individuals or groups. We'll keep you updated on how the 30

for 30 celebration is going throughout the year.

Email me at [jrash@tab-media.group](mailto:jrash@tab-media.group) or call 800-803-5201 to let us know which item you covered.

Following up with the second 10 options (first set appeared in the Jan. 8 edition):

1. Spend 30 minutes reviewing our Ground Level Reports coverage items

from 2025. Poke around [groundlevelreports.com](http://groundlevelreports.com) and some of the social media channels.

2. Spend 10 minutes looking in this edition for three nuggets of information to share with friends or family.

3. Take a 30-minute break from thinking about the most frustrating or discouraging item in front of you at the moment.

4. Spend an extra 30 minutes reading God's Word this week.

5. Donate \$3 to The Alabama Baptist, The Baptist Paper or both.

6. List 30 people connected to your church family and pray for them by name.

7. Add 30 families to your church's group subscription list.

8. Send us a letter to the editor with at least 30 words but no more than 300.

9. Write down three story ideas and send those to us within 10 days.

10. For the next 30 days, look to see where God is working around you.

—Jennifer Davis Rash

# Your Voice



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

## The power of rhythms over balance

By Brodie Croyle

CEO, Big Oak Ranch

**O**ur temptation is to chase balance, but balance is an illusion.

Balance builds scales — tipping back and forth between extremes. It keeps us grappling for stability, while rhythm gives us footing. Balance teeters back and forth with emotion; rhythm walks with conviction. Rhythms build margin into our lives and leadership.

That's why we must intentionally elevate habits into rhythms, especially in these four areas.

### Spiritually

Balance says, "I can step outside of order for a moment and tip the scale back later." Rhythm says, "I stay within God's Word and His order — because outside of it, I step outside of His protection."

Balance looks like only seeking God's direction when we've hit a wall. Rhythm is establishing prayer-driven decision-making at the start of every day, so we move with clarity instead of confusion.

The strength of any leader flows from the order of their allegiance.

### Physically

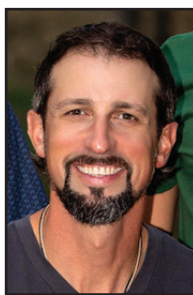
The better we lead ourselves physically, the stronger we stand spiritually.

Balance looks like trying to juggle long nights at work



Photo by Freepik

with long weekends off, swinging between overwork and total withdrawal while sacrificing our health. Rhythm looks like keeping a sustainable cadence — quarterly vision planning, early mornings for strategy work, daily margin to think and exercise, protected family dinner hours — that creates long-term consistency without constant recalibration.



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Energy is a leader's currency — if we spend it wisely, our families and teams reap the dividends.

### Mentally

Leaders are learners. We must be

willing to learn what we need to learn in order to do what we need to do.

Balance looks like weighing unwarranted options to keep fear at bay, often leading to slow decision-making. Rhythm is committing to learn continually, set clear decision points and move forward with conviction instead of paralysis.

We don't have to know everything — we keep learning what we can and trust God to reveal what we don't yet know. If we refuse to do this, we forfeit the right to lead.

### Relationally

Rhythms show up in the company we keep. The people with whom we consistently walk either sharpen us or weaken us.

Balance looks like only investing in people when conflict or burnout forces our hand.

Rhythm is keeping a consistent cadence of one-on-ones, encouragement and accountability so relationships stay strong and culture is protected.

Follow the leadership of two people you aspire to be like, while also leading two people who can look to you for accountability.

When consistency in these areas becomes our cadence, these disciplines become our desires. That's the gift of rhythm. It creates the margin to lead freely, fully and faithfully — and it becomes second nature.

"One thing we have to remind young people with ChatGPT is that we never want to call it 'Pastor Chat' or 'Counselor Chat.' We've got to encourage students and help them understand where they can go for real, actual help," said **Shane Pruitt**, national next gen director for the North American Mission Board.

"I was called into ministry as a young man, and I can honestly say that I have never been bored for a single moment in my entire adult life."

**Chris Crain**

Birmingham Metro Baptist Association  
on Facebook

"I've been an SBC pastor, layperson and/or employee for most of the last 25 years, and I still believe that your average SBC pastor and messenger is a Jesus-loving, Bible-believing, humble servant who wants to live their life to God's glory & see lost people love Jesus."

**Brandon Smith**

@brandon\_d\_smith on X

"Don't buy the lies of Satan that you are too broken for the grace of God."

**Daniel Ritchie**

@DanielRitchie on X

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“Friend, your someday begins today. So start where you are right now ... because this moment matters.”

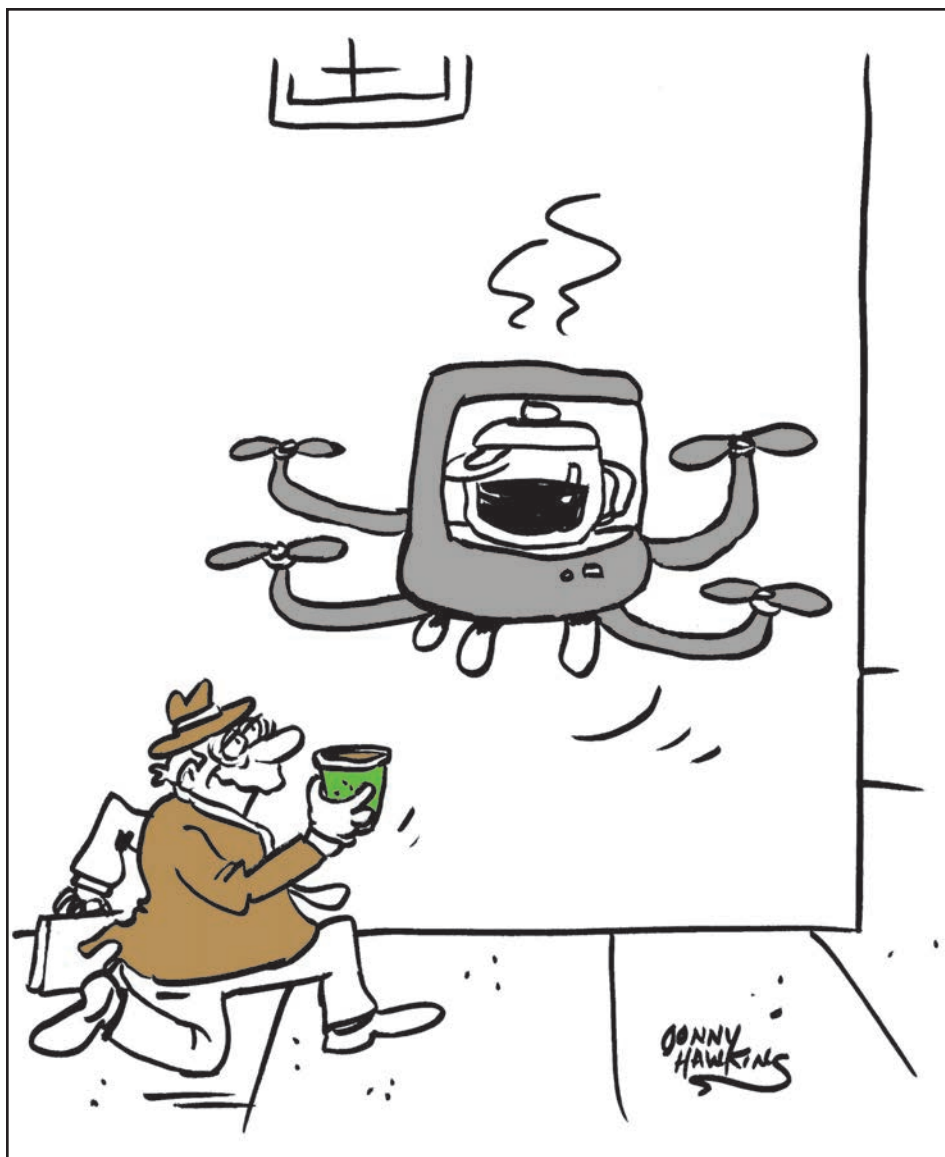
RUTH CHOU SIMONS  
*author*

“I think this verse keeps rising to the top because it addresses one of our deepest needs, the assurance that we’re not alone.” YouVersion founder and CEO **Bobby Gruenewald** said while announcing Isaiah 41:10 as the top Scripture of 2025. “In a world full of anxiety and uncertainty, people are drawn to God’s promise to be with us, to strengthen us and to help us. That message never gets old because the need for it is universal and timeless.”

“The door opened for me to be salt and light. ... Motorcyclists need a pastor too, but unfortunately a lot of them are not welcome in churches or they don’t feel comfortable in church. I attend their meetings, and

I am there to share the truth when I have the opportunity to do so,” said **Mahlon LeCroix**, senior pastor of Shoal Creek Church in Priceville, who has built relationships with motorcyclists in order to share the gospel.

“Christians need to understand that pastors need help. They need encouragement. They need to be looked at as normal human beings. I think it’s something that we automatically think — that pastors are a level above. We do hold them in high esteem, but we do want them to be healthy mentally and physically. We should be ministering to them as well,” said **Lisa Stamps**, author of “Anchors in My Sea.”



# LASS WORDS



BY **KEN LASS**  
The Alabama Baptist

## DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

### Clear vision in a ‘fuzzy’ world

I recently ordered a new pair of glasses. The kind where the lenses gradually transition from distance vision to bifocals as you scan down to the bottom of the lens. When I tried them on for the first time it was evident the bifocal line was too high, breaking right across the midpoint of the lens. When I looked straight ahead my eyes and my brain couldn’t figure out whether to use the distance part of the lens or the reading glasses part.

Objects would first appear in focus, then fuzzy, then clear, then fuzzy again, as my poor brain tried to interpret the mixed messages my eyes were sending to it. This drove me crazy of course. I had to return the glasses and ask for a redesign, lowering the bifocals. The company agreed to do this, and a few weeks later they presented me with a new pair that worked beautifully. Everything was clear both up close and far away. What a relief!

#### Fuzzy lines

Your Christian walk can be like that. Often you have to make decisions about what is right and wrong, but the line between the two isn’t clear. It can get fuzzy. First you think you’re doing the right thing and your path is clear. Then you’re not sure. The culture is pulling you a different way. What used to be wrong now

is commonly accepted, even encouraged.

Just like those faulty glasses, it can make you crazy. How do you know you’re on the right path? Am I pleasing God with my decisions, or have I wandered astray?

#### New routine

Maybe it’s time for a redesign, a new routine for your life that includes daily study of God’s Word. Within it are the answers to your dilemmas. There is no fuzziness about right and wrong in the Bible.

You will see your intended path with total clarity. In the book of Isaiah, in the eighth chapter, the prophet writes “Consult God’s instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this Word, they have no light of dawn.”

I take my new glasses with me everywhere I go. I would be lost without them. We should feel the same way about that holy book. You don’t need an optometrist to be a faithful believer. You just need to see the Truth.

#### MEET THE AUTHOR

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



Unsplash.com

## Nigerian churches attacked and worshippers abducted

Armed assailants attacked two churches in Nigeria's Kogi State in recent weeks and abducted worshippers, according to a United Kingdom-based human rights organization.

Attackers opened fire as they entered Aiyetoro Kiri in the Kabba-Banu Local Government Area on Dec. 14, disrupting worship at First Evangelical Church Winning All. They subsequently abducted at least 13 worshippers, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported.

The Dec. 14 abductions marked the second attack on a church in Kogi State within two weeks. On Nov. 30, militia disrupted services at the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Ejiba, abducting the pastor, his wife, a visiting preacher and several church members.

Kingsley Fanwo, the commissioner for information and communication in Kogi State, said local hunters engaged in a fierce gunfight with the assailants in the Dec. 14 attack.

### Local officials respond

"Our local hunters, who serve as the first line of defense, resisted them strongly," Fanwo said.

Fanwo reported the Kogi State governor mobilized a joint security task force including local hunters and the police, as well as the Nigerian Army's 12th Brigade, the Department of State Services, and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps.

The joint task force is searching the Ejiba forest, seeking to locate the abducted individuals, he added. (Baptist Standard)

## NFL players spotlight religious persecution in Nigeria

A group of NFL players sent a letter to Capitol Hill on Dec. 19, urging U.S. leaders to take steps to curb violence against religious groups in Nigeria, including Christians.

"As current and former NFL players who care deeply about justice — here in America and around the world — we are grieved and outraged by the mounting violence, and we write to urge you to act now to confront religious persecution in Nigeria," the players stated in the letter.

About 60 current and former players signed the letter, addressed to President Donald Trump and leaders in the House and Senate.

Among the signers were quarterback C.J. Stroud of the Houston Texans, Brock Purdy of the San Francisco 49ers and Treveon Henderson of the New England Patriots.

Hall of Fame coach Tony Dungy also signed, as did Kirk Cousins of the Atlanta Falcons, Jameis Winston of the New York Giants, and three-time Super Bowl champion Devin McCourty. (RNS)

## Southern Baptists celebrate 175-year legacy in Nigeria

Southern Baptists first arrived in Nigeria when it existed as independent kingdoms. Now, 175 years later, Southern Baptists continue to serve in the West African country home to diverse ethnic groups.

As International Mission Board missionaries and Nigerian Baptists celebrate 175 years of gospel outreach, they also acknowledge the mission is not complete.

Thomas Jefferson Bowen journeyed by boat to Africa in 1850, becoming the first Southern Baptist missionary to serve in the country now known as Nigeria.

His passion for reaching Nigeria has continued throughout generations of missionaries who served after him and national believers who are reaching their nation for the Lord.

"We celebrate Southern Baptist presence in Nigeria for 175 years, and we're so grateful," IMB missionary Josh Rivers said. Rivers serves as a regional leader in West Africa.

The Nigerian Baptist Convention was founded in 1914, and the Nigerian Global Mission Board is the missionary-sending organization of the convention.

"Why would we still send missionaries to a place that we sent missionaries to 175 years ago?" Rivers said some people may ask.

### Religious divides

While Nigerian Baptists have been effective in spreading the gospel, the country is still very divided, Rivers said. The north has a Muslim majority, and the south predominantly identifies as Christian. Animism exists throughout the country.

"When we think about Nigeria, we celebrate the history of the

work that is there. But we acknowledge that this is a country that still has a Muslim majority and needs the gospel," Rivers said. "There is still the strong need ... to see the gospel flow into those unreached areas."

Nigeria is home to 435 people groups, 40 of which are unengaged and unreached. While some regions are difficult or even dangerous for Westerners, IMB missionaries can access other areas and are partnering with Nigerian Christians to bring the gospel and disciple believers.

Projects to add water wells to communities have given clout to Christians in strongly Muslim areas where people had to walk miles to access water for drinking and bathing. As Nigerian Christians

built the wells, they shared the gospel, and people have committed their life to Christ and formed fellowships.

Significant ministry also happens in theological education. IMB missionaries are teaching in seminaries and other institutions and working along-

side Nigerian Baptists to send out missionaries.

Rivers said they are continually looking to place theological educators at key seminaries and theological schools to help with the formation of leaders who are taking the gospel across Nigeria and to the world.

"We are working alongside of them, pulling from our experience and learning from their experience as well, to see Nigeria mobilizing to the nations." (IMB)

*EDITOR'S NOTE — Some names have been changed for security reasons.*



Photo courtesy of Shirley Crowder  
In the 1960s, Aunt Lil Wasson taught 4 grades at a time in a garage classroom on the Baptist Hospital Nigeria compound.

# Answering God's call

Feb. 1 is  
George Liele  
Church  
Planting,  
Evangelism  
and Missions  
Sunday.

## George Liele: Out of a life of slavery to become the world's first Baptist missionary

By Denise George  
The Alabama Baptist

In 1750, shortly after the end of the Great Awakening in America's British-controlled colonies, a slave named Nancy gave birth to a son. She named him George.

One of Virginia's 101,000 African slaves as a result of the 1705 Virginia General Assembly Declaration, baby George took his father's last name, Liele. His mother's "owner" was Virginian Loyalist, Henry Sharp.

Slaves were "real estate" to their colonial owners and suffered a life of cruelty and punishment: whipping, branding, severing ears, maiming and hanging. If a slave's "correction" caused death, under the law, the master was "free of all punishment ... as if such accident never happened."

### Spiritual revival

America's African slave trade proved prosperous during the 1730s and 1740s, a time of spiritual revival encouraged by ministers like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, David Brainard and others. The movement awakened the colonists' declining lukewarm faith, bringing them face to face with a living, personal Christ, and triggering an avalanche of Baptist growth.

Sometime before 1770, Henry Sharp moved George with him to St. George's Parish (later Burke County), Georgia. In 1735, the British prohibited Black slavery there, but on Jan. 1, 1750, the House of Commons reversed that decision.

In fewer than 30 years, Georgia's slave population grew from 500 slaves to 18,000. The slaves' hard work made the Lowcountry's white plantation owners very wealthy.

In Georgia, Sharp became a deacon in the Buckhead Creek Baptist Church, a white congregation led by

pastor Matthew Moore. Sharp encouraged George to attend worship services. During one Sunday service in 1773, God touched George's heart, calling him to Himself and to love and minister to the other slaves on Sharp's plantation. George enthusiastically gave his life to Jesus and answered His call to ministry.

"I requested of my Lord and Master to give me a work. I did not care how mean it was, only to try and see how good I would do it. ... I felt such love and joy as my tongue was not able to express."

Pastor Moore baptized George, accepting him into the church, and Sharp's plantation became George's missions field. He taught the slaves to sing hymns, shared God's Word and explained the gospel message.

Impressed by George's innate ministry skills, Buckhead Creek Baptist Church licensed him to preach, and Henry Sharp granted his freedom from slavery.

George soon became a minister and preacher to slaves in Silver Bluff, South Carolina, south of Augusta, Georgia, and formed a 30-member congregation of new African American believers. In December 1773, Liele organized the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, the oldest black church in North America. Four of his converts, the Reverend Andrew Bryan, Hannah Bryan, Kate Hogg and Hagar Simpson formed the church's early membership.

Upon his ordination, Liele became the first ordained African American Baptist preacher in America.

A few years earlier, on March 22, 1765, Britain passed the Stamp Act, imposing unfair taxes on angry colonists. When British troops landed in Boston to enforce the Act, their actions resulted in the 1770 Boston Massacre, a deadly incident that triggered America's rebellion against Britain. Five years later, on April 19, 1775, the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired

at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. The British freed tens of thousands of Black slaves who agreed to fight against the colonists.

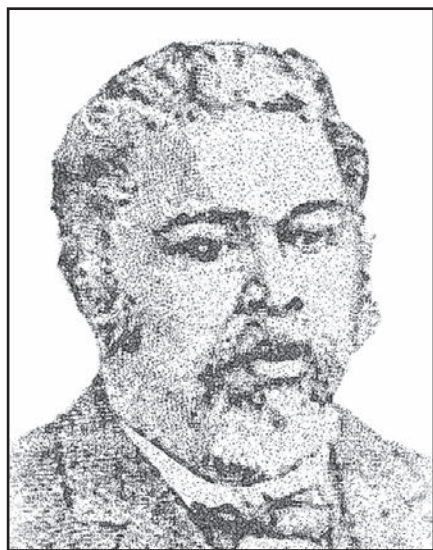
Henry Sharp fought with the British, dying of battle-sustained injuries in 1783. Fortunately, Sharp had given Liele his manumission papers, documentation that saved Liele from long-

term imprisonment when Sharp's children tried to re-enslave him.

British colonel Moses Kirkland helped Liele after his release from prison. A grateful Liele repaid Kirkland by working for him as an indentured servant. When Kirkland escaped to Jamaica around 1782, George, his wife, Hannah, and their four children accompanied him.

### Ripe missions field

Kirkland and the Liele family landed in Kingston, Jamaica, where George discovered a ripe missions field of hundreds of thousands of African slaves working the sugar cane plantations. The slaves suffered with cruel owners, back-breaking work and little food. Thousands were starving to death.



GEORGE LIELE

IMB photo

Liele planted a church, baptizing hundreds of professing converts in a nearby river every three months. He never accepted payment, supporting his family through farming and hauling goods by wagon.

For "preaching sedition" and "agitating the slaves," Liele was frequently imprisoned by Jamaican authorities, once for three years.

### Legacy

By the end of his life, George Liele, referred to as "the Negro slavery's prophet of deliverance," helped found three Baptist churches: First Bryan Baptist Church and First African Baptist Church in Savannah and the first Negro Baptist Church in Jamaica. He also established schools to educate Jamaica's slaves.

Liele encouraged and taught his new converts to preach the gospel to the world. Author David Shannon writes: "The Christianity practiced by Liele was not limited to one nation, colony or ethnic group, but was a faith found and spread through interaction with colonists and national leaders in the Americas and England.

"In turn, this broad vision of Christianity shaped and spread a variety of Christian experience that became widespread and influential in Black, white and integrated congregations in Georgia, South Carolina, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone and beyond."

Liele died in 1828 in Kingston, Jamaica, and is buried there in an unmarked grave.

The world calls Baptist missionary William Carey, "the father of the modern missionary movement." But George Liele left America to preach Christ in Jamaica a decade before Carey left England to preach in India, earning George Liele the well-deserved title of "The World's First Baptist Missionary."

# 'SO FAITHFUL'

## Louisville Baptist honors Fenn for 70 years as choir director, applies for world record

By Grace Thornton  
The Alabama Baptist

**M**ichael Whitman said when he went to make a plaque for Mary Annice Fenn, it hit him that this had to be some kind of record, and not just at his church.

"This year marks her 70th year as choir director here," said Whitman, pastor of Louisville Baptist Church. "One of her sons and I went to digging into it, and Guinness World Records, longest choir director, continuous service — the record was set in 2019 at 57 years, 320 days."

Fenn technically would've had the record then too if Guinness World Records would've known, Whitman said — and now she "has shattered that record with 70 years of service."

The church honored her for her long tenure Dec. 14, the same day as their annual Christmas cantata, and they've applied to have her record recorded officially by Guinness.

### 'Doesn't miss church'

"It will take some time for them to verify it and all that, but whether it's official or unofficial, we know that she started when she was 16 and she is the world record holder," Whitman said. "It is absolutely amazing. She's so



Mary Annice Fenn (center) was honored Dec. 14 for 70 years as choir director of Louisville Baptist Church. The church has applied to have her record officially recorded by Guinness.

faithful — she doesn't miss church."

Fenn said she is "certainly humbled" by the opportunity to serve at the church for so long.

"The Lord has been good to me," she said.

It all started when her piano teacher told her she had to join the choir.

"When I was growing up, I took piano from the lady who was the organist and choir director at the church," she said. "One day she told my friends and me that it was time for us to sing in the

choir. My friends weren't happy about having to go to practices, but I was."

A little while later, Fenn's piano teacher told her she was moving.

"She said, 'I'm going to go out West, and you're go-

ing to need to take over the organ and the choir,'" Fenn said. "I was 16 years old, in the 10th grade."

### 'God has blessed me'

That might've seemed like a lot for some, but for her, it



Photo courtesy of Louisville Baptist Church

was "a surprise and a blessing," she said. "I thought I could do it with the Lord's help, and the pastor and his wife encouraged me."

Seventy years later, she's still leading it.

"I've loved it and lived here and been a member of this church since I was a little girl," Fenn said. "I've enjoyed it and had so many wonderful people through the years who have been in the choir, even my dad. ... In every way, God has blessed me."

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# Kornegay 'grateful' for full-circle moment in music ministry

By Grace Thornton  
The Alabama Baptist

Paula Kornegay says it's a story only God could write.

When she stood up to lead the choir at West End Baptist Church in Clanton during their Christmas presentation Dec. 13–14, some special people were among them.

"The neatest thing to me, some of my childhood Sunday School teachers are there in the choir," she said. "The lady who taught me how to go 'one, two, three, four' in children's choir is with me now. It's just a God story. It's incredible."

As a young girl growing up at West End Baptist, Kornegay took that "one, two, three, four" to heart, and at 18 she started leading choirs. She continued to lead music in various ways in Kentucky until moving back to Alabama and serving for a decade as worship leader at First Baptist Church Pelham.

From there, she moved back to Clanton, and after taking on the role of director of music ministries at West End Baptist in 2019, the church started a different kind of Christmas outreach — their annual Christmas presentation.

## New tradition

Pastor James Watkins said prior to that, the church had been known in Chilton County for the Living Christmas Walk it held at the local Goosepond Park each year.

"But we were dealing with weather — rain, cold — and Paula had the idea to move it inside," Watkins said.

That was the start of a



Paula Kornegay (center), director of music ministries at West End Baptist Church in Clanton, now co-writes and directs the annual Christmas presentations for the church where she grew up.

Photo by Jill Green

new tradition for West End and for local residents — a Christmas musical and drama, written each year by Kornegay and her daughter, Liv Meany.

"Paula does it differently every year, and it's done beautifully," Watkins said.

Kornegay said after Easter each year, they start praying about the idea for that

year's Christmas presentation.

"I try to go to conferences and listen to new music, and I have a big box of music from over the past 30 years," she said. "I also start thinking about our people and what would fit them."

This year's presentation, "The Greatest Gift," was maybe her favorite yet, Kornegay said. "Maybe it's just the season I'm in — I'm so grateful."

She said West End Baptist viewed their Christmas pre-

sentation as a missions trip this year and involved everyone in some facet of the production — most of all the outreach.

"We saw it as we are on mission as a church, a churchwide missions trip," Kornegay said. "Our people got out there with thousands of invitations throughout the community, just talking to people — and they came. There were a lot of new fac-

es in that room, and we pray that we were able to plant seeds and share the gospel."

## The whole gospel

She said that's the point every year, and because of that, they choose not to stop the story at the birth of Jesus — they go all the way through the cross to Jesus' second coming.

"A lot of these people, that's their one time a year

to go to a church, and when they walk out of the doors I want them to have heard the whole gospel of Jesus Christ," Kornegay said.

She said the choir, which ranges in age from 15 to 88, also does an amazing job with the task they're given.

"Their heart for worship stands out to me more than the sound they make, even though it's absolutely beautiful," she said.

## 'Wonderful privilege'

She said she thanks God because she has "the best seat in the house, and this is why — I can look out at the 102 people, and I know the story of what they're going through. I know what's happening in their life, so many who are hurting, so many widows in my choir. They worship God through it."

She said it's a blessing to her to have the "wonderful privilege" to lead and encourage them and work together to put on the Christmas presentation.

"I couldn't ask for more," Kornegay said. "I'm so grateful. Every year it's just, 'Let's share it one more time; thank you, Lord, for one more opportunity to see who is in our path that we get to share Christ with.'"



Paula Kornegay directs the Christmas presentation, The Greatest Gift, at West End Baptist Church in Clanton on Dec. 14.

Photo by Jill Green



Photo by Jill Green

**UPCOMING EVENTS**  
sponsored by the State Board of Missions

# E3: Evangelize, Establish, Equip

## 2026 State Evangelism Conference

Join us for a wonderful time of fellowship, worship and impactful messages at the State Evangelism Conference, with a goal toward encouraging and training attendees to share and live out the gospel.

The conference will be at Heritage Baptist Church in Montgomery on March 1-2.

This event is free except for an optional \$5 lunch on Monday.

The conference begins with a Sunday evening session from 6-7:45 p.m. featuring a message from Mark Johnson, president of Louisiana Christian University.

The Monday morning session begins at 8:10 a.m. and features a

For more information or to register for lunch, visit [evangelizeAL.org/E3](http://evangelizeAL.org/E3) or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



offered at 9:25 and again at 10:45. The morning concludes with an optional lunch program featuring Sam Rainer, pastor, author, and president of Church Answers, speaking on the topic, "The Evangelism Trends That Can Make or Break Your Next 10 Years."

There is a \$5 charge for the lunch. Please register in advance at [evangelizeAL.org/E3](http://evangelizeAL.org/E3) to help in planning for the right number.

Following lunch, Scott Wilkins will be leading a bonus afternoon session from 1:30-3 p.m. on the subject, "REACH: A Team Approach to Evangelism and Assimilation."

This session is being offered in partnership with Montgomery Baptist Association.

For a full schedule and more information, please visit [evangelizeAL.org/E3](http://evangelizeAL.org/E3).



message from evangelist David Burton. Parker Webb from Guilford County, North Carolina, will be leading worship for both sessions.

Following that, six different breakout sessions on a variety of topics will be

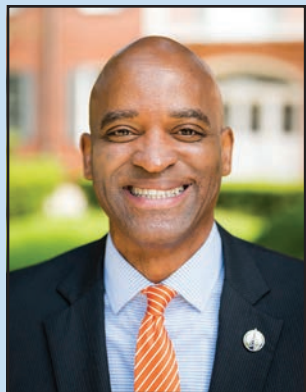
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"Blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the Law of the Lord."

PSALM 119:1



**Mark Johnson**  
President of Louisiana Christian University



**David Burton**  
Evangelist



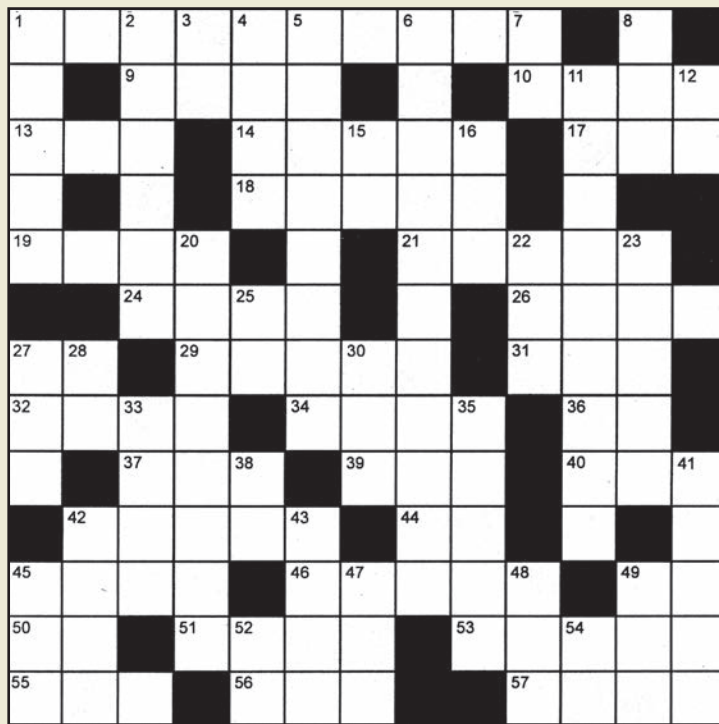
**Sam Rainer**  
Pastor, author and president of Church Answers

# CHRISTIAN Crossword



**ACROSS**

- 1. Last book of the Bible.
- 9. A thing offered unto an \_\_\_\_\_. (1 Cor. 8:7)
- 10. Boaz and Ruth's son. (Ruth 4:21)
- 13. Cozbi, daughter of \_\_\_\_\_. (Num. 25:15)
- 14. Alpha and \_\_\_\_\_. (Rev. 1:8)
- 17. \_\_\_\_\_ and drink. (Acts 10:41)
- 18. \_\_\_\_\_, and Dimonah, and Adadah. (Josh. 15:22)
- 19. Sendeth \_\_\_\_\_ on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:45)
- 21. A tenth part of the \_\_\_\_\_. (Num. 18:26)
- 24. \_\_\_\_\_ found grace. (Gen. 6:8)
- 26. The province of \_\_\_\_\_. (Dan. 8:2)
- 27. Dad.
- 29. \_\_\_\_\_ himself in water. (Num. 19:19)
- 31. Cast the \_\_\_\_\_. (John 21:6)
- 32. Who Cain murdered. (Gen. 4:8)
- 34. Linen \_\_\_\_\_. (1 Kings 10:28)
- 36. Not a she.
- 37. \_\_\_\_\_ there be light. (Gen. 1:3)
- 39. \_\_\_\_\_ them about thy neck. (Prov. 6:21)
- 40. The beginning and the \_\_\_\_\_. (Rev. 22:13)
- 42. \_\_\_\_\_ Peter.
- 44. Symbol for nickel.
- 45. Papa and \_\_\_\_\_. (Matt. 2:19)
- 46. An \_\_\_\_\_ of the Lord. (Matt. 2:19)
- 49. Opposite of "out."
- 50. \_\_\_\_\_ I my brother's keeper? (Gen. 4:9)
- 51. Exalt His \_\_\_\_\_ together. (Ps. 34:3)



By Faith Wade Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.

- 53. Shut the \_\_\_\_\_ mouths. (Dan. 6:22)
- 55. The number of lepers Jesus healed. (Luke 17:17)
- 56. What Gideon was checking for. (Judg. 6:37)
- 57. Children's teeth are set on \_\_\_\_\_. (Ezek. 18:2)
- 20. Jesus healed his son. (John 4:46)
- 22. The \_\_\_\_\_ Commandments.
- 23. Hast thou \_\_\_\_\_ of the tree? (Gen. 3:11)
- 25. Alcoholics Anonymous. (abbr.)
- 27. Frying \_\_\_\_\_. (Lev. 7:9)
- 28. Jewish month.
- 30. Head covering.
- 33. They removed from \_\_\_\_\_. (Num. 33:10)
- 35. North side of Bethemek, and \_\_\_\_\_. (Josh. 19:27)
- 38. Go ye in \_\_\_\_\_ all the world. (Mark 16:15)
- 41. He saw \_\_\_\_\_ smoke rising. (Gen. 19:28, NIV)
- 42. Identical.
- 43. I will praise Thy \_\_\_\_\_. (Ps. 54:6)
- 45. Welcome \_\_\_\_\_. (Titus 1:2)
- 47. \_\_\_\_\_ Testament.
- 48. God, that cannot \_\_\_\_\_. (Titus 1:2)
- 49. Suffix.
- 52. Newspaper.
- 54. Doctor of optometry. (abbr.)

**DOWN**

- 1. One of these never touched Samson's head. (Judg. 16:17)
- 2. Mary was one. (Luke 1:27)
- 3. Edward's nickname.
- 4. God hates a proud \_\_\_\_\_. (Prov. 6:17)
- 5. Under the shadow of the \_\_\_\_\_. (Ps. 91:1)
- 6. The feast of \_\_\_\_\_. (Ex. 34:22)
- 7. Negative.
- 8. Meadow.
- 11. Where Jesus was born.
- 12. Deuteronomy. (abbr.)
- 15. Printer's measure.
- 16. \_\_\_\_\_ the son of Abdiel. (1 Chron. 5:15)

*All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.*

## Hunger Sunday

God's Word is clear that we are to minister to the poor and needy as part of our Christian walk. The hunger faced by the poor continues to be one of the greatest problems facing our world today. The primary focus of the Hunger Offering — collected this year on Feb. 15 — is to feed hungry people.

When a dollar is contributed to the Hunger Offering, the first 50% will be used to feed the hungry in Alabama by assisting associations and designated churches with food pantries. The remaining 50% will be distributed through the Global Hunger Fund.

Hunger Sunday is a great time to let your church know about the hunger cri-

sis and how Alabama Baptists are responding. To get free Hunger Offering and other promotional resources for your church, visit [alsbom.org/hunger](http://alsbom.org/hunger) or contact Lynn Graham at [lgraham@alsbom.org](mailto:lgraham@alsbom.org) or 334-613-2244.

**For free promotional resources, visit [alsbom.org/hunger](http://alsbom.org/hunger) or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.**



## Bible Skills and Drills Event in Hoover

Don't miss a great opportunity for third through sixth graders to learn more about God's Word and how to use it in their lives.

The Faith Over Fear: Bible Skills and Drills Event will be Jan. 31 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Shades Crest Baptist Church in Hoover.

This year's event will have two tracks from which to choose. The first track will

include conferences for children and leaders preparing to participate in Bible Drill this year.

The second track will include conferences for children who want to learn God's Word and develop great Bible skills.

The cost of the event is \$20 and includes lunch.

For more info or to register, visit [kidzlinkal.org/event](http://kidzlinkal.org/event).

## Intentional Leader Series

The next Intentional Leader Series, set for Feb. 10, will focus on the Preacher aspect of the four Ps of leadership: Person, Pastor, Preacher and Pathfinder.

The next session in this ongoing series will be led by Herb Reavis, pastor of

North Jax Baptist Church in Florida.

Join us as we focus on preaching with intentionality, with a goal of where God wants to take His church.

Cost is \$10, which includes lunch. Register at [alsbom.org/ils](http://alsbom.org/ils).

# Alabama news

## OBITUARIES

### LAWRENCE “LARRY” KENNETH HUGHES

Lawrence “Larry” Kenneth Hughes, a former Alabama Baptist pastor and international missionary, died Dec. 4. He was 73.

Over the years, Hughes served in a number of Alabama Baptist churches, including Cave Spring Baptist, Owens Cross Roads; Capshaw Baptist, Harvest; Church on the Bluff, Hoover; West Park Heights Baptist, Anniston; and Angel Grove Baptist and Clearview Church, both in Jacksonville. He also served churches in Alaska, Tennessee and South Carolina and as a director of missions in South Carolina.



HUGHES

Hughes and his wife, Laura, also served as International Mission Board representatives in Western Europe for five years.

He is survived by his wife of 53 years; daughter, Amie; son, Alan; five grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

### JAMES IVALOY LOPER

James Ivaloy Loper, a longtime Alabama Baptist pastor, died Dec. 27. He was 85.

Loper served his country in the U.S. Army for two years, stationed in Hawaii. After he returned to Alabama, he continued to serve in the Army National Guard for four years and studied at Baptist Bible Institute (now Baptist University of Florida) in Graceville.

Loper served for 43 years as pastor of Kennedy Baptist; Stansel Baptist, Reform; Bethlehem Baptist and Four Points Baptist, both in Centreville; Carrolls Creek Baptist, Northport; and Pleasant Hill Baptist, Moundville, as well as serving as interim at Thomas Mill Baptist, Briarfield, and Cottondale Baptist, the church where he was ordained.



LOPER

He also served as pastor of churches in Florida and Georgia and worked full-time jobs outside the church throughout his ministry. He retired from the pulpit in 2005.

Loper is preceded in death by his son, Jonathan. He is survived by his wife of 63 years, Judy; sons, Jeff and Brock; three grandchildren and one great-grandson.

### BIRMINGHAM BAPTIST METRO ASSOCIATION

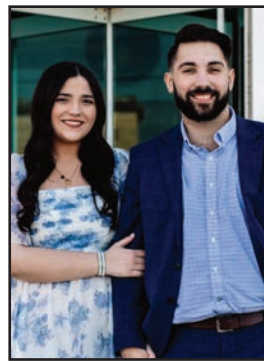
▶ Fuller Musselwhite is the new associate pastor of discipleship for Leeds Valley Church. He previously served as assistant pastor of Grace Auburn Church. He is married to Annie. Nate Farrow is pastor.



MUSSELWHITE

### BLOUNT ASSOCIATION

▶ Pleasant View Missionary Baptist Church, Holly Pond, hosted a singing Jan. 18 at 5 p.m. featuring The Lacy Family. Earl Harper is pastor.



Facebook photo

### CALHOUN ASSOCIATION

▶ Andy Gardner is the new communication specialist and student ministry director for Mount Zion Baptist Church, Alexandria. He previously served at Lakeview Baptist Church, Southside. He is mar-

ried to Caitlyn. Jeff Knight is pastor.



ABERNATHY

### CHEROKEE ASSOCIATION

▶ Michael Abernathy was ordained Dec. 14 as the associate pastor of Unity Hill Baptist Church, Centre. Ken Pace is pastor.

### EAST LIBERTY ASSOCIATION

▶ John Sparks is now serving as transitional interim pastor of Waverly Baptist Church through March 2026. He served as pastor of churches in Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana and also several area churches as interim since retiring in 2023.

### LIMESTONE ASSOCIATION

▶ Ross Clemmons will become the new director of missions for Limestone Baptist Association in February. He has served as pastor of The Grove Church, Madison, for 23 years. Clemmons earned a bachelor's degree in religious education at Samford University and a master's at Southwestern Seminary. He and his wife, Beth, have six children and one grandson.



CLEMMONS

### TUSKEGEE LEE ASSOCIATION

▶ Lindsey Wolfe is the new residency coordinator for college graduates at First Baptist Church Opelika. Previously, she served as the women's associate on the college ministry team of FBCO.



WOLFE

*EDITOR'S NOTE — Please send news items to news@thealabamabaptist.org. Submissions that include the following information are greatly appreciated:*

- ▶ complete details of the event, celebration or honor;
- ▶ at least one high resolution photo of the event or honoree;
- ▶ the name and phone number of a contact person at your church.

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PRESENTS

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# TAB CLASSIFIEDS

Place a classified ad below for \$1 per word. For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 200, or email ads@thealabamabaptist.org.

## CHURCH POSITIONS

### SENIOR PASTOR

Cypress Shores Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, is prayerfully seeking a full-time senior pastor. Please email resumé to: cypress9631@comcast.net or mail to: 4327 Higgins Rd., Mobile, AL 36619.

### SENIOR PASTOR

Central Baptist Church, North Little Rock, Arkansas, is seeking a senior pastor. Three years minimum senior pastor experience required; seminary experience preferred. Send resumé to: cbcnlrpastorsearch@gmail.com. Deadline to apply: Jan. 31, 2026.

### PASTOR

Pintlala Baptist Church is seeking a full-time pastor. The candidate should be a self-starter, enthusiastic about the word of God and excited for opportunity to bring new members to the church. Pintlala Baptist Church, which is located in the southwestern portion of Montgomery County, has a loving church family that is here to share the good news of Jesus Christ to serve our community (and beyond) in His love. We are genuine in our atmosphere and enjoy supporting one another. For more information, please go to: <https://pintlalabaptist.com/ministry-position-open>.

### PASTOR

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

### WORSHIP LEADER

Seeking a full-time worship leader in dual services with praise band and choir. We are a growing congregation of 450 just 90 minutes from the beaches. View the job description at <https://sbcandalusia.com/worship-pastor>.

### BIVOCATIONAL MUSIC MINISTER

New Center Baptist, Hartselle, Alabama, (newcenterbaptist.org) seeking bivocational music minister for blended services, leading choir and coordinating volunteer musicians. Email resumé to: raykballev@gmail.com or contact pastor at 256-221-6880 for more information.

### YOUTH MINISTER

Seeking youth minister at The Baptist Church at McAdory (McCalla). Candidate must be SBC member with passion for

discipling students and leading Christ-centered ministry. Submit resumé: Personnel Committee, 4954 Eastern Valley Rd., McCalla, AL 35111, or tbcam.bcm@gmail.com.

### STUDENT PASTOR

Mt. Zion Baptist Church is seeking a full-time student pastor to lead our student ministry of 80-100 students (grades 6-12). Email your resumé to: pastorsearch@mzbcclife.net. Subject Line: Student Pastor

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## TRAVEL/VACATION

### LARGE BEACH HOUSES

Planning reunion at the beach in the 30A area? Large houses for between 18-35. Short beach walk, private pool, arcade, beach chairs provided. Owner managed, 877-868-4659, <http://www.funretreats.org>.

### LOG CABIN

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## BOOKS

### SOARING WITH FAITH

Soaring with Faith offers both courage and direction for churches seeking renewal. Learn from George Bullard's more than 50 years of ministry experience. Find this first-in-a-series book from ForthTelling Innovation through Amazon.

Introducing our new column on congregational vitality ...

# Soaring congregations emphasize lifelong journey of Christians

1 of 13 pivots

For Baptists and many other evangelical denominations or networks, the most important spiritual experience every person can have is to receive Jesus the Christ as their personal Savior and Lord.

Soaring congregations affirm this and focus on it. They are motivated by the eternal mandate of the Great Commission. They also affirm the second half of this commission in Matthew 28:20 which says, "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you."

They further embrace Mark 12:30-31: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. ... Love your neighbor as yourself."

Together these verses establish a mandate to fulfill the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment.

Strong congregations believe this too. However, their evangelistic passion may cause them to overemphasize the conversion of nonbelievers to eternal life through Jesus Christ. They may spend less time helping people become fully devoted followers of Christ.

It is not either/or. It is both/and. Soaring congregations typically focus on the full journey of Christians. Thus, this is the first of 13 pivots congregations must make to be more Soaring than Strong. (See column on the 13 pivots in the Jan. 8 edition of The Alabama Baptist or online at [thebaptistpaper.org](http://thebaptistpaper.org).)

## An illustration

In my book "Soaring with Faith: The Difference Maker for Congregations," I share the following illustration:

"Years ago, I was part of an ongoing multiracial and multiethnic gathering of ministers. In one session, a white minister posed a question to a Black pastor. 'Pastor, what do you believe is the key difference between white Baptists and Black Baptists?'"

"The pastor pondered the questions a few moments and then said, 'White Baptists emphasize being saved, and Black Baptists focus on walking with Jesus.'" (Bullard, "Soaring with Faith," p. 74)

The point of this illustration is not to suggest a racial difference. It is a commitment, conviction and practice difference. Soaring congregations emphasize the full spiritual

spectrum of walking with Jesus. Strong congregations can fall into an unintentional trap. They may overemphasize conversion and de-emphasize the intentional journey to grow as Christian disciples.

A second trap is that Strong congregations, in their positive spiritual passion to grow their congregation, can become myopic about the gifts of the Spirit, placing more emphasis on everyone having the gift of evangelism and underemphasizing other gifts God is inspiring in His disciples.

## Recognizing spiritual gifts

A Soaring congregation focuses on the evangelism gift as well as helping people understand other gifts God may be calling them to express.

On a Strong to Soaring continuum, congregations can plot where they are, develop a consensus understanding and then pray for God's guidance for the spiritual and strategic actions of their congregation. They can ask questions such as, "Lord, what is Your calling upon our congregation? Where do we need to focus our capacities for the work of Your Kingdom?"

This appropriately suggests there is not a right and wrong place to be at various steps along the continuum between Soaring and Strong. There is only God's place for your congregation.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Bullard spent five decades in Baptist congregational and denominational ministry. His ministry roles included three churches, three associations, three state conventions and one national entity. He began as a columnist for TAB Media Group's publication The Baptist Paper in 2022. Bullard now serves as a strategic thinking mentor for Christian leaders through his ForthTelling Innovation ministry. TAB Media Group published his new book "Soaring with Faith: The Difference Maker for Congregations" — available on Amazon.

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# EXPLORE THE BIBLE

## Sunday School Lessons

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Mobile



### For February 1

#### LOYALTY TESTED Matthew 10:16–20, 26–34

Matthew 10 records the disciples' first independent ministry assignment. Jesus gave them specific direction — a limited audience, a clear message and a ministry itinerary. Like today's believers learning to share the plan of salvation or their personal testimony for the first time, the disciples were entrusted to communicate the words of Jesus to a familiar group of people.

The disciples were to seek out Jews on this trip, avoiding Gentile thoroughfares and roads traveled by Samaritans. They were not yet ready for those conversations. Jews were eager to talk about the Messiah, but Gentile and Samaritan interactions could lead to rabbit trails that the disciples were not yet prepared for. This was their first recorded independent ministry experience.

#### Snakes and Doves (16–20)

The Lord Jesus warned His disciples that difficult circumstances awaited them. To prepare them, He told them to be sheep among wolves with a serpent's shrewdness and a dove's innocence. In the days to come, they would reflect the meekness of the Master as they faced public ridicule from religious and political leaders. In fact, they would surrender their lives for their faith in Jesus.

Jesus informed them that the Holy Spirit would provide the words for them to say. Does that mean we should not prepare for evangelism and apologetics? "The mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart" (12:34).

When Peter preached at Pentecost, Stephen at the temple, Philip on the road to Gaza and Paul at Pisidian Antioch, each man communicated the words of his reasoned faith from the overflow of his regenerated heart shaped by the Scriptures and guided by the Holy Spirit.

#### Sparrows and Hair (26–31)

In the first century, a follower of Jesus was targeted by both Jews and Romans as threats to the status quo. The Master's following was growing, but so were the number of groups suspicious of His teachings. Jesus warned His disciples not to allow fear to distract them from their mission.

The Father is well aware of the details of your life, including the number of hairs on your head or the threats upon your life. Jesus taught that God values each of us more than sparrows sold in the marketplace.

In the 21st century, Baptists in the Bible Belt have little fear of persecution for confessing Christ. Our Christian brothers and sisters around the world face all kinds of threats for following Jesus — accusation, arrest, death, disinheritance, divorce or eviction, to name just a few.

#### Peace and Swords (32–34)

Some groups that claim Christian faith teach that once a person trusts in Jesus, the believer will live in peace without conflict. This does not align with creation. God separates light from darkness, day from night, waters above from waters below, waters from dry land, flora from fauna and humanity from all other creatures. God who creates also separates.

To side with truth is to wage war against falsehood. To live in the light is to overcome darkness. To embrace life is to stop fearing death. To side with the One who is "holy, holy, holy" is to reject wickedness.

Jesus brought a sword. He explained that a relationship with Him is the highest priority, even over family members. Three times in the verses that follow this passage, Jesus refers to priorities that make people "not worthy of Me."

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

### For February 8

#### CONFRONTING DOUBTS Matthew 11:1–6, 16–24

Jesus is not threatened by doubt but faith demands decision. In our passage this week, we observe Jesus confronting doubts from John the Baptist, John's disciples and unbelievers in the towns where Jesus had previously ministered.

#### Uncertainty (1–6)

When John first baptized Jesus, his certainty about Jesus' messianic identity was affirmed through Jesus' own words, the Holy Spirit's appearance as a dove and the voice of the Father. Time passed, and Jesus had not yet fulfilled John's expectations. Was Jesus the One they were looking for?

How was it that John was so uncertain that he sent his disciples to question Jesus? First-century Jews were looking for a military messiah, an economic emancipator, a political prince who would set their people free from the oppressive Roman regime that had replaced the Babylonians, Persians and Greeks who had preceded them. Even the disciples asked Jesus when He would reestablish the Davidic kingdom (Acts 1:6).

Jesus responded to the inquiry by describing how He had demonstrated messianic authority. The deaf hear, the lame walk, the blind see and the dead are raised. Who but the Anointed One of God could do such things? Happy and satisfied is the one who is not scandalized by Jesus.

#### Cynicism (16–19)

John the Baptist lived away from crowds, much like the Essenes with whom he is often associated. He was not inclined to attend social gatherings. By contrast, Jesus spent time with people. He went to weddings and banquets, and He showed little concern for how others perceived the company He kept. The

cynics who watched them complained about John for being antisocial and about Jesus for being too social!

The generation Jesus described sounds similar to our current American mindset. Visit social media sites or listen to people gossip, and you may be inclined to become a people-pleaser, being more concerned for how observers judge your words and appearances than what assignment God has given you to do.

#### Denial (20–24)

Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum — these coastal towns on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee were where Jesus lived and ministered, yet many of the people there rejected Jesus. They were witnesses to His words. They saw the Savior bring healing to the hurting. In the final judgment, they will receive no pardon. Why? Unlike Nineveh in the days of Jonah, where the people repented in sackcloth and ashes, the people of these towns denied Jesus.

Genesis 19 describes the destruction of Sodom by fire and brimstone. If the southern city of Sodom had seen Jesus' miracles, it would have remained for another two millennia rather than being destroyed in the days of Abraham.

Sidon and Tyre were prominent northern Mediterranean coastal city-states whose people worshipped Baal and other gods during the time of the prophets. Jesus said those cities would have repented had they seen His miracles.

Jesus taught that denial of His identity is intolerable and that those who do not believe will go to hell (Hades). Knowing Jesus is not enough. Think about it. James and his brothers knew Jesus, but they did not believe in Him (John 7:5) until after the Resurrection (Acts 1:14). They came to trust Jesus as their only Lord and Savior through the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

**"Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight ...'"**

Matthew 11:4–5a

# BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

## Sunday School Lessons

By Jeffery M. Leonard, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Biblical & Religious Studies, Samford University



### For February 1

#### JESUS MATTERS Colossians 1:15–22

When he died in 2021 at the age of 100, the academic and statesman George Shultz brought to a close an astonishing record of public service. It was in his role as secretary of state that Shultz had the task of commissioning various men and women to serve as ambassadors to foreign countries.

Prior to their departure, Shultz would hold a brief meeting with the ambassadors where he would spin a large globe and instruct the new appointees to point to their country. Each one would dutifully point to his or her new post only to be corrected by Shultz, who would point to the United States and remind them, “No, this is your country.” Shultz’s point, of course, was to charge the new ambassadors to never forget which country they were truly serving.

As Paul writes to the church at Colossae, he is eager to make a similar point to his own readers. Amid the various strains of religious thought, the apostle wants to remind the Colossian believers that they are first and foremost servants of Jesus the Christ.

#### Jesus is the Creator of all things. (15–17)

The first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Colossians contains one of the longest rehearsals of Christ’s attributes in all of the New Testament.

Paul begins by emphasizing Jesus’ role as creator. He notes that “everything was created by Him, in heaven and on earth,” and he insists that Christ’s role as creator is inextricably tied to His role as ruler. As the “first-born over all creation,” He rules over creation as the Father’s regent. He is “before all things,” and as the one who sustains creation, “by Him all things hold together.”

#### Jesus is the Ruler over all things. (18–20)

Christ’s rule over creation is mirrored in His rule over the Church. Paul describes Jesus as “the head of the body, the Church,” and he goes on to identify the twin elements that make Christ’s headship over the Church a reality. On one hand, there is the Incarnation. “For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him,” Paul proclaimed.

On the other hand, there is the Resurrection. Paul describes Jesus as “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,” and he insists that it is Christ’s defeat of death that ensures that He might “have first place in everything.” Jesus took on the travails of a human life, and as God raised Him from the dead, the Father announced His approval of Jesus’ great sacrifice.

#### Jesus is the Reconciler of all things. (21–22)

Perhaps most important from our perspective is that Jesus’ roles as creator and ruler are wedded to His role as reconciler. When Paul notes that all of the fullness of God dwelt in Jesus, he is careful to specify that the incarnation occurred in order that “through Him” He might “reconcile everything to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.”

This is a message that should have been particularly relevant for the Gentile believers at Colossae. Separated as they were from God’s covenants with Israel, these former pagans had been “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.”

But now, Jesus the Creator has taken on the role of Christ the Incarnate, Christ the suffering Servant and finally, Christ the resurrected One. Through His incarnation, death and resurrection, Christ paved the way for even Gentiles to find salvation.

### For February 8

#### JESUS SAVES Acts 2:22–24, 32–41

At various points in Church history, individuals have undertaken the task of producing so-called “harmonies” of the Gospels. These works take the narratives, parables, sayings and sermons from the canonical Gospels and combine them into one work rather than four. While these kinds of combinations can be interesting from a scholarly perspective, some early attempts in this direction aimed at a different goal, namely to have Christians actually replace the four individual Gospels with the one combined account of the life of Christ.

Thankfully, the Church rejected these attempts. To turn the four Gospels into one always involves trimming away or sanding down elements of one Gospel account in favor of another. What is gained by resolving one narrative tension or another is far outweighed by what is lost as the distinctives of the evangelists’ four pictures of Jesus are blurred out to form one.

One particularly fascinating distinction in Luke (and its companion, Acts) has to do with Luke’s presentation of the death of Jesus. While we often think of Jesus’ death through the theological lens of substitutionary atonement — that Christ died on our behalf and in our place — Luke places his emphasis somewhere else.

Luke underscores the fact that the death of Jesus was a crime and we were its perpetrators. When he saw the lifeless body of Christ on the cross, the centurion in Luke declared, “This Man really was righteous” (23:47). Luke insists that we were ultimately the ones who killed this innocent Man.

#### Jesus was sent to be our Savior. (22–24)

As the crowds gathered after the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it was Peter who took the lead in addressing them.

Peter insists that Jesus’ identity was plain for all to see; He was “a Man attested to you by God with miracles, wonders and signs that God did among you through Him, just as you yourselves know.” And yet, despite the fact that Jesus’ appointment by God was clear, Peter charges, “You used lawless people to nail Him to a cross and kill Him.” A few verses later, Peter will make this point once more as he refers to “this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36).

#### Jesus is exalted as Lord. (32–36)

Despite our complicity in the death of His Son, the Father refused to abandon us to our own fate. Jesus lived His life reaching out to outcasts of society, and He died a cruel and ignoble death.

The Father’s ultimate stamp of approval on the way Jesus lived and the way He died was exercised as God raising Him up (v. 24). From His lowly status as the suffering Servant, God exalted His Son to sit at His right hand and rule as “both Lord and Messiah.”

#### Jesus becomes our Savior when we trust in Him. (37–41)

As the assembled crowds heard Peter’s Pentecost sermon, Luke tells us, “they were pierced to the heart.” They turned to Peter and the apostles and begged to know, “Brothers, what should we do?”

Peter’s response was one that is now quite familiar to us: “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

In his own distinctive way, Luke reminds us of our complicity in the death of Jesus and urges us to turn to God, seeking His forgiveness.

*“This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified ...”*

Acts 2:23

# Culture of intentionality

## Churches celebrate those exploring ministry after Calling Out the Called Sunday

By Grace Thornton  
The Alabama Baptist

**R**ick Wright said in college, speech was his worst class. “I dreaded it, and I hated it in high school too,” he said. “But when God gets hold of you, He can take care of all those things that are fears.”

Wright, now pastor of The Church at Chelsea Westover in Harpersville, shared that lesson with his congregation as part of 2025’s Calling Out the Called Sunday, an emphasis encouraged by the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions’ office of LeaderCare.

Three families and two young men in the church that day responded to an altar call to indicate that God was dealing with them about the possibility of serving in ministry.

“It was a pretty unforgettable experience for my church as we joined with so many across Alabama to call out the called,” Wright said.

He said his church tries to create a culture of intentionality to send out pastors to the ministry, but the Calling Out the Called initiative gave him new ideas about how to emphasize that message.

### Continue asking people

“I encourage churches to make this a part of who you are regularly. Whether it’s Calling Out the Called



Screenshot

Rick Wright, pastor of The Church at Chelsea Westover, shares the story of how God called him into ministry during 2025’s Calling Out the Called Sunday. Three families and two young men responded to an invitation that day to indicate that they too were considering a call to ministry.

Sunday (or other times) ... we have to continue asking people and calling them to answer God’s call,” Wright said.

Bryan Blass, director of the SBOM office of LeaderCare, said Wright was the first pastor he heard from after the emphasis Sunday.

“I was blessed to hear how God was glorified as several answered His call for service,” Blass said. “Only God can place His call upon a servant’s heart; however, there can

be great joy in the life of the church as ministers and church members alike encourage and spur on those who are experiencing that individual call.”

He said as church leaders share their own stories of their call into ministry, those testimonies can help clarify some questions for others who might be dealing with a call.

“Our God is not limited, so do not be surprised when people of all ages begin that journey to follow God in service, wherever He leads,” Blass said. “While some answer ‘yes’ from a call early in their life, others are asked to say ‘yes’ to His call even in their retirement years.”

He shared Wright’s story through a video at the Alabama Baptist

State Convention annual meeting Nov. 11.

He also shared the story of First Baptist Church Trussville, which held a luncheon for people exploring a call to ministry.

Pastor Buddy Champion said the Calling Out the Called emphasis “really rang” with them because “each one of the team members knew of an individual, a man or a woman or a young student, who had spoken with them about vocational ministry.”

### Cultivating the call

They decided to invite those individuals to a luncheon but also extend the invitation to anyone who might be considering a call.

“We just began the luncheon with some of the team members telling their story, and then we walked through a quick Bible study talking about how God calls us all to a specific ministry, sometimes in the secular world but sometimes in vocational ministry,” Champion said. “... What areas could God possibly be calling you to?”

More than 30 people from age 14 to 64 attended the luncheon.

Blass said he’s certain that “when we see the need to have servants step up and say, ‘Yes I feel God’s call, I hear God’s call, I’m

going to answer God’s call,’ I’m convinced He will give us the tools that we need to be able to extend those invitations and come alongside them.”

The next Calling Out the Called emphasis Sunday will be Aug. 9, 2026, but Blass said he encourages churches to prioritize God’s call on people’s lives throughout the year.

For resources and more information, visit [callingoutthecalledal.org](http://callingoutthecalledal.org).

**“We have to continue asking people and calling them to answer God’s call.”**

**Rick Wright**  
pastor, The Church at Chelsea Westover