



# Little League lessons

*Editors note: Luke's wife, Kathryn, passed away in April 2024 from an extremely quick & aggressive type of cancer. They have a 1 year old and 3 other kids. He sends out periodical updates.*

**HUDSONVILLE** – A couple years ago Kathryn signed Noah & Wyatt up for T-ball, and then I was informed that I was also signed up as an assistant coach! Don't you love it when you are "voluntold" to do things. I have to admit I was not a big fan of helping.

There is a tension between being a dad on one side of the fence and the coach inside the ballpark. But I have to say that my love for coaching baseball has grown, and this season of ball was an unexpected blessing. I didn't know how much those young men would encourage me.

When our season ended with a tough loss in the playoffs, and I had to wipe some tears from my eyes, I realized that I must be getting old because little league became a metaphor for life.

## **Lesson 1 – Being on a team is the dream**

We were made to play as a team. There is no way that any of us could truly ever survive on our own. We all have points of connections and people on our team. When that team is working together some amazing things happen. I don't know how my family and I would be where we are today without the team that has rallied around us. Our church, the kids' school teachers, and unbelievably generous people have carried us.

## **Lesson 2 – Coaching & Cheering > Criticizing**

We all need people in our lives who are coaching us and calling us to more, but we need to recognize the difference between coaching that builds up and criticism that tears down. I saw our team play better baseball when they were cheering each other on and when they knew the coaches were in their corner. I was crazy blessed by the way our team cheered on Wyatt after missing a few games while we laid Kathryn to rest in Texas. As we were walking up the boys started cheering his name (Wyatt, Wyatt, Wyatt). I wish you could have seen his smile, it was a mile wide. When you're on a team and you're cheering one another on it is a pretty special thing.

## **Lesson 3 – Everything can change in a moment, it's what you do next that matters.**

Baseball is all about the moment because one hit, one pitch, one play can change everything. You can go from winning to losing in a moment. You can go from feeling fully in control to out of control. A sweet catch can fuel the team and crush the batter. A great hit can make the kids shout and shake the dugout fence like maniacs, and bad plays can cause you to lose your way in the game. We had a few of those tough moments, the boys got tagged out, they struck out, and

ultimately lost what they had been working for. These moments had some of the boys angry, frustrated, and disappointed but it's what they did next. They put their gloves back on and got back in the field. They hustled and got ready for the next play. They took a knee, let their frustration out, and then they picked their heads up and shook hands with their opponents.

This is life, like a baseball game things will go the way we want or something unexpected will come and try to keep us from playing the game. This is one of the biggest lessons I continue to learn in this season.

With Kat's cancer and death I have been reminded over and over again it's what I do next that matters. It's the reason why I do not think questions like, "Why would God let this happen" are helpful. Why doesn't it help? We live in a broken world and death is the cruelest picture of its brokenness. Our world changed drastically in a moment, and so the question I'm asking for the Bitter & Bilberry Team is not "why God?", but **how should we respond to God?** What we do next matters. We can't change the past. We can't change the loss our team just took, but we can choose to respond and stay in the game.

So as I took a knee with the boys after our final loss, and I saw the tears in the boys eyes, I got to tell them how proud of them that I am, and I reminded them that what we do next matters more. The reality is as much as I was trying to coach them, I was trying to coach myself in the game of life. I needed the pep talk to get up, to keep showing up, and to keep my head up.

So thanks Panthers and Hudsonville Little League. I didn't realize how much I needed you this season. I'm praying you show up in the game of life and play ball.

Grace & Peace,  
Luke

P.S. Thanks Carthage Bulldogs and Uncle Jarrod you took a little of the sting away from our trip to Texas by letting Wyatt play on y'all's amazing new field.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Luke is the Executive Pastor of Multiplication at Chapel Pointe. This role entails overseeing the organizational movement and developing strategic plans to continue advancing the Gospel. With a passion for church leadership, Luke pursued a Masters in Christian Leadership from Dallas Theological Seminary. He loves outdoor adventures with his four children.

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# Sheep and lions

**HOWELL** – As I consider some of the animals mentioned in scripture, I reflect on sheep and lions. I often perceive sheep as gentle, foolish creatures that rely on guidance and assistance. On the other hand, like many of the movies we have watched, I frequently view the lion as the ruler of the land – they control their surroundings, understand their needs and desires, and fulfill their purpose on earth. Even from my words and the quantity of words I've used to portray a lion, it's evident that I have much more admiration for a lion than I do for a sheep.

However, when you think about a lion, you don't usually associate grace with lions, but you do associate truth with a lion. A few years ago, I felt that the Holy Spirit impressed upon my heart that for a lion to show someone grace, they would have to lie down, remain calm, and submit their will to the person in front of them. On the other hand, for a sheep to extend grace is quite simple; a sheep appears graceful on its own. It looks graceful in appearance, and doesn't need to do anything at all to give the impression that they're going to offer grace.

But for a sheep to convey truth, they would need to step out of their comfort zone. They would have to demonstrate courage by standing up and holding their ground. All of this to deliver the message that I believe I am meant to share with you today.

I believe each one of us needs to have the grace of a lion, knowing that with our words we have the power to uplift someone, change someone's day, or make someone contemplate their choices. Through our words, we can also provide encouragement, revealing the incredible impact they have. As a lion, you have to understand how to use your words.

As for a sheep, you have to recognize when it's time to speak up. You have to determine the moment it's appropriate for you to convey the truth that God has placed within you. Too often, we can do the opposite, becoming lions that destroy everything in front of us simply because we can, because the person is wrong, and someone has to set them straight, so it might as well be us. But so much can go wrong with this approach.

Our objective is to populate Heaven with as many people from this earth as possible. To make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to go and do likewise. If we devour people, what's the likelihood that they will want to learn about the Jesus who spoke the great commission to us?

On the other hand, the alternative isn't the solution either. We can't go around behaving like timid sheep in a fallen world and not share the message within us. God redeemed us for a purpose, God is sanctifying us for a purpose; let's not lose sight of the work we have the privilege to participate in. We must boldly proclaim the message of Jesus to receptive ears.

In essence, I want to encourage each one of you today to possess the grace of a lion, knowing that you have all the abilities given to you by your loving creator, and express the truth of a sheep, so that we can step into the abundant life that Jesus promised.

Let's apply these thoughts to something that is probably very common to each of you, and most of you can articulate it better than me.

**Care for the person** – believe they are made in the image of God.

**Listen to their story** – genuinely listen, ask questions to learn, be curious.

**Pray for insight to discern what the person needs** – a graceful lion or a truthful sheep. Lastly, ask for permission to share what you believe God wants them to hear. Please remember, invoking the name of God means you are acknowledging and respecting the God who not only loves the person you are speaking to, but also likes them.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Joe Amini left the build trades about 10 years ago to enter full time ministry and spent the last 9 years as a pastor with different capacities mostly serving as a Campus Pastor, which is his favorite role! Joe has been married to Angie for the past 22 years with three amazing kids. When not at work Joe is with his family, running or in his wood shop. Joe's mission is to help people discover their identity in God and use that knowledge to lead others!

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## **Michigan recognized as the first Send state**

**INDIANAPOLIS** – During the Southern Baptist Convention in Indianapolis, North American Mission Board (NAMB) President Kevin Ezell featured stories from Canada and Michigan. Ezell introduced Michigan Baptist's State Executive-Treasurer, Pastor Tim Patterson saying, "Michigan was the very first Send Network state, and is a state with 10,000,000 people and has a great need for the Gospel." Ezell added, "Since 2010 they have added 137 new congregations, many of these are church plants and others are established churches that want to be part of what Southern Baptists are doing in Michigan."

Patterson, who started his ministry with Michigan Baptists in the summer of 2015, and who intends to step down from Michigan's leadership on December 31, 2024 to return to Florida explained how Michigan's progress rests in the unity of the pastors and churches when he said, "Our pastors are focused, and they're all in for the Gospel. That's what I love about it. We've decided we can do a lot more together than we can by ourselves." Patterson added, "As we've begun to have more enthusiasm and excitement about what God wants to do, our associations, our state, and our local churches have come together to truly make a Gospel impact. We call it punching holes in the darkness."

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# Messengers leave Indy undaunted

**INDIANAPOLIS, IN** – Road crews wheeled their black boxes out the Indiana Convention Center doors onto Maryland Avenue. Messengers with their bright red convention bags in hand marched away toward their hotels, toward restaurants, toward home. The 166th annual Southern Baptist Convention was over. And while some no doubt felt disappointment that a candidate, a motion, or a resolution they supported did not go as desired, the spectacle that is sometimes called the world's largest deliberative body did not disappoint.

## They came

Just under 11,000 messengers and over 3,000 guests packed the downtown Indianapolis meeting, significantly more than in the city's two previous hostings, in 2004 and 2008. Illinois Baptists took advantage of the close location, and 352 made the shorter than usual drive to take part. Most were on hand at a Monday evening Illinois reception held just across the hallway from the SBC Pastors Conference, talking and laughing together.

## They saw

The exhibit hall was expansive and always bustling with activity. Convention goers gathered bags full of swag and information from booths featuring everything from Baptist universities and colleges to Branson's Sight and Sound Theater. (It's great, you should go!) They also saw Indianapolis. Numerous conversations could be overheard discussing Indy's wonderful zoo, children's museum, and canal walk.

More significantly, they saw 83 new IMB missionary appointees on stage Tuesday morning. Most stood behind the screens, with only their silhouettes visible, due to future security concerns in the countries where they will serve. In a moving moment, one couple only appeared as silhouettes on the video screens, in a pre-recorded message. The deaf couple, who met as singles serving on the mission field, are going back as career missionaries to the deaf.

## They voted

Bright orange ballots were raised again and again. And crowd favorite Don Currence, SBC Registration Secretary (and mayor of Ozark, Mo.), reported Wednesday that tellers had counted 58,123 ballots during the week. A new slate of officers was elected, with North Carolina pastor Clint Pressley winning the race between six candidates that went three rounds. Messengers affirmed the recommendations of important study groups on the efforts and effects of the 2010 Great Commission Resurgence and Cooperation within the convention. And they affirmed moving forward with the important ARITF recommendations. And significantly, the high profile second year vote on the Law amendment fell just 5% short of the two-thirds majority needed to pass.

## No turn signals

So as Southern Baptists go home, where are they headed? Many saw this year's meeting as an opportunity to signal a shift right or left, theologically. Yet as the messengers often do, they defied expectations.

The Law amendment did not pass, but messengers voted overwhelmingly (6,759 to 563) to deem a Virginia church as "not in friendly cooperation" and unseat their messengers due to endorsing and ordaining female pastors. This is the third year in a row for messengers to take similar actions.

Messengers also spurned attempted motions to write a new *Baptist Faith and Message*, dissolve the ERLC, investigate NAMB, and censure Bart Barber, Al Mohler, and Ben Mandrell.

It appears that rather than a turn to the right or left, messengers have kept the steering wheel mostly pointed forward, trying to keep the convention on the road to mission and out of the ditches of controversy.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Jones is the Communications Team Leader at the Illinois Baptist State Association.

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## Jump

**PLYMOUTH** – Not long ago I received a letter from a former high school classmate. We had not had contact with each other since the summer we graduated from that marvelous institution of higher learning that was nestled among the sand dunes of West Texas.

I guess if we had been closer in our friendship that we would have kept the lines of communication flowing more freely, but as we all know, time and life have a way of creating chasms of forgetfulness that can separate even the closest of relationships. As I went off to college and she to another town, our absence began to eat away at our memories, or at least it pushed our thoughts of friendship into obscure corners of our minds into which we would seldom venture.

I was glad to hear she has continued to grow in her faith and has come to know the pleasures and the pains of a family. The photographs of her children and grandchildren are a testament to a life well lived and a legacy that will linger long after she and I are conspicuously absent from this planet.

Yet recently she has experienced some of the sad realities of life. She has tragically lost a son to an accident and now his children are being mistreated and neglected by a mother that cares more for personal pleasure and feeding her addictions than she does for the precious gifts that have been given to her care.

I cannot imagine what it must be like to be the grandparent of those or any child, and be forced to watch from a distance as the vestiges of your own loins are thrown about and abused like a rag doll that has outlived its usefulness. I am the blessed grandfather of five wonderful Grand Girls, and my instinct and passion to protect and care for them is intense.

May God help anyone who would try to harm them. As I have jokingly said on many occasions, "I will hurt you in Jesus Name!" If it came to my Grand Girls, it would be no joke.

But as we well know, many times we do not have the privilege of "interfering" in the affairs of our grown children or our children's children. At times we feel like we are in a bad dream from which we cannot awake. Our loved ones are in harm's way, and we are trying desperately to get to them, but we cannot. The anxiety and frustration together form a type of fear that is not only difficult to explain, but almost impossible to imagine.

What do we do when our hands are tied, so to speak? What do we do when we are consumed by fear and a sense of hopelessness? What do we do when there is nothing we can do? This story I heard years ago explains it well.

A family was awakened by their smoke detector in the middle of the night to discover that their house was on fire. The father ran into the upstairs bedroom of his children and carried his eighteen-month-old baby in his arms while dragging his four-year-old son by the hand.

They were halfway down the stairs when the little boy remembered that he had left his teddy bear in the bedroom, so he broke free from his father's hand and ran back to the bedroom to retrieve it. In the furor and confusion, the father didn't notice that his son wasn't with him until he got outside.

By now the flames and smoke trapped the little boy in his second-story bedroom. Smoke swirled around him, and he coughed and cried out from the upstairs window, "Daddy, Daddy! Help me!"

His father yelled from below, "Jump out of the window, Andy! I'll catch you!"  
In the darkness and smoke, the little boy yelled back, "But Daddy! I can't see you!"  
Daddy shouted back, **"That's okay, son. I can see you! Jump!"**

What do we do when the black acrid smoke of fear and confusion surrounds us? What do we do when we cannot see the way to safety and security? What do we do when we seemingly have no choices? We must JUMP!



Jumping is not some blind, irrational leap into an unknown darkness, but an act of faith that will deposit you in the arms of the Savior. Place your trust (grandchildren, children, job etc...) in Him who can see everything and has the strength to carry it all.

I know that is much easier said than done and even though my spirit is willing, my flesh can be very weak. I also know that if I am ever in a situation as my friend is, I will have to keep repeating that to myself as I take that leap of faith, "Don't hurt anyone in Jesus' name before you jump."

His arms are outstretched, and His eyes are open. Just....

#### **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.

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## **Increased professions, baptisms, and generosity**

**PLYMOUTH** – Last year, 35 out of 41 Southern Baptist state conventions reported increases in baptisms from the previous year. At the annual Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) gathering in Indianapolis, Indiana, June 11-12, 2024, Dr. Kevin Ezell, President of the North American Mission Board, while on stage with state convention executives from across North America announced, "Overall, baptisms increased by 26% among SBC churches, the highest percentage gain in at least 25 years." Ezell invited the state executives to the stage to represent their respective pastors who as Ezell expressed, "have labored so tirelessly to share the Good News."

Addressing the audience of 11,000 SBC voting messengers, Ezell went on to say, "We're seeing big numbers, but each individual decision is eternally important, and God honors each and every one, but we can't rest and be satisfied until everyone across the globe hears the Good News. But we can celebrate what God is doing in and through each of you and each of your churches."

#### **Florida Leads with Almost 30,000 Baptisms**

During his remarks Ezell introduced Dr. Tommy Green, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention who earlier this year announced his intention to retire on December 31, 2024.

Florida saw nearly 30,000 public professions of faith and baptisms in 2023 which was a 33% increase over the previous year.

Green said, “We’re just so blessed to have incredible pastors and churches who have a heart to reach Florida for Christ just like every other area of our nation. Florida is a fast-growing state, 300,000 people per year are moving into the state of Florida. Our churches are deeply committed to being multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-generational in order to make a difference in the state of Florida for Christ.”

Ezell, with emotion in his voice, said of Green, “Tommy is tireless when it comes to personal evangelism and leading the way for our churches to do the same. They are a great partner in Send Network and Send Relief. I just want to take a minute to say thank you for your ministry. Thank you for your cooperative spirit and thank you for your friendship.”

### **Michigan Recognized as the First Send State**

During a separate presentation at the convention, Ezell featured stories from Canada and Michigan. Ezell introduced Michigan Baptist’s State Executive-Treasurer, Pastor Tim Patterson saying, “Michigan was the very first Send Network state, and is a state with 10,000,000 people and has a great need for the Gospel.” Ezell added, “Since 2010 they have added 137 new congregations, many of these are church plants and others are established churches that want to be part of what Southern Baptists are doing in Michigan.”

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### **Michigan’s Baptisms and Church Plant Generosity**

Ezell announced to the audience who responded with applause that Michigan experienced a 31% increase in baptisms during 2023 compared to the previous year for a total of 1389 reported baptisms.

Ezell, highlighting the outstanding culture of generosity among Michigan’s young Send Network churches mentioned that 3 of the top 10 churches giving to the Annie Armstrong Offering for North American Missions and 3 of the top 10 churches giving to the Cooperative Program are led by young Send Network church planters. Patterson replied, “We have these particular churches (4 young church planters in total in the 2 categories) who want to give and make a

difference. In fact, one of our church plants is the top Cooperative Program giver in Michigan which is just exciting to me.”

### **Mile City Church and Travis Whittaker**

Ezell and Patterson moved the conversation to feature one of Michigan’s church plants that started the same year Patterson arrived in Michigan. Ezell said, “One of the church planters I know that we’re very proud of is Travis Whittaker.” Reflecting the well-defined culture of the Send Network, Whittaker and his family planted Mile City Church, Plymouth with 75 people just nine years ago. The congregation has multiplied more rapidly than any other church in the state.

Patterson went on to say of Whittaker and Mile City Church, “They have planted 7 churches out of that 1 church and they’re about to plant their eighth church. One of the churches they’ve recently planted was a Hispanic church doing a phenomenal work. Another is a Japanese church, and then another that was planted, called Lantern Church, is led by a young guy who was saved . . . grew up in the church . . . and was called to the ministry of church planting.”

Whittaker has commented about the sacrifice of starting new churches to Patterson in previous conversations. Patterson shared, “Travis said, Tim, you know I love seeing churches get planted but buddy it’s hard to let a group of my people go every time.” Patterson went on to add, “Because multiplication is built into their DNA . . . they’re going to plant churches and they are multiplying.”

At the conclusion of the report Ezell said, “Many of you may not know this, but Tim is transitioning, retiring, and I just want to say thank you for your partnership, brother, and your friendship.” Ezell then invited Patterson to lead a time of prayer, with 11,000 SBC messengers, over preschooler Luke who is in a battle to regain his health and is the grandson of the Executive Director of the Canadian National Baptist Convention, Dr. Jeff Christopherson. It was a classic moment of convention proceedings when everyone was reminded that those who lead the seminaries, the states, and the entities/agencies of the SBC are pastors with caring and supportive hearts for one another, as well as, a lost world.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the Send Network Director for Michigan and the Language/Ethnic Church Planting Catalyst. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as a lead pastor in Michigan churches and as an international missionary, along with his wife Jamie, in the Niger Republic, France, and Canada.

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## 5 ways to ruin a partnership

**WINDSOR, ONTARIO** – Many of our churches will “go on mission” over the summer, and some are welcoming teams from other states to help them reach their communities. Opportunities like Vacation Bible School, neighborhood clean-up, or a yard sale for low-income families help churches penetrate lostness.

The story of every church is the story of partnership. New churches get their start with the prayer, personnel, and financial support of other churches, often called “sending churches” or “supporting churches,” and their partnership is vital. Established churches need the goodwill, intercession, and camaraderie of other churches to help them stay focused on the mission of God, living in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.

Every church and every pastor needs to think about partnership.

In the years we were immersed in the world of church planting, the Holy Spirit impressed upon us the critical and dynamic nature of developing successful partnerships with senior pastors and churches who have a heart for the gospel and the multiplication of disciple-making, gospel-saturated, mission-focused churches (Acts 9:31).

But like every church planter, I learned some painful lessons along the way, and after talking to other planters with horror stories of their own, here are my top five suggestions on how to ruin a church partnership.

### 5. Set expectations they can't meet

In church planting networks, we talk much about raising up partners who will Pray, Participate, and Provide. You want and need partners at all three levels. If you expect a new friend or a supporting church board to provide funds without questions after only your second conversation, you are going to be disappointed, and the pastor will likely avoid your next call or text! Slow it down. Be patient. Develop the relationship first. Lower your expectations.

### 4. Be fuzzy about your vision

Every partner and potential partner we've been graced with has asked me the same question: “What is your vision?” Their eyes glaze over in about 30 seconds if you waffle and vacillate and beat around the bush. Give it to 'em straight. Share your vision with fire.

On his blog, Pastor Danny Wood (Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama), wrote, “Help me see the grander vision God has placed on your heart and in your mind. Let me step into your world and see through your eyes the work that God is doing and can do in your part of the city. Vision not only inspires and motivates the members of the church, it does the same for potential partners.” So do not be fuzzy about your vision!

### **3. Do not share your needs**

I once had an interview with the Senior Vice-President of one of the largest companies in Canada. I was there to solicit his help on an international relief and development project I was working on. After three minutes of my finely tuned presentation, he interrupted. “Garth, what do you need from us?” I jumped into an interminable explanation of our approach to fund-raising. He interrupted again. “Garth, when you figure out what you need from us, contact my Executive Assistant, and we’ll see what we can do.” Ouch! That day I learned to share my (our) needs quickly, concisely, and honestly. You should do the same.

### **2. Delegate all the responsibility**

Initializing and maintaining church planting partnerships is a lot of extra work for busy pastors. But consider the alternative – going it alone – and then get busy. Don’t delegate all the responsibility for communication and partnership development to an elder or someone in your church who happens to be computer savvy. You are the pastor. You’re the vision-caster. You may need help on this, but you are the one person partners want to hear from. Do not delegate the crucially important role of partnership development to someone else. Lead the charge yourself.

### **1. Don’t communicate**

The number one reason great partnerships die is lack of clear communication. If you want to ruin your friendship with a supporting pastor or church, do not reply to email, do not engage in social media, don’t respond to texts, and don’t return phone calls. And believe me, it happens every day!

Planters are busy people, I get it. But if you get so busy that you do not communicate effectively and efficiently with churches who care about you, then you will soon find yourself with no prayer, no participation, and no provision.

Several years ago, I developed a deep and meaningful relationship with Brian Bloye, senior pastor at West Ridge Church in Dallas, Georgia. Our church nurtured a partnership with West Ridge that continues to bear fruit ten years later. Brian often called me, texted me, and prayed with me over the phone. He and a few staff members visited our church in Canada more than once. They provided generously so we could engage our city, make disciples, and plant The Gathering Church. This fruitful gospel-saturated relationship was built on good communication, and we still connect regularly, ten years later.

Ed Stetzer once said, “If a true multiplication movement is to take place, it will require reconsidering the ways in which we cooperate.” The context of his comment may not be your context, or mine, but it fits. We must consider carefully and prayerfully how we work with our partners, current and future, for the glory of God!

## **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.

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## **EL ROI – “The God who sees me”**

**WATERFORD** – Psalm 139: 13-16 “For it was You who created my inward parts; You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will praise You because I have been remarkably and wondrously made. Your works are wondrous, and I know this full well. My bones were not hidden from You when I was made in secret, when I was formed in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw me when I was formless; all my days were written in Your Book and planned before a single one of them began.”

It took most of my life for me to fully understand and accept just how true and lovely this Psalm is. I grew up in quite the opposite of a Christian home. Without going into detail, my siblings and I experienced years of many forms of abuse. The effects of this abuse would eventually claim the lives of both of my siblings. But God.....

I knew in my heart from an early age that there was more to life than what we were experiencing. As I look back, I can clearly see the times that God provided ways for me to hear about His grace, mercy and love. An aunt took me to church one time where I first heard the name of Jesus. A local church had a bus ministry and went door to door inviting people to come. God prompted my mom to allow me to go a few times, and I met people who cared about me.

When I was in 3rd grade, two retired missionaries named Sadie and Eleanor started an after-school Bible Club at my school, and I was allowed to attend. It was during those weeks that I learned how God sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross for my sin because of the great love He has for me. I heard how Jesus rose again on the third day, is now at the right hand of the Father in Heaven and will come again to take His children home. Sadie and Eleanor also helped me to understand that this free gift of salvation was for even me and that whenever I felt alone and scared, God was always there. After one of our meetings, I stayed and prayed to receive Christ as my Savior.

God’s Hand was on me then and He continued to guide my life toward Him. We moved to Kentucky at the end of my 6th grade year and for a few years, there weren’t any opportunities

for me to grow in my faith. I continued to pray and read my little Gideon New Testament, but I knew there was so much more to learn!

When I graduated from High School, a series of events led me to Cumberland College, which (NOT by chance) is an SBC College. I was surrounded by Christians! I was able to attend church on a regular basis and was baptized. I also took some Bible classes and soaked in the Truth of Scriptures.

My professors, college staff, and new friends all contributed to my discipleship. God even allowed me to serve two summers as a summer missionary in the Appalachian Mountains teaching Vacation Bible Schools. During those summers I learned many of the Bible stories I had never heard before. I can honestly say that I became a different person during those years.

My journey has continued with many highs and lows, but the awe of knowing that God truly saw me during those early years and provided ways for me to see and know Him is nothing short of miraculous. He continues to bless, teach, and use me in ways I never expected. He has answered prayers time and time again in ways that have changed my life. He is my good, good Father and it is my honor and privilege to spend the rest of my days on this earth praising and serving Him.

Romans 8:28- "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." (In honor of ML)

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Becky is a retired teacher who currently serves as the Children's Ministry Director at Transformation Church in Waterford and as the Children's Missions Consultant for MI WMU. Becky and her husband, Gary love to craft, travel, and spend time with both their biological and church families.

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## **God chooses us**

**EASTPOINTE** – I was raised on the lower eastside of Detroit. My family was large with eight kids plus my mom and dad. Every Sunday my mom would get us ready for church, and we would walk down the street two blocks to church. I don't know how she did it! I grew up knowing that God loved me and wanted me to be good. I learned my Bible verses and read my Bible every day. I loved to sing, and was part of the junior choir. I was a happy child.

It was during a revival service when I was nine years old that I realized I needed to pray and ask Jesus to come and live in my heart. I knew that Romans 3:23 said, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." I prayed for God to forgive my sin, and take me to heaven when I died. It was such a simple thing to do when you are nine years old. Little did I know how much more I would learn to love Jesus and understand what it all meant. It meant that I was a child of God and He was preparing a place for me in heaven. It also meant that He had some special things for me to do for Him.

When I was 16, I went through a time of doubting if I had truly accepted Jesus as my Savior. I searched the Scripture and Romans 10:9-10 kept coming to my heart and mind, "That if you shall confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and shall believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Through more Bible study and prayer, I was assured that I had accepted Jesus as my personal Savior.

Several years later we spent time learning about our spiritual gifts. It was so amazing to realize that God had something special for ME to do. I discovered that one of my gifts was working with children. God led me to teach the Girls in Action (GA) mission group in my church and I loved it. I attended GAs from 9 years old to 16, and then went right into teaching young girls about missions and how the whole world needed to know our Jesus. It didn't stop there. I have been teaching kids in Sunday School, VBS (Vacation Bible School), and children's church ever since. The best opportunity came when I was 33 years old. I took my daughter to GA camp at Bambi Lake and was a leader. It was so awesome, and God affirmed He wasn't finished with me.

A couple of years later I was asked if I would be willing to be trained as the camp director. I was overwhelmed and was afraid of something that big. I felt so inadequate. Of course I prayed, and God used a children's song to speak to me. It said, "So I'll give what I have to Jesus, even though what I have is small, and if He wants to bless me and use me as He will, I will gladly give Him my all." I had to give God my all.

I accepted His call and followed Him for 33 years (plus some) serving as the GA/Acteen (known as Girls Mission Camp today) Camp Director. God has called many young women to serve in His kingdom. They have gone on mission trips, they are leaders in their churches, and some are missionaries. God knows who we are and where He can use each of us. We need to respond to His call.

John 15:16 says, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you that you should go and bring forth fruit . . ." God's plans are so much bigger than we can imagine or think! Trusting in Jesus has been the best thing I have ever done. I'm praying that you are part of the Kingdom and that God is using you, too!

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Nelda Popkey is married to Jim Popkey, mother to Jinelle and Kevin and has five beautiful grandchildren. She attends Eastside Community Church, Eastpointe, Michigan. Nelda retired from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan in 2020.

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## Leading women well

**SHELBY TOWNSHIP** – I am the women’s ministry leader at Lakepointe Church and God put it on my heart a few years ago to build a team to help me lead the women of our church. I began praying about who God would want me to invite to be part of this team. Right away I felt Him impress on my heart that I needed Spirit-led women. In ministry, we deal with many situations and issues, and I wanted to know that the women I chose to be part of this team had a growing and thriving relationship with Jesus and could recognize His voice.

After praying over this for quite some time, God put six women on my heart to join me. God is so good at confirming where he is leading us; during this time, I was praying about who to add to this team, and as I was reading in Acts, God spoke directly to my heart.

*“Brothers and sisters, choose **seven** men from among you who are known to be **full of the Spirit and wisdom.**” – Acts 6:3 (NIV)*

God spoke, then He confirmed, and they all accepted the invitation! This team has helped me plan and execute events this year. They have also been given the opportunity to hold their own connection gatherings throughout the year to help connect women within our church to get to know each other better. We also pray monthly as a team for each other, the women in our church, and our church as a whole.

At our very first meeting, I told the team I wanted to take them on a retreat. As leaders in ministry, it is vital that we are poured into by God in order to pour out and minister to the women of our church. They all agreed to go and we set a date.

The word “retreat” can mean many things to different people. I am not sure if this team knew what to expect when they were first asked to attend. This was a spiritual retreat for them to get away and have time to be present with Jesus. Jesus modeled this in Mark 6, after a busy day in ministry.

*“The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he*

*said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."* – Mark 6:30-31 (NIV)

That is what we did! We got away to a quiet place and had time with our Lord. We worshiped, we prayed, we spent time alone with our Father.

It is vital that we have time with God each day, but it is also important to get away from the daily tasks and responsibilities to be fully present with Him! It is easy to get into a routine where we have our quiet time and check it off our "to do" list, but we may not always take the time to be still in His presence to hear Him speak to us. God wants us to REST in Him. I love to think of this acrostic when it comes to RESTing in Christ:

**R** – Resist the desire to be in control  
**E** – Escape to a quiet place  
**S** – Be still and listen  
**T** – Talk to God

As we REST in Christ and allow Him to pour into us, we are filled to the brim, ready to return to ministry and pour out to others. God not only poured into us individually on this retreat, but He united our team together in a deeper way.

If you lead the women's ministry at your church, I want to encourage you with two things.

### **1. Don't lead alone.**

Ask God to show you who you can invite to come alongside you to minister to the women He has entrusted to you. It is so much better to lead together! I am reminded of this verse:

*"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!"* – Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NIV)

### **2. Pour into your leaders.**

We can't lead others well if we don't first lead ourselves well. Take the time to meet regularly with your leaders; pray together and worship together. When we are united in Christ, the enemy can't get a foothold and we can accomplish more for the Kingdom!

*"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* – Ephesians 4:11-13 (NIV)

God clearly showed me this year was a team-building year. However, I am excited now to move forward to 2025 and Lord willing, we plan to offer a spiritual retreat churchwide for our women.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Karen 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!

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## **The best adventure**

**STERLING HEIGHTS** – When I think of my salvation story, I remember the most important times during my life that make up my testimony, but in reality, I see the proof and am reminded and feel saved every day.

I had a rough time in high school because I wanted to be friendly and make friends with anyone, which seemed to pull me in many directions. At the beginning of freshman year my grandma passed away and my grandpa passed just a few months after. I was learning just how short and precious life could be, and I also began gathering a lot of questions and thoughts about what happens after death.

My family had been going to Memorial Baptist church for about 7 years and I was faithfully attending youth group. I was 16 years old when I realized I did not want to go to Hell. I accepted Christ as my Savior, was baptized, and continued to enjoy my friend group at church. Though my life didn't change much, I tried to keep learning, reading, and talking to God, but only when I felt it fit into the life I wanted.

I graduated high school and started my first job. My life started to fill up and didn't leave room for church, studying the Bible, or even my friends from church. I started to think, say and do things that I thought were best for me. I made some poor choices and ended up living a life that I didn't love at all, in fact it was uncomfortable, hard, and just wrong.

During this time, I knew I missed my church family, so I started going back to church, and they welcomed me with open arms. I had the Holy Spirit the whole time since my salvation, and if you don't know already, it's exhausting trying to justify your wrong life with the Holy Spirit who

knows what is good and perfect for you. I was always making excuses, or trying to find ways to appear like a Christian without really asking God what he thought of my life.

Through some tough and heartbreaking circumstances, God made a way for me to grow into the life he wanted for me. I took time to heal, learn, and talk with God. He and I had moments of tears, happiness, and even sarcasm (He made my sense of humor after all). I started to fall in love with spending time with the Lord, after all this time of not wanting to be alone, I realized that with Jesus as my Savior. I was never alone.

When I was 24 years old, I was trying to sleep one night when my mind kept racing, and I just surrendered everything to Him. Every thought, every action, and especially every feeling. That night I understood that when I was 16 years old, I had accepted Jesus as my Savior but now He also became Lord of my life. And goodness, let me tell you I have been on the best adventure since.

People sometimes think handing your life over to Christ means you no longer can do fun or exciting things, and some even think that you are now proclaiming that you are perfect. Both of those ways of thinking could not be more incorrect. Since totally surrendering my life to Christ's will, I have traveled many places in the world, learned new things, and met new exciting people. I am nowhere near perfect and I need a LOT of work, but He is guiding me, teaching me, and allowing me to teach and help others through my struggles, too. Amen for that! I pray that whoever reads this not only knows Christ personally, but that you allow Him to take you on the best adventure, His plan for your life!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Megan is married to David Line. I enjoy serving in many different ways through the Memorial Baptist Church in Sterling Heights. A current find joy in my life is serving both on the Michigan WMU team and at Bambi Lake.

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## **My journey to Christ**

**BROWNSTOWN** – Whenever I meet a fellow Christian, I like to hear about their journey with Christ. It inspires me to hear how God leads each of us to Himself. I hope my walk can give you something to think about as you consider your own walk with Jesus.

I grew up going to a church system that emphasizes good works as a means of becoming right with God. The church taught to work hard, do good things, and if the scales balance in your favor then you will make it into heaven. By the time I was in junior high school, none of my

immediate family (including myself) were attending church anymore. When I was 16 years old, a friend invited me to her church. I'm thankful that she was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ and was willing to share Jesus with me.

This reminds me of Romans 1:16. "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it's the power of God to Salvation for everyone who believes..." This friend of mine attended a Baptist church in the area. I really liked it, and started attending regularly. While there I heard the Gospel and realized it was different from what I had been taught before. The main thing that impressed me was the concept of God's grace being the way to Heaven.

The verse that the Holy Spirit used to draw me was Ephesians 2:8-9, which says "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourself, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Once that sunk in, I realized I was not really right with God, according to the teachings of the Bible. I was relying on my good works. So, one Sunday, after I had been going to church for a few weeks I prayed and asked Jesus to be my Savior. I was baptized and continued to attend the church.

After I accepted Christ, I was compelled to learn and grow in Him. II Peter 3:18. "...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." I learned to pray, read God's word, and fellowship with those in the church. The church leadership even invited me to serve in the church, in spite of my young age. I sang in the choir, sang solos in the services, and directed a children's choir.

As the years went by, I attended a nearby college and turned to God's leading for my future. I subsequently earned a degree in music education. I was able to use this education and experience to teach elementary music in schools for many years, while also serving alongside my husband, who is a pastor. I enjoyed a music ministry in each of the churches where he was the pastor.

I am thankful that God led me to Himself and has been guiding me ever since. I rejoice in the truth of Philippians 1:6. "...being confident of this very thing, that He Who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ..."

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

JoLinda Russell lives in Brownstown, Michigan, with her husband, Dan Russell, who is one of the pastors at Calvary Church in Southgate. They have three grown children and nine grandchildren. JoLinda has a degree in Music Education and is a retired elementary music teacher from the Southgate Community Schools where she taught in several schools for 18 years. She has been involved in music ministry at all the local churches where she has also been a pastor's wife.

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# Some churches partner with pregnancy centers after *Roe v. Wade* reversal

**BRENTWOOD, TN** – Two years ago, the Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade* and the right to an abortion. In the aftermath, many churchgoers say they've seen their congregations involved in supporting local pregnancy resource centers.

On June 24, 2022, in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the Supreme Court opened the door for states to pass laws restricting abortion. In the aftermath, local pregnancy centers have [received increased attention](#). A [Lifeway Research study](#) finds 3 in 10 U.S. Protestant churchgoers (31%) have seen at least one type of congregational connection with those local centers since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

"In a survey of Americans conducted days before the *Dobbs* decision was leaked, almost [two-thirds of Americans](#) agreed churches and religious organizations have a responsibility to increase support for women who have unwanted pregnancies if their state restricts access to abortion," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. "According to those who attend, the majority of Protestant churches in the U.S. are not supporting a pregnancy resource center that exists either separately or as part of their church."

More than 1 in 8 churchgoers say their church has supported a local pregnancy resource center financially (16%), encouraged those in the congregation to support a center financially (14%) or encouraged the congregation to refer those with unplanned pregnancies to the center (14%). Another 11% say their church has encouraged the congregation to volunteer at a local pregnancy resource center, and 7% say the church has had a leader from the center speak at the church. Among those who say their congregation is involved with pregnancy resource centers in some way, the median number of activities churchgoers hear about is two.

Others aren't aware of any connection between their congregation and a local pregnancy center. More than 2 in 5 churchgoers (44%) say they haven't heard of their church being involved with any of these measures to support a local center. Less than 1 in 10 (8%) say there are no such pregnancy centers near their church. Around 1 in 7 (16%) say they aren't sure how or if their church is involved.

"More than 4 in 10 pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended according to the [Centers for Disease Control](#)," said McConnell. "Changes to the legality of abortion do not change the reality that a large number of women and couples are not planning for the positive pregnancy tests they receive. They need compassion, care and tangible help but are often [not open to turning directly to a church for help](#)."

## Churches offering assistance

Often, younger churchgoers and those who attend more frequently are among the most likely to say their church is working with local pregnancy centers. Those in Lutheran congregations and part of smaller churches are among the least likely.

Specifically, churchgoers under 50 (21%) are almost twice as likely as those 65 and older (11%) to say their church has financially supported a local pregnancy center. Restorationist Movement (22%), Baptist (19%) and non-denominational (16%) churchgoers are more likely than Lutherans (7%) to say this is the case at their church.

Additionally, those who attend four times a month or more (20%) are more likely than those who attend one to three times (11%) to have heard about their church giving financially to pregnancy centers. Churchgoers with evangelical beliefs (19%) are more likely than those without such beliefs (12%). And those at the largest churches, worship attendance of 500 or more, (23%) are among the most likely to say their church financially supports local pregnancy resource centers.

In terms of their churches asking them to financially give to such centers personally, adult churchgoers under 35 (23%) and those 35 to 49 (21%) are among the most likely to say their congregation has encouraged such support. Those at the smallest churches, less than 50 in worship attendance, (8%) are among the least likely.

Beyond financial support, churchgoers under 50 are also among the most likely to say their congregation has been encouraged to refer those with an unplanned pregnancy to those resource centers—27% of those 18 to 34 and 22% of those 35 to 49. Hispanic Protestant churchgoers (24%) are twice as likely as white churchgoers (12%) to have heard this type of encouragement. Restorationist Movement (22%) and Baptist (16%) churchgoers are more likely than those at Lutheran (8%) or non-denominational (10%) churches to say their congregation has been encouraged in this way.

Those who attend less frequently, one to three times a month, (11%) and those attending the smallest churches, less than 50 in attendance, (10%) are among the least likely to have heard such encouragement in their congregations.

Younger churchgoers are again more likely to have heard calls to volunteer at local pregnancy resource centers. Those 18 to 34 (19%) and 35 to 49 (20%) are more likely than those 50 to 64 (8%) and 65 and over (5%). Hispanic churchgoers (21%) are more than twice as likely as white (9%) churchgoers to say their church has encouraged them to volunteer. Baptists (13%) and non-denominational churchgoers (12%) are three times as likely as Lutherans (4%).

Again, the less frequent attenders (8%) and those at the smallest congregations (3%) are among the least likely to say they've been encouraged by their church to volunteer at local pregnancy resource centers.

Older churchgoers, those who attend less frequently, those at smaller churches and Lutherans are among the least likely to say their churches have had a leader from a pregnancy resource center speak at their church since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. White churchgoers (5%) are also half as likely as Hispanic (11%) and African American (10%) churchgoers to say this has happened in their congregations.

### **Churches that may not be helping as much**

For some, their congregations may not be serving with local pregnancy centers because they aren't aware of any near their churches. Those in the Northeast (15%) are more likely than those in the South (7%) or West (7%) to say that is the case.

Lutheran (14%) and Baptist (10%) churchgoers are more likely than those in Presbyterian/Reformed congregations (2%) to say their church is not near any such centers. Those who attend less frequently (12%) and those attending smaller congregations, less than 50 (15%) and 50 to 99 (12%), are also among the most likely to not be aware of any pregnancy centers nearby.

Regardless of how close a pregnancy resource center may be, some churchgoers aren't aware of their church having any involvement with pregnancy centers since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. Older churchgoers, those 65 and older (56%) and 50 to 64 (49%), are more likely than those 35 to 49 (32%) and 18 to 34 (22%) to say they haven't heard of any of the five types of involvement.

White churchgoers (47%) and those of other ethnicities (56%) are more likely than African Americans (33%) and Hispanics (32%) to say they're unaware of their church being involved. Lutherans (53%) are more likely than Baptist (42%) and non-denominational (42%) churchgoers to say they haven't heard of their congregation being involved with pregnancy resource centers in any of the five ways.

"There is equal opportunity for all churches to point those with unintended pregnancies to help if there is a Christian pregnancy resource center nearby," said McConnell. "Yet few churches are doing so in a way their congregation notices."

For more information, view the [complete report](#) and visit [LifewayResearch.com](https://www.lifewayresearch.com).

### **Methodology**

The online survey of 1,008 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted Sept. 19-29, 2023, using a national pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attend religious services at least once a month. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,008 surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error from the panel



does not exceed plus or minus 3.2%. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Evangelical beliefs are defined using the NAE Lifeway Research Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition based on respondent beliefs. Respondents are asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced-choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Those who strongly agree with all four statements are categorized as having evangelical beliefs:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Aaron Earls is a writer for Lifeway Christian Resources.

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## **5 quick tips for VBS follow-up**

**BRENTWOOD, TN** – The days and weeks immediately following VBS are the most crucial for outreach. But so often this critical element seems to fall through the cracks. We all have good intentions for connecting with children and families again after VBS, but then the aftermath of VBS kicks in. The excitement of VBS is over; people are tired; life returns to normal; it's time to go on vacation ... there are tons of excuses, and most are valid.

But here's the thing. Follow-up will not magically happen on its own. You must have an intentional strategy in place before VBS and a follow-up plan ready to spring into action as soon as VBS is over.

So here are five tried and true ideas to try as you connect with children and families:

### **1. Enlist a follow-up director just like you enlist a VBS director.**

Make this your point person for coming up with a strategy for follow-up that's effective and easy for everyone to participate in. The follow-up director should enlist a follow-up team to

work with VBS teachers to make sure every child is remembered after the week of VBS is over. This is especially important for children who are not already a part of the church family! Those first few weeks immediately after VBS may be the only time a church member is welcome in the home of an unchurched family. So don't lose the momentum of VBS by putting it off.

Activate follow-up teams immediately after VBS. People will never be more receptive to follow-up than they are immediately after the event. This is a great time to showcase what your church has to offer the entire family. And while we're on the subject, send or deliver information about the church directly to the home. Don't trust that fliers or handouts will make it home with kids from VBS.

## **2. Embrace a relationship-building approach to follow-up.**

Train every VBS worker to intentionally connect with parents during VBS. Talk to them when they drop off or pick up their kids. Try to find things you have in common. Find out where they normally attend church. Tell them how happy you are they're here and how well their kids are connecting with other kids in their group. Outdo one another in being welcoming and inviting so when it comes to following up after VBS, parents have positive impressions of your church. Follow-up has to be more than a single postcard or phone call. It must be about building a relationship with children and their families. It takes time to develop relationships and an ongoing strategy to move unchurched families into the life of the church. But a relationship is what earns you the right to share the gospel. So it's something we must take seriously.

## **3. Partner with other kids ministry leaders in your church to bridge VBS with other ongoing programming and summer events for kids.**

For example, ask children's Sunday School teachers to participate in follow-up alongside children's VBS teachers. That way visiting kids will already know a familiar face when they visit again. This is huge in helping kids feel connected when they return to church the next time. Kids need to feel a sense of ownership—this is my church, my classroom, my teacher, my friends—and giving them that sense of ownership is one way to help them feel loved and accepted and that they belong.

## **4. Provide opportunities for families from within your church to build relationships with unchurched families.**

Conduct a family movie night, a cookout in a local park, or some other activity for the whole family within two weeks of VBS to give unchurched families an opportunity to reconnect with the church. This year, why not partner with a local minor league ball team to host a Faith Night? Offer discounted tickets in a reserved seating block and encourage VBS families to attend. Plan for a picnic on the grounds or tailgating before the game begins. Encourage families to get to know a family they haven't met yet.

## 5. Take a small gift to the home of each child who visited your church during VBS.

It can be something as simple as the [Music for Kids CD](#), [Music for Preschoolers CD](#), [Kids Activity Book](#), [Preschool Activity Book](#), or a small trinket ([bookmark](#) or [keychain](#)) or decoration from VBS. Any of these would make an excellent gift. Plus, each of these allows a parent to hear the good news of God's Word their kids heard during VBS. Now that's a gift that keeps on giving.

So now it's your turn. Which of these ideas will you implement this year in your follow-up strategy?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melita Thomas is the VBS and kids ministry specialist for Lifeway Christian Resources.

### ABOUT LIFEWAY CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

In operation since 1891, Lifeway Christian Resources is one of the leading providers of Christian resources, including Bibles, books, Bible studies, Christian music and movies, Vacation Bible School and church supplies, as well as camps and events for all ages. Lifeway is the world's largest provider of Spanish Bibles. Based in Middle Tennessee, Lifeway operates as a self-supporting nonprofit. For more information, visit [Lifeway.com](http://Lifeway.com).

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## Churchgoers believe public perception of Christians is declining in the U.S.

**BRENTWOOD, TN (BP)** – Most churchgoers believe Christians have a good reputation with Americans in general, but they worry those feelings are starting to sour.

A Lifeway Research study finds 53 percent of U.S. Protestant churchgoers say most Americans have a positive perception of Christians. Two in 5 (40 percent) disagree, and 8 percent aren't sure.

More consensus exists on the direction public sentiment is headed. Around 7 in 10 (69 percent) believe people's perceptions of Christians in the U.S. are getting worse, while 21 percent disagree. Another 10 percent say they aren't sure.

"The percentage of churchgoers who believe most Americans view Christians positively is remarkably close to a recent national poll indicating 53 percent of Americans view Christianity favorably," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. "Though a majority

agree, fewer than 1 in 6 churchgoers is strongly convinced most Americans view Christians positively.”

### **Public sentiment**

With only a slight majority believing Christians are viewed favorably in the U.S., many demographic groups have differing outlooks on the current reality.

Men are more likely than women to agree that most Americans have a positive perception of Christians (56 percent v. 49 percent). Additionally, African Americans (66 percent) and Hispanics (65 percent) are more likely to agree than whites (48 percent) and people of other ethnicities (44 percent).

Restorationist movement churchgoers (61 percent) and Baptists (57 percent) are more likely than those who attend a non-denominational church (45 percent) to agree most Americans view Christians positively. Churchgoers who aren't evangelicals by belief (57 percent) are also more likely than those with evangelical beliefs (49 percent) to agree.

On the other side, churchgoers 65 and older (46 percent) are among the most likely to disagree. Also, those who attend a worship service four times or more a month (43 percent) are more likely than those who attend one to three times (36 percent) to disagree that most Americans have a positive perception of Christians.

While 7 in 10 churchgoers believe the public perception of Christians is worsening in the U.S., some groups are more likely than others to see a downward trajectory.

Other ethnicities (84 percent) are the most likely to say people's perceptions of Christians in the U.S. are getting worse, while whites (71 percent) are more likely to agree than Hispanics (61 percent) or African Americans (60 percent).

Baptists (73 percent) and non-denominational churchgoers (73 percent) are more likely to agree than Lutherans (61 percent). Also, those who attend a worship service four times a month or more (72 percent) are more likely than those who attend less frequently (65 percent) to believe the public opinion of Christians is declining. Those with evangelical beliefs (77 percent) are more likely than those without such beliefs (61 percent) to agree.

“Surely the small growth in other religions in the U.S. and large numbers of Americans that once called themselves Christians but no longer do impacted churchgoer perceptions,” said McConnell. “Not all who left the faith have ill feelings toward Christianity, but indifference is definitely a worse perception than once identifying as one.”

### **Reasons for a reputation decline**

Those who believe the public perception of Christians in the U.S. is worsening say responsibility for the decline belongs to both Christians and the rest of America.

Out of seven options that may have contributed to the decline, 75 percent of churchgoers point to at least one of the two options holding Americans responsible and 71 percent choose at least one of the five options placing responsibility on Christians. Most blame both, as 53 percent point to at least one option that places responsibility on Americans and at least one option that faults Christians.

Two in 3 churchgoers (66 percent) say a reason the public perception of Christians is worsening is because fewer Americans believe faith in God is relevant. Around 2 in 5 point to Christians not acting any different than those who aren't Christians (45 percent), more Americans rejecting Christianity because it claims to be the only way (40 percent) and Christians often looking down on those who aren't Christians (38 percent).

Fewer claim the drop should be credited to Christians often treating each other poorly in person (29 percent), Christians often treating each other poorly on social media (25 percent) and Christians being too political (22 percent). Small percentages say none of these options (4 percent) or they aren't sure (3 percent).

"Many churchgoers admit Christians are getting in the way of the message of Jesus Christ," said McConnell. "But if the only reason Christians are not accepted is because people reject the message of Jesus Christ, Christians have already chosen whose approval they desire."

Frequent church attendees are among the most likely to blame Americans. Those who attend a worship service four times or more a month are more likely than those who attend less often to say Christians' worsening public perception is due at least in part to fewer Americans believing faith in God is relevant (70 percent) and more Americans rejecting Christianity because it claims to be the only way (44 percent).

Those who attend four times a month or more are less likely than other churchgoers to say the declining perception is due to Christians looking down on those who aren't Christian (32 percent) and Christians being too political (19 percent).

Churchgoers in the South are among the most likely to point to Christians treating each other poorly on social media (28 percent).

White Americans are among the least likely to place blame on Christians being too political (21 percent). White Americans (70 percent) and those of other ethnicities (68 percent) are more likely than African Americans (49 percent) to say a reason for the declining reputation is that fewer Americans believe faith in God is relevant. For their part, African Americans (47 percent) are more likely than whites (34 percent) to point to Christians often looking down on those who are not Christians.

Churchgoers with evangelical beliefs are more likely than other churchgoers to say the decline is because fewer Americans believe faith in God is relevant (71 percent vs. 59 percent) or because Christians don't act any different than those who are not Christians (48 percent vs. 40 percent). But those who hold evangelical beliefs are less likely to point to Christians often looking down on those who are not Christians (32 percent vs. 45 percent) and Christians being too political (17 percent vs. 29 percent).

For more information, view the complete report and visit [LifewayResearch.com](https://lifewayresearch.com).

The online survey of 1,008 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted Sept. 19-29, 2023, using a national pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attend religious services at least once a month. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,008 surveys. The sample provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Evangelical beliefs are defined using the NAE Lifeway Research Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition based on respondent beliefs. Respondents are asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced-choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Those who strongly agree with all four statements are categorized as having evangelical beliefs:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Aaron Earls is a writer for LifeWay Christian Resources.

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## Distribution of ‘Essentials’ curriculum reaching thousands of churches ... and counting

**NASHVILLE, TN (BP)** – Late last Wednesday afternoon (June 12), the gavel dropped at the 2024 SBC Annual Meeting in Indianapolis and thus officially ended the service of those on the Convention’s Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force (ARITF). However, several weren’t there to see it.

Instead, they were across the street at the FedEx store in the Westin Hotel. For hours, boxes were packed with copies of “Essentials,” the curriculum guiding churches through sexual abuse prevention and response and shipped to addresses handwritten by Baptist associational leaders.

It was only one of the signals ARITF members witnessed throughout the annual meeting of the desire for churches to strengthen their safeguards and protocols regarding abuse, said ARITF member Brad Eubank.

“The first guy who came to our table said, ‘I need this curriculum for my church, and by the way, I’m a survivor,’” Eubank said of the man who went on to share how his minister of music had abused him. “For four days, we heard those stories, one after the other.” The ARITF had a space in the meeting’s exhibit hall.

The “Essentials” curriculum for guiding churches through sexual abuse prevention and response has received over 1,200 signups online in addition to the 6,000-plus copies distributed last week in Indianapolis.

Launched by the ARITF, [Essentials went live on June 9](#) and revolves around five areas of abuse prevention and response – training, screening, protecting, reporting and caring.

Eubank, senior pastor of Petal (Miss.) First Baptist Church, said the online signups included nearly 600 unique churches. An extra 1,000 thumb drives containing the resource were distributed to churches alongside those that accompanied each set of materials given out at the annual meeting.

[Messengers voted](#) June 11 to adopt recommendations from the ARITF, following the group’s final report to messengers. Those recommendations handed responsibility for overseeing abuse-related priorities to the SBC Executive Committee. The [ARITF was formed](#) after the 2022 Annual Meeting in Anaheim based on the recommendations of the Sexual Abuse Task Force and [granted an additional year](#) in 2023. The original SATF [came into being](#) after the 2021 meeting in Nashville through the will of the messengers.

Indianapolis included many conversations not only with sexual abuse survivors, Eubank said, but with numerous church staff and lay leaders expressing appreciation for the resource.

While praising the materials found within the Caring Well curriculum launched in 2019, Eubank pointed to Essentials as streamlined to work better with smaller and normative-sized churches.

“We listened to pastors and association leaders, and they said bivocational pastors are working full-time jobs while trying to do funerals, weddings, counseling, hospital visits and everything in between.

“There’s nothing wrong with the resources at [churchcares.com](https://www.churchcares.com) and Caring Well, but we tried to make this resource as simple and approachable as we could so that the average church could gather five leaders over five months to work through these five essentials,” Eubank said.

The feedback from conversations with church leaders has factored in how Essentials gives steps for preparation and response in a situation of abuse.

“We heard a lot of stories [during the annual meeting] from those going through situations right now,” said Kris Buckman, youth and kids missionary at the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware [who also served on the ARITF](#). “People needed advice on a situation, trying to figure out how to deal with it in the right way and the next steps. We were able to point to the book again and again and say, ‘Here, this is what you need to do.’”

The remaining Essentials copies were shipped from Indianapolis back to the SBC building in Nashville. Some now-former ARITF members will meet back up in a couple of weeks to send out more shipments. Churches can access the free curriculum at [sbcabuseprevention.com/ministry-toolkit/](https://sbcabuseprevention.com/ministry-toolkit/).

In speaking with BP, Buckman and Eubank both said a national-level, long-term response by Southern Baptists toward sexual abuse is important. However, reform and protection begins closer to the ground.

“The real, generational change is going to come from churches,” said Eubank. “You take this information and implement it. Then you care for those who have experienced abuse.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Scott Barkley is chief national correspondent for Baptist Press.

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