

The Alabama Baptist

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

April 30, 2026

Vol. 191, No. 9
Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

God is moving “tremendously” at Auburn Baptist Campus Ministries, according to Ben Edfeldt, director of the SBOM office of collegiate and student ministries. Students are engaging the campus every day with the gospel.

‘Start of a great movement’



Photo courtesy of Auburn BCM

Auburn BCM adapts ministry, sees exponential growth in discipleship, evangelism

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Fill the field, not the room.” Clint Culpepper said that was the vision when he and Kennedi Kruger became the Baptist campus minister and associate minister at Auburn University two years ago.

At that point, the school’s long-standing Baptist Campus Ministries found itself at a crossroads. Its Tuesday night worship and Bible study was starting to wane, and they were new to campus.

He and Kruger began looking for a way to mobilize students to reach their campus. They started with 15 students “who wanted to be disciplined and wanted to learn how to

share the gospel” and started equipping them to share their faith. Then they started sending them out into “a campus that needed to see how deeply loved it is,” Kruger said.

‘Curious questions’

Culpepper said their goal is to get the gospel to 192 places on campus, one of which is a biology classroom where they recently held a God and Science night led by a quantum chemist who is a Christian.

“People have curious questions, so we want to be able to answer those,” Culpepper said.

He said they also do Discovery Bible Studies in places on campus where the students are among their peer groups. Kruger said that’s given

them access to places they couldn’t otherwise go.

“We can’t just go in and say, ‘We’re going to hold a Bible study in this building,’ but our students can,” she said. “We try to teach students that the Lord has strategically brought you to Auburn, and He has placed you in the classrooms you’re in for a purpose — what are you going to do with it?”

One music student shared with Kruger that she wanted to reach her classmates. The student started leading a Discovery Bible Study there with Kruger on Thursday nights.

During a study of John, a student from Birmingham asked the same question Nicodemus asks in John 3 — “How can someone be born

again?” Kruger said it was a good reminder: “That question is still being asked today.”

Beginning of a movement

Ben Edfeldt, director of the office of collegiate and student ministries at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, said he’s excited to see what God is doing through the Auburn BCM.

“We’ve seen God move tremendously at Auburn BCM — nearly 300% growth, mobilizing students to engage the campus every day with the gospel and dozens of students participating in missions. I believe we’re just seeing the start of a great movement of the Lord at Auburn BCM.”

SPOTLIGHT SPONSOR ...

The Bus Center
Helping Your Church Go Further — Together



BCA/ASBP

Communication professionals gather for annual workshop, meeting

Baptist communication professionals from across the nation gathered April 13-17 in Mobile for the group's annual workshop.

TAB Media Group's Jennifer Rash served as president of the Association of State Baptist Publications, a division of Baptist Communicators Association, and FBC Montgomery's Amanda Smith served as BCA's workshop chair.

Doug Rogers with the State Board of Missions managed all AV aspects of the meeting and served as master of ceremonies (along with Rash) for the awards ceremony.

Those from Alabama honored with awards were:

Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions

▶ **Design — Print Collateral: advertisement** — *1st place, 2025 VBS Live, Jesse Conte*
 ▶ **Design — Digital Collateral: advertisement** —

1st place, Saints Alive, Jesse Conte
 ▶ **Feature Writing — Copywriting: ceremony** —

1st place, The Ballad of Brad Bensing, Doug Rogers
 ▶ **Audio — Broadcast/Podcast: individual episode** —

2nd place, Buddy Gray One Mission Podcast, Mitchell Bruce
 ▶ **Feature Writing — First-person Column/Blog: series** — *2nd place, AI: The Next Culture Shift Series, Mitchell Bruce*

▶ **Feature Writing — First-person Column/Blog: single entry** — *3rd place, Peanuts 75th anniversary stirs lifelong memories, Doug Rogers*

▶ **Video — Event Coverage: 1-3 minutes** — *3rd place, Pursue 2025 Recap, Mitchell Bruce*

First Baptist Church Montgomery

▶ **Design — Print Publications: annual report** — *3rd place, 2024 State of the Church, Amanda Smith*

Samford University

▶ **Grand Prize — Albert McClellan Award for Exceptional Achievement in Print Media & Design** — *Ampersand Calendar, René Zimny, Zimny Media*

▶ **Design — Print Collateral: speciality item** — *1st place, Ampersand Calendar, René Zimny, Zimny Media*
 ▶ **Design — Digital Collateral: landing webpage** — *2nd*

place, Beeson Scholarship Landing Page, Samford University Web Team and Neal Embry, Beeson Divinity School

▶ **Interactive Communications — Web, Organization or Company:**

large site (25 pages or more) — *3rd place, Beeson Website, Samford University Web Team and Neal Embry, Beeson Divinity School*



Overall Publication: Newspaper — *1st place, The Alabama Baptist*

TAB Media Group
 ▶ **Overall Publication — Print publication: newspaper** — *1st place, The Alabama Baptist*

▶ **Photography — News: series or package** — *1st place, Texas Flood Coverage, Marc Ira Hooks, The Baptist Paper*
 ▶ **Photography — Promotional or Advertisement: single** — *1st place, Ground Level Reports, Marc Ira Hooks, The Baptist Paper*

▶ **Photography — Feature: single** — *2nd place, Flood — Texans On Mission, Marc Ira Hooks, The Baptist Paper*
 ▶ **News Writing — Series or Package** — *2nd place, GCR Records Unsealed, Available for Review, The Baptist Paper*

▶ **Photography — News: single** — *3rd place, Texas Flood Coverage, Marc Ira Hooks, The Baptist Paper*
 ▶ **Photography — Event Coverage: single** — *3rd place, SBC Protest, Marc Ira Hooks, The Baptist Paper*

▶ **Feature Writing — Single Article: less than 750 words** — *3rd place, Serving at the Rim, Shawn Hendricks, The Baptist Paper*
 ▶ **Design — Print Publications: newspaper** — *front page* — *3rd place, Texas Flood — Jesus Wept, Marc Ira Hooks, Lauren Grim, The Baptist Paper*

University of Mobile
 ▶ **Overall Publication — Print Publication: magazine** — *1st place, University of Mobile 2025 TorchLight, UM Marketing & Communications*

▶ **Design — Print Publications: annual report** — *2nd place, University of Mobile Annual Report 2025, UM Marketing & Communications*



Grand Prize: Print Media & Design — *Ampersand Calendar, René Zimny, Zimny Media*



Jennifer Davis Rash and Doug Rogers serve as masters of ceremonies for the BCA awards presentation.

Photo by Marc Ira Hooks/TAB Media Group

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)
 © The Alabama Baptist, Inc.

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
 Email: news@thealabamabaptist.org

or subscribe@thealabamabaptist.org
 Periodicals postage paid at Baton Rouge, La.

ANNUAL TAB SUBSCRIPTION RATES
 Includes print, digital, app and full web access

Group Rate per subscriber per year — \$19.95

Individual — \$34.95 per year (26 issues)

JENNIFER DAVIS RASH
 EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEWS SERVICES
 Baptist Press (BP)
 Religion News Service (RNS)
 Morning Star News (MS)

POSTMASTER
 Send address changes to:
 The Alabama Baptist
 3310 Independence Drive
 Birmingham, AL 35209

ADDRESS CHANGE
 Send old and new addresses, and name of church to:
 Subscription Department
 3310 Independence Drive
 Birmingham, AL 35209
 Allow two weeks.

To the best of our knowledge, all of the ads in *The Alabama Baptist* represent legitimate companies and offerings. However, one should always exercise normal business caution in responding to ads. Also, the information in Alabama News is typically provided by or approved by the individual, church or association represented.

Member of Alabama Press Association

Accredited member of Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability



TAB Media Group among top in nation

The newspapers, online content and other media offerings produced by TAB Media Group continue to be honored among the top in the nation in the Christian market and in the state's general market. Best in Class, Awards of Excellence and other top awards have been earned by team members every year for nearly 30 years.



The crossword puzzle can be found on page 11.



Rashional Thoughts

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

Email: jrash@thealabamabaptist.org / Social media: @RashionalThts

Escalating level of negative stress provides obvious opportunity to fill the gap

As we wrap up Stress Awareness Month (April) and head into Mental Health Awareness Month (May), I'm curious what our congregations might consider as ways to fill in the gaps for families struggling with overload, exhaustion and confusion.

What if our churches became known for instilling peace? And, wow, do we know the author of Peace.

The ultimate Light

What if the community surrounding our church campus saw light beaming constantly from our property? And, yes, we know all too well who is the ultimate Light.

What if we opened our hearts and minds up to truly meeting each other where we are, rather than where we think we should be when walking into church? And we've likely taught on or sat under teaching emphasizing the benefits of genuineness, authenticity and transparency.

Focusing on the needs of the people sitting around us on Sundays as well as within walking distance of the parking lot might seem overwhelming at first.

After all, we truly can't solve all the problems we will encounter in any given week, nor can we support or hold up everyone who has issues.

But what if we could change one person's life or one family's situation? What might God do with the trickle effect of where that could lead?

How might God grow us in the process? How can we fight the fear of stepping into full vulnerability, not knowing where the path might lead or what we might be asked to do?

Do you ever think about how we sometimes don't know what we don't know? And in the not knowing we could be missing out on something incredible if we require maintaining control and a decent roadmap outlining the next steps.

Think about those times you stepped out on faith and fully trusted without knowing all the details. I'm guessing you could share a powerful God story from that experience.

Alleviating pressure

But back to seeking ways to alleviate the life pressures and mental health issues wrecking so many individuals and families — and the number is increasing at an alarming rate.

Why would we not want to step in and be part of the solution?

Of course, we know the answer is to abide in Jesus, but if we are honest, then we know even the most faithful believers

sidestep the "simple" life hack of abiding from time to time.

If strong and dedicated believers must be reminded and assisted through difficult moments, then how much more do those who aren't walking closely with our Lord.

Start the conversation

So, what does it look like to demonstrate peace, calmness, regulated central nervous systems and simple joy when more

and more people we encounter spend their days merely trying to survive?

Where do we start? Spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, relational, financial, societal, philanthropical — or all of the above?

If we truly are called to be on mission and to minister, then how can we ignore the obvious pain all around us? Let's start the conversation and take the journey together.

We live in a world drowning in information but starving for truth.

People read self-help books, watch motivational videos and listen to endless podcasts — yet many remain anxious, confused and defeated.

There is only one reliable source of truth. Eternal and absolute truth is found in the

Bible — the Word of God. In the Bible, God has given us a clear road map that leads to life, if only we will follow it. To abide in the Word is to abide in Jesus, because Jesus is the Word (John 1:1, 14).

Bill Wilks, pastor
NorthPark Baptist Church,
Trussville

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

JOHN 1:14

Your Voice



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

First person: Remember the Christians of Iran

By **Eddie Vines**

Special to The Alabama Baptist

In 2019, I was blessed to have the opportunity to participate in a missions trip to Athens, Greece, with New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary for the purpose of ministering to Middle Eastern refugees living there.

During our trip, the Lord moved mightily, and we were able to witness to many. Although we enjoyed powerful experiences during our trip, such as visiting Mars Hill and seeing new converts baptized in the sea at Cenchrea, the thing I have found myself sharing most often since then is the vibrant and life-consuming faith of the Iranian Christian translators who assisted us while we were there.

Many times over the years I have described them as believers who, if given the choice on a particular day to either eat or share the gospel, would choose the latter.

A changed life

One translator I became especially fond of was named Saeed, which means “happy” in Arabic.

Saeed explained to me that for many years he had not lived up to his name, as he had struggled with

major depression. He had been so distraught living under the tyrannical regime of his home country that he traveled over rugged mountains and through the wilderness in order to escape.

This story was difficult to believe as the young man standing before me virtually radiated joy and positivity. Saeed shared that since finding Jesus, people he knew from before could hardly believe he was the same person.

Since that trip, I have developed a keen interest in the underground church in Iran and have learned that in recent years it has been growing quickly and thriving despite heavy persecution from the Shiite-led regime. Some estimates place the number of Christians in Iran at over 1 million.

Growing up in the U.S. during the 1970s and '80s, it is impossible to erase from my memory the daily water-torture coverage of the Iran hostage crisis or the ensuing decades-long “Death to America” policy of Iran’s leaders.

Considering this history, it is not hard to understand why many Amer-

icans might think that obliterating this perpetually threatening country would be a good thing. As Christians, however, we don’t have the luxury of thinking in such simplistic terms.

Brothers and sisters

Galatians 6:10 reads “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

As Christians, we should feel a special bond with anyone who follows Jesus. Believers in Iran are not only our brothers and sisters in Christ, they serve Him with an inspiring level of courage that few American believers are ever called upon to live out. While most of us in America have been blessed with material comforts and religious freedom, our spiritual family members in Iran have been faithfully shining the light of the gospel into one of the darkest places on earth.

So, as pundits yell and bombs fall, I would implore everyone reading this to pray that our leaders turn to God for wisdom during this time and that our Christian brothers and sisters in Iran would be protected, encouraged and comforted in coming days.

EDITOR’S NOTE — Eddie Vines is a former Jefferson County Judge. He currently serves as president of Faith Fortress Ministries.



VINES

“If they have a parent they can go to, they can really have this open line of conversation,” said **Amy Cooter**, deputy director and co-founder of the Institute for Countering Digital Extremism, in regards to protecting children from dangers in the digital age. “There’s a much easier pathway back out of all this.”

“God is at work. Jesus has done His part. He died on the cross. He has opened the hearts of millions of people. Now we need to work with Him, partner with Him and build up His church,” said **Hormoz Shariat**, founder and president of Iran Alive Ministries.

“Don’t wait too late! We can see in newspapers and on TV that Satan is very active in our world today. What a great time to minister to these prodigal Christians.”

Charles Hendrix
Member of Fannin Baptist Church in Brandon, Mississippi

“Prayer makes the powers of darkness tremble.”

Charles Spurgeon
Baptist preacher in 19th century England

“So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

Galatians 6:10

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“I, the Lord, search the heart,
I test the mind, to give to each man
according to his ways, according
to the results of his deeds.”

JEREMIAH 17:10
David L. Allen @DrDavidLAllen on X

Purity isn't a prize for perfect people.

It's not something you win if you behave well enough.

It's not a status you unlock by staying clean.

Purity is the byproduct of walking with a perfect Savior.

It's what happens when you live loved, not when you live afraid.

It flows from proximity, not performance.

Take off the pressure.

Draw near to Christ.

Let Him do the transforming.

Jennifer Carr, author
“The Weight of the Ring”

I'm reminded that God's program has never been about one nation. God's zeal has always been for all peoples, nations and languages.

“... With the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and He came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion and glory and a Kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His Kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13–14).

As Christians, we don't pray for one nation. Pray for all nations, peoples, rulers and governments. Pray for peace. Pray for gospel advancement. And above all, pray as Jesus taught us to pray: “Your Kingdom come.”

Walter Overman, pastor
Providence Baptist Church
Kansas City, Missouri



“David doesn't like manna.”

Lass WORDS

BY **KEN LASS**
The Alabama Baptist



DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

What's zero calories, yet very satisfying? Hint: It's not your breakfast cereal.

They've gone too far. Now they're telling me that breakfast cereal is terrible for you.

I tried my best to keep my cool when they struck down my burgers, fries, fried chicken and pizza. I kept up a brave front when they nixed soup, sandwich meat and snack chips. I even agreed to bite the bullet when they debased my favorite sodas and then decided diet sodas were even worse!

But now nutritionists are saying you shouldn't eat cereal. Too much sugar and processed ingredients, they say.

This is a real blow.

From childhood on, I have started my days with the likes of Frosted Flakes, Rice Krispies, Lucky Charms and Cocoa Puffs. My best friends growing up were Tony the Tiger, Lucky the Leprechaun and that cheerful little trio Snap, Crackle and Pop.

List of deceptions

Did they lie to me when they told me on the box that cereal was full of oats and wheat and protein — things that would help me grow up to be big and strong?

Next thing you know, they'll be saying that big glass of orange juice I drank every morning was bad. Oh wait, they're already saying that. Sugar is the culprit again.

Add that to the list of deceptions I heard as a child. I was told if I went swimming within

an hour after eating a big meal, I would get cramps and drown. I was told if I continued to contort my face into grotesque expressions to tease my friends, my face would stay that way. I was told cracking my knuckles would give me arthritis.

Now I learn that heaping bowl of Cap'n Crunch I knocked down before going to school each morning was unhealthy.

Is nothing sacred?

What hasn't changed

At least one thing is lasting. It's remained true throughout the many years — God's Word hasn't changed. I was taught as a child that the path to heaven was Jesus as Lord and Savior, and it still is.

Not only that, but prayer and ministry are sugar free, non-fattening, low in cholesterol, good for the heart and enlightening for the mind.

So even if I have to pour something into my breakfast bowl that looks and tastes like wood chips, I can take comfort in the sweet taste of God's love. Zero calories, yet very satisfying.

MEET THE AUTHOR

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

'UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY'

Ukrainian Baptists find purpose amid 'new reality' as war refugees

One moment, they were tourists, vacationing in Europe to visit friends. The next, they were among an overwhelming swell of millions of Ukrainian evacuees, losing homes, careers and stability during the Russian invasion of 2022.

Nickolas Skopych and his family could have leaned into the misery of their new reality as refugees. Instead, they leaned into Christ and chose to be "happy missionaries."

On March 31, the Missions Mobilization department of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board hosted a Connection Meeting with Nickolas Skopych and his son, Martin, Ukrainian Baptist missionaries to the diaspora in Germany.

The meeting emphasized how Mississippi Baptists can partner with the Ukrainian Missional Movement, a network of Ukrainian Baptist churches working to multiply and plant churches across Europe.

Ironically, Nickolas was raised in a Soviet family in Kyiv. Like other Soviets, he was told that Baptists were a cult. Around the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he began



ALMAZ GERMANY CHURCH

Photo courtesy of The Baptist Record

to seek meaning in his life, and by God's sovereignty, an American Baptist missionary handed Nickolas a gospel tract on the streets of Kyiv.

Nickolas gave his life to Christ, grew in ministry with other believers and attended the seminary started by American Baptists. He joined a Bible study group of new believers, out of which was formed Almaz Church, where he would pastor from 2000 to 2022.

Having decided to be missionaries

in their unexpected circumstance, the Skopyches planted Almaz Germany Church, one of 88 Ukrainian Baptist churches planted in Germany, a country open to refugees and immigrants from around the world.

New openness to gospel

"We use our unique opportunity to share the gospel," said Nickolas. "Ukrainians are very open to talk about God now. Today, you can meet on the streets and begin to

talk with them. In Ukraine, they would react negatively to a stranger speaking to them. But outside of Ukraine, where we are refugees and have that commonality, they want to talk. ... We understand now that it's a great opportunity to preach and plant new churches in our language."

The Skopyches' goal in ministry is to strengthen the Ukrainian Missional Movement. They want to encourage Ukrainians to be missionaries where they are by supporting new leaders, new churches and new initiatives to continue to fulfill the Great Commission.

Compelled by Christ's calling amid their hardship, Ukrainian Baptists recognize an incredible opportunity to encourage their German brothers and sisters in Christ.

"When we left Ukraine, we lost our cars, our houses, our careers, our 'adulthood,'" Nickolas explained. "We decided to be happy missionaries, instead of pitiful refugees. We decided to preach Christ. We decided we are still followers of Christ, we still have a mission, and we still have a great goal in our life." (The Baptist Record)

Ukraine church destroyed; pastor killed in 'direct attack'

A Baptist church in Ukraine was destroyed during an evening worship service April 16, when many Ukrainian churches observe Easter, leaving multiple people injured and one minister dead, according to a former Ukrainian lawmaker.

Pavel Unguryan, a former member of the Ukrainian parliament, confirmed House of Prayer Baptist Church was struck while congregants gathered to celebrate Easter, observed in

Ukraine through both Western and Eastern traditions.

Several church leaders were inside at the time of the attack. Unguryan said seven or eight people were seriously wounded, and minister Ruslan Utyuzh was killed. Utyuzh is survived by his wife and two children.

Calling for prayer

"We are asking you to pray for the church and families," Unguryan said, noting that up to 700 churches have been destroyed since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

He described the church as "a beautiful house of prayer that believers built over many years, sacrificing their own finances and strength," adding more than 300 people had called it their spiritual home.

"Now it lies in ruins," Unguryan said. "We already know of at least five victims, including one minister, Ruslan Utyuzh, who was inside the church at the moment of the strike. Rescue teams are still working through the debris, and the number may rise."

"This is not just another

building destroyed — this is a direct attack on the church in Ukraine, on people of faith who gathered peacefully to worship God. Please stand with us in prayer and action," Unguryan said.

Call for just peace

Elijah Brown, general secretary and CEO of the Baptist World Alliance, condemned the attack.

"The ongoing targeting of churches, and places of worship, must come to an immediate stop," Brown said.

"The destruction of this

Baptist church is yet another poignant reminder of the moral bankruptcy of wars of ambition, which leave in their wake the destruction of lives, but not the destruction of faith.

"The Baptist World Alliance prays for the families that were killed and renews our call for the establishment of a just peace, a peace which will only be possible as all of us continue to pray and advocate for an immediate and just cessation." (Baptist Standard)

Persecuted church

Seeking the truth: Christian's death sparks protest, calls for police action

A Christian farmworker in Pakistan appears to have been tortured to death by his employers, who then staged the scene to look like suicide.

Relatives said Marcus Masih, 21, was found hanged in a shed at the Muslim-owned cattle farm where he worked. However, his body was covered with bruises and burns that suggested torture, said a human rights advocate.

Pakistan is No. 8 on Open Doors' 2026 World Watch List of the 50 places most difficult to be a Christian.

Pakistani courts, police side with captors in child marriage cases

A Pakistani court in March granted custody of a 13-year-old Christian girl to the man accused of abducting her, forcing her to convert to Islam and marry him. A two-judge panel upheld the marriage even though the girl's father provided proof that she was 12 when she was kidnapped in July 2025 and therefore too young to marry.

According to Christian Daily-Morning Star, human rights advocates say the case reflects a recurring pattern of forced marriage and conversion of young Christian girls in Pakistan.

In a similar case, a Christian father whose 14-year-old daughter was kidnapped in January and forced to marry one of the captors claims police are making no effort to return her to her family. After the kidnapper threatened the girl's family, they filed a police report, but no arrests resulted.

Pakistani Christian family disallowed to have proper designation put on ID

A Pakistani Christian family is facing persecution and financial hardship because authorities are defying a court order to change their religious designation to "Christian" in Pakistan's national identity database.

Naseem Bibi said her family's identity had been changed and that "Muhammad" had been added to the names of her three sons. A civil court



MS photo

directed the National Database and Registration Authority in 2023 to change their identity to Christian and remove Muhammad from the sons' names, Bibi told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News. The second part was completed, but they still are deemed Muslim. Their faith and ID status has adversely affected their

employment status and wages, Christian Daily-Morning Star reported.

Family in Pakistan fights to bring Christian boy home from captivity

A 14-year-old Christian boy's employer is accused of keeping the boy from his family and forcing him to convert to Islam. During a recent visit, the boy was taken from his parents' home by armed men.

The family has since been told he converted to Islam. Christian advocacy group HARDS Pakistan is helping the family seek assistance from Farooqabad Saddar Police in recovering the boy, Morning Star reported.



MS photo

Group wants U.S. to add Pakistan to list of religious freedom violators

An independent watchdog group has urged the United States government to redesignate Pakistan a "country of particular concern" because of unabated religious persecution.

In its 2026 annual report, released March 4, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom enumerated systemic religious freedom violations occurring in Pakistan, according to Christian Daily International-Morning Star News. Among those are blasphemy laws, mob violence against religious minorities and coerced conversion of minority girls — particularly Christians — to Islam and forced marriage to Muslim men.

The news outlet said the U.S. last designated Pakistan a country of particular concern in late 2023. Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Nicaragua, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also were included on the 2023 list.

Nigerian Christians slain, dozens abducted amid separate attacks

The persecution of Christians in Nigeria continues to claim lives.

In a February attack, a pastor in Dorowa Maitozo village was slain and dozens of Christians were abducted.

The assailants are believed to be Muslim.

In a separate incident, John Omoniyi Ajise was killed March 11 when suspected extremists attacked Oyatedo village in Kwara state. His wife and four other Christians were kidnapped, reported Christian Daily-Morning Star.

Nigeria is No. 7 on Open Doors' 2026 World

Watch List of the 50 places most difficult to be a Christian.

Finland's high court returns mixed verdict in religious freedom case

The Finnish Supreme Court recently ruled 3–2 to convict Päivi Räsänen of "hate speech" for a 2004 church pamphlet outlining biblical views on marriage, while also unanimously acquitting her over a 2019 Bible verse tweet.

Lower courts had cleared her of all charges. The court also convicted Juhana Pohjola, who published the pamphlet. Räsänen called the ruling a violation of free expression, and she is considering appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

Religious freedom advocates are sounding alarm bells over the March 26 decision, according to Decision Magazine.

Paul Coleman, executive director of Alliance Defending Freedom International, warned the decision could chill free speech.

In a social media post, Tony Perkins, president of Family Research Council, called the decision an example of a "new dark age ... descending upon Europe as governments restrict the truth because it is seen as offensive by some."



Photo courtesy of Alliance Defending Freedom International

'My family wants me dead,' says man in refugee camp who accepts Christ

A man has had to seek safety inside a church in a South Sudan refugee camp because of death threats against him since he put faith in Jesus Christ. In May of last year, the man put his faith in Christ after watching "Jesus Film" at a church within the camp.

Hostility and death threats from Muslim extremists in the camp followed, he told Morning Star News, and his family disowned him. "My family wants me dead," Ahmed told the media outlet.

Not only is he facing threats, but he is also in a camp where food and water supplies sometimes are inadequate. The 16-year-old camp supported by the United Nations was built to accommodate 2,500 people, according to Morning Star. As of April 2025, the count was greater than 22,000.

Sudan is No. 4 on Open Doors' 2026 World Watch List of the 50 places most difficult to be a Christian.

Alabama news

AUTAUGA ASSOCIATION

▶ **Travis Coleman** is serving as interim lead mission strategist for **Autauga Baptist Association**. He has been serving in various transitional pastor roles since he retired as pastor of First Baptist Church Prattville.



COLEMAN

▶ **First Baptist Church Prattville** recently promoted two team members to new staff positions.



KRAMER

Audra Kramer is the new church administrator. She previously served as financial assistant 15 years. She and her husband, Scott, have three children. **Laura West** is the new finance ministry assistant and had served as finance secretary for more than two years. She and her husband Jonathan, have two children. Justin Hall is pastor.



WEST

CALHOUN ASSOCIATION

▶ **Roger Willmore** has announced his retirement as director of missions for **Calhoun Baptist Association**. He has served in this role for more than 10 years, working alongside the 83 churches in the association in several ministries including

the backpack ministry, Willmore's favorite. In addition, he has served 42 years as a pastor, including seven years at First Baptist Church Weaver. He was president of the Alabama Baptist State Convention (2006–2008). A graduate of Samford University and Jacksonville State University, Willmore holds a master's and doctor of ministry degrees from Luther Rice Seminary; an honorary doctor of divinity degree from the University of Mobile and Judson College; and a doctor of philosophy degree from Trinity Theological Seminary. Willmore has been actively involved in overseas ministries that include several trips to Ukraine where he helped build a seminary in Kiev and preaching in many countries, including Japan. He and his wife, Sandra, have one adult son. Willmore plans to remain active in ministry. A celebration honoring Willmore will be held at Parker Memorial Baptist Church, Anniston, May 17, 5 p.m. Special guests include David Olford of Olford Ministries Institute of Biblical Preaching, and Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. Music will be provided by the CBA choir, directed by Don Gober, music minister of Parker Memorial. A reception will follow.



WILLMORE

CHEROKEE ASSOCIATION

▶ **Tyler Barron** is the new pastor of **Sandy Creek Baptist Church, Centre**. He previously served as pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church,



Submitted photo

Rome, Georgia. He and his wife, Heather, have two children.

COFFEE ASSOCIATION

▶ **Michael Coleman** is the new pastor of **Westside Baptist Church, Elba**. He previously served as associate pastor of First Baptist Church Pulaski, Virginia. He and his wife, Kim, have two children.



COLEMAN

SIPSEY ASSOCIATION

▶ **Kevin Morrison** is the new director of missions for **Sipsey Baptist Association**. He has served as pastor of several churches in Alabama, including Bethabara Missionary Baptist Church, Northport. He was ordained at Bevan Chapel Baptist Church, Berry, the same church where he was saved and surrendered to preach. Morrison has also held various leadership positions for the association. He and his wife, Tiffany, have five daughters.



Submitted photo

Craig Carlisle to be nominated for SBC 1st vice president

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

Alabama's Craig Carlisle will be nominated for first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention when messengers meet in Orlando in June.

Carlisle, director of missions for Etowah Baptist Association, is currently serving as second vice president of the SBC and wrapped up his two-year term as Alabama Baptist State Convention president this past November. He has long been part of Alabama Baptist life and currently serves on the board of directors for The Alabama Baptist newspaper/media group. He also serves in a national capacity as a board member of the SBC Executive Committee.

UM's Smith to nominate Carlisle

Charles W. Smith, president of the University of Mobile and member of Redemption Church in the Mobile area, shared his plans to nominate Carlisle with The Alabama Baptist.

Smith said he believes Carlisle is "uniquely suited to serve" as SBC first vice president at this time.

"This nomination comes from a clear conviction about Craig's character, his proven leadership and his heart for Southern Baptists," Smith said. "It also reflects my deep appreciation for the kind of leader who invests in the next generation. ... He loves Jesus, treasures God's Word and spent more than 30 years faithfully pastoring three Southern Baptist churches. Today ... he effectively serves and supports 80 churches [through his associational missions leadership role]."

Smith noted Carlisle's heart for bivocational pastors, his leadership of Alabama's Calling Out The Called initiative and his work as chair of the state's Sexual Abuse Task Force and Advisory Council, which "he led with humility and conviction."

"His leadership in significant moments ... has only further reinforced the trust Alabama Baptists have in him," Smith said.

"Every corner of our state — north and south, metropolitan and rural,



Photo by Van Payne/The Alabama Baptist

young and old — holds Craig Carlisle in high regard. I am confident that same respect and affection will be evident on the national stage."

Carlisle said he is "passionate about the average Southern Baptist and our normative size church having a voice and feeling represented through our Convention. ... We are a Convention of normative size churches and pastors who serve churches that average less than 75 in attendance. Most of them won't be in the room when the Convention meets. I want them to know they matter and are important."

The push for Carlisle to allow his name to be put in nomination for an SBC officer surfaced earlier this year after he posted a message on Facebook related to the officer election.

Who is willing?

He asked who would be willing to speak to the pastoral shortage and the need for bivocational ministers.

"We have made great strides in elevating the role of bivocational ministry and the need to call out the called in Alabama. ... We are poised to make even greater strides and a more significant impact in the days to come.

"I hope we can acknowledge what we've realized in Alabama is a reality everywhere in our Southern Baptist Convention," Carlisle said.

"My prayer is that we will collectively ... address these challenges and make a concerted effort to raise up and appreciate those who serve bivocationally and internationally."

The SBC Annual Meeting will be held June 7–10 at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando. More details about the meeting and related events are available online at sbcannualmeeting.net.

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



Living well happens here.

Living with a chronic health condition doesn't mean childhood has to stop. At Children's of Alabama, we make sure kids can keep doing what they do best—laughing, playing, and simply being kids. With expert care, advanced treatments, and a team that never stops believing in brighter days, we help families navigate their healthcare journey with confidence, strength, and hope.



Learn more at ChildrensAL.org

The Alabama Baptist to share 'iconic' building with Timberchase Financial

Staff members of The Alabama Baptist, Inc., have operated out of 3310 Independence Drive in Homewood, Alabama, for 50 of the media group's 183 years.

Then-editor Hudson Baggett negotiated the 1975 land purchase and oversaw the construction of the Georgian colonial-style building, which was completed in the spring of 1976.

'Top of our wish list'

Five decades later in the summer of 2025, Timberchase Financial LLC's founder Bryan Hancock and his firm's partners determined they needed more space for their Birmingham-area office.

Currently leasing a suite at 31 Inverness Center Parkway in Hoover (as well as

operating an office in Bend, Oregon), Timberchase leaders began exploring options for where they might like to move.

"We were open to moving closer inside the metro area if we could find the right fit," Hancock said.

"The Alabama Baptist building was at the top of our wish list. Not only is it in a great location, but I have always thought of the building as iconic. I remember visiting the building as a child, soon after it was built."

Hancock's team approached The Alabama Baptist staff and board of directors in the fall of 2025 to propose the idea of selling while also staying as a long-term tenant.

The two groups quickly realized the opportunity would

be a "win-win," he said.

Jennifer Davis Rash, president of The Alabama Baptist, Inc., also known as TAB Media Group, agreed.

'Strong commonality'

"While Timberchase is a wealth management and financial planning firm and The Alabama Baptist is a faith-based media group publishing digital content and a variety of printed newspapers, we discovered a strong commonality through our work ethic and style of customer engagement," she said.

"We weren't looking to sell our building, but we had been talking through how best to set ourselves

up for future growth opportunities.

"The more we discussed the idea of a leaseback agreement, the more we saw those opportunities as realities with this creative way to share 3310 Independence Drive.

"Bryan's description of the building as 'iconic' is one I would use as well," Rash said. "I've heard many people mention how they love seeing the building and the sign as they top the hill on Independence Drive."

'Special place'

"It's been a special place for me to work out of for more than 30 years now, and we really are situated in a beautiful,

comfortable and convenient location."

Hancock owns 3310 Independence Drive LLC, which will purchase the building from The Alabama Baptist for \$1,850,000 and then lease the building to both groups. Closing is planned for May 1.

Timberchase will occupy the bottom floor, and The Alabama Baptist will work out of the second floor.

"By this summer, we should be in our new office, after a remodel that enhances the existing classic look of the building," Hancock said. "We look forward to a long partnership with The Alabama Baptist." (TAB)



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

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

Learn about ESL ministries at upcoming workshop

Kristy Kennedy says many of the internationals who live in Alabama have never had their own Bible or heard of Jesus specifically.

“For me personally and my experience, ESL ministries are one of the best ways to reach internationals with the gospel,” said Kennedy, who leads in the area of community ministries at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. “There’s a huge opportunity here.”

A first step toward getting

To register, visit alsbom.org/esl or scan the code below with your smartphone’s camera.



involved is to attend the upcoming ESL workshop set for June 12–13 at First Baptist Church Montgom-

ery’s Community Ministries Caring Center.

You’ll learn how to get started, organize the ministry, plan lessons and share your faith with your students.

The workshop will run Friday from 1–8 p.m. and Saturday from 9 a.m.–4 p.m. To be certified, you must attend all 12 hours of training. The cost is \$30 and includes materials, dinner Friday and lunch Saturday.

To register, visit alsbom.org/esl.

Keep your missions teams safe

Get your summer missions teams ready to travel. Safe Travel Training is a video-driven resource that will help your teams navigate travel and safety issues.

Even if your teams have been to a country many times before, they can still run into issues.

Scotty Goldman, director of the office of global missions at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Mis-

sions, said he gets phone calls like this all the time from teams that are at work in countries they’re familiar with.

“Why would we want to take a chance on reacting to something if we can be proactive in knowing how to avoid it?” he said. “What we’re trying to do is be proactive in knowing what to look for, whether it’s cultural, criminal or governmental.”

Prior planning also helps your teams be ready when reaction is necessary too. The video-based training offers a convenient way for your teams to prepare on their own time.

Teams who complete the training have an Emergency Traveler Support system that is available 24/7.

Contact Angie Williams at awilliams@alsbom.org or 334-613-3373 for more information.

Basic Legal Issues conference to discuss challenges for churches

Basic Legal Issues for Churches, a conference set for May 21, can provide your church staff with helpful information about current legal challenges for churches.

This free workshop will cover the top 10 legal issues facing the church today and provide guidance in the proper operation of the church.

Attend virtually or in person. The conference will be held at the SBOM in Prattville on May 21, 9 a.m.–12 p.m. To register, visit alsbom.org/legalissues.

WORD search

- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| ADULTERY | JEZREEL |
| ASSYRIA | JUDAH |
| BETHEL | JUDGMENT |
| COMPASSION | KNOWLEDGE |
| COVENANT | LOVE |
| DEVOTION | MERCY |
| EPHRAIM | PLOW |
| FAITHFUL | PRIESTS |
| FORGIVENESS | RAIN |
| GOMER | REDEEMED |
| HARVEST | REJECTION |
| HEALING | REPENT |
| HEART | SACRIFICE |
| HOSEA | SIN |
| IDOLATRY | UNFAITHFUL |
| ISRAEL | WORSHIP |

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

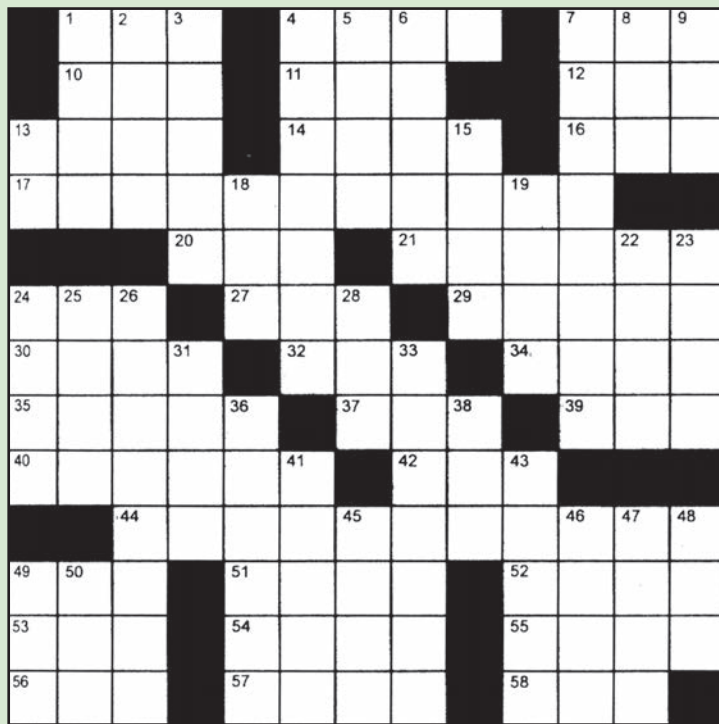
“Come, and let us return to the Lord; For He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up.”
 HOSEA 6:1

CHRISTIAN Crossword



ACROSS

- 1. Monthly literature.
- 4. Delicate network fabric.
- 7. Of ____, the family of the Punites.
- 10. Past.
- 11. Building wing.
- 12. __ your affection on things above. (Col. 3:2)
- 13. Molding.
- 14. Among.
- 16. Tavern brew.
- 17. ____ tells the story of King Saul.
- 20. A language of Southeast Asia.
- 21. That he may ____ upon you a blessing this day. (Ex. 32:29)
- 24. Radiation measure.
- 27. The sons of Elpaal ... who built ____. (1 Chron. 8:12)
- 29. Measurement for wood.
- 30. City of Judah. (Josh. 15:29)
- 32. Ye have not gone up into the ____s. (Ezek. 13:5)
- 34. Ireland.
- 35. ____ and Juliet.
- 37. Three.
- 39. Still.
- 40. Tie the score. (2 words)
- 42. Now ____ was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel. (1 Sam. 2:22)
- 44. A charmer ... a wizard ... or a ____ ... are an abomination. (Deut. 18:11-12)
- 49. And the stork ... the lapwing, and the _____. (Lev. 11:19)
- 51. Arizona Native American.
- 52. Therefore, hence.



By Janet W. Adkins Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.

- 53. Mother of all living.
 - 54. Belonging to Mrs. Peron.
 - 55. Stick for jumping.
 - 56. Young man.
 - 57. ____d died without children. (1 Chron. 2:30)
 - 58. Troops. (abbr.)
- DOWN**
- 1. The Wise Men.
 - 2. Golden ____.
 - 3. Whither thou ____, I will go. (Ruth 1:16)
 - 4. Thou shalt destroy them that speak _____. (Ps. 5:6)
 - 5. Woman's name.
 - 6. They shall ____ up upon the houses. (Joel 2:9)
 - 7. Praise Him with the ____ and harp. (Ps. 150:3)
 - 8. Sons of Bani. (Ezra 10:34)
 - 9. Did eat.
 - 13. About.
 - 15. Render therefore to all their _____. (Rom. 13:7)
 - 18. A Chinese religion.
 - 19. Italian family;
 - patrons of the Renaissance.
 - 22. Nickname of Oriel.
 - 23. Past tense of "go."
 - 24. It is a ____ thing that the king requireth. (Dan. 2:11)
 - 25. Black Sea arm.
 - 26. Insane.
 - 28. Grain.
 - 31. Handwriting on the wall. (Dan. 5:25)
 - 33. Basic proposition for an argument.
 - 36. Settings of precious stones.
 - 38. Longshoremen's union.
 - 41. ____ me now ... if I will not open you the windows of heaven. (Mal. 3:10)
 - 43. Clumsy, unskilled.
 - 45. Iridescent stone.
 - 46. Farmer's produce.
 - 47. Ova.
 - 48. Kanga's child.
 - 49. ____ boweth down. (Isa. 46:1)
 - 50. And the king of Assyria brought men ... from ____.

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

Celebration 250 Alabama

This year marks our nation's 250th birthday, and we are praying for revival. Celebration 250 Alabama is a powerful movement with a vision to reach our country with the gospel.

As part of this statewide effort, churches and believers will unite in prayer, preparation and proclamation, lifting high the name of Jesus across Alabama and beyond.

Revival gatherings and other special events will be held throughout 2026 across the state. The effort

culminates with All-Church Alabama worship and prayer gatherings Sept. 30 and continuing with Celebration 250 Revivals in multiple locations on Oct. 1.

This initiative calls every church to join together in revival readiness, community outreach and sharing the message of salvation in Christ.

For a list of events already planned, helpful resources about holding an event in your area or additional information, visit celebration-250AL.org.



Small Church Tax Conference available in person, online

Do you need a W2 if the pastor is the only employee? Do you have to complete the 941? Can the minister take 100% of his income as housing? How does a small church of 100 or fewer differ from the large church in tax issues? The Small Church Tax Conference will help answer questions about those topics and more.

Join us June 4 at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions in Prattville, or you can choose to attend virtually.

This free conference runs from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. To register, visit alsbom.org/smallchurchtaxconference.

For questions, call Lee Wright at 334-613-2241 or email lwright@alsbom.org.

To register, visit alsbom.org/smallchurchtaxconference or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



From the steps of Jewett Hall on April 21, Wayne Williams, CEO of logistics company Callan JMB, announces to community members and others in attendance the purchase of Judson College's campus and shares how the campus will be renovated and used going forward.

'RESTORED HOPE'



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

New owner of Judson College campus brings fresh energy

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

After almost a year of negotiations, the keys to Judson College's campus were handed over officially in recent days, and the public announcement came from the steps of Jewett Hall at noon April 21.

Callan JMB, a logistics company out of Texas specializing in providing space for developing and storing pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and other resources, will operate out of the campus under the name Atlas Complex.

Wayne Williams, CEO of Callan JMB, said the campus was purchased by him and his brother-in-law as a private entity for an undisclosed price and will lease it to Callan.

"We already feel like part of the family [here in Marion]," Williams said, noting families from India and Korea will relocate to the area as the work is brought back to the U.S.

Judson president Daphne Robinson acknowledged a range of

emotions, from sadness as an alumna to relieved as the president who watched the

buildings sit vacant and lifeless for nearly five years.

"We are pleased with how everything turned out," she said, noting the proceeds from the sale were added to the Judson Foundation fund, which will eventually be used to support whatever the new version of the college becomes. Judson College remains open legally and technically.

"Judson's still there, it's just in a different capacity now," Robinson said. "God still has His hand on Judson and is preparing us for what He's got next for it."

Williams also indicated Atlas Complex leaders will work to preserve the legacy of Judson College.

John Nicholson, pastor of Siloam Baptist Church in Marion, said, "We are incredibly appreciative of someone who has that sense of the importance of what the Judson legacy means here. And with the opportunity for new jobs and a renewed energy in the community overall, this is a moment of generational importance and hope-building for an area that has been in decline since the 1970s.

"It means restored hope for this community and really for the entire region," he said. "There's also opportunity for us to extend the gospel beyond the borders of Marion by our very presence and faithfulness here, so we are excited."



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/TAB
WAYNE WILLIAMS

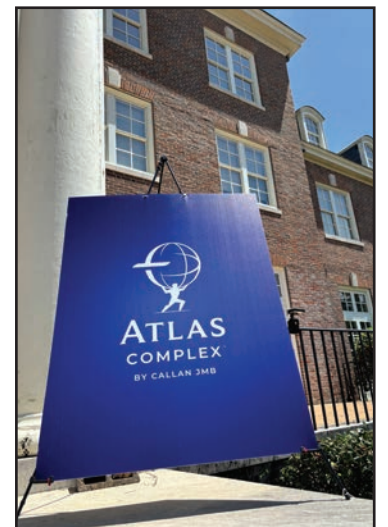


Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

Above: The former Judson College campus is now known as Atlas Complex.

Below: Area community leaders (l to r) Tyrone Smith of Tuskegee University and Donna and Donald Bennett of Main Street Marion are on hand April 21 to celebrate the new industry coming to the area.



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist
John and Vanessa Nicholson of Siloam Baptist Church in Marion are among community members attending the April 21 gathering on campus.



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

TAB CLASSIFIEDS

Place a classified ad below for \$1 per word.
For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 200.

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.

PASTOR

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

PASTOR

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

MINISTER OF YOUTH

The First Baptist Church of Jemison, Alabama, is seeking a minister of youth. Inquire at secretaryjfbcc@jemison.firstbaptist.com.

STUDENT PASTOR

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

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

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

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Southside Baptist Church, Talladega, is searching for a bi-vocational pastor. Please send resumé to: sbctalladega@gmail.com.

OTHER POSITIONS

OPERATIONS MANAGER

Etowah Baptist Missions Center, located in Gadsden, Alabama, is a faith-based poverty-alleviation organization looking to hire an operations manager. Candidates must be a member of a local church and preferably reside in Etowah County. The role will include facilitating daily processes to run the center, administrative duties, monitoring resources, volunteer oversight and scheduling. The role requires organization along with strong leadership and problem-

solving skills. Questions can be directed to the executive director, Lance Hughes, at 256-295-7531 or by email at jobebmc@gmail.com. A more detailed job description will be provided upon submission of resumé.

MINISTRY ASSISTANT

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

AVAILABLE FOR SERVICE

PULPIT SUPPLY

Retired pastor, transitional interim trained, available for pulpit supply in central Alabama. Rev. John Sparks, 334-415-8330

SIGNS

CHURCH SIGN

Signs are your first impression. What kind of impression is your church sign making? Call us to replace/update yours with either digital or traditional. Statewide since 1994. 1-800-729-6844 or 205-664-0955. reliablesigns.com

BUSINESS

STEEPLES, ETC.

No job too big or too small. Call for free on-site consultation. Toll-free 1-888-699-9679 or Alabama local 205-699-9679. Ask for the owner, Terry Barnes. Visit gallery at leadsstainedglass.com.

TRAVEL/VACATION

LOG CABIN

Lake Guntersville area, beautiful view and fully furnished. Discounts to ministers. Log on to <https://paradisevistatravel.com/2024/08/20/paradise-vista-cabin> to see pictures. Email Karen for reservations at kwlwdc@gmail.com or call 205-540-3600.

ABSOLUTELY THE BEST PRICES ON THE BEACH

Beachside and beachfront vacation condos in Orange Beach, Alabama. Rent direct from Christian family owners. Efficiencies, 1 bedroom, 2 bedrooms and 3 bedrooms are available. Call Don, 251-752-2366 or www.gulfshorescondos.com.

~A resource for congregational vitality~

Soaring congregations focus more on being received rather than sent

Is the key message of the New Testament that we are sent? Or is it a deeper concept that we need to go locally and globally to communities and people groups so they might receive the gospel message?

Consider this example: Often when congregations have limited parking related to its attendance, the church uses volunteers to direct cars to available parking places.

Parking lot volunteers are sent — they have a mission to get people efficiently in and out of parking places so they can get to worship or small group gatherings.

But these volunteers are doing so much more than directing traffic. They create a welcoming atmosphere where God can speak into the lives of the people as they arrive. These volunteers realize the worship and disciple-making experience begins before people enter the church facilities.

While the New Testament contains many sending mandates, it also places a high priority on those who receive the good news of the gospel and actions of Christian love. Thus, there is an important connection between those being sent and those who receive the message. Scripture often recounts the success of those who are sent by telling us how their message is received by the people (see Acts 4 as an example).

Both strong and soaring congregations go and serve. But soaring congregations understand the correlation between being sent and being received. A key difference is in the attitude of those who are sent.

First impressions

Mary Ann Sibley, a ministry expert on congregational volunteers and first impressions, shares this story.

One day a car pulled into a church parking lot and was directed to an available space. An obviously pregnant woman got out of an older model car. One of the volunteers realized her left rear tire was flat and approached her. The woman broke down crying. She was a military wife. Her husband was deployed internationally and was not likely to be home before the baby was born. She did not have family nearby and was trying to hold her life together. She thought coming to church might help.

Several volunteers huddled with her. They all had on church T-shirts and name tags that identified them as being with the congregation. They comforted her and said they would be glad to change her tire while she

was at worship. She agreed and gave them her keys.

As she walked away, they opened her trunk and discovered her spare tire was flat. They remembered a nearby big box store was open on Sunday mornings. They could buy a tire and put it on the car.

Caring ministry

They went to the store, picked out a tire and asked to talk with a manager. They told the manager the story and were given the tire for free. They returned to the parking lot and replaced the tire.

When the woman returned following worship, she was emotional and grateful. She received an unexpected level of caring ministry. This team's ministry was well received because they focused on the person's needs, not just checking off their ministry assignment of managing the parking lot.

Soaring congregations know ministry is always about making a difference in the life of others — not just feeling proud your congregation went on a mission. Soaring congregations emphasize the people who need to receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord, those who need a word or action of deep compassion and empathy.

This shifts the focus from the messenger's effort to the messenger's genuine display of Christlike compassion — to the gift rather than the giver.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Sunday School Lessons

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Mobile



For May 10

ALERT

Matthew 24:36–51

God saved me through the work of Christ, transforming my life when I was a college student in 1981. In the early years of my spiritual growth and ministry, I became acquainted with the teachings of Hal Lindsey and other end-times prophecy proponents.

My wife and I watched Mark IV Pictures movies beginning with “A Thief in the Night” about the coming rapture and the events related to the Great Tribulation. In 1988, I received a booklet sent to 300,000 U.S. pastors outlining 88 reasons for the Lord’s return on Rosh Hashanah. We are still waiting.

I have no doubt that Jesus is coming. We just don’t know when He is coming. While we wait, we must be on alert.

An Unknown Hour (36–41)

When? The disciples asked Jesus questions earlier in Matthew 24:3. When will these things happen (the destruction of the temple)? What is the sign of Your coming? What is the sign of the end of the age? Jesus explained that only the Father knows the timetable.

With this in mind, it would be best to ignore the person who predicts the day and the hour of the return of Christ, the rapture of the Church or the rise of the Antichrist. In fact, Jesus reiterated this prior to His ascension in Acts 1:7.

Manner? They didn’t know exactly when the flood was coming in Noah’s day. Engagements, weddings, celebrations and parties were happening up until the family boarded the ark. This is the way it will be when Jesus returns.

Who? Men will be at work in the field but not everyone will be taken. Women will be grinding grain, but some will be left behind.

Be Alert (42–44)

Be alert. Jesus called His disciples to be alert. Each of us must be diligent in the work we have been entrusted to do.

Be aware. Like a thief in the night, He will come when most do not expect Him. This motif is found in Matthew 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2–4 and Revelation 16:15.

Be ready. I grew up participating in Boy Scouts of America, and our motto was “be prepared.”

Every Christian is called to be ready for the return of Christ. And while we wait, we are to always be ready to tell people the reasons why we follow Jesus (1 Pet. 3:15).

Be Faithful (45–51)

Be diligent in service. While believers await the Master’s return, we have a stewardship to take care of all that belongs to Him. As He tarries in His coming, we are accountable to do what He has equipped us to do. We are called to trust Him, and we must be faithful to serve Him.

Don’t be derelict in service. Not everyone will be found faithful. There are men and women who haven’t been faithful in following Jesus since they were in youth group. Some go to their graves as members of County Seat FBC or Deep-in-the-Woods Baptist Church, but they haven’t borne spiritual fruit for decades.

Don’t ignore the Savior. Why is it that so many people quit coming to church when they graduate high school? Many grew up in church, but they never surrendered to Jesus (1 John 2:19). The coming of Jesus will be like a thief in the night for them.

Pray for the salvation of the lost, including the folks on church rolls who have never trusted Jesus.

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

For May 17

ACTIVE FAITH

Matthew 25:31–46

The Judge (31–33)

God promised redemption for the nations through Abraham and his seed in Genesis 22:18, 26:4 and 28:14. The prophets wrote of the coming judgment on the nations in Isaiah 13–23, Ezekiel 26–39 and Amos 1–2, among others. The psalmists anticipated it in Psalm 67 and Psalm 96. For this reason, Jesus commissioned believers to make disciples of all the nations. The Judge will separate believers and unbelievers.

Sheep on the right. The right side is the hand of favor in many cultures. Benjamin’s name means “son of my right hand.” Jacob favored his younger grandson Ephraim by blessing him with his right hand and the older Manasseh with his left hand (Gen. 48:13–20). The Good Shepherd will place the sheep on His favored side.

Goats on the left. Goats are wily, crafty and observant. No wonder that unbelievers are characterized as goats, for they think they have good reasons not to believe. They think they know better — that they know better than God or that they are too educated to stoop to some superstitious notion of some all-wise creator.

Instead, they believe that nothing made everything and that time and chance and matter organized their biological-chemical-electrical machinery (material being) into psychological sophistication capable of communication and ethical judgments (immaterial being).

The Righteous (34–40)

Who are the righteous sheep? They are the ones who trust in Jesus. They are righteous, not because they do everything right but because they are surrendered to the One who is the standard of right. His righteous-

ness is imputed to them in such a way that their lives reflect Him.

The Judge knows their actions and their attitudes. Just as He met them at their point of need, they see others and meet them in their needs. They see hungry people and feed them. They offer drink to the thirsty. They welcome the stranger. They care for the sick. They reach out to the imprisoned. When the Judge commends them, they don’t congratulate themselves. They wonder why they would be commended for doing right. When did we do this?

The Faithless (41–46)

Who are the unrighteous goats? They trust themselves. They already know what’s right, and they don’t need instruction or assistance. They are fine on their own, thank you very much.

They may see the hungry and thirsty as long as there is something in it for them. Maybe they will see the stranger as a project or a prospect, but not likely as a person. The sick and imprisoned? Survival of the fittest! When they are judged, they won’t remember people in need. They will simply wonder why they were judged. After all, didn’t Jesus say, “Judge not”?

Hell. Isn’t that just a cuss word? A lot of church folks don’t believe in hell anymore. They know family and friends who may have walked an aisle in Vacation Bible School half a lifetime ago, but they expect their pastor to preach their fruitless family member into heaven at the funeral.

Several times in the teachings of judgment, Jesus talks about a place where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), “where their worm does not die” (Mark 9:48) or “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). Now is the time to trust Jesus. Now is the acceptable time (2 Cor. 6:2).

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to Me.’”

Matthew 25:40

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sunday School Lessons

By Daniel Gilliland

Content manager, TAB Media Group; associate pastor, Union Community Church



For May 10

A MISSION SOAKED IN PRAYER Acts 4:23–31

Recognize the majesty and power of God. (23–26)

After Peter and John responded to the Sanhedrin and said that they would have to obey God rather than men and continue to speak about the resurrected Jesus, they were released and they went back to their fellow believers and relayed what they were commanded by the chief priests and the elders (4:24).

In light of the opposition they received and the charge from the Sanhedrin to be silent about Jesus, they prayed together.

Acknowledge that God is at work even in the face of opposition. (27–28)

As they pray, they address God as the Creator of all things and as the One who spoke by the Spirit through David. They pray along with David's prayer in Psalm 2, joining David's voice.

David and the apostles see — in the nations raging and plotting, in the kings and rulers joining against the Lord and against His Anointed One — this as testimony of the treatment of Jesus, the Lord's Messiah, by Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and Israel.

Israel, the Gentiles and their rulers all arrayed themselves against Jesus, God's anointed king.

When the nations and their rulers opposed and killed Jesus, they were unknowingly unfolding God's plan. This means that if we see opposition to Jesus, and if we experience opposition to the message of the gospel that "Jesus is Lord," this is not necessarily an impediment to God's plan.

The opposition itself may be the precise way by which God is accomplishing His plan.

As Acts puts it, opposition to God and to the Anointed One may paradoxically be people unknowingly doing "what [God's] power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Ask for boldness in sharing the gospel. (29–31)

Since opposition to Jesus and the message of His reign may be how God accomplishes his plan, Peter and John ask God to enable them to continue to speak the gospel with courage.

Peter and John read and pray Psalm 2, considering not only Jesus' suffering at the hands of Herod, Pilate, Israel and the Gentiles, but also finding themselves included in His suffering, as they too are opposed by the leaders of Israel. In other words, the apostles share in the suffering of Christ.

While Psalm 2 is first and foremost about Jesus, who Peter and John call "your Holy servant" (4:27), the apostles then describe themselves as "Your servants" (4:29). In other words, Jesus is the anointed and suffering servant of Psalm 2, and the disciples are also servants against whom the leaders of their own kinsmen oppose, just as they opposed Jesus.

We too are servants of the Lord who should not expect to receive different treatment than Jesus, our master. After all, as Jesus said, "a servant is no greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:18). In response to their request for courage, God fills them with the Holy Spirit as they requested, and they spoke the gospel of Jesus with boldness.

This reminds the reader of the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the apostles before Pentecost where we read of the "sound like the blowing of a violent wind coming from heaven and filled the whole house. ... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:1–4).

EDITOR'S NOTE

— This lesson was written by Rony Kozman, Ph.D., assistant professor of Biblical Studies at Samford University.



For May 17

A MISSION OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE Acts 8:26–38

The stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 sparked "a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem" (8:1). The believers scattered from Jerusalem throughout Judea and Samaria like ants after a child steps on an anthill. As they scatter, the gospel spreads, and a new chapter in the story of the Church begins.

The scene at Pentecost in Acts 2 already featured several nations and tongues, but that was on the home turf of the Jerusalem church. Now in Acts 8, the believers began to go out to other regions and peoples, exporting the good news of Jesus.

The gospel is not bound by geographic borders, so the witness of the Christian should not be.

Be willing to go where God sends you — even when crossing cultural boundaries. (26–29)

Philip's obedience was simple and immediate. The angel tells him to go south toward Gaza, and he goes. He has just seen a fruitful ministry bloom in Samaria, which had "received the word of God" (8:14). Gaza is in the opposite direction of Samaria, yet Philip does not try to negotiate with the angel's instructions. He does not make excuses or debate the usefulness of the angel's plan.

When it comes to crossing cultures, it's too easy to come up with all the reasons why not. It's difficult. It's inconvenient. It's probably awkward. As Christians we must prioritize all the reasons why — because God has called us and is indeed calling others to Himself, and He invites us to join Him in that work with the help of His Spirit.

The Ethiopian eunuch was from a completely different place and status than Philip, but the evangelist does not let any earthly differences prevent him from speaking to the eunuch.

Every single person is made in the image of God and is equally in need of Jesus' saving work — rich

or poor, young or old, black or white, left or right.

Be ready to share Jesus. (30–35)

In terms of evangelistic opportunities, Philip gets a real layup. The eunuch is not just reading the prophet Isaiah. He is reading one of the songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, a perfect segue for Philip to explain who Jesus is and what He has done. The Spirit has guided every step of this process, laying the groundwork for Philip to introduce the man to Jesus.

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV) says, "Always be prepared to give an answer" for the hope we have in Christ. We do not have to have all the answers for every question in the cosmos. We simply have to know the answer for our hope, and that is Jesus Christ.

If another person is similar to us, it may be easier to broach the conversation. But even if the hearer is from a different culture, he or she can see that we live in a broken world full of broken people in need of a mighty Savior.

It may be unnerving not to know how the full conversation will go, but we can take comfort in Jesus' words to his disciples in Luke 12: "the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

Be prepared to help others take the next step. (36–38)

Philip's obedience to go and to share leads directly to the eunuch's obedience in baptism.

We certainly hope that people will be as eager to respond as the eunuch, seeing water and desiring baptism. This particular baptismal scene is extraordinary, even by New Testament standards. Realistically, we should be prepared to help others water the seed, pointing them toward a local church or helpful resources.

It is not our job to decide the response of those who hear the Word. Our responsibility is to obey the Lord's voice and communicate the love and light of Jesus. It is the Spirit who works in the hearts of men and women.

Listening and compassion

Elizabeth Smart shares story of abuse to support victims of abuse, trafficking

By Tracy Riggs Frontz
The Alabama Baptist

It's something no one thinks will happen to them — being taken from a middle-class home to an outdoor camp to be sexually assaulted daily for months. However, it happened to Elizabeth Smart, who is now an activist, author and founder of the Elizabeth Smart Foundation.

Smart shared her story at Blanket Fort Hope's annual gala Feb. 12. Blanket Fort Hope is an Alabama-based nonprofit that recently finished its Restoration Home, which will provide specialized care to young girls who have been victims of child trafficking.

When her living nightmare began, Smart was simply looking forward to high school. Her younger sister, who was her best friend, shared a room with her. They were in bed together when it happened.

"That night, I remember going to sleep, and the next thing I remember was hearing a man's voice saying, 'Don't make a sound. I have a knife at your neck. Get up and come with me.'"

'That could not ... be real'

"When I first heard that voice, I didn't respond because that could not actually be real. I mean, I was in my bedroom. I was in my home. I was surrounded by my family.

"Bad things didn't happen in my life back then. Bad things don't happen in my home, and so I didn't need to respond. I just laid there. And then I heard the voice repeating the same words again," Smart said.

Smart was found nine months after she was abducted. Eventually, through the support of friends and family, therapy and living through a highly publicized trial, she was



Photo by Travis Frontz/The Alabama Baptist
Elizabeth Smart speaks at Blanket Fort Hope's annual gala Feb. 12.

able to heal — and eventually help others through the Elizabeth Smart Foundation and her activism.

"Unfortunately, sexual abuse happens everywhere. (It) happens at home, happens at school, happens at work, happens in church — like all the places you think you'd be safe — but it does happen everywhere. So it is important to address it everywhere.

"Talking about chastity, purity, waiting for marriage, abstinence — I don't have a problem with any of that. ... However, if you're going to have that conversation, you also need to make the differentiation between consenting, loving intimacy versus sexual abuse, rape and exploitation," Smart said.

Asking, "Why didn't you ...?" is the worst thing to say. Instead, Smart advocates saying, "I believe you, and I'm here for you."

"It's important to keep in mind it's not our place to question a sur-

vivor. It's not our job to find out all the facts," Smart said.

Instead, trauma-informed forensic interviewers should be called upon to find out what happened so an investigation can happen without further traumatization.

"If [a survivor] wants to talk to you, the best thing you can do is just listen and show compassion. If they don't want to talk to you about it and they just told you that it happened, that is a leap of courage already.

"Let them know you believe them. Let them know that you love them, that you're here for them. But also, you're happy to go get ice cream with them. You're happy to go to the movies with them. You're happy just to continue on with your relationship because in my experience, most survivors still just want to be treated like a normal person," Smart said.

In December 2025, Smart released her third book, "Detours: Hope and Growth After Life's Hardest Turns." While her first two books discuss her story and healing, "Detours" was written because many look to her for answers on how to become "fine" and "normal" after going through trauma.

"'Detours' came about because everybody has trauma in their life. No matter what it is, big or small, we've all experienced our own worst day. ... Nobody just goes straight through life exactly how you planned it.

"I tried to pinpoint, as much as I could, those healing highlights or the moments that stood out to me in my own healing journey. And I tried to write about it and make it as relatable as possible," she said.

Netflix documentary

In addition to the new book, a Netflix documentary called "Kidnapped: Elizabeth Smart" was released Jan. 21. It shares how her family and community wouldn't give up, which finally led to catching the perpetrators.

"I felt a lot of shame around what had happened. I wanted to hide the sexual abuse as much as possible. Looking back now, it was naive of me to think that that was possible.

"I never heard anyone openly talk about rape or sexual abuse grow-

ing up — or any kind of abuse for that matter. It was always, 'Keep your skeletons in the closet. Keep your dirty laundry hidden.' I just didn't hear people openly speak about it, so that ended up making me feel like I was the only one who had experi-

enced it, and it was lonely."

She noted, "When the trial took place, and I spent all these hours up on the stand and all of this information came out, I just remember thinking, that's not all of my story.

"My story deserves some context, and if it's going to be out in the world, then I want to be the one sharing it. I want it to serve a purpose."

FOR MORE INFORMATION
ABOUT THE ELIZABETH
SMART FOUNDATION, VISIT
ELIZABETHSMARTFOUNDATION.
ORG.

FOR INFORMATION ABOUT
BLANKET FORT HOPE, VISIT
BLANKETFORTHOPE.ORG.