

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.



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Felt needs First in a series

How congregations can bring hope to families with wayward youth

By Denise George
The Alabama Baptist

The Connors are Christian parents of three teenagers. They are faithful church members who have attended and supported their church for decades, serving their fellow members with loving hearts and smiling faces.

But behind their Sunday morning smiles, their hearts ache with

emotional pain, confusion, fear and unanswered questions.

Their 18-year-old son, Kyle — the child they raised in a Bible-believing, Christ-loving home — has strayed far from the values, faith and moral boundaries they taught him.

His life choices and belief in God have shifted almost overnight into angry rebellion, family withdrawal, parental disrespect, reckless deci-

sions, risky choices and a rejection of his Christian faith.

Deep sorrow

The Connors feel a deep sorrow that robs their joy and causes them to question their parenting.

They pray for Kyle and wonder where things went wrong. They worry about his spiritual, physical, mental and emotional health and safety. Kyle's parents cling to the

hope that God will gently lead their prodigal back home.

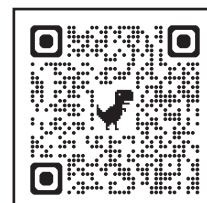
The Connors' concerns mirror the current fears of countless Christian parents as increasing numbers of young people depart from their families' Christian faith and values and journey to "the far country."

According to the Pew Research Center, about half of U.S. teens say they share their parents' religious (See 'Far country,' page 12)

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Equipping students

Renovated J.L. Bedsole Library unveiled at UM

The University of Mobile’s J.L. Bedsole Library recently completed a major renovation thanks to a grant from the J.L. Bedsole Foundation and other supporters.

The newly renovated library, located in Bedsole Commons, offers spaces designed around the student experience, including updated study areas, collaborative rooms, new furnishings, an inviting central area, a classroom and an Honors Room.

The new space reflects the University of Mobile’s commitment to cultivating an environment where academic excellence and Christian faith are woven together.

The library also received a generous gift from Lifeway Christian Resources of approximately 1,300 books. The new materials, sponsored by Lifeway and regional churches, strengthen the library’s collection and provide students with resources for study and spiritual growth.

Ryan Blackwell, president and CEO of Lifeway, said the organization is grateful for the opportunity to support the university’s mission of preparing students to follow God’s calling.

Equipping students

“As the university equips students to follow God’s calling on their lives, our prayer is that these resources will deepen their faith and help prepare them to serve Christ wherever He leads,” Blackwell said.

The library’s namesake, Joseph



Photo courtesy of the University of Mobile

Linyer Bedsole, was a respected Mobile businessman, civic leader and devoted Christian whose commitment to education and service helped shape the community.

Bedsole was the first chairman of the University of Mobile’s board of trustees and one of the leaders who helped establish what would become Mobile College. The J.L. Bedsole Library was dedicated in 1971.

“We deeply appreciate the Bedsole Foundation’s longstanding commitment to education and community impact,” said University of Mobile President Charles Smith. “It’s impossible to tell the University of Mobile story without mentioning J.L. Bedsole and the work of the Bedsole Foundation. ... Their contin-

ued support is impacting the lives of thousands of students here at UM.”

Church support

The university also gratefully recognizes the churches and ministry partners whose generosity helped make the renovations possible, including Mobile-area churches Spring Hill Baptist Church, Cottage Hill Baptist Church, 3Circle Church, Redemption Church; Woodmont Baptist Church, Florence; First Baptist Church Prattville; Whitesburg Baptist Church, Huntsville; and the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

The University of Mobile will hold a ribbon-cutting ceremony and celebration on Oct. 22. (UM)

University of Mobile Golf Classic set for Oct. 29

The University of Mobile is calling all golfers to the green for the annual University of Mobile Golf Classic on Thursday, Oct. 29, at Magnolia Grove Golf Course. The tournament brings together friends, alumni, businesses, churches and university supporters for fellowship, fun and an opportunity to invest in the lives of UM students.

The UM Golf Classic will feature a four-person scramble welcoming players of all skill levels. From the first drive to the final putt, partici-

pants will enjoy a day on the course while helping contribute to UM’s mission of providing students with a Christ-centered education.

Missions support

Proceeds from the tournament support the university’s Great Commission Fund, a fund that helps provide scholarships, strengthen spiritual formation and create missions opportunities for students as they pursue God’s calling on their lives.

For UM student Brianna Carmi-

chael, support through the Great Commission Fund has been more than financial assistance — it has helped make her college education possible.

“The Great Commission Fund scholarships have been a huge blessing to me. Through the generous giving of our donors, the financial burden of college has been greatly diminished, allowing me to focus more on preparing for the calling that God has placed on my life,” Carmichael said. (UM)

The Alabama Baptist

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

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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The crossword puzzle
can be found on page 15.



Rashional Thoughts

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

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

Could 15 weeks make a difference? If so, what's the first step?

Fifteen weeks from the date of this edition wraps up 2026. That's 105 days, a little more than three months, and we'll be ringing in the new year.

September, particularly Labor Day weekend, always helps me reset for the fourth quarter of the year. Summer activities have ended, and we quickly find ourselves focused on football season and a new school year.

Anticipation of fall

Fall brings its own special flavor, features and, this year at least, much-needed relief from a long-lasting intense heat index.

So, what do you have in mind for these next 15 weeks?

As I look over our current coverage assignments related to The Alabama Baptist and The Baptist Paper, I see that we'll have a team covering the upcoming SBC Executive Committee meeting in Nashville.

Several news updates are anticipated from that coverage. We'll keep you informed through thebaptistpaper.org website and print publication.

We also had a team in New York City a few days leading into the 25th anniversary of 9/11 and provided video interviews and social media coverage

through Ground Level Reports with Marc Ira Hooks.

Back here in Alabama, we worked to share stories from those who recalled their experiences in the days following that tragic September day in 2001.

Check out our websites

You can find those articles online at thealabamabaptist.org and thebaptistpaper.org.

Our team tried something a little different Sept. 13 when an opportunity to partner with Alabama Black Deaf Advocates, American Sign Language-certified interpreters and Pickleball Kingdom Birmingham surfaced. We were able to help host a first-of-its-kind pickleball event for the Deaf community.

We were honored to help make this unique and creative opportunity possible for our friends in the Deaf community. Along with a fun social experience, it provided a friendly, informal environment to share about the various ministries available around the state as well.

We work hard to connect people from all walks of life because we truly are better together, and we've watched God work in some incredible ways through His people.

Sponsoring the pickleball

event was an easy yes for our team, and we hope all who participated enjoyed the afternoon on the court and around the refreshment table.

September also shifts our focus to associational annual meeting season. We'll join the other entities representing Alabama Baptist life, along with the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, to share about our ministry efforts.

If you see us at one of the meetings, then you'll likely learn more about how The Kids Edition newspaper is really taking off and how you can sign up to make sure the kiddos in your life aren't missing out.

You'll also discover the new "Waiting in the Meantime" Bible study written by Denise George, which is published through our new book publishing arm.

Our team continues to hear of family after family facing the difficulty of estrangement, and we are hopeful the eight-week Bible study for mothers and grandmothers will provide a path forward.

Helpful resources

Several churches plan to offer the Bible study soon, and Denise prepared a detailed leader's guide that will be super helpful.

Hunter Street Baptist Church in Hoover went a step further by recruiting Denise and TAB Media Group team member Susan Stevens to lead their study. They are offering the Bible study Thursday mornings from 9:30 to 11 a.m. beginning Sept. 24.

It's not too late to start a Bible study in your area, however. The study can be done any time and will likely be one you will want to offer repeatedly. And if you would like to move ahead with it quickly, then launch it by Oct. 1 and you'll be wrapped before Thanksgiving.

Available on Amazon

Either way, check out the book "Waiting in the Meantime: A Guided Journey Toward Hope and Healing for Mothers of Estranged Adult Children" on Amazon.

Oh, and speaking of October, be sure to share your fall festival, trunk or treat, and other Halloween-alternative event photos with us. We would love to sprinkle them across our digital platforms for a little extra boost showcasing your hard work.

Thank you for all you are doing and will do to reach your community for Christ. Let's illuminate these next 15 weeks with the brightest of His Light, the kindest of His compassion and the happiest of His heart.

Your Voice



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

After-school Bible club making a difference in central Ala.

Discovery Clubs after-school Bible club is reaching nearly 80 classrooms in 29 schools in the Birmingham area, and volunteers confirm God is working.

Sharon Ferrell, a member of First Baptist Church Birmingham, said she is seeing God plant seeds and work in children's lives. She hopes others will join the effort.

One God story Ferrell shared a few years ago still rings true.

Several God stories

"My children and I are able to share God's love and the story of His rescue plan for man. The students who participate in Discovery Clubs come from various home situations, some facing great challenges. Many are not in church and have never heard the gospel. One little boy said, 'Discovery Club is my church.'

"Through Bible stories, memory verses, activities, games and songs, the story of Jesus, the Rescuer, is told beginning with Genesis and going through Revelation. Each week, we share new truths about the Rescuer and His plan for our lives," Ferrell said.

"Discovery Clubs is a place where students feel loved and free to seek answers to questions they have. Some weeks we run out of time because of answering questions like these: Did Jesus die for me? What if Jesus hadn't died? Do

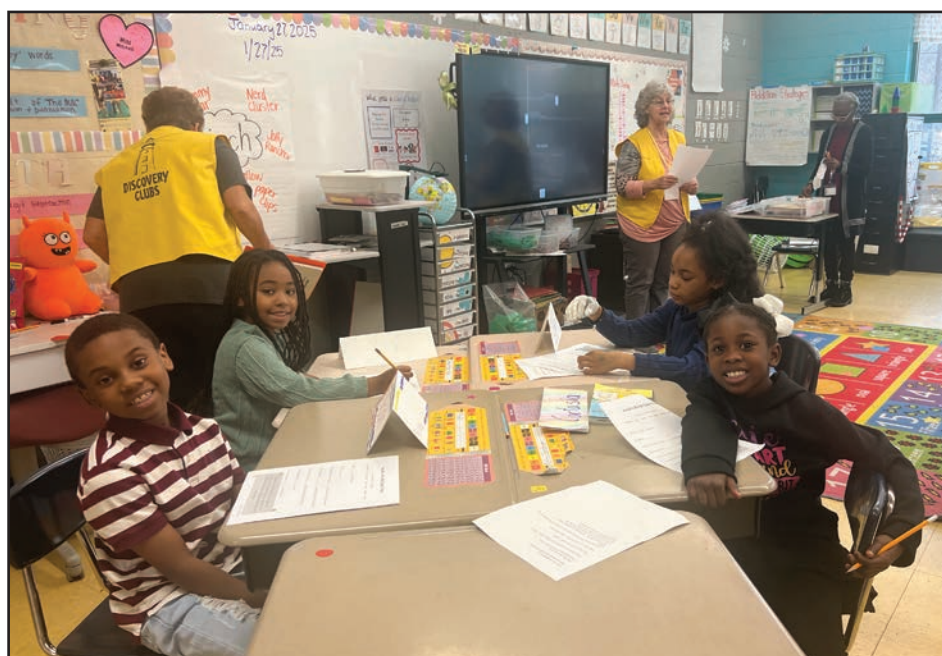


Photo courtesy of Discovery Clubs

you have to love everyone? Do we have to forgive everyone? If someone does something really bad, like murder, can he be forgiven? Does God still love him? Doesn't the Bible contradict science? Why doesn't

God speak so we can hear Him, like over the loudspeaker at school?

"Since we are free to share the Word of

Truth with them, they are able to learn who Jesus is and what He has done for them," Ferrell continued.

"In her second year of coming to Discovery Clubs, one of our girls became a Christian. Not long after this, she and her siblings were placed in foster care due to a difficult family situation. Praise the

Lord; she knows Jesus is with her through what she faces.

"(Another child) Bryan really wanted a Bible. After we gave him one, each week he eagerly reported what he had read in his Bible. On the last day of club, his mom shared how his behavior had changed over the year, attributing this to what he had learned in Discovery Clubs. God is changing lives through Discovery Clubs of Birmingham."

'The Bible is God's letter'

The Discovery Clubs Bible statement is: "The Bible is God's letter to me. It teaches me about God. It teaches me what is right and wrong. It teaches me how to live God's way. I will learn it and do what it says." (TAB Media Group)

"Social media now attempts to assume the role of parent by offering young people affirmation without accountability, advice without investment and belonging without obligation," said children's rights advocate and Christian author **Katy Faust**. "But an algorithm does not love a child. An influencer will not sacrifice for her, protect her or remain at her bedside when things fall apart."

"It was like everyone was a part of the same team. We were all in it together in that moment. Whatever we were doing, wherever we were, and people were doing whatever they could do. I think God was working through all kinds of people," said longtime teacher, storyteller and photo-journalist **Jim Veneman**, who recently reflected on his assignment to cover search and rescue efforts in New York City the week of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

"When major news breaks, stop and ask: Does this post still need to be said right now? Sometimes the most pastoral thing you can post is nothing," said church communication consultant **Mark MacDonald** on how churches should respond after a crisis happens.

For more information, visit discoveryclubs.org.

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“Christian, your life displays your faith. What does your life say to the world?”

TIARA PEREZ

Social media coordinator, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

The way we talk online eventually changes the way we talk in the real world. We may promise ourselves that it doesn't, but we're still creating patterns that cannot help but bleed through into our in-person interactions.

It's why we need to remember that even seemingly anonymous message boards or comment sections are not anonymous to God. After all, it's not our intended audience that determines whether our speech is sinful, and the Lord promises we'll have to give an account for all of it (Matt. 12:36-37).

Ryan Denison
The Daily Article
Denison Forum

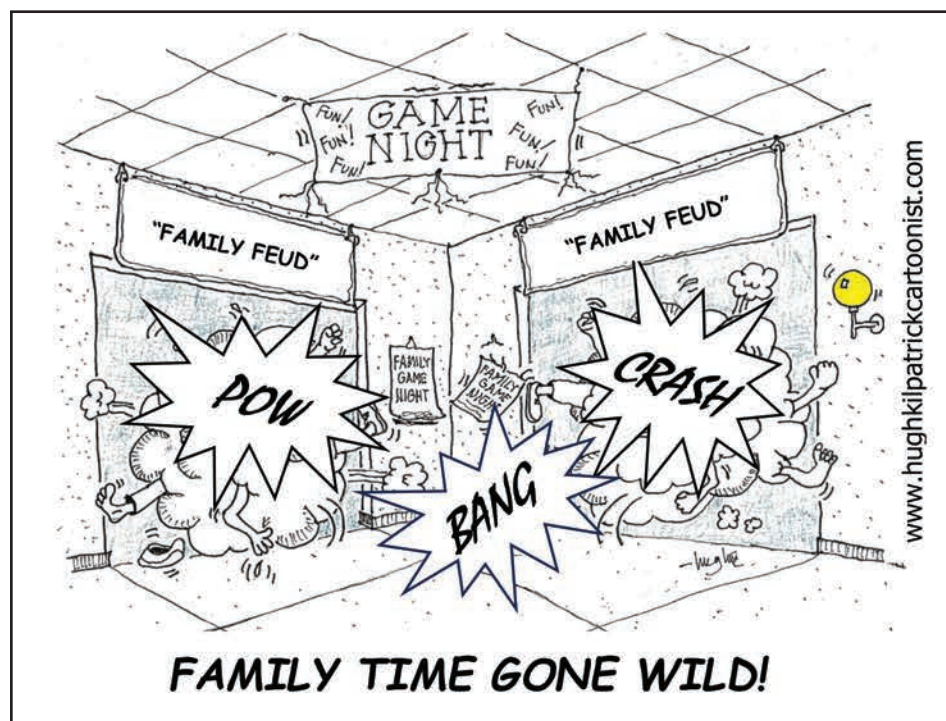
“The same God who brought the vine, planted the vine and sustained the vine is still at work today. ... If His providence has brought us this far, then we can trust Him with whatever comes next,” **Chris Crain**, executive director of Birmingham Metro Baptist Association.

“The goal of the event is not to build the relationship, but to give them the push to do it on their

own,” said **Jonworth Locke**, minister to students at Glynwood Baptist Church in Prattville, regarding how the church's senior adults are mentoring young people through a question-and-answer session called “speed-mentoring.”

“Continually remind yourself that God is in full control of the process ... and He can be trusted,” said **Joe Walker**, executive vice president and chief operating officer at Lifeway Christian Resources on organizational transitions. “View your role as an assignment God has entrusted to you rather than something you have achieved by your own effort and abilities.”

“Pastors are in the most emotionally healthy place they've been in a while regarding vocation,” said **Daniel Copeland**, Barna's vice president of research. He said the data trends suggest pastors are content with their calling but struggling with the work itself. “The satisfaction data suggests they may be settling into a more sustainable — but less deeply fulfilling — experience of the work itself,” Copeland said.



Lass WORDS

BY KEN LASS
The Alabama Baptist



DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

Climbing your mountain

When God created human beings, He instilled in them a tremendous potential for overcoming adversity and conquering challenges.

He probably intended this ability to be used to overcome the powerful lure and temptation of sin, but man has often preferred to use it to accomplish mind-boggling physical achievements.

For example, from the first time humans laid eyes upon the towering and beautiful Mount Everest, rising from the border between Nepal and China, they have longed to climb it. No matter that there is nothing at the top but frigid, snowy wilderness — adventurous explorers felt compelled to take on the challenge.

According to Britannica.com, Everest is 29,032 feet high, the tallest mountain on Earth. That's just under five-and-a-half miles straight up.

The summit is too cold to support any kind of plant or animal life. The warmest temperatures are in July, averaging two degrees below zero Fahrenheit. In January, the average temperature is 33 degrees below zero.

Challenging ascent

Thousands have attempted the climb despite threats of avalanche, icefall and severe air sickness. More than 280 have lost their lives in the attempt.

However, the website “High Adventure Expeditions” reports that 7,563 climbers have successfully reached the peak and

returned safely, some of them more than once — an incredible achievement of human will and determination.

‘Lesson for all of us’

There is a critical lesson for all of us here, even if the highest thing we ever climb is our porch steps: We all have our mountains to scale, our challenges to overcome, our adversity to face. Fortunately, we are not alone.

Fortunately, we can and must call upon God's help. In Philipians Paul famously writes, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (4:13).

If we truly believe that, if we cling to our faith as securely as the mountain climber clings to his cliffs and ledges, there is no evil we can't overcome and no setback we can't restore.

So when the uphill battles of life get you down, remember those mountain climbers. But more importantly, remember how much more incredible is God's masterful creation of the mountains and the landscape in the first place.

And keep in mind that, when your climb is finished, Jesus Himself awaits you at the summit!

MEET THE AUTHOR

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

Alabama news

CALHOUN ASSOCIATION

► **Ryan Edwards** is the new lead pastor of **Iron City Baptist Church, Anniston**. He previously served as the church's family pastor. He and his wife, Gracen,



Facebook photo

have two children.

► **Kellie Young** (left) is the new children's director of **Greenbrier Road Baptist Church, Anniston**. She is married to Scott. Keith Screws is pastor.



Facebook photo

COVINGTON ASSOCIATION

► **James Arcuri** (below) is the new worship pastor of **Southside Baptist Church, Andalusia**. He and his wife, Lindsey, have two children. Josh Wilson is senior pastor.



Facebook photo

► **Smyrna Baptist Church, Flora**, celebrated its 100th anniversary June 7. Member Cole Dunn recounted the church history along with a slide presentation.

He also read a proclamation from Alabama Sen.



Photo by Heath Harrison

Josh Carnley. Written congratulations also came from Gov. Kay Ivey and President Donald Trump. Pastor Chad Johnson (left) accepted a commemorative plaque from Jim Lambert (right), a commissioner with the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission. Made for More, a quintet from another church, sang during the service and

also shared a concert in the afternoon following the meal.

DEKALB ASSOCIATION

► **Justin Joiner** will be concluding his pastorate at **Lathamville Baptist Church, Crossville**, after the Sept. 13 church service. He has served as pastor for five years.

EAST CULLMAN ASSOCIATION

► **David Chambers**, pastor of **First Baptist Church Fairview, Cullman**, celebrated 25 years as pastor Aug. 16. During an afternoon reception held in the fellowship hall, Jay Stewart (left), a state missionary with Alabama Baptist State

Board of Missions, presented a commemorative plaque to Chambers (center) and his wife, Renee.

► **New Hope #2 Baptist Church, Cullman**, celebrated its 125th anniversary July 26. Special guests included former pastor Ralph McGowan and his wife, Martha. Testimonies were given by members Carol Gunter and Randy Hayes. Carol Watts read a brief history of the church, noting 13 people established the church in 1901 and gave a total of 75 cents in the first offering. Commemorative plaques were presented to the church by Randy Makemson, East Cullman Baptist Association's missionary, and Ken Blackwood, a commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission. Pictured are (l to r) executive pastor David Westall, lead pastor Austin Rowell and Blackwood.



Submitted photo



Photo by Alison Blackwood



Submitted photo

ELMORE ASSOCIATION

► **Jamie Baldwin** is the new pastor of **Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, Eclectic**. A retired state missionary for Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, Baldwin and his wife, Beth, also helped relaunch Liberty Church, Craig, Alaska, in 2021 as part of the partnership with the two state conventions.

► **Crossroads Community Church, Elmore**, welcomes three new staff members: Derek Blankenship (left) is the new children's minister; Jeff Pasley (center) is the new worship minister; and Larry Brewer (right) is the new discipleship and care minister. All three are members of the church and were called to serve in their respective ministry roles. Brandon Wilemon is pastor.

► **Geneva Baptist Association** will celebrate its 150th anniversary Oct. 18, 3–5:30 p.m. at El Bethel Baptist Church, Chancellor. Edward Shirley will be the guest preacher, portraying evangelist Sam Porter Jones, who was a circuit-rider



Facebook photo

preacher in the 1800s. A meal will conclude the jubilee event. Tim Bedsole is the associational mission strategist.

MADISON ASSOCIATION

► **New Market Baptist Church** will celebrate its 180th anniversary Sept. 27 at 10:30 a.m. with lunch to follow. Jeff Reeves is pastor.

NORTH JEFFERSON

► **Calcedonia Baptist Church, Gardendale**, will celebrate its 150th anniversary and homecoming Oct. 4 at 10:30 a.m. with a luncheon to follow. Mika Marcum is pastor.

SAND MOUNTAIN ASSOCIATION

► **Roger Little** is the new pastor of **Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, Section**. Little was saved, served as a deacon and announced his call to ministry at Mount Zion. He is married to Ange.



Submitted photo

ST. CLAIR ASSOCIATION

► **Tim Gold**, minister of education and administration of **First Baptist Church Pell City** for more than 18 years, retired Aug. 31. The church held a come-and-go reception between the morning services at the welcome center for Gold and his wife, Chris, who serves on staff as the pastor's ministry assistant. John Thweatt is pastor.



Submitted photo

TUSKEGEE LEE ASSOCIATION

► **Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, Salem**, celebrated its sesquicentennial anniversary June 28. Special guests included former pastor Richie Ashburn who led in prayer. Pastor Jordan Hoge shared a message from Hebrews 10:23 using photos of former members and church activities to illustrate perseverance and faithfulness through the years. Calvin Milford, a commissioner with the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a commemorative plaque to the church with three long-standing members (l to r), Sandra Horne, Quinton Horne and Polly Davis, and Hoge accepting the honor. A meal was served following the service.



Photo by Calvin Milford

Intentional focus on missions

Northport churches practice international ministry ‘without a passport’

By Taylor Inmon
The Alabama Baptist

Five Tuscaloosa-area churches are partnering to expand missions and ministry efforts with Clarkston International Bible Church.

Near Atlanta, Clarkston is known for being a refugee resettlement city. It’s a mere three-hour drive from Tuscaloosa, so it is international ministry without needing a passport, said John Brooks, pastor of Five Points Baptist Church in Northport.

Five Points, along with North River, Valley View, Capstone and Anchor Church, work directly with CIBC’s pastor Trent Deloach.

Clarkston has been a refugee resettlement city since the 1980s. It hosts people from over 60 different countries who speak over 100 different languages and has been described as the most diverse square mile in the country.

As internationals began to populate their town, members of Clarkston Baptist Church saw a need.

Clarkston Baptist merged with a Filipino church and an African church to form CIBC. The church has adapted its ministry through the years to witness to and serve the nations on their threshold, Brooks said.

Several separate congregations meet in the church’s building to hold services in their own languages. The North American Mission Board operates its Send Relief Center out of CIBC’s campus.

Send Relief also partners with the church to organize day camps each summer, which prompted Five Points’ students to get involved.

Missions mobilizer

Amanda Gillam helps students make the connection.

A full-time accountant, Gillam first started volunteering in student ministry before taking on the part-time staff role of missions mobilizer.

She led the students in praying for the nations, evangelizing and serving at the Send Relief Center.

“It’s so much fun, I’ve never considered it work,” she said of her student ministry responsibilities.

She also enjoys the cultural education she receives when working in Clarkston.

“You learn

things you wouldn’t have ever imagined,” she said, such as not giving fruit gummies as a snack to Muslim girls (gelatin sourced from non-halal or unspecified animals is forbidden for them).



Photo by Amanda Gillam

Five Points Baptist Church in Northport ministers to refugee communities in Clarkston, Georgia, through their partnership with Clarkston International Bible Church.

Both Gillam and Brooks (who previously served as Five Points’ student minister) attribute their deep love for and intentional focus on missions to the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement curriculum.

CIBC has identified 14 apartment complexes its members focus on with intentional ministry. The church rents out a unit in one of the complexes to host prayer meetings, Brooks said.

Each of the five Tuscaloosa-area churches plans to adopt one of the complexes and support the residents there and CIBC outreach through prayer and missions/ministry efforts.

The college interns from Five Points Baptist lived in the complex the church adopted over the summer in order to immerse themselves in the community.

Tutoring and Backyard Bible Clubs are prevalent among ministry efforts. ESL and job training and placement remain a largely unexplored but ripe potential for outreach in Clarkston, Brooks added.

‘Catch God’s vision’

Brooks and Gillam said they hope the summer exposure will help prepare students to love and reach out to international students they will encounter during fall and spring semesters at college.

“Sometimes you’ve got to go somewhere to catch God’s vision for the nations,” Brooks said, noting he has expanded beyond the students and is now challenging everyone from the congregation to consider how they might participate.

“We’re all called to be ministers of reconciliation,” he said. “The current goal is to send a team every month.”



Photo by Amanda Gillam

Missions volunteers to Clarkston have opportunities to share the gospel with people from around the globe.

A patient's last wish fulfilled with baptism

Jeannie Guffey knew her time was short. Diagnosed with lung cancer last summer, she was now confined to a bed in Huntsville Hospital's Medical Intensive Care Unit.

Soon, she would be sent home for hospice end-of-life care.

Guffey had expressed a desire to be baptized, and her family wanted to honor her wish. But inside a fourth-floor hospital room packed with monitors, IV poles and other medical equipment, they weren't sure how to make it work.

Enter ICU nurses Erin Powers, Kaitlin Swaim and Emily Owens.

"This was a last wish that was very important to the patient and her family, so we had to find a way," said Owens.

After a little online research, the nurses used their own money to buy a kiddie

pool from Walgreens, and they had it delivered to the hospital by DoorDash on July 8. They inflated it using an electric air pump supplied by Guffey's family, then crafted a makeshift hose out of ventilator tubing to fill the pool with warm water from the sink.

"Sometimes, you've just got to get innovative," Owens said.

Once everything was ready, the ICU staff used the ceiling lift in the room to help Guffey, 74, into the water. Her adult son Jody performed the baptism ceremony as her husband Ronnie and other loved ones gathered close around the pool.

'Emotional moment'

"It was just a really sweet, emotional moment," said daughter-in-law Carol Guffey. "The nurses went above and beyond to make this happen at the 11th hour



Photo courtesy of Huntsville Hospital
Facing a terminal diagnosis, 74-year-old Jeannie Guffey wanted to be baptized before going home on hospice end-of-life care. Her nurses at Huntsville Hospital helped make it happen.

when we were running out of options."

"Seeing her baptized, it was like the weight of the world was lifted off our shoulders."

A day after fulfilling her final wish, Jeannie left the hospital to spend her remaining days at home in Huntsville surrounded

by loved ones. She passed away peacefully the following Friday, July 17, leaving behind a family filled with gratitude.

Her daughter-in-law believes it wasn't mere coincidence that the nurses and other ICU staff assigned to care for Jeannie Guffey supported the family's wishes

and went out of their way to make the hospital-room baptism possible.

"That was a total God thing," she said. "And those nurses will be special to us forever."

Total care

Powers, who was Guffey's charge nurse, said being a nurse is about providing care for all the needs of each patient: physical, spiritual, mental and emotional.

"We're here for all of it," she said. "It was just an honor being able to give Ms. Guffey the last thing she wanted before she went home. The family was eternally grateful ... we were able to do this for them and for Miss Guffey."

EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was written and originally published by Huntsville Hospital. Used with permission.



REKINDLE THE JOY

ALABAMA BAPTIST PASTORS CONFERENCE

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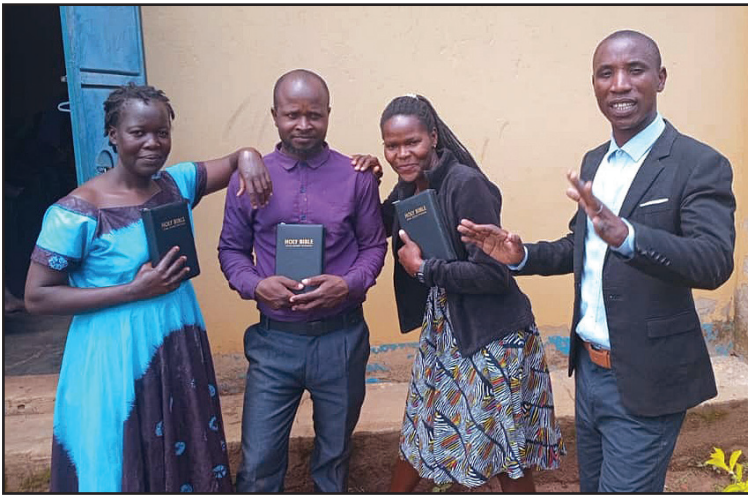


Photo by Wamono Ibra

Believers in Uganda receive audio Bibles as well as physical Bibles through John and Cindy Thomas' discipleship ministry. Bible study groups meet via the online platform WhatsApp.

DISCIPLESHIP

Popular app allows Alabama couple, African believers to study the Bible together

By Taylor Inmon
The Alabama Baptist

Cindy and John Thomas recently passed their one-year mark of discipling believers in East Africa via WhatsApp, an online messaging and calling app used by more than 3 billion people worldwide.

The Thomases are part of Southeast Alabama Baptist Association in the wiregrass region of the state. John serves as SABA's associational mission strategist. Cindy, who also is active in the work of the association, is a preschool teacher at Ridgecrest Baptist Church in Dothan.

They hold weekly video calls with 24 believers in Africa. They all do the best they can, as connectivity and electricity issues sometimes interrupt the calls.

The group uses a method of Bible study called SOT: stating in simple sentences what the passage "Says," asking how the passage is calling you to step out in "Obedience" and asking who in your life can you "Tell" what you've learned.

"What I get out of the lessons, I share on the ground," said Ibra, a pastor in Uganda. "We are experiencing God and learning sound doctrine. It would be selfish to learn and not tell!"

To participate in an upcoming virtual discipleship session with the Thomases and the East African believers or to learn more about their process, email John at john@sabachurches.com.

The Thomases, known as Papa John and Mama Cindy by the African believers, met Ibra when Cindy led a Facebook study on the Gospel of John in 2025. Ibra had also connected with another pastor, Lucas, who is from

Kenya, and they eventually asked the Thomases to host the virtual discipleship group.

"Discipleship is mandatory," Lucas shared during a recent session. "We need to differentiate between the world and the light."

Those participating in the virtual discipleship sessions dig deep into Scripture and provide productive discussions, the Thomases noted. They sometimes share relevant Scripture from memory as they work through passages together.

Partnership

"We learn just as much from these guys and ladies, and their insights into Scripture, as they do from us," John said.

The partnership also has branched into meeting practical needs such as the children's discipleship curricu-

lums shared with Lucas to use in churches throughout Uganda and Kenya. John also sent physical Bibles and audio Bibles to the seminary in Kampala. The audio Bibles are especially helpful in the rural regions where there's lower literacy rates, he noted.



Photo by Wamono Ibra

Ugandan believers use their smartphones to connect with Christians in their country and around the world using messaging and video chat apps.

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A WORD FROM OUR STATE LEADERS



Rick Lance
State Missionary and Executive Director



During 2026, the theme for our Alabama Baptist family is **Encouragers**, based on 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (CSB): “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing.” Your gifts to the Myers-Mallory State Missions Offering go a long way to help encourage and build up fellow believers and share the love of Christ with the lost. The offering bolsters five strategic Great Commission Ministries: *Alabama WMU* encourages missional living by challenging, equipping, and empowering Alabama Baptists to fulfill the Great Commission; *Disaster Relief* compassionately ministers to those affected by storms and other catastrophes; *Church Planting* spreads the Gospel through new congregations; *Partnership Missions* provides Kingdom networking with Alabama-connected missionaries anywhere in our nation or world; and *Church Revitalization* seeks to strengthen existing local churches. Thank you for your gifts, which help countless Alabama Baptists serve as **Encouragers** in His Kingdom!



Candace McIntosh
Executive Director



Last year, Alabama Baptists gave the second-largest Myers-Mallory State Missions Offering gift since the inception of the offering 10 years ago. I continue to be encouraged by the faithfulness and generosity of Alabama Baptists to support the Great Commission through steadfast giving and fervent prayer. Living out the Great Commission begins in our homes and churches and reaches to our communities, across our state, and around the world. Nearly half of Alabama’s population is considered unchurched, living lives separated from the hope of the Gospel. Your generous gifts and committed prayers empower the work of five Great Commission Ministries, allowing Alabama Baptists to share Christ, meet critical needs, and advance Gospel impact throughout our state and beyond.

Myers-Mallory.org

'FAR COUNTRY'

A closer look at potential risks facing wayward youth in today's culture

(continued from page 1)
beliefs, and nearly 10% say the differences create conflict at home. A majority of teens (61%) say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values.

In Luke 15:11–32, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son who demanded his father's inheritance, traveled to a distant land and engaged in physical, emotional, moral and spiritual self-destruction. The world, and his own rebellion, broke him.

The current day "far country" is just as dangerous for our sons and daughters, and it is pulling many of today's youth away from faith, family and safety.

While major risks facing wayward youth are not surprising, the following five are important to consider (statistics pulled from various research agencies who follow the specific topics).

Risk factors

► **Premarital sex:** Up to 95% of young adults in the U.S. engage in premarital sex by their early 20s. The average age of first premarital sexual experience is 17 years old.

► **Underage drinking:** Young adults have the highest rate of binge drinking. Alcohol contributes to thousands of deaths of people under 21 each year — in-

cluding car crashes, homicides, alcohol poisoning and suicides.

► **Illegal drug use:** In 2023, 1.86 million adolescents ages 12 to 17 (7.2%) used drugs in the previous month. That same year, 5,926 Americans, ages 15 to 24 years old, died from an illicit drug overdose.

► **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs):** STIs are a growing epidemic, with adolescents and young adults (15–24) accounting for roughly half of new infections each year. In 2024, more than 2.2 million STIs were reported nationwide.

► **Mental health struggles:** Teen mental health



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issues have surged. Youth face school shootings, bomb threats, cyber-bullying, digital addiction, academic pressure, identity confusion, depression, suicidal thoughts, dating violence, eating disorders and more. Sui-

cide — one of the top three causes of death for ages 10 to 24 — has risen by 52% in recent years.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Names have been changed for privacy purposes.



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What the church can do to help estranged families

Pray for the church's prodigal children by name and need. Create a confidential prayer support system for parents who are hurting.

► **Offer a parent support group.** Provide a monthly gathering where parents can share burdens, be encouraged, receive prayer support and gain biblical guidance.

► **Preach and teach openly about prodigals** so that church families don't feel isolated or ashamed.

► **Ask mature mentors to reach out to and walk with struggling teens.** A trusted, Christ-centered adult can often reach a teen when parents cannot.

► **Offer workshops and seminars that teach parents how to keep communication open with their teens.** Focus on developing

listening skills, de-escalating conflict and establishing healthy boundaries.

► **Teach Bible studies and build programs** that strengthen youth discipleship and address identity, mental health, peer pressure and values from a biblical worldview. Answer their questions with honesty and biblical truth, and respond to their immature emotions with understanding and patience.

► **Provide pastoral counseling for the whole family.** Help them sort through guilt, fear, anger and spiritual confusion with grace and biblical truth.

► **Involve teens in opportunities to serve in ministry.** Service ministries often give youth a sense of purpose and belonging that keeps them in the church

and draws them back when they drift.

► **Stay connected with parents and youth.** Never give up on them. Email, text, send a note, remember birthdays and keep the relational bridge open. Faithful persistence communicates the love of Christ.

Jesus' story

When Jesus told the story of the prodigal son, he highlighted not the son's rebellion but the father's loving response: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

When the wayward boy finally "came to himself" and started home, the father embraced him, restored him and celebrated his return with joy and thanksgiving.

The loving father's response can guide parents today in offering forgiveness, compassion and open arms to their returning prodigals.

The church can join them by welcoming, praying for, shepherding and loving the prodigal back to spiritual health. (Denise George)



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If you are the parent of a prodigal

Keeppraying for your prodigal. See 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and James 5:16. God hears every prayer and works in ways you cannot see. While you have served — and are still serving — as the temporary caregiver, remember God is your prodigal's ultimate Parent.

► **Release the guilt.** Even faithful, loving parents can have children who wander. You are not solely responsible for your child's choices.

► **Stay connected** by reaching out with simple gestures — texts, notes or phone calls.

► **Set healthy boundaries.** Love your child deeply, but do not enable or tolerate destructive

behavior or disrespect.

► **Guard your marriage and other children.** A prodigal's bad choices can affect the whole family. Protect your family unity.

► **Surround yourself with support** from trusted friends, small groups and your pastor and church.

► **Stay grounded in God's Word.** Let His promises reshape fear, worry, disappointment and discouragement.

► **Remember and trust the Father's heart** (Prov. 3:5–6). Know God is actively pursuing your prodigal even now. Trust His timing, His power and His eternal love. (Denise George)

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A concussion is nothing to play with.

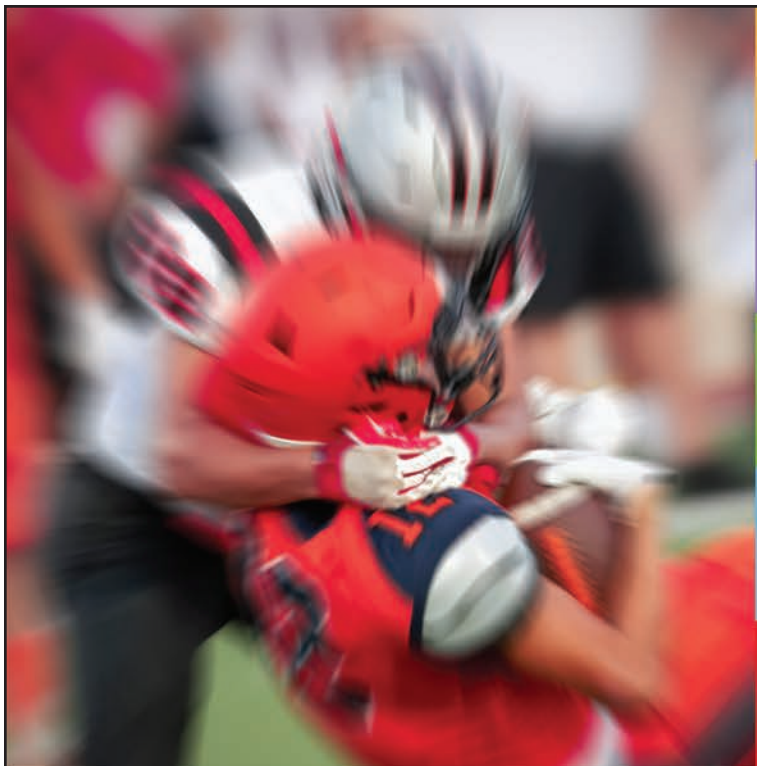
A concussion is a traumatic brain injury and should be taken seriously. Although fewer than 10% of concussions involve a loss of consciousness, it is important to understand the dangers and not take them lightly. Even a minor fall or collision may be of concern, so be alert to symptoms such as headaches, unsteadiness, confusion or other types of abnormal behavior.

Any athlete with a suspected concussion should immediately be removed from play and activity, evaluated right away by a doctor or healthcare professional, monitored and not left alone and not drive a motor vehicle. **To make an appointment, please call 205-638-6921.**

ChildrensAL.org/Concussion



Children's
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UPCOMING EVENTS
sponsored by the State Board of Missions

International Friends Retreat at WorldSong

Thirteen years ago, Alabama WMU came alongside Collegiate & Student Ministries at the State Board of Missions as they began hosting the International Friends Retreat at WorldSong Missions Place.

The retreat is designed to help international students attending college in Alabama make American friends and adjust to life in the United States.

This annual weekend away has grown to become an impactful world missions opportunity for college stu-

To register, visit alsbom.org/event/international-friends-retreat or scan the code below.



dents across Alabama. American students invite their international friends to enjoy a weekend of canoe-

ing, mountain climbing, zip lining, archery and breakout sessions about life in Alabama.

The retreat provides an avenue for relationship building and sharing the gospel. Over the years, hundreds of international students from dozens of countries have attended.

This year's International Friends Retreat will be held Oct. 2–3. If you know an international student who could benefit from this, encourage them to register at alsbom.org/event/international-friends-retreat.

Minister Appreciation Month

October is Minister Appreciation Month. Have you thought about how your church might show appreciation to your pastor and church staff?

The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions offers these possibilities for consideration:

- ▶ You could honor your pastor and staff on a Sunday in October.
- ▶ You could feature each minister and family in the church newsletter and express gratitude for their contributions to the church.
- ▶ You may wish to include a gift to each minister

as a part of the special recognition. This could range from a gift card for dinner at a nice restaurant to a weekend away or a love offering.

For more suggestions and printed resources, visit alsbom.org/event/minister-appreciation-month.

2026 State Convention Annual Meeting in Trussville Nov. 17–18

Be sure to mark your calendar for our 2026 Family Reunion of Alabama Baptists on Nov. 17–18 at First Baptist Trussville.

This year's theme is Encouragers, based on I Thessalonians 5:11. Highlight-

ing the event will be inspiring messages and theme interpretations, coupled with meaningful times of worship and celebration.

In addition, a reception honoring retiring executive director Rick Lance and his wife, Pam, will be held

Tuesday from 4:30–6, followed by a time of recognition and appreciation for Dr. Lance in the Tuesday evening service.

Messenger registration is open! Visit alsbom.org/convention for more details.

WORD search

- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| ACACIA | HOLINESS |
| ALTAR | INCENSE |
| ANOINTING | LAMPSTAND |
| ARK | LINEN |
| BASIN | MERCY SEAT |
| BREAD | OIL |
| BREASTPLATE | PILLARS |
| BRONZE | PRIEST |
| CHERUBIM | SACRIFICE |
| COURTYARD | SANCTUARY |
| COVENANT | SCREEN |
| CURTAINS | SILVER |
| EPHOD | TABERNACLE |
| FRAMES | TABLE |
| GLORY | TENT |
| GOLD | VEIL |

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

*"And let them make Me a sanctuary,
that I may dwell among them."
EXODUS 25:8*

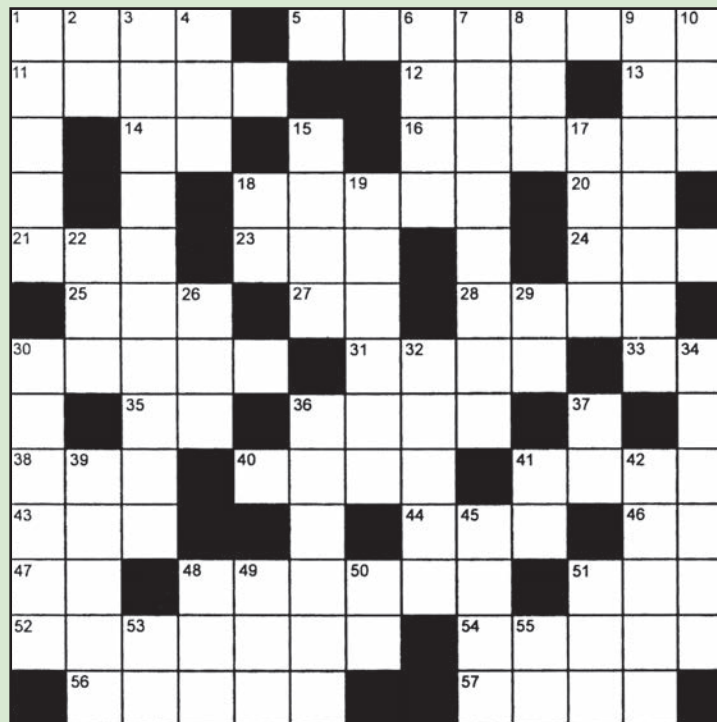
CHRISTIAN Crossword



UPCOMING EVENTS
sponsored by the State Board of Missions

ACROSS

1. We ought to ___ God rather than men. (Acts 5:29)
5. Son of Rachel. (Gen. 35:24)
11. Simon's wife's mother was taken with a great _____. (Luke 4:38)
12. Edible cereal grass.
13. Fa, so, _____.
14. Suffix indicating plural.
16. Odorous.
18. One of the 12 spies. (Num. 13:6)
20. And hath raised up _____ horn of salvation. (Luke 1:69)



By Pat Horning Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.

21. Narrow beam of light.
23. Rod for billiards.
24. A time to rend, and a time to _____. (Eccles. 3:7)
25. Pigpen.
27. Los Angeles. (abbr.)
28. Large rodents.
30. Son of Jacob. (Gen. 30:13)
31. Change direction.
33. South Dakota. (abbr.)
35. Give, and _____ shall be given unto you. (Luke 6:38)
36. Simple.
38. Light brown.
40. _____ unthankful lepers healed. (Luke 17:17)
41. Then shall the lame man _____. (Isa. 35:6)
43. Or if he shall ask an _____, will he offer him a scorpion? (Luke 11:12)
44. Cardiac Care Unit. (abbr.)
46. Louisiana. (abbr.)
47. North America. (abbr.)
48. Put up thy sword into

- the _____. (John 18:11)
51. Average amount.
52. Reject.
54. Come ye yourselves _____ into a desert place. (Mark 6:31)
56. Loud.
57. Inner surface of the hand.

DOWN

1. Let us _____ the sacrifice of praise. (Heb. 13:15)
2. _____ ye holy; for I am holy. (1 Pet. 1:16)
3. In _____ give thanks. (1 Thess. 5:18)
4. Expression of affirmation.
6. I put my hook in thy _____. (Isa. 37:29)
7. Merry gathering.
8. Already eaten.
9. Period of bad health.
10. Negative vote.
15. Pull.
17. But many that are first shall be _____. (Mark 10:31)
18. Cubic centimeter.
19. Purge out therefore the old _____. (1 Cor. 5:7)

22. And the Lord opened the mouth of the _____. (Num. 22:28)
26. Nevertheless.
29. Arkansas. (abbr.)
30. _____ to the voice of my supplications. (Ps. 86:6)
32. Build.
34. To _____ from evil is understanding. (Job 28:28)
36. Remember his _____ no more. (Prov. 31:7)
37. Blessed is _____ that cometh in the name of the Lord. (Matt. 21:9)
39. Once more.
41. Halle____jah.
42. Sound an _____ in my holy mountain. (Joel 2:1)
45. Roughen and redden.
48. Science. (abbr.)
49. Owns.
50. Newspaper ____.
51. Comrade.
53. Do-re-mi-fa-____-la-ti-do.
55. Ma and ____.

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

NextGen Lunch & Learn series

Healthy ministries are built on meaningful connections. The NextGen Lunch & Learn series provides preschool, children, student and discipleship leaders with a space to discuss this year's theme, Relationships Matter.

Choose the location nearest you and then register your ministry leaders at kidzlinkal.org/next-gen.

- Sept. 22 — First Baptist Church Prattville
- Sept. 24 — CrossPoint Church, Trussville
- Sept. 29 — West Mobile Baptist Church, Mobile

To register, visit kidzlinkal.org/next-gen or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



Cost is \$10 and lunch will be provided. Each event will be held from noon to 2 p.m.

Reminder: Submit your Annual Church Profile

The Annual Church Profile (ACP) is one of the most practical ways churches partner each year with the local Baptist association, the State Board of Missions and the Southern Baptist Convention to prepare for the future. As churches take stock of where they are in key statistical categories, it enables the SBOM to provide resources and offer training to meet specific needs.

"The ACP allows us to focus on collecting information that will give us a true picture of what's going on in Southern Baptist

churches and helps us to be able to share that in ways that will advance the Kingdom of God," said Rick Lance, state missionary and executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

Now is the time for churches to begin working on their ACPs. They may be turned in through your association or online at al.sbcworkspace.com.

If you need help completing the ACP, please contact your local association or Sandy Harmann at the SBOM, 334-613-2266 or sharmann@alsbom.org.

Submit your Annual Church Profile online at al.sbcworkspace.com.

‘God has been faithful’

Sandi Patty releases new single, announces plans for new album at age 70

A decade after her farewell tour, Grammy-winning Christian singer Sandi Patty, 70, is out with a new song, “The Voice I Have Now,” and has plans for another album next year.

Patty said the new song was an ideal match for her vocal cords and her stage in life. Patty brought her powerful vocals to First Baptist Trussville on July 30 during Frank Jones’ Oasis concert.

“It’s the perfect song for someone sort of looking back over their career, looking back over life, and realizing God has been faithful all this time,” Patty said in an interview Aug. 19, two days before the song’s release. “And so, as I sing that song, I definitely am grateful.”

Patty, contemporary Christian music’s most awarded female singer, has won 40 Dove Awards from the Gospel Music Association in addition to five Grammys. The 2004 Gospel Music Hall of Fame inductee said her voice is now used to mentor women in her life — from young female singers to her daughters and a growing number of grandchildren she shares with Don Pelsis, her husband of more than three decades.

She plans to release a brand-new album, “Back to Love,” in February 2027. The album will be released by Gaither Music Group. Some of the 12 songs were written by Bill and Gloria Gaither, who Patty is traveling with. Patty said one of the tracks is a duet with Bill Gaither.

A soprano who began singing in church at age 2, Patty said her voice has changed but so has her understanding of the deeper spiritual meaning of the songs she sings.

She spoke to Religion News Ser-



SANDI PATTY

Sandipatty.com

vice about aging, her favorite artists and heading back on the road again. The interview was edited for length and clarity.

Interview

Q: How does it feel to reach 70?

A: I realize — you know what? — it’s coming, whether I embrace it or not right now. It’s weird. So I’m just embracing it and celebrating it. And from here on out, I feel like it’s just all bonus years.

Q: I want to ask you about your song, “The Voice I Have Now.” Those very words can be interpreted in different ways. So what do they mean to you personally when you sing “you find that God was planning all this time for the voice I have now”?

A: One of the things that comes with age is the opportunity to have more years seeing God’s faithfulness. I think sometimes people think when I talk about my voice that I’m only talking about a singing voice. And in this season, it’s a lot more: the voice where I

can speak into some younger generation, the voice where I can help worship teams and vocal teams, the voice that I can use to mentor and share.

Q: The lyrics also recall times when “there were doubts to crush and dues to pay, but we paid them all and how.” What do those words bring to mind?

A: In 70 years, you have a lot of really great things. In 70 years, you have some really hard chapters as well. And walking through a di-

voice and walking into a blended family — which has now been part of my life for 31 years — those things do come at a cost. ... And yet I’m able to look back and see how God has, brick by brick by brick, begun to build something even better and new. He promises to make all things new. That doesn’t mean we skip lightly over the hard. But we give Him the broken pieces, and by His love, He makes them whole.

Q: How would you describe Christian music now as it compares to how people viewed it at the height of your career in the ’80s and ’90s? What do you think has changed?

A: What makes Christian music is the lyric content, the message.

When I started, there was contemporary Christian music, there was a little bit of rock, there was the Southern gospel, all with the same message, speaking to those people, their audience, that love that style of music.

Now what I love about Christian music: There’s such incredible variety of personal taste. So there will be people who will not come to my concert who will go to a Forrest Frank concert. Hopefully they’ll get the same message. My grandkids love Forrest Frank!

Q: Last fall, the Museum of Christian & Gospel Music opened in Nashville, and it includes a room of dresses worn by you, Vestal Goodman, CeCe Winans and Jenn Johnson. What is that like and how did you choose?

A: That was fun! We gave the museum a couple of options and they went with one I wore on “The Tonight Show (with Johnny Carson).” (RNS)

Sandi Patty appeared July 30 at First Baptist Church Trussville as part of Frank Jones’ Oasis event. For more information about Oasis, visit frankjonesministries.org/oasis.

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Place a classified ad below for \$1 per word. For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 200. To place an online classified ad for \$9.99/month, visit thealabamabaptist.org/classifieds.

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BIVOCATIONAL YOUTH MINISTER

The Hueytown Baptist Church is a mid-sized congregation located in the Birmingham metro area. We are in search of a bivocational youth minister to join our staff and work with our youth team and volunteers to help the youth of our church and community become, grow and engage as disciples of Jesus Christ. Interested applicants may reply to: office@hueytownbaptist.com.

CHILDREN'S DIRECTOR OR MINISTER

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In this 8-week Bible study, Denise George walks beside hurting mothers with honesty, biblical truth and gentle encouragement for the long road of estrangement of adult children. Perfect for individual study, church support groups, women's ministries and Christian counseling support resources. Available on Amazon.

THE KIDS EDITION

The Kids Edition is a monthly publication for children ages 5 to 12 with articles, puzzles, jokes and other items of interest to children that offers parents and grandparents a family-friendly gateway into discussions related to Christian values and principles. Subscribe at thebaptistpaper.org/kids-edition. Also available for bulk subscriptions and special events.

DAD'S NOTES

Need a succinct way to share life tips with someone in your life or looking for a refresher in the foundational areas such as faith, family, finances and fitness? Check out Jason Davis' "Dad's Notes" — found on Amazon.

~ Why research matters for your church ~

Connecting reliable data with Kingdom growth

Over the past four years, I have written more than 100 columns for TAB Media Group through The Alabama Baptist and/or The Baptist Paper, focusing on congregations and associations.

Now it is time to make a shift. Beginning with this column, I'm writing about solid, informative research on what empowers congregations to be vital and vibrant and to reach their full Kingdom potential.

Often, congregations rely on friends who have tried various ideas, books they have recently read or the latest conference they attended rather than on research that has long-term viability, accuracy and appropriate empowerment for the future to which God is calling them.

Where can pastors, staff ministers, laypeople and leaders in the association, state, regional or national denomination access research to help congregations reach their full Kingdom potential?

I have conducted research on vitality and vibrancy in congregations and denominations for more than 50 years. In future columns, I intend to draw on my experience, the sources I have used over the years and emerging research to provide insights that may not have been available previously.

There are different understandings of what makes congregations effective and how they can assess whether they are truly making progress toward fulfilling God's empowering vision for them.

A certain percentage of research that congregations read is driven by the research sponsor's desire to prove their point, promote their product or perspective on how congregations ought to be effective, extend their influence over other congregations or highlight what's wrong with congregations more than what's right about them.

Reassessing effectiveness

My goal will be to provide research insights from diverse sources to help congregations affirm or rethink what makes them effective in fulfilling the Great Commission and the spirit of the Great Commandment. I also will seek to provide strategies that accurately reflect congregations' desired level of vitality and vibrancy.

Finally, this information will help congregations think in different terms about how they measure their effectiveness, which may have more of an impact on their future than the typical metrics they use (or are asked to use) to complete denominational reports.

In writing these columns, I welcome your questions. If I don't know the answer, I'll be

glad to do the research for you. Send your question to me at FortheTellingInnovation@tabmedia.group.

Measuring engagement

To start, let's consider best practices in counting membership, attendance and overall engagement within your congregation. Do you count every individual involved in the various activities and events in your congregation's life and ministry?

Every person is a person of worth, created in the image of God to live in love. We would not want to miss any individual. Would that be your perspective?

But are there other ways to count people and measure their engagement in the life and ministry of your congregation that are equally valuable for assessing the effectiveness of your congregational ministry?

I will introduce some of them in the next several columns. I will also suggest real-time, practical methods for gathering the additional information you need without overburdening your congregation or staff with unnecessary work.

Research insight: In addition to counting the individuals connected to or engaged with your congregation, why should you also count the number and types of households? What are the benefits of better understanding the households in your congregation? How might knowing this make your congregation more effective?

Look for my insights in the next column on this research topic.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Bullard spent five decades in Baptist congregational and denominational ministry. His min-

istry 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 Robert Olsen, Ph.D.
Professor of Historical Theology and Director of Intercultural Studies, University of Mobile



For September 27

RESTORED RELATIONSHIP Romans 5:1–11, 18–21

A New Peace (1–5)

Peace comes to us because of the reconciliation we have with Christ through faith. Our salvation is because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, not what we can do.

As humans we understand the concept of earning something. We work; we get paid. Many people apply this understanding to salvation.

They think that if they do enough or follow the commands of God they will be saved. It is easy to understand this way of thinking, but the glory of the gospel is that it is not like that. By trusting in Christ's death on our behalf, we have salvation because Christ's righteousness is applied to us. This is the good news of the gospel.

Paul highlights that since we have been made right with God, we can face suffering and hardship because we know our eternal destiny. This is what has allowed Christians to face death throughout history.

We no longer need to fear death because we know we will be with Christ.

This should motivate us to have joy in the midst of our trials. In fact, Christianity has often spread because of how Christians have faced suffering.

A Proven Love (6–11)

Since the fall of man in Genesis 3, the natural state of mankind is one of enmity with God. We see this every day in how people across cultures do evil things that violate the commands of God.

The idea that mankind is naturally good, which is taught by many mainstream philosophies, makes no sense when faced with reality.

So if people are in fact evil and rail against God, what hope is there for us?

The good news is that even

though we were evil, Christ died for us. That fact is mind-boggling. That Jesus would die for humans, all of whom are evil, is what makes Christianity such a unique religion. Because of this reconciliation accomplished by Christ, Christians now rejoice.

Instead of God just wiping us out, which we deserve, He died for us in our place. I often think of how this is beautifully summed up in Charles Wesley's hymn "And Can It Be, That I Should Gain?" It says, "Amazing love! How can it be/ That Thou, my God, should die for me!" This baffles the nonbeliever.

What God loves His creatures so much that He would take their place and die so that they may have eternal life? The Christian God does.

A Growing Grace (18–21)

Paul points out that Adam's sin was a curse that has impacted all of mankind. This is called original sin. We are now all affected and maimed by sin.

The law highlights sin and shows us our faults. Instead of this being bad news, this is actually good news because it shows that we need a remedy. If we had to obey the law, we would spend our lives trying to do what it demands.

We would be focused on our own works and spend our lives trying to be good enough, trying to be perfect. However, the law shows us our faults so that we look for the solution from outside of ourselves.

Paul shows us that Jesus' atoning death on the cross is the answer. Christians accept this good news of salvation, and we share it with others so that they too may come to know the joy of reconciliation with the God of the universe.

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

For October 4

FREEDOM Romans 6:1–14

Dead to Sin (1–7)

Once a person becomes a Christian, a question often arises: Since we are saved by grace and not by works, is it OK to sin? After all, if my sins are forgiven, what difference does it make if I sin?

Paul renounces this view because he affirms we have died to sin. Paul references baptism as a symbol of death to our old, sinful self and resurrection into new life.

This is why Baptists believe that baptism is to be done by immersion upon the profession of faith. It represents our identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

Just because we are forgiven for our sins does not mean we should abuse His grace and choose to sin. All of us will fall short. When we do, we need to repent and ask for help not to do so again.

Christians can often fall on two sides of this issue. They either give up trying to be obedient because of their persistent failures, or they turn toward legalism and think that if they sin they are no longer saved.

The conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit shows us that we are not perfect and are in need of work. However, the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to overcome sin and offer grace to other Christians struggling with sin.

Alive in Christ (8–11)

Being dead to sin and alive in Christ means that we do not have to give in to the power of sin. Because the Holy Spirit lives within us, we have power over sin. (See Rom. 8:9.)

Christians are called to live up to the standard of Christ and strive to obey His commands on a daily basis. Prayer is important because it causes us to rely on God to help us

live in a way that brings glory to Him.

It helps us see where we are falling short and where we are sinning in our lives so that we can ask for help to be obedient.

It is important to realize that no Christian will live a perfect life, and there is forgiveness when we fall short.

We should not abuse this wonderful gift but instead be thankful for God's conviction so that we can live a life that pleases God and builds up the Church.

Instruments of Righteousness (12–14)

Living like Christ and striving to be obedient is called sanctification — the process in which we become more and more like Christ. Because we are free from the power of sin and can choose to live like Christ, we become more Christlike.

Part of this process involves the Holy Spirit indwelling us and helping to point out areas of sin in our lives. This can be a frustrating thing because we will never be perfect.

There will always be areas of our lives where there can be improvement, but the fact that the Holy Spirit is convicting us of sin is a wonderful thing because it shows that God is alive and working within us.

This is why when we mature as Christians, sins we used to struggle with often fall by the wayside, only for us to be shown new sins that we may not have even realized before. This also helps us have compassion for Christians who sin because we know that we have struggles and that God forgives us.

Sanctification is a lifelong process in the Christian life, but Christians can be encouraged because "sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (6:14).

***"Now if we have died with Christ,
we believe that we will also live with Him."***

Romans 6:8

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sunday School Lessons

Associate Professor and Executive Director of Christian Ministry, Samford University

By Scott Guffin



For September 27

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH CIRCUMSTANCES Romans 8:26–35

As a young pastor in my 20s, I faced a dilemma: I had been accepted into the doctoral program at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary — which would require me to move my family to Louisville, Kentucky — and I also had a large, local church in our area offering me a staff position that would provide well for my family.

On a Sunday afternoon during all this, I was on my way to a meeting and was stopped by a train. I started counting the cars of the unusually long train, and somewhere around car 20, I noted that every car had the word “SOUTHERN” emblazoned on its side. I laughingly thought, “Is this God’s way of telling me something?”

I’ll have to ask God about that one when I get to heaven, but it was too coincidental and unclear at the time to say definitively that God was relaying His will through 140-plus train cars. God does, however, use various circumstances at times to communicate to us, as noted in Scripture.

It is up to us to ensure that we are listening carefully and discerningly as He does.

The Holy Spirit helps us pray and navigate our circumstances. (26–27)

Thankfully, we are not alone in this endeavor. Paul writes that the Holy Spirit Himself intercedes on our behalf, helping us in our weakness.

Particularly, He helps us when we don’t know what to pray for and addresses the Father on our behalf with “inexpressible groanings.”

Such a truth is especially helpful as we seek to understand, analyze and walk in obedience to God through the things we face in this life.

God uses our circumstances to accomplish His will and make us more like Christ. (28–30)

Ultimately, the best thing we can know and comprehend about our life circumstances is that God is working out His will in us even when we don’t see it or understand it.

We confess that we live in a fallen and broken world where people make bad — sometimes evil — decisions and where terrible things occur.

In such a context, it is all the more necessary for us to lean on God and to view everything that happens to us and around us through the lens of His revealed desire to make us more like Christ. While we may struggle at times to understand His will, it is vital for us to trust it.

We can trust God to work for our benefit. (31–35)

Years ago, a cousin of mine passed away after more than a decade of struggling with cancer. Her life served as a testimony to many, however. With each new round of bad news, she would respond with, “I’ll just have to Romans 8:28 that.”

Her meaning was clear: While she couldn’t explain the “why” of her sufferings, she could point to the “Who” that she trusted to work everything out for her good and His glory. She knew that there was nothing in all creation, including cancer, that could separate her from His love for her.

Her life and words expressed the sentiments of Paul in verse 18 — “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.”

As we face various circumstances in this life — both positive and negative — to whose voice will we listen? Whose heart will we trust?

Let us rest in Paul’s declaration in verse 37 that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

For October 4

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH HIS CHURCH Ephesians 4:11–16, 25–29

As a lifelong Southern Baptist, I often joke that I started attending church nine months before I was born. Indeed, growing up in my home church — Gardendale First Baptist Church — is a significant part of my story because it was there that others communicated God’s truth to me, encouraged me to put my faith in Christ, recognized my spiritual gifts, gave me opportunities to serve and later licensed and ordained me for ministry.

It was also in my home church that I preached my first sermon on a Sunday night, after which a woman I’d known all my life said to me, “I think you’re more of a teacher than a preacher.” Today, I serve as a professor of Christian ministry at Samford University in Birmingham doing the very thing this older sister in Christ recognized in me years ago. This moment in my life is one of many examples of how God spoke to me through the people of His Church.

God speaks through our spiritual leaders. (11–14)

In this passage, Paul explains that God has put into place a variety of leaders in the Church whose assignment is to equip the saints. A significant part of equipping involves preaching and teaching, which Paul highlights in 1 Timothy 5:17, noting that “double honor” should be offered to church leaders engaged in such work. If you’ve been exposed to much biblical preaching and teaching, you’ve likely had those moments of feeling that God is speaking directly to you through the leader — sometimes to bring encouragement and sometimes to bring challenge or even confrontation.

Regardless of the content or intent of the message, it’s vital in times like these that we have ears to hear.

God speaks through the body of believers — His Church. (15–16)

God will also speak to us in a variety of ways through fellow believers. Of course, the words we hope to hear the most are those that communicate positive things to us, spoken with the warmth of brotherly affection. At times, however, we need something a little more direct. In Colossians 3:16, we are told to admonish one another.

To admonish means “to warn, scold or reprimand someone firmly but usually with good intentions to correct their behavior,” and there are moments in our lives when such correction is exactly what God intends. Ultimately, we are to speak “the truth in love” (v. 15). We need both truth and love from our brothers and sisters to help move us forward in our spiritual maturity.

God speaks through us to others in the Church. (25–29)

As members of the body of Christ, however, we are not just spoken to by others. We are also spoken through to others! This is one reason we should be careful in what we say. Our speech should be characterized by honesty and integrity, and we should always seek to build up others, both to their faces and behind their backs.

To accomplish this, it is imperative that we remove all ungodly motivations (bitterness, anger, wrath, slander, malice) and that we operate instead from a place of godly virtues like kindness, compassion and forgiveness, dealing with others as God has dealt with us.

As we consider the truth that God will speak to us through His Church, let us seek to develop humility and an openness to listening to what our brothers and sisters have to say to us. Let us also seek to ensure that we are fit vessels for God to communicate through to others.

“And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints ...”

Ephesians 4:11–12

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Steve Potts
The Alabama Baptist

Exploring religious camp meetings, discernment, evangelist Sam Jones

“Knowing God’s Will: Discovering His Plan for Your Life”

By Kevin Sanders

Independently published, 2025

After spending 11 years as a missionary in the Philippines, Kevin Sanders returned to the United States and now is a pastor. From his ministry experience Sanders has written a helpful and concise book, “Knowing God’s Will: Discovering His Plan for Your Life.”

Sanders has degrees from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Gateway Seminary, and his book is easy to understand as he discusses key questions to consider when seeking God’s will.

Sanders addresses seven “crucial questions” for the believer seeking to discover God’s will. He explores how God speaks through His Word, the Holy Spirit, wise counsel, practical wisdom, circumstances,

redeemed desires, and gifts and talents.

He also is insightful in helping believers consider the influence of trials and suffering as we seek to follow God’s will, as well as dealing with temptations and regrets.

“God is more than willing to meet you right where you are and take you to places you could never reach on your own,” Sanders writes.

Sanders also addresses “joyful blessings,” and the specific issue of marriage and singleness. This book is great for newer and older believers, Bible study groups or Sunday School classes.

“Sam Jones: A New Biography”

By E.A. Johnston

Old Paths Publications, Inc., 2023

While evangelists like Billy Graham and Dwight Moody are well known, Sam Jones (1847–1906) is far less familiar. A biography by E.A. Johnston — “Sam Jones: A New Biography” — aims to bring greater awareness to this once-popular gospel preacher.

Johnston, who is from the Tampa Bay area in Florida, is a fellow with the Stephen Olford Institute for Biblical Preaching and the author of many books on revival and Christianity.

Here, he writes about Samuel Porter Jones, who was born in Alabama and studied law in Georgia but faced a deep struggle with alcohol and other issues.

He had a dramatic conversion when his father died, and Jones then gave his life to Christian ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Jones became a very effective evangelist and revivalist, drawing large crowds in extended

meetings in the cities of Memphis, Nashville, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Toronto and other locations.

In Nashville, one of his converts was an influential riverboat captain, Tom Ryman, who would later build the Union Gospel Tabernacle, later known as the famous Ryman Auditorium.

Johnston fills the book with vivid descriptions of the evangelist’s services, energetic preaching and humor. Also included in the volume are several full sermons by Sam Jones.

Because of his own early struggles, Jones was unsparing about the dangers of drinking and other ungodly practices, which he confronted with passion.

Jones died on a train trip returning from a revival. His legacy is dramatically described by Johnston.

Sam Jones was known by many for being an unforgettable preacher, and now those who never could hear his voice can appreciate his powerful gospel influence through this well-written biography.

“Praying in the Pine Straw: The Camp Meeting Experience in Alabama”

By Robert C. Morgan

University of Alabama Press, 2025

Religious camp meetings were a notable part of American culture in the 1800s, particularly

in Alabama and across the South. Robert C. Morgan provides a fascinating history of the role and character of camp meetings in “Praying in the Pine Straw: The Camp Meeting Experience in Alabama.”

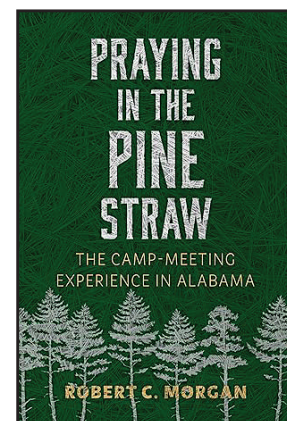
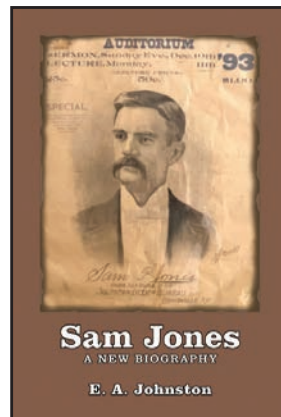
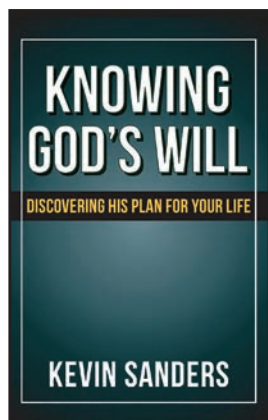
Morgan, a retired journalist and former Southern Baptist pastor, has written a sprawling account of camp meetings in Alabama, focusing mostly from the Civil War through the early 20th century. The book is full of rich detail and the reader is transported to an earlier time when crowds would gather in rural locations to hear famous (and infamous) preachers and revivalists.

I had heard of the evangelist Gypsy Smith but learned there were actually three Gypsy Smiths, which was confusing then as now. The author fills each chapter with stories that bring alive an amazing part of Alabama religious history.

While I have no doubt of the factual veracity of Morgan’s account, I suspect those who attended camp meetings may have found them more wholesome and edifying than his history might imply.

The book is filled with moral scandals of preachers, incidents of racism, violence and murder.

It could be the case that this retelling of the history of these camp meetings, while accurate in detail, slants the story in a more negative way than was experienced by most people who “prayed in the pine straw.”



EDITOR'S NOTE

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