

Hospitality and the Christian Life

MONROE – It's the month of February where our thoughts tend to focus on hearts and love and all things chocolate. However, as the most Hallmark of holidays approaches (Valentine's Day), I would like you to consider one of the often overlooked ways that Christians are to show love for God and for one another. God's word commands us to show hospitality.

Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Romans 12:13

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

1 Peter 4:8-9

As a young pastor's wife in rural Iowa many years ago, I was challenged and encouraged by the book *The Hospitality Commands* by Alexander Strauch. It had a profound effect on the way I perceived and practiced loving God and others. One of the key takeaways is that hospitality promotes loving Christian community. Hospitality is an identifying mark of the Christian life!

In our fast paced, individualist society it is easy to put aside the Biblical command to practice hospitality. We live in a time that fosters isolation along with increasingly demanding work and family schedules. We are also bombarded by endless entertainment options and online diversions that distract us from deep and meaningful relationships.

Hospitality is hard. It takes work and time and sacrifice. Hospitality is not always convenient. For some, hospitality can be downright scary. Rosaria Butterfield offers some challenging counsel in her book, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. She writes, "Knowing your personality and your sensitivities does not excuse you from ministry. It means that you need to prepare for it differently than others might." In other words, despite our objections, we have no excuses.

So, how do we practically start showing hospitality in love for God and others?

Here are some steps that help me practice hospitality:

1. **Make a plan and start slowly.** You do not have to fill every evening with people in your home. Pick a regular time and make a commitment. It might be once a month or once a week for your family. For our family, Sunday at noon works great.
2. **Keep a running list of people that you can encourage with your offer of hospitality.** You should not always invite the same group of friends. Consider including the lonely and hurting and unchurched.
3. **Make a list of simple and inexpensive meals.** You do not have to break the bank to be hospitable. We do a baked potato bar, much to the dismay of my children, almost every

single week. It helps me know what to prepare each Saturday evening and it fits in with most dietary restrictions.

4. **Focus on people and not presentation.** You do not need to have a gourmet meal or an immaculate house. Our goal is to show the love of Christ, not to try and be in the pages of House Beautiful.
5. **Pray for yourself and your guests.** Hospitality provides us with a wonderful opportunity to spread the gospel.

In this season of love, let us not forget that hospitality is a very tangible way we are commanded to show our affection for God and others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristie Anderson is a wife, mom and homeschooler. She is a native of Kentucky, but has called Iowa, East Asia, and Michigan her home. She loves Jesus, hanging out with her husband, reading aloud to her kids, and drinking good coffee.

Midwest Leadership Summit: Challenging the “You Be You” culture

SPRINGFIELD, IL – Our Midwest churches and people are different from other regions in the US. I think that is why I love the practical nature of churches that are moving forward and accelerating Gospel movement in their community and state.

Every two years twelve Midwest states come together and have a Midwest Leadership Summit. These Midwest states send their pastors and church leaders to Springfield, Illinois to hear from several great national speakers and choose from 60+ breakout sessions. They also hear testimonies from practitioners and how they are spreading the gospel message in our Midwest settings.

There was such a good list of speakers and breakout group leaders that it was difficult to choose the one that inspired me the most this year. I think Trevin Wax, North American Mission Board (NAMB) VP of research and resource development and former missionary to Romania, compelled me the most. He spoke at the opening night plenary session, and I went to his breakout group the next morning called *Meeting the Challenge of Discipleship in a “You Be You” Culture*.

The relevancy of the postmodern subject of the You Be You culture was spot on. I'm a member of Treeline Church in Ann Arbor whose focus is to reach students for Christ at the University of Michigan. They have a strong discipleship program. I've seen that the *You Be You* mindset is not just with the new generation, but it is a culture that spreads into all age groups and is even in our churches across the US. The focus is on "express individualism" which believes humans are inherently good, institutions are suspect, and external authority is rejected and internal authority is exalted. "Express individualism" allows you to be your own boss.

Trevin spoke from his great depth of understanding of the culture. He had sources to back his conclusions. He looked at trends, and gave verbiage and meanings of those mantras. He pointed out openings in the culture today where Christians should step up and share the solid foundation of the Word of God, and lovingly share the Gospel with a world that is lonely and lost without Christ.

A few things that caught my heart in the *You Be You* culture was their beliefs of:

- Be true to yourself is the utmost goal.
- Look inside for who you are, then to others, and finally up to a deity.
- Greatest sin is not being yourself.
- You must applaud others who are being themselves.
- There's an explosion of pseudo-religions to choose between.
- We've moved from *institutional* religion to *intuitional* religion.

It's sad to know these all lead to loneliness. We were created to be relational, to have a relationship with God. That is the only thing that will satisfy our souls. Trevin shared opportunities that the church has in sharing the gospel with this *You Be You* culture:

- To step into the culture and beckon people into a **Kingdom** much bigger than oneself.
- The gospel pushes us out of **center** and puts God where He belongs.
- The gospel invites people into a bigger world of **adventure**, to expand their horizons to a Kingdom that is **everlasting**.
- The gospel is a more exciting **non-conformity!** To not conform would be NOT listening to yourself or expressing yourself. Jesus says to deny yourself and follow Him.

Some of the phrases that have crept into our churches from the *You Be You* culture are:

- You are enough.
- Follow your dreams.
- You do you.

Trevin suggested that we can recognize that we're affected by self-expression by staying connected to the Global Church, going on mission trips, and being around international Christians and churches. See how they pray, share, and testify of following God while denying

themselves for the sake of others. We know that the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges any way of life that says, *Me first!*

I found myself grieving for this culture that thinks they have nowhere to lay their sin-guilt (the cross). Their first commandment is to be yourself and the second is like it, affirm your neighbor's self-expression. Thank God that He knows us. He knows us even better than we know ourselves. God, help us be open to sharing your foundation of truth in this pervasive culture that is slipping away from coming to see You as the Authority, Creator, and our only Salvation and Guide in life.

The 2024 Midwest Leadership Summit video recordings of the sessions are at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/10932605>. Trevin Wax's plenary session video is at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/10932605/video/905845827>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie Lynn works at the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. She's a member at Treeline Church in Ann Arbor (new church start that is focusing on university students). It's her joy to mentor several young women. Jamie loves spending time with her husband Tony, her three kids and spouses, and nine grandchildren.

Summit offer 12,000 hours of training for church leaders

SPRINGFIELD, IL – Church leaders from the central states engaged 12,000 hours of training, teaching, and worship at the three-day Midwest Leadership Summit meeting in Springfield January 23-25. In multiple plenary sessions led by national SBC speakers and church planting practitioners, and in 80 breakout sessions, almost 1,000 leaders shared and received equipping for ministry in their unique Midwest settings.

The biennial event brings together nine Baptist conventions covering 12 states. It is sponsored by Lifeway, Guidestone, the North American Mission Board, and Woman's Missionary Union.

In day two of the gathering, **Vance Pitman**, president of NAMB's Send Network, encouraged pastors, "The size of the church does not determine the significance of the church. The size of the mission determines the significance of the church."

Noting it might be controversial, Pitman said, "Church planting is not the goal. The church that you are planting one day is going to die. All the churches that were planted in the New Testament are all dead and gone....But the kingdom of God is alive and well."

Then where does the local church fit in? To introduce people to Jesus, disciple them, and launch them into serving him. “We’ve made the local church the goal,” said Pitman. “We’re doing it wrong. The church is a tool for establishing the kingdom of Jesus.”

Pitman said, “The church being born isn’t the finish line of God’s activity. It’s the starting line.”

Church planter **Aaron Taylor** from Columbus, Ohio, said their congregation, Living Hope Baptist Church, runs 120 on a “banner day,” but is impacting its city in a big way. The church started a free furniture store, Finding Hope Center, three years ago with virtually no inventory or funds, only God’s calling.

When space across from the church opened up, Taylor asked the landlord to give the church 30 days. “It was going to cost \$25,000 to pay rent for a whole year,” he said. “We did not raise \$25,000. God did it in 22 days, and we raised \$31,000.”

A year later Taylor received a call about connecting with a friend who had a storage unit with some furniture he wanted to give away. “We pulled up and it was the Midwest Distribution center for La-Z-Boy Furniture, and we found out the director of that facility loved Jesus a whole lot,” Taylor said. They were given permission take as much scratch and dent furniture as they wanted. Over the course of the last few years, the church has given away over in \$700,000 in furniture and shared the gospel with 350 families.

“We’re living in the middle of a miracle,” Taylor said.

Healthy pastors

The Guidestone leaders addressed pastoral health in a luncheon the financial institution sponsored. President **Hance Dilbeck** picked up a theme he introduced at the IBSA Annual Meeting in November—pastoral self-care. “If God is calling you to oversee the flock, you’ve got to oversee yourself,” he said, citing 1 Timothy 4:16.

Paul tells Timothy to guard the self and the doctrine. More pastors fail at the issue of the self than the doctrine, Dilbeck said. “If we mess up in these two areas, it’s all going down the tubes—if we get the doctrine wrong, or we don’t pay attention to ourselves,” he said.

The Summit was scheduled to conclude with one more breakout slot and a final worship and teaching session on Thursday.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lisa Misner and Eric Reed are writers for the Illinois Baptist, newsjournal of the Illinois Baptist State Association.

Why your church needs to be planning VBS now

BRENTWOOD, TN – For many churches, dates for Vacation Bible School (VBS) are among the first placed on the church calendar each year. Churches give VBS high priority because pastors recognize VBS as one of the most important evangelistic events for the entire church year.

In some churches, a volunteer serves as the VBS director. Other churches may have a children's ministry staff person who's responsible for coordinating VBS. For some churches, especially single-staff churches, the pastor may wear the hat of VBS director. When a VBS director is wearing multiple hats, it is not uncommon for earlier events on the calendar to quickly push VBS planning to the back burner.

Preparation with a purpose

But preparing for Vacation Bible School can be compared to preparing for a trip. When I go on a trip for five days, I don't just throw a toothbrush and some clothes in a bag and head to parts unknown. When planning a vacation, I sometimes spend months learning as much as I can about my destination. As a result, I can make lists of items I need to pack to enable me and those traveling with me to have the best experience possible.

Similar to planning for a destination vacation, planning must take high priority when preparing to guide children and families on an exciting journey during VBS. The destination for some may be accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. For those who are already Christians, the destination may be growing in their daily walk with Christ. When a church recognizes the potential for eternal impact, VBS planning may become the most important planning of the church year.

I often hear, "There is no tired like VBS tired." Let's face it. VBS is hard work! But [it's worth it](#). VBS is the one week of the year with the potential to mobilize the entire church to reach the community with the gospel. At the same time, churches are providing a unique discipleship experience for individual children and volunteers.

Equipping leaders for VBS

Enlisting volunteers early in the year and providing teaching resources are important parts of VBS preparation. In order to be successful, volunteers need to receive more than a leader guide. Volunteers need training. While most churches schedule VBS during the summer months, the planning and training process should begin much earlier. Thousands of leaders attend Lifeway VBS Previews in January each year. State conventions and associations schedule training sessions as early as February.

Training is an important part of seeing people come to Christ through VBS. Lifeway VBS statistics show that for every person trained for VBS, we see 1.1 salvations. Awareness of those

statistics motivates me to see every VBS leader trained to share the gospel. Training VBS leaders includes more than Bible study leaders. Music, crafts, recreation, missions, and even snack leaders need to be trained to share the gospel during VBS. Recreation and snacks are areas where kids often let their guards down and are more open to conversations. I have heard testimonies of recreation and snack leaders who had an opportunity to lead a child to Christ. A trained leader will be more confident in having gospel conversations with children, parents, and grandparents.

Enlistment and training are key elements of preparing for a successful VBS, but there is so much more. Every April and May, multiple people ask me: “Are you getting ready to start working on VBS?” People are often surprised to learn I work on VBS all year long. While some breathe a sigh of relief when the last decoration comes down, some of the most important work is just beginning. Personal follow-up with prospects and individuals who have made decisions needs to start right away.

How to equip your VBS director

By now, you may be thinking “VBS is months away and we are already behind. How can we map out a strategy for VBS without getting overwhelmed?” Lifeway prepares a [VBS Administrative Guide](#) each year to help in planning a successful VBS. The *VBS 2024 Administrative Guide* presents a six-step strategy to guide churches in VBS planning.

1. Know your purpose and theme.
2. Start planning.
3. Enlist and train your workers.
4. Promote and publicize.
5. Register participants.
6. Continue the connection.

Each step has tips and tools to help you accomplish that particular step. One of my favorite tools for helping VBS directors is the planning calendar provided in step two. The calendar is a checklist of tasks that need to be completed before, during, and after VBS. The list is divided into months leading up to VBS, helping VBS directors track their progress as they move toward VBS week. The calendar begins with tasks to be completed as early as six to nine months before VBS and gradually adds additional tasks. This planning process helps directors avoid feeling overwhelmed by attempting to do multiple tasks within a few weeks before VBS begins.

Lifeway’s [VBS Directors Club](#) is another great resource. The VBS Directors Club gives access to recruiting and enlistment tools, downloads for exclusive themed clip art, training presentations, a downloadable VBS planning timeline, and more.

Keep the main thing the main thing

In the midst of everything that must be done before VBS, it is easy to forget the purpose of VBS. The VBS director may have gathered all the items on the supply list. Teachers may have cut and sorted all the items in their leader pack. Worship leaders may have learned the motions to every song. Craft leaders may have organized every item possible for a project. But a leader who has not studied information on sharing the plan of salvation is not ready.

Always remember that the main purpose of VBS should be to reach lost people for Christ. You can have lots of fun with a theme and share all kinds of stories from the Bible. But remember to keep the main thing the main thing—helping unsaved children, students, and adults come to an understanding of their need for a Savior.

When you have made your lists and checked them multiple times, what else do you need to do? Be intentional about informing leaders about how your church plans to handle decisions during VBS. Help leaders know it is not their job to save people. They may not see results from their efforts right away. Their role is to share the good news of Jesus prayerfully, carefully, and lovingly. Encourage leaders to leave the rest to God.

Consider having a commissioning service on the Sunday before VBS begins. Pray with leaders, thanking God for the privilege of sharing His love with future generations. Ask God to bless the preparation of each leader and to give them opportunities to share with children, students, and their families.

If you find yourself questioning how you can justify months of planning for one week out of the church year, remind yourself of the main purpose of VBS. VBS is worth it!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vicki Hulsey has served as a childhood specialist for the Tennessee Mission Board for 19 years. Previously, she served on church staff in the areas of preschool, children, students, family and education ministries.

Doodle-bugger

PLYMOUTH – It has been said of my homeland that, “this is where God sat down and made the rest of the world.” One glimpse of the West Texas countryside will reveal the reason for this statement. It is a barren, flat and desolate place that is home to only the heartiest of desert dwellers.

Hundreds of years before the white man settled this region only jackrabbits, lizards, coyotes and a few brave, but very skinny Native Americans inhabited it. Sagebrush, cactus, mesquite, and sand covered the surface of this wilderness along with a few sprigs of buffalo grass.

When the pioneers were making their way to the West coast and happened upon this land, they made a very wise decision. They kept moving. No riches to be seen, but plenty of pain and suffering abounded.

Later, a few brave cowmen decided to make a go of ranching in this “God forsaken land” and for the most part did fairly well. Of course, it took five acres to graze one cow, but there was plenty to go around.

With the advent of the automobile and the insatiable need for petroleum, the search was on for new sources of oil. It just so happened that this dry and desolate desert became a true diamond in the rough. Beneath its unforgiving and harsh surface lay billions of barrels of the finest crude oil known to man. West Texas Crude is considered the benchmark for all other petroleum that is extracted from the coursing veins of our terrestrial ball.

Some people have the mistaken idea that it really doesn't matter where one might drill for oil in West Texas. They think that all that is necessary is to punch a hole through the earth's crust in the middle of this desert region and oil will automatically come gushing forth.

Many have operated under such a mistaken notion and have lost fortunes poking holes in these shifting sands. There is a great deal more to drilling for oil than just surveying the surface for a likely spot and setting up a rig. It is far too expensive a venture to risk drilling into some dark unknown hole.

To know where to drill is far more important than the drilling itself. When I was a young man and still living in Texas, this process of knowing where to drill was determined by a group of men known affectionately as “doodle-buggers.”

Doodle-buggers are men who operate seismographic equipment that maps and records the strata and substance of the subsurface formations. This is accomplished by creating shock waves with big hydraulic “thumpers” that are carried in large all-terrain vehicles. These “thumpers” pound the ground with enormous force, thus sending shock waves racing downward through the earth. Special seismographic instruments then record the returning shock waves as they are bounced back to the surface by the varying strata they encounter.

A sonogram or “sound picture” is recorded, and then a knowledgeable geologist can read and interpret them, thus determining where the likelihood of oil deposits were to be found. Hundreds of thousands of miles of land are mapped before the first drill bit is placed in the ground.

When man first looked upon the flat desert lands of West Texas, he determined that it was worthless and undesirable. But when a closer observation was made of what lay below the surface, they came to the realization that this was, and is indeed, a valuable and precious place. What lies beneath is where the real worth resides.

God tells us that man is in many ways like this desert region. That which we see on the surface of man is not that which determines the true worth of an individual, but what lies deep beneath the exterior is where a man's value is to be found. The foundation upon which the whole man stands or falls, is discovered deep within the heart of an individual and not by his outward appearance.

If we desire to know the true worth and character of an individual, we cannot determine this by looking only at the outward appearance. We must know and see the foundation upon which one's life is built. The clothes one wears or the physical features one possesses has little or nothing to do with who that person is. What lies below the surface is the deciding factor.

You and I have a difficult time seeing past the outward appearance of men, but God does not. In fact, He tells us in I Samuel 16:7 "But the LORD said unto Samuel, look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for *the LORD sees* not as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

I can just imagine what many of those early settlers thought after they passed up all that sand only to later find out that wealth beyond belief lay just below the surface. "If I had just known. I would have.....?"

When it comes to people, God does know. Shouldn't we ask Him what He thinks of an individual before we pass judgment on them? There could be a world of riches lying just below the surface. If you don't believe me, just ask a "Doodle-bugger."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Patterson is Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Elected unanimously in May of 2015, Patterson formerly served for 9 years as pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. He also served as trustee chair and national mobilizer for the North American Mission Board.

Good changes

PLYMOUTH – I am in my ninth year working for the Send Network as the Send Network Director in Michigan.

Three years ago, I invited Matt Thompson to join the team as a church planting catalyst. Early during our partnership in the ministry, I saw the discipline, the spiritual gifts, and the dedication in Thompson that convinced me that I had found someone in whom I could invest extra time allowing him to see “behind the curtain” so that he could hopefully, one day increase his platform of service with the Send Network.

Others saw the progress Thompson made these past three years adding value to the Send Network, locally, regionally, and nationally. I am happy to say the day of recognition arrived for Thompson; and the timely expansion of his assignment as Lead Church Planting Catalyst, creates space for me to devote my time and energy on two important areas in Michigan.

My Changes

The two vital areas where I will redirect my efforts are . . .

1. Language/Ethnic Work – I will cultivate relationships, coach towards multiplication, and catalyze movement in language/ethnic church planting throughout Michigan. When called upon in the Midwest region, I will serve as a resource person in eleven other states.

2. Michigan Baptist Churches – I will assist BSCM churches in the application of the North American Mission Board’s pipelines for training, leadership development, and multiplication. These processes are convenient, flexible, and robust.

In order to recall how I will continue to serve Michigan Baptists you can use two titles to remember my newest direction. I am the “Send Network Director” in Michigan, and I am the “Language/Ethnic Church Planting Catalyst” in Michigan.

Thompson’s Changes

Matt Thompson’s new title is “Lead Church Planting Catalyst” in Michigan meaning he will serve as the main point person for leading all things Send Network in Michigan.

- 1. Send Network Movement** – Matt will lead the Send Network Michigan staff in continuing the mission, vision, values, and strategy seeing that we continue as a family of “churches planting churches everywhere for everyone.” He will be the first point of contact.
- 2. Pathway Guide** – Thompson and the team will help each potential planters and partnering churches move forward on their respective pathways:

- a. Potential planters will advance from assessment, to orientation, to training, to coaching, to care.
- b. Partnering churches will advance from cooperating, to supporting, to sending, to multiplying, to movement churches.

Regardless of our new or additional titles, Thompson, the team, and I, with our unending passion to effectively serve the pastors/planters and members of our churches are here for you.

Why Change?

Some of you may be asking, “Why make these changes?”

The answer is easy, “We see the Lord accelerating Gospel movement among the language/ethnic groups in Michigan. We are convinced this is the perfect time to increase the impact of the Kingdom of God in Michigan, the nation, and the world. Observing those advances, we must put more time into language/ethnic groups and longtime established churches in the state.”

Jesus Christ’s invitation to make the journey out of a sinful, human, broken existence into the Kingdom of God is streamed for everyone to see on the big 360o screen we call the Book of Acts.

In Acts 1:3 author Luke, summarizes what Jesus Christ did during the forty days in between his resurrection from the cave to his ascension through the clouds to the Father’s right hand in heaven. Luke writes, “During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And *he talked to them about the Kingdom of God,*” (italics added for emphasis).

Using your device or your paper edition of the Bible, flip to the last written chapter of the Book of Acts to see the final two verses. Acts 28:30-31 says, “For the next two years, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense. *He welcomed all who visited him, boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.* And no one tried to stop him,” (italics added for emphasis).

Like any epic, memorable film, overcoming conflict to accomplish a mission is the highlight of the opening and ending of the gripping story! We see this in Acts 1 to the final verses of Acts 28.

The Book of Acts displays the heroic effort of thirty-two years of the early church continuing Jesus Christ’s mission to help others see, hear, and experience the Kingdom of God. Luke 17:20-21 records an interaction between community leaders who were spiritually blind, deaf, and dumb with Jesus Christ prior to his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

The text says, “One day the Pharisees asked Jesus, “*When will the Kingdom of God come?*” Jesus replied, “*The Kingdom of God can’t be detected by visible signs. You won’t be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ For the Kingdom of God is already among you,*” (italics added for emphasis).

“*The Kingdom of God is already among you,*” are some of the most hopeful and inspiring words. We believe we are approaching a new threshold in Michigan where we can see the Lord’s Kingdom expand and impact the world . . . but that expansion of the Kingdom requires change.

Let’s Talk About Change

Matt Thompson and I are available to discuss and explain these changes with anyone, so that we are all striving for the same Kingdom expansion. Call one or both of us for a visit: Tony Lynn, (734) 770-0608 and/or Matt Thompson (616) 202-8707.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the State Director of Missions for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as lead pastor for more than six years at Crosspoint Church in Monroe, Michigan. He and his wife, Jamie, also served with the International Mission Board in Africa and in Europe.

Search for identity

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – In a recent sermon I disclosed something that made people wince.

“For the first five years of my pastoral ministry in a small church in Canada, I did not take a day off, except for vacation. Five years of non-stop work, seven days a week.”

I felt justified. People around me, living without Jesus, were on their way to hell. How could I stand by and imperturbably take a day off? They needed me. *God* needed me (or so I thought).

The Bible says that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on Jesus to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in Jesus if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about Jesus unless someone like me tells them (Rom. 10:14)?

So, yes, I felt justified working around the clock. God needed me to declare the gospel so they could be saved. Wrong on so many fronts! God does not *need* me. He is not served by human

hands as if he needed anything (Acts 17:25)! He loves me and he welcomes my service in the name of Jesus but he is not dependent on me. Sadly, my theology and the mission of God back then were not as compelling as my identity crisis.

Pastors either get their identity vertically, from who they are in Christ, or they shop for it horizontally in the experiences and relationships of ministry. That was my biggest problem. I excused my workaholic tendencies by appealing to the lostness of mankind, but the way I worked my fingers to the bone and neglected my marriage and family proved that my horizontal search for affirmation was clearly misdirected and hazardously mismanaged.

Paul Tripp speaks to this tendency in most of us. He suggests that many church leaders place themselves into a nonexistent spiritual category and see themselves as “arrived” or spiritually mature, or in my case, indispensable. They are quick to minister to others, but slow to receive ministry from others. But, whenever we place our identity in ministry instead of Jesus, then a distorted and skewed sense of self-awareness, pride, and sin will result.

Our identity should be found in Jesus only who freely lavishes grace upon us and transforms our hearts, minds, and souls (*Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*. Crossway, 2012).

In an article for The Gospel Coalition website, Tripp adds a bit of his own testimony:

Ministry had become my identity. I didn't think of myself as a child of God, in daily need of grace, in the middle of my own sanctification, still battling with sin, still in need of the body of Christ, and called to pastoral ministry. No, I thought of myself as a *pastor*. That's it, bottom line. The office of pastor was more than a calling and set of God-given gifts that had been recognized by the body of Christ. *Pastor* defined me.

When we derive identity from ministry we develop spiritually unsafe habits. We allow inconsistent devotional habits to take shape, read the Bible only for sermon preparation, and worship songs no longer find the soft spot in our hearts. Loving correction from faithful friends are suspect at best, and often interpreted as betrayal. Ministry as identity is a dangerous place for anyone to live, but especially an elder or pastor.

If you find yourself in this space, get alone with God. Seek his face and cry out. Remember all that he has done for you. Repent of your sinful passion to find yourself in what you do, in your performance. Restore your first love in Jesus. Recalibrate your heart for the journey ahead.

When Jesus spoke to the church at Ephesus, he said,

“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.... I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have

fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent”

(Rev. 5:2-5 ESV).

You may be working hard every day, toiling for the sake of gospel, ministering to your church family, patiently enduring whatever trial is in front of you, and you are doing it for the name and fame of Jesus. But if you forsake your first love in the process, exchanging worship for work, pursuing a sense of worth from work, then it's all for nothing. *Remember* what God has done. *Repent* of your self-sufficiency. *Restore* your first love.

Acceptance by God has nothing to do with performance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Garth Leno is the Pastor/Planter Care Specialist with the BSCM. He serves in a similar role with the Canadian National Baptist Convention, and he is the founding pastor of The Gathering Church in Windsor, Ontario, a church he planted with his wife, Patty, and a few of their friends.

First-Person: Midwest Leadership Summit

ADRIAN – It can be difficult to leave the joys of family and the obligations of ministry for three days. It is possible that you might wonder if there is any real benefit to attending this leadership summit or any other conference. Humbly, I suggest there is great benefit to attending the Midwest Leadership Summit.

My takeaways had two common themes that have been personal prayer items throughout the past few months. First, how do we saturate the community with the gospel? Second, how do we fully depend on prayer as a congregation? God was gracious to provide insights for both themes.

The Midwest Leadership Summit is a collective of nine Baptist state conventions. Pastors and church leaders from twelve states gather in Springfield, Illinois to be refreshed, renewed, edified, and encouraged as they strive to lead their churches well. There are main session speakers. There are ministry testimonies. There are breakout sessions. There are late night conversations. There are meals with other Michigan church leaders. There is prayer, worship, and a replenishing of your soul.

Is it possible to pack all of that into three days? Yes, and so much more.

On Tuesday evening, Trevin Wax spoke about a few worldview aspects of our culture. I was reminded to allow the gospel to speak for itself. Wax said, “The gospel helps us get beyond the emotions of guilt and shame.” I also wrote down, the gospel is GOOD NEWS, provides rest, fills the gaps, feeds the soul, redirects the lies, and points to the truth.

On Wednesday evening, Vance Pittman reminded us that God invites churches into His activity FOR God’s glory.

On Thursday morning, Jared Wilson taught from Romans 15. He said, “Our church must be impacted by the gospel before our church impacts the community with the gospel.” He continued by giving six proofs that the gospel impacts our church.

The breakout sessions were the focus of Wednesday. Those in attendance chose from sixty sessions in ten categories of ministry. The sessions were led by pastors and ministry leaders who live in trenches, just like you and me. They are familiar with the toil and the weight that we carry in ministry.

Writing space will not allow me to share from each of the breakouts, so I will give three highlights.

Leading From Your Knees reminded me that God always pursues our relationship. When I pray, I ought to ask him to remove the scales of sin, open the heavens and show me his glory.

From Surviving To Thriving reminded me to protect time for rest by establishing biblical rhythms.

Lastly, I would like to share the words of a fellow pastor named Aaron. While Aaron was telling the story of his church plant, he said, “God loves to give big vision. Ask him for it and communicate it well.”

Fellow church leaders, you are dearly loved, and your efforts are seen! All of us need the reminders that come from the Midwest Leadership Summit. They will fill you up and prepare you for another year of ministry. The archived videos can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/10932605>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Peoples serves as the lead pastor at Trinity Baptist Church in Adrian, Michigan. He has been married to Bridget for twenty-five years. They have four children.

A better new year!

SOUTHGATE – I was talking with a young man from our church regarding how 2023 had gone, and what his goal was for 2024. At some point, he made a statement which caused me to stop our conversation for a moment. He had concluded that what he desired for the next 12 months was, “better, not easier.” I paused so I could quickly write that down. While it is February, the year is still in its infancy.

For some, you were ready to kick last year to the curb well before the Holiday season. For others, it may have been full of the favor of God. For most, it probably falls somewhere in between. Some highs, some lows, some incredible blessings, and some challenging difficulties. Which is maybe why that statement hit me with such impact. No matter where you fall on the spectrum – you can always aspire for BETTER! Scripture shares with us.

Psalm 84:10 gives us the launching pad for pursuing “better” in the months ahead of us. *“A single day in your courts is better than a thousand anywhere else! I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God than live the good life in the homes of the wicked.”*

The more significance we place on the presence of God in our lives, the more confidence His presence will bring, and the more influence His presence will have! While we all are aware of God’s presence, if you’re like me and it took you more than two years to read the “One Year Bible,” then a gentle reminder of the power that comes with that presence may not be a bad idea. We can get so engrossed in the work and busyness of ministering out to others that we fail to allow much ministry into our own hearts and minds.

Remember when Jesus and His disciples made their way to Mary and Martha’s home for dinner? One sister was in the kitchen seemingly doing all the work, while the other sister was sitting at the feet of Jesus taking in every word. As Luke shares the story in his gospel, I can’t help but imagine the clanging of pots and pans getting noisier as Martha endeavored to make her point without having to...make her point.

But then, she’d had enough and actually interrupted the gathering. *“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”* Jesus responds with *“Martha, Martha.”*

Remember when your mom called you by your full name? Never good – kind of the direction I feel this conversation going.

“You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is (wait for it...) BETTER, and it will not be taking away from her.” (Luke 10:38 – 42)

I gave this as a benediction to my church earlier this year, and I share it with you as we bring this article in for a landing.

- My prayer for you in 2024, is to have moments this year where peace comes flooding over you in a way that is so overwhelming there can be little doubt as to where it came from and who sent it your direction.
- My prayer for you in 2024, is to have a request so incredibly answered, it's as if it was from God specifically just for you.
- My prayer for you in 2024, is that you would experience moments where you are so keenly aware of the presence of God, your eyes fill with tears, you are so overwhelmed by His love.
- My prayer for you in 2024, is that you would have a greater understanding that you are never alone, but that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the abiding Love of our Heavenly Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, not only goes with you...but before you.

Not Easier...Just Better!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Billy Walker is the Lead Pastor of Calvary Church in Southgate, MI and Vice-President of the Billy Walker Evangelistic Association. He and his wife Laurie live in the Downriver area of Michigan.

Secondhand Faith

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – With all the media we have access to in our lives now, we are able to gain knowledge and have access to so much more than ever before. However, we aren't having true and real experiences; we are often living through the experiences of others through the world of social media!

I can relate this same idea to my own faith. I grew up in a Christian family and went to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. I even married a pastor and started a church, but for years I was living through a "secondhand faith." I believe for the majority of my life, my faith came through my parents and then through my "pastor" husband. It wasn't until I was faced with a crisis of belief that I had an encounter with God, and everything changed for me!

I was a very good rule follower growing up and always wanted to please. I accepted Jesus as my Savior as a young girl and then became very good at doing all the right things and looking like a

good Christian girl. What I didn't realize at the time was that I was missing a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus. Don't get me wrong, I thought I was doing all the right things; but that is where I was misled.

I love this quote from Geri Scazzero, author of the book the "Emotionally Healthy Woman":
"Our doing for Jesus must flow from our being with Him. Often, we live vicariously through other people's spirituality while busily on the run. Going to church, attending conferences, and listening to worship music are all good things, but they should not be a substitute for being quiet and listening to God for ourselves."

I was doing all the right things but was far from God. In Hebrews 5:12-14 (NLT), we read,

You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.

I was a baby Christian for most of my life. Just like our children when they are babies, they don't know they are babies. It isn't until they grow up and look back over the phases and stages of their lives that they realize what a baby is. The same goes for our spiritual life. We don't know what we are missing until we experience it.

Recently I was reading in John about the Samaritan woman at the well. I have read this story and heard it preached more times than I can count. However, God gave me a fresh revelation on this day that I had never seen before. As we know from the story in John 4, the Samaritan woman had an encounter with Jesus at the well and her life was changed. She ran back to tell everyone in her town about her experience.

John writes in John 4:39 (NIV),

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. "He told me everything I ever did."

Our testimonies are powerful to the people we share them with. However, their faith should not stop there! They need to have an encounter with Jesus for themselves. When we stop short of encountering Jesus for ourselves, we are living a secondhand faith.

John continues in John 4:40-42 (NIV),

So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two more days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the women, "We no longer believe because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man is really the Savior of the world.

I truly didn't know what I was missing in my life until I received it. God is so good to continue to pursue us and draw us closer in our relationship with Him. Don't settle for living a secondhand faith in Christ! He wants to give you so much and grow your relationship with Him. There are so many treasures to be found. Seek God for yourself! Don't live off someone else's faith! If you are serious in wanting a deeper relationship with God, pray the following prayer.

Father God,

Your word says that when we seek you, we will find you. I admit that I have relied on the faith of others in my life. God, I just want to know you more. Reveal more of yourself to me and show me how to walk closely with you. I want to recognize when you are speaking to me and have an intimate relationship with you. Give me a heart to follow you and your ways. Help me turn to you and not to others. I know that you will give me all I need as I choose to put you first and seek you. I don't want to wait until heaven to see you; I want to see you here on earth. I pray these things with anticipation of experiencing you in my life.

Amen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Blanchard is married to Scott Blanchard, pastor of Lakepointe Church, and moved from Florida to Michigan in the summer of 2009 to plant Lakepointe Church in Shelby Township. She enjoys mentoring and discipling women and also leads women's life groups through her church. She is passionate about helping women find their purpose in who God created them to be. She is on staff at Lakepointe Church and loves being part of what God is doing in the Metro Detroit area!

What does love look like?

WOODHAVEN – Fifty-three years ago, Pastor Jones sent people to plant a church in Woodhaven. The church developed a motto that we still use today saying "A Church Born in Love".

When I think of love the first and foremost thing that comes to my mind is our God and how much he loves us. His love is proven to us day after day. Salvation alone is pure proof of that love.

Through the love that God has for us we can learn more about love every day. We are required to love him and serve him and are to love one another. John 15:17 says: “These things I command you, that ye love one another.”

There are many ways to show love. One example is on February 14th, many will buy candy, flowers, or go out for romantic dinners. While these are ways to show love, I think the greatest way to show love is to pray for others. Think of the disciples, of all the things they could have asked Jesus for, they asked him to teach them to pray.

Romans 1:9 says: “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers.”

Most times when we greet people with “How are you doing?”, so often people answer “I’m doing well” or something general like that, when sometimes that is not always the truth. People try to cover up what’s really going on when in return what they really need is prayer. We MUST take people to the Lord in prayer. Maybe, instead of saying, “How are you doing?”, we can ask, “Can I pray for you?” You see, we have One who can help, so taking them to God in prayer is very important.

Here’s a small story on how I know people are watching us as Christians and need God’s love. When I was in Trenton High School, I played football. One day we were scrimmaging Grosse Ile, and I made a tackle. During this tackle, I got a concussion. I started cussing everyone out and my friend knew immediately that something was wrong—they grabbed me and took me to the coach. They said “Coach, something’s wrong with Rick, he doesn’t talk like this!” That’s when I saw the team doctor and they realized that I had a concussion. The moral of this story is my friend saw that I had a need. They didn’t make fun of me, they didn’t let me keep rambling on, they took me to the coach for help.

Folks, people around us are hurting. We are not here to make fun of them, nor to talk about them, but to take them to the one who does or can help, Jesus. We can take our friends to Jesus for help just like my friends helped me. They saw a need in me during that moment, but we should be able to see the daily need in them. God’s love is an eternity of help, not just for one moment. If we love people like God’s Word commanded us to, we shall take them to him in prayer. God is love and prayer changes things!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Sparks has been blessed to be pastor of Woodhaven Baptist Church for almost 27 years. His wife, Debbie and he have 6 children, a son-in-law, 2 daughter-in-laws and soon another, and in the best part of life they have 6 grandchildren, 3 boys and 3 girls.

Blood drive

OSCODA – In early January, I received a call from a blood drive center requesting the use of a room at the church for a Community Blood Drive. They had been double booked at another location. I said that we would be glad to host them.

Fast forward a few weeks and it is donation day. The crew arrives and sets up shop. They have loads of equipment, and it is freezing outside. I asked if they have a full docket and they replied, “We have 15 scheduled appointments.”

I was thinking of all the different people that could come and give their blood when one of the young ladies asked, “Are you going to give?” I told her that it has been a while since I gave so when traffic slows down, I will come back to give. About an hour before they closed, I sat down to give.

The needle going in my arm had a small bite, less than a bee sting, then a short wait until the container was full. It took a little less than 10 minutes, and the machine started beeping. That was it. A small poke and a few minutes to help save a life.

The ladies working were talking about how many people do not even think to give blood until they or someone else is in need of it. My best friend growing up had a total blood transfusion that saved his life when he was a baby. That has always stuck with me and has been my reminder that it saves lives. Sometimes that life is yours or someone you love.

I asked if they would take my picture so I could write an article about the importance of giving blood, and that the blood of Christ is the greatest example of giving blood. His blood redeems us.

“Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”

1 Peter 1:18-19 NKJV

The Father showed His love to us by sending Jesus to shed His blood instead of ours. It is for our salvation, our redemption. It is the only thing that would satisfy God for the remission of our sin. When I think of the suffering of the cross, I am humbled to the core. Our gratitude is what should drive us to share the Gospel with others.

Many people will not give blood for one reason or another. Maybe they don't want to experience the small poke, or maybe they think they don't have time in their busy lives. Maybe they are simply scared. Maybe, just maybe, they don't think of the love it is showing by saving the lives of those that need it.

Many people will not share the love of Christ with others as well. It is so simple and yet so important. The joy that comes with leading someone to saving faith in Christ far outweighs anything we might have to endure.

Jesus stepped out of heaven to put on flesh to shed His blood to save the world. There is no greater love story than this. Let's go share with the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor Jason Livvix is the Planter/Pastor of Fresh Start Fellowship of Oscoda since 2013. Serving with his beautiful wife Tracy and their four wonderful children, Madeline, Wyatt, Joel and Sophia. (The Three oldest have moved back to Illinois.)

Delighted in the Lord

GRAYLING – Twenty-one years ago, I gave my life to the Lord. God had been working on my heart for six months since the first time I had stepped into a church. It can take that long when you are taught your whole life the opposite of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I had a wonderful upbringing with parents who loved me dearly and took great care of me. But sadly, the name of Jesus was not present or even welcome in our home.

In the months following my radical life change, I had two people speak the same verse over me. I will never forget the feeling of awe that I had that second time. One was at our church, and one was at a visiting women's conference. This was no coincidence since I hadn't shared it with anyone. God had a word specifically for me. It was

Psalms 37:4 "Delight yourself also in the Lord, And He shall give you the desires of your heart."

I can imagine that most of our desires are similar as born-again believers: to see the lost saved, to love our families well, and to enjoy the short time God has given us on this beautiful earth.

It is humbling to be used by God when you feel so imperfect, so lacking. Do most of us not mess up every single day? But God is there to pick up the pieces and to use even our weakness to draw others to Him.

This summer our family experienced many extreme life changes. Our beautiful firstborn daughter began her college career in Alabama, we moved from Gaylord to Grayling, and I resigned my career to devote more time to family and ministry. Within a month of the move,

my father-in-law was diagnosed with stage four terminal cancer. We purchased a home and did extensive remodeling, which took about two months.

We moved into our new home in early November, and hence the holidays felt quite odd as we processed all the changes, with the underlying possibility that this would be our last Christmas with the patriarch of the family.

To say that we have been a bit overwhelmed may be an understatement! But God.

Through it all, God has been our rock. It was clear that He wanted us to live closer to our church family and to my in-laws. The church had been steadily growing since we were called almost seven years ago, but in the last year we are bursting at the seams.

This summer/fall has been an intense time of nonstop ministry and strengthening of the body of believers. The building campaign that we began four years ago is getting close to coming to fruition. God is moving at Grayling Baptist Church.

I can tell you that where I am at right now (in a worldly sense) is not where I would have pictured myself a year ago. Every change that has occurred recently has been emotionally taxing. Finding a balance in personal time with God, family, work, ministry, and the household has always been a struggle for me, and now even more so.

We have five children, and as my youngest is now nine years old, the tasks and time with them look very different than they did in the days of constant feeding and diapering. Now it looks like juggling after school sports and activities, monitoring friends and entertainment, and being available at the drop of a hat when they need to talk. I know the next stage of empty nesting/grandparenting will be different as well.

It is so important to take delight in each stage of life that we have been given. So that when we look back on our lives we can know that we did our best with the time God has given us. When our desires for our lives align with God's, there is no end to the possibilities!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer and her husband, David have been married for almost 20 years and have five children ranging from 9 years old to 18. They planted several churches in the U.P. and one in Texas and have been ministering to their flock at Grayling Baptist Church for seven years.

The Word is a weapon

PORT AUSTIN – A few years ago, the ladies in our church did an incredible study on the armor of God from Ephesians. It was one of those passages that I had heard and read about my whole Christian life, but it wasn't until we did that study together that I realized how real spiritual warfare is and how powerful the armor of God is to fight it.

Now, I'm not one of those people who believes there's a demon behind every bush. But, when I realized that we have a real enemy who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour," my eyes were really opened to his evil schemes.

One of the pieces of armor that specifically stood out to me was the sword of the Spirit, which the Bible says is the Word of God. For me personally, a common area the enemy tries to get at me is my thoughts. Late at night when I can't fall asleep, I replay a situation over and over, analyzing every detail, or I'm overtaken by fears of the future.

These are just a few examples of ways my thoughts can consume me. But what is so powerful about the sword of the Spirit is we are literally using God's Word as a weapon to fight those anxious thoughts. When the devil tried to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, we know in an instant He could have just defeated the devil with a flick of his finger. But what did He do instead? He quoted Scripture to fight him. How powerful! We have the same weapon available to us and can use the Word of God to fight the lies of the enemy.

Here are just a few ways using the Word as a weapon has helped me:

1. Take every thought captive.

II Corinthians 10:5 says "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ."

When we immediately take our thoughts captive and recognize that it's from the enemy and not God, we have the power to fight that thought with His Word and not spiral into worse thinking.

2. Trade anxious thoughts for prayer and gratitude.

Philippians 4:6-7 says "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Sometimes it's hard if our anxious thoughts take over and won't leave, even after we try to take them captive. Replacing them with praise and thanksgiving to God helps realign our focus.

3. Filter my thoughts through Scripture.

I like to look at the rest of the Philippians passage and analyze every thought through this verse. Are my fears true? Are my thoughts lovely or honorable, etc.? Usually not. So, I want to be reminded of God's promises and that what He says IS true. (Philippians 4:8-9)

Having a weapon as powerful as the Word of God is as good as it gets to win this spiritual battle. We need to be utilizing this amazing power God gave us to fight the enemy's schemes and lies. As James 4:7 says "Submit yourself therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

His Word is a weapon. Use it!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon Goforth is a pastor's wife in the thumb of Michigan. She works part time as a social media manager and serves alongside her husband Michael, as he pastors Mercy Hill Church in Port Austin, MI. This includes singing on the worship team, helping in children's church, teaming up with other women in their church to help lead their summer women's Bible study, and more. Shannon and Michael have been married for nine years and are expecting their first child, a baby girl due this May, and are very excited to become first time parents.

Small in number, but mighty in the Lord

YPSILANTI – I was 5 years old as I watched Godly men work on the building of North Prospect Baptist Church block by block. This church was built in 1957.

I have many personal feelings, happy memories, and lots of love within the walls of this very building. My parents raised my brother, sisters and myself in this church. I was married here, and raised my own family here. My three daughters were saved and baptized here.

God called me to be a deacon in 1974 and I served as a deacon until 2018. At that time I felt a calling to preach. I met that call as my church voted me to be their pastor.

My journey as pastor of this church has been blessing after blessing. I feel in my heart that God is not through at North Prospect. I foresee that God has great and mighty things ahead for this very church.

I pray he will show me this vision (Jeremiah 33:3). The congregation here is very loving and God-fearing people. My prayer is that God will give me the wisdom to lead His people to build his church in the way he desires.

Our congregation is small, older and slightly handicapped, but I know with God's help we can do wonderful and mighty things. Many other things could be said about this congregation; they are very friendly, loving and a very generous and giving group of people. Small in number, but mighty in their love for the Lord. I love this church and I thank God every day for calling me to preach and also calling me to be the pastor of North Prospect Baptist.

Our congregation is small, older and slightly handicapped, but I know with God's help we can do wonderful and mighty things.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doyle Parks is the pastor of North Prospect Baptist Church in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Most evangelicals chose Christ during childhood, new study finds

EXPORT, PA (BP) – Most adult evangelicals were saved in childhood with several factors influencing their decisions, according to newly released findings from Infinity Concepts and Grey Matter Research and Consulting.

More than 90 percent of the 59 million adult evangelicals in the U.S. each said several factors motivated them to accept Christ as Savior, the study found, with parents, churches, other family members, individual Bible reading and pastors ranking highest.

A total of 72 percent of adult evangelicals were saved before 18, and only 4 percent of respondents said they chose Christ in the four years preceding the study.

The age of belief and the factors influencing belief are valuable insights in designing evangelism strategies, researchers said.

“Parents are an enormous influence on their children. Do you try to reach adolescents directly,” researchers posed, “or do you also invest in teaching or training parents or other family members how to have spiritual conversations with their children?”

The influence of both parents was cited as the strongest factor in their faith decision by a plurality of those polled, 28 percent, followed by 16 percent who cited the church they

attended as the strongest factor for them personally. Other family members were cited as the strongest factor by 11 percent of respondents, followed by 10 percent who cited their personal Bible reading, and 7 percent who referenced pastors.

Researchers were not discouraged by the low percentage of evangelicals saved in the four years preceding the study, as 16 million respondents were saved in adulthood.

“Adult evangelism is far from futile,” researchers wrote. “But by far, the biggest impact is among youth and children, especially between the ages of 5 and 12. Half of today’s evangelical adults came to their beliefs during these formative years; a total of around 43 million evangelical Protestant adults came to their faith before adulthood.”

Other significant factors leading people to salvation were life’s difficulties, events, spouses, friends, other church leaders, direct experiences with God, radio or television, and books other than the Bible. “Something online” ranked lowest.

The numerous factors in play in salvation can encourage evangelicals in ministry, researchers said, and understanding the findings can help evangelicals reach the unsaved.

“One commonly expressed frustration Christians have with evangelism is the failure to see results. They plant a seed, and hope or expect to see something sprout directly from that effort,” researchers wrote. “You may not see the plant actually sprout, but you may be one of those important factors influencing someone’s eventual decision.”

Only 46 percent of evangelicals point to a specific time when they were saved. Instead, 37 percent said they were raised as Christians, and 16 percent said their decision to follow Christ was gradual.

Researchers defined evangelicals to encompass 23 percent of the population, using a definition developed by Lifeway Research, which is racially inclusive. Specifically, evangelicals are considered those who view the Bible as the highest authority in their beliefs, say it’s important to them to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus as their Savior, cite Jesus’ work on the cross as the only sacrifice for forgiveness of sin, and that salvation is in Christ alone.

The online study was conducted in early 2023 among 1,010 evangelical Protestants, using several research access panels and using stringent quality controls, researchers said. The study did not include non-Protestants such as Mormons, Roman Catholics or Orthodox Christians.

The study’s findings are available [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

Dislike of organized religion, maltreatment cited by many 'Nones,' Pew finds

WASHINGTON (BP) – More than half of religiously unaffiliated Americans, identified as ‘Nones,” say they don’t like organized religion or have been mistreated by religious people, Pew Research said Jan. 24.

Specifically, 55 percent of Nones cited one of the two factors in explaining their reason for being nonreligious. Nearly half of respondents, 47 percent, said their dislike of religious organizations is an extremely or very important reason they’re nonreligious, while 30 percent said the same about bad experiences with religious people.

Maltreatment by religious people was cited more often among women Nones, at 32 percent, than among men, at 27 percent.

Skepticism of religious teachings and a disbelief in God were the most common reasons cited by Nones in explaining themselves, with 60 percent questioning a lot of religious teachings and 32 percent not believing in God or a higher power. Altogether, 67 percent cited one or both factors.

Others, 44 percent, say they’re nonreligious because they either don’t have time for religion (41 percent) and/or don’t need it (12 percent).

Nones comprise more than a quarter of American adults, 28 percent, with 20 percent of them describing themselves as agnostic, 17 percent saying they are atheists, and 63 percent saying they are “nothing in particular” religiously.

While Nones’ 28 percent share of the population marks a continual decrease since 2021, and is equal to findings in 2020 and 2019, Pew’s researchers said that doesn’t necessarily mean Nones are decreasing among the population.

“These kinds of trends are best assessed over the long haul, based on many survey readings. After all, every estimate from a probability survey comes with a margin of error,” researchers [wrote](#). “Furthermore, it’s always possible that any single survey could be an outlier – that is, any one survey can defy the odds and produce an estimate that differs from the “true” value by more than the margin of error.”

Pew culled its findings from the 3,317 religious Nones among the 11,201 respondents in a study among Pew’s American Trends Panel conducted in the summer of 2023. That sampling included 658 atheists, 678 agnostics and 1,981 “nothing in particular” adults.

Researchers detailed various characteristics of Nones, including their civic engagement, spirituality, attitudes towards religion, and views of science and morality.

Most Nones, 70 percent, believe in God or a higher power, followed by 67 percent who believe humans have a soul or spirit, and 63 percent believing there is something beyond the natural world we can't see. Strong majorities (61 percent) don't believe in heaven, nor hell, 69 percent.

Nones are not automatically hostile to religion, Pew found, with 41 percent saying religion is just as good as it is harmful to society. More, 44 percent, said religion is more harmful than good.

About a fifth of Nones, 19 percent, consistently cited negative views of religion in all five categories Pew addressed, saying religion does more harm than good in society, encourages superstition and causes division. This segment also rejects notions that religion encourages people to treat others well, and helps society by giving people meaning and purpose in their lives.

Among other top findings:

- 39 percent of Nones voted in 2022 midterm elections, compared to 51 percent of the religiously affiliated; but voting was nearly as high among atheists, at 50 percent, as among the religiously affiliated.
- 10 percent of Nones say a belief in God is necessary to be moral and have good values. Nearly all agnostics, 98 percent, and atheists, 97 percent, said a person can be moral and have good values without believing in God.
- 44 percent of Nones believe there is a scientific explanation for everything, with the highest adherence among atheists at 78 percent.

In addition to its 2023 American Trends Panel, Pew also relied on earlier ATP studies and its National Public Opinion Reference Surveys in drawing its conclusions. Pew's report is available [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' senior writer.

‘DR Family’ gathers for annual SBDR Roundtable

NEWARK, DE (BP) – More than 200 Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDR) leaders and volunteers from across North America arrived at Ogletown Baptist Church for the SBDR Roundtable Jan. 23-25.

The mostly gold-bedecked army of SBDR volunteers is a unique group. For Dan Hyun, BCM/D partnership team leader, who led a breakout session titled “Healthy Rhythms for Helpers,” it was the first time being at a large SBDR event.

“You have a particular culture and feel,” he told the group. “You ‘get’ each other.” Hyun called attendees heroes — giving of themselves to help others in times of distress.

Disaster Relief volunteers refer to that culture as the “DR Family,” and that family bond was very much in evidence as volunteers from 38 of 42 Baptist state and regional conventions, including Canada and Puerto Rico, reunited with partners they have worked with side by side in difficult, often traumatic situations.

Many recalled challenges and innovations surrounding recent disasters, including Hurricane Idalia, flooding in Vermont, the Maui fires and other major events. There was immediate camaraderie as strangers became engaged in conversation while perusing the SBDR response trailers in the parking lot or between classes — sharing ideas and discovering ways to improve their work.

The conference offered a wide range of advanced training opportunities for volunteers in chaplaincy, using drones in damage assessment, managing a mass care feeding site, incident management administrative best practices, equipment safety and maintenance and other technical and ministry topics.

Crisis Response Director for Send Relief Coy Webb said in addition to a wonderful turnout and some great training sessions, one of the highlights this year was an anticipated strengthened partnership with the Salvation Army.

“It will be beneficial to both organizations, and we’re very excited,” Webb said, adding that he is particularly pleased that the Salvation Army is faith-based.

“I think we’re going to see, in the near future, a great opportunity for us to have some partnership with them that will release some resources to strengthen our feeding ability in times of disaster,” Webb said.

Webb spoke highly of the newly updated and revamped Disaster Relief Operations Manual.

The annual training conference and business session was planned this year by the four Northeast state conventions with Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware (BCM/D) SBDR Director Ellen Udovich and the Maryland/Delaware team hosting. The SBDR team with the Baptist Resource Network (Pennsylvania/South Jersey) assisted in preparing hundreds of meals and serving at the awards banquet.

Awards

One of the most anticipated events of the annual roundtable is the awards dinner. Each year, volunteers are nominated for national awards by their state convention SBDR directors, with the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief Steering Committee making the final selection.

This year's keynote speaker for the dinner was longtime national SBDR Leader Eddie Blackmon, who shared about the need to trust in the Lord. "Partners are important, but we need to partner with the Lord," he said, sharing that he has witnessed many times how God has provided what was needed on the field.

Henry Blackaby's book, "Experiencing God," had a huge impact on Blackmon's life, and that carried over to serving disaster relief. One of Blackaby's major themes in the book was recognizing where God is working and joining Him in what He is doing. There's no better ministry than SBDR for putting that into practice, said Blackmon. "God is all around you."

The following awards were presented:

Distinguished Service Awards for exceptional service

Michael Fujimoto, Hawaii Pacific Baptist Convention
Daniel Arnold, Northwest Baptist Convention
Brian Gueringer, Louisiana Baptist Convention
Tom Malott, Missouri Baptist Convention
Debbie Klepinger, State Convention of Baptists in Ohio
Artie Horn, Missouri Baptist Convention

Joel W. Phillips Outstanding Achievement Award

Tom Waites, Louisiana Baptist Convention
Mike Bastin, Kentucky Baptist Convention
George Blevins, Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware

Robert E. Dixon Award for a lifetime of service

Linda Gregory, Florida Baptist Convention
Jerry & Andy Cable, Kentucky Baptist Convention

Laddie Adams Retiring State Director Award:

Mike Bivins – California Southern Baptist Convention

SBDR Steering Committee Service:

Mark Wakefield, Alabama Baptist Convention

Kenton Hunt, Baptist Resource Network of Pennsylvania/South Jersey

Roundtable Business

The Roundtable itself was held on the final day of the conference. State SBDR directors, along with Coy Webb and other national leaders, met to set the direction of the organization, hear reports, delegate to working committees and set policy.

Highlights of the session included greetings from national partners, including the Red Cross, National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), and Lowe's. The state directors also approved recommendations clarifying the basic qualifications of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief chaplains and discussed the new SBDR Operations Manual, which provides a framework for the various entities of the SBDR network to maximize organizational leadership in coordinating disaster responses at both the command and functional levels.

The meeting concluded with a challenge for the network to prioritize mutual aid and support as SBDR is being called upon to respond to more frequent and severe disaster and crisis events locally and nationally.

Next year's Winter Roundtable will be in San Antonio, Texas. The convention directors also meet each June following the SBC annual meeting.

Religious donors keep giving to houses of worship and beyond amid inflation

(RNS) — Religious Americans are continuing to give to their houses of worship — and to other causes — with money and in-kind donations despite rising costs for daily living, a new report shows.

More than 8 in 10 (81 percent) faith-based givers who donated money in 2023 gave funds to houses of worship, and 60 percent gave \$1,000 or more, according to “Giving in Faith: Exploring Key Trends in Religious Giving,” a joint 2024 report from Givelify, a mobile and online app, and Indiana University’s Lake Institute on Faith & Giving.

Most religious donors (81 percent) gave the same amount of money (or more) to their congregations in 2023 as in 2022.

A similar percentage of religious donors (82 percent) reported that they made in-kind gifts, such as physical items to places of worship, registered nonprofits, informal community groups or directly to people who had a need.

By viewing the philanthropy of people of faith beyond just their congregations, researchers have gained a wider sense of how much and why they share their money and their time, said Wale Mafolasire, founder and CEO of Givelify, an Indianapolis-based company that launched in 2013.

For example, 48 percent of faith-based givers who made donations gave money directly to friends, neighbors, relatives and others in need. Describing those direct monetary gifts, 70 percent reported donating to family members, 61 percent to friends and 60 percent to strangers.

“When we expand that definition to include not just what they’re giving to their place of worship, but also what they’re giving in kind and to other members of the community and to their members, we’re seeing that people of faith are probably the most generous in the United States of America,” said Mafolasire, whose company runs an app used by congregants and others to make donations to nonprofit organizations.

The report’s findings are based on responses from 2,000 religious Americans and 980 faith leaders in the country. The vast majority of the respondents were Christians.

The research included an oversample of African American and Black faith givers in order to gauge perceptions on the value of houses of worship to their communities. Forty-four percent of the respondents who were people of faith were Black or African, while 48 percent were white. The racial composition of the faith leaders’ congregations was 45 percent Black or African, 34 percent white or European and 19 percent multiracial (or with no more than 80 percent of a single race or ethnicity).

“There’s an increase in the number of places of worship, especially within the African American segment, that are taking a more active role of providing safety net programs to members of their congregations, and also nonmembers or members of the local community,” said Mafolasire.

Black people comprise about 80 percent of Givelify app users, and about 80 percent of congregations using Givelify are predominantly Black.

According to the faith leaders surveyed for the report, predominantly Black congregations were more likely than mostly white congregations to offer elderly support services (60 percent vs. 46 percent), outreach programs for people in prison (35 percent vs. 17 percent) and supplemental educational support, such as GED classes and tutoring (46 percent vs. 29 percent).

Black faith leaders also were more likely to say they teach their congregants to give money, items and time to their congregation (84 percent vs. 77 percent) and the local community (67 percent vs. 57 percent).

Close to all (97 percent) houses of worship offered at least one outreach program to their communities, an increase from 90 percent of faith leaders who reported the same in the 2022 Giving in Faith report released by the two organizations. These efforts included support with money, goods, volunteers and physical space.

Overall, almost all faith leaders (99 percent) reported that they intended to increase or maintain their community outreach work in 2024.

Despite higher prices for groceries, housing and other regular expenses, the amount of giving to houses of worship remained stable, with an average gift amount of \$125, the same figure as in the joint 2022 report.

“It’s oftentimes the last thing that many people of faith would think about cutting,” said David P. King, director of the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving. He said giving to houses of worship is often considered to be a basic expense rather than a “luxury good,” as some other forms of charitable giving might be viewed.

Other findings:

- 82 percent of religious givers describe giving as a core tenet of their faith
 - 79 percent reported giving the same amount or more money directly to individuals as they had the previous year
 - Digital gifts amounted to 60 percent of total contributions to houses of worship in 2023
 - The research in the report is based on a survey conducted in August and September 2023.
 - The 980 faith leaders included 606 in a random sample of congregations contacted by Givelify and 374 who responded either through e-newsletters or via a marketing research firm. The estimated margin of error was about plus or minus 3 percentage points.
 - In addition, 1,000 Givelify customers and 1,000 respondents to the academic survey platform Prolific completed the survey, with an estimated margin of error of about plus or minus 2 percentage points.
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German church plant thriving through intergenerational relationships

Alina came to faith at age 17, and her life was radically changed.

When Steve and Julia Dunn, International Mission Board church planters in Germany's Ruhrgebiet region, first met her, she bore fresh wounds from self-harm. Julia's first conversation with Alina was outside of a church retreat as Alina rolled a cigarette.

A few months after Alina came to faith, Steve approached and asked if she wanted the church to start a small group for her friends and others her age.

The new Christian thought a small Bible study group was a great idea, but she had one stipulation. She didn't want it to be a small group exclusively for those her age. It needed to be intergenerational.

"I want to do a Bible study where old people can come," Julia recounted, putting "old people" in air quotes, knowing full well that Alina's definition of old at 17 wasn't what most would consider "old."

Alina's reasoning for this request, though, showed her maturity. "I'd prefer if it would be a mixed group so that my mom would come too."

Alina's mother did, in fact, attend. She professed Christ and was baptized. Now she's serving in the women's ministry.

As Alina began growing in her faith and became a faithful member of their church plant, Steve and Julia saw that she clearly had the gift of teaching.

Julia shared that Alina was disciplined well and attended a year of Bible college. Three years after she became a believer, she started leading Bible studies for women of all ages.

Edda, who is 65, started following Christ two years ago. She attends a Bible study Alina co-leads with Julia. "[Alina] has so much Bible knowledge and she does a great job of being able to communicate it with us in such a loving way," Edda said.

For members of this church plant, learning and growing together intergenerationally is the standard. It's a standard that worked for Gretchen Deese, a 30-year-old HandsOn missionary, and Ute, a 67-year-old widow.

When Deese entered Ute's apartment, she was flabbergasted.

Ute's apartment was covered in mauve paint. Most every wall. She walked past the bathroom and the colors got even bolder. In there, hot pink reigned.

One of Gretchen's favorite experiences from her time in Germany was this breakfast meeting with Ute, a member of the church plant, in her colorful home.

Gretchen hung on every word while Ute shared her life story as they sipped coffee and munched on snacks. Ute had only been a believer for a short time, but she had plenty of wisdom to share.

"I really value intergenerational relationships," Gretchen said when asked why this visit to Ute's house stood out. Apparently, Ute's unique sense of home decor wasn't the draw.

"I have a ton to learn from women who are older than me. It meant a lot to me that she wanted to have me over and spend time with me."

The intergenerational mindset is key to growth, the Dunns agree.

"Our church is so small. We have no choice but to be intergenerational," Steve said of the congregation of 45 or so members. Julia estimates that 75 percent of the church members are first generation believers. This means that they rely on each other to learn and grow. The older women give advice for raising children in Christian homes. The younger women share insights from Scripture and provide encouragement for the older generation.

Edda added, "I feel like we are a large family. Everyone brings their experiences to the table, and everyone appreciates what the others have to say, no matter how old they are."

Some names have been changed for security purposes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myriah Snyder is senior writer/editor for the IMB.

First-Person: A message of hope

Mental health and wholeness are important topics to me. God has helped me so much and used people in my life to lift me from anxiety and depression, and I love to help others come out of their doldrums. So many in our world are depressed and in desperate need of hope.

Some of the hopelessness in our world has its origins in macro issues like the wars in Ukraine and Israel and in other tragic stories we read about in places like Haiti and Sudan. There is a more existential, personal hopelessness that pervades the lives of so many even in our great state of Texas. Many have turned away from the God of the Bible and His foundational teachings regarding how to live as people of faith.

But I have good news: there is hope! One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Romans 15:13. God has used this verse powerfully in my life and I believe He will bless you as you meditate on it as well: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

The Greek word translated “hope” is “elpis,” and interestingly, the Lexham Bible Dictionary says, “The word appears in the New Testament only as a verb or noun, never as an adverb or adjective. That is likely because the emphasis is not on the subjective states of mind we have when we say ‘hopefully’ or ‘hopeful.’ Rather, hope in the New Testament has an objective focus.”

Here is my definition of hope: the confident assurance that all will be well because God is with us. The key to living in hope is we must believe. Ephesians 1:19 states, “And what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.” When we believe, God causes us to abound in hope. It is the match that ignites the fire of the Holy Spirit. Belief or trust is the key that unlocks the treasures of God’s multitude of blessings upon our lives.

I want to encourage you to live out the Christian life the way you began, and that is by faith. Three times the Bible says those who know the Lord will live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, and Galatians 3:11.)

Believe God for great days. He has a wonderful plan for your life filled with hope, peace, and joy. Trust God and enjoy a life of wonderful hope, the assurance that God is in control and all will be well.

Hope has a name: Jesus!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danny Forshee is president of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention and pastor of Great Hills Baptist Church in Austin.

To view the corresponding images and links that accompany these stories or to read past stories and issues of the Baptist Beacon, visit BaptistBeacon.net.

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Editor: Tim Patterson - tim@bscm.org

Managing Editor: Jamie Lynn – jamie@bscm.org

Webmaster: OneMissionTV, LLC