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Held captive by the Past

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – As we begin a new year, we often like to look back and reflect on all that God has done in our lives. I think we should do that! Looking back helps us trace God's hand of faithfulness and remember His goodness and love for us.

However, while this may be true in many instances, dwelling on the past can hold us captive. When we walk through a difficult season in our lives, sometimes the enemy wants to dredge up everything that happened, and will try to keep our hearts and minds focused on the hurt and pain. If our spiritual enemy can keep us trapped in the past, we will never be able to receive what God wants to do in our future.

Paul writes in Philippians 3:13b-14 (NIV),

"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Before encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul persecuted Christians. From that defining moment in his life, he was forever changed. Paul could have let the guilt and shame from his past life keep him from walking in the calling God placed on his life, but he didn't. He understood the gift he received through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Paul writes in Galatians 2:20 (NIV),

"I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

I don't know where you find yourself as you begin 2024, but here are some helpful insights as you move forward:

1. Don't Dwell on the Past.

"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind..."

This is much easier said than done. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians to "take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ." If we allow our minds to dwell on things that have happened in the past, those thoughts are sinful. When we allow this mindset, we are not being obedient to Christ.

Paul tells us in Philippians that we are to think on things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. When intrusive thoughts come that want to keep us trapped in the past, shut them down immediately. Focus on the truth of God's Word and invite the Holy Spirit to heal

your heart and mind. Ask Him to help you stop dwelling on the past so you can move forward with your future.

2. Keep Your Eyes on Jesus.

"...straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

When we release the stronghold of the past, we are then free to move forward with the good plans God has for our lives. In Romans, we are told that God "works all things together." He wants to use what we have learned from our past to move us forward and make a difference for eternity in the lives of others. When we understand that the trials we go through in life are meant to mold us into the person He created us to be, then we won't be held captive by the past. We also won't be ashamed of what God has done in our lives. Keep your eyes focused on Jesus and His good plans for your life!

Paul is such a great example for us to follow. Saul, before his conversion to Paul, was one of the leading religious leaders who persecuted Christians. He was well-known for his religious stature and Jewish heritage; however, once he encountered God, the gospel became more important to him than those things.

Paul writes in Philippians 3:7-8a (NLT),

"I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

I encourage you today to leave the past behind. Don't allow your mind to dwell on it; instead, look to Jesus. He will use it all to refine you into the person He created you to be. Someone is depending on you to fulfill your calling so they can encounter Jesus. Don't let the enemy hold you captive!

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!

You're going to need a bigger God in 2024.

WARREN – There's a scene in the movie *Jaws* where the main character is hunched over toward the back of the boat, throwing chum out into the water.

The water is red with blood and fish guts.

At once, a massive shark's face breaks the surface of the water, revealing rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth. The main character stands up completely petrified. His eyes widen and refuse to blink in awe of the sheer scale of this fish.

Suddenly, the boat doesn't seem big enough. With an unflinching gaze fixed on the open water before him, he begins to slowly walk backward into the cabin of the boat. There, we see the old captain at the helm. With an unbreaking stare, the main character finally breaks his silence with one of the most iconic lines in film history:

"You're gonna need a bigger boat."

At the risk of being misunderstood, there's something about that scene that I want to recover for myself and for my church in 2024.

Now, before you think I'm completely bonkers, allow me to state what should be obvious: God is not a terrifying, man-eating shark. Nor does he want people to be horrified at the thought of him. God is not on the hunt to kill, but to save (2 Peter 3:9).

We know that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). The Lord is no killer great white, but a God of incomprehensible love.

But I fear that we often misunderstand just how shocking—how radical—God's love is because we fundamentally misunderstand God. And if we misunderstand God, we certainly misunderstand ourselves in relation to him.

In my experience, a phrase like, "God loves you" rarely jolts anyone like it should. Even now, I can picture the phrase on a bumper sticker stuck to the back of a rusty old van in front of me at a red light. I may read that phrase while I'm waiting for my light to turn green, but it doesn't cause my pulse to race. My eyes don't widen. I'm not speechless. I've heard it before. I'm not moved. I'm not in awe. Frankly, I'm bored with it.

Boredom with God is a cancer in the church. But boredom with God is a symptom of an even deeper disease: idolatry. It occurs when I (or my problems, desires, needs, situation) am "bigger," "more important," or "more dominant" than God. We get bored with God when he becomes small, tame, and completely predictable to us. Boredom with God occurs when we've reduced him down to a mere function of meeting our felt needs, like a therapist in the sky.

For many church-going people, God is folded neatly into a box. They'll take him out of this box when they go to church, or when a crisis arises, or they need some extra help, but other than that, they'll put him right back in their little box until they want to bring him out again.

People who have God in a box may even think that they're doing God a favor when they take him out of it.

"Hey God, aren't you happy with me? I took you out of your box. I went to church today! I read my Bible! I prayed! I even gave an offering."

One obvious problem with God-in-the-box is that it's unbiblical. Another problem is that it's boring.

You won't risk anything from a God who can fit into a box. You won't feel pressed to change for "tame." You won't give up sinful habits for "average." You won't do the hard work of cultivating holiness for "boring." You won't be able to endure suffering, sickness, or grief with "puny." Your husband won't get off the couch for "meh." Your kids won't put down their phones for "lame." You won't risk your job, your health, or your future for "snooze."

But the wonderful truth is that God is not boring, tame, average, or puny. I think if our churches are going to flourish in 2024, we've got to wake people out of their boredom with God. We need a recalibration of who God is and who we are. We are pots; he's the Potter.

A few weeks ago, I asked my people: *What if God?*

"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Romans 9:22)?

I dare you to read that verse again slowly and then ask yourself: *What if God* wants to do that?

Is that okay with you? This is not the kind of God who gives me warm fuzzies. I would not write this verse on a Christmas card. But this is the God of the Bible.

Yes—he's loving, he weeps with those who weep, a broken and contrite heart he will never despise, he's patient and desires that all people might be saved.

Yes—he's a lamb, but he's also a lion. You don't have a box big enough for this kind of God.

Just like the guys in the movie *Jaws* were at the mercy of the shark, the truth is that we are all totally at the mercy of God. And when you see that it is *this* kind of God who loves you, you'll realize that he is anything but boring.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clayton Knight has served as the senior pastor at Warren Woods Baptist Church in Warren, Michigan since 2021. He's married to his best friend, Sarah, and they have a daughter named Aubrey.

Our calendar has built-in opportunities for alignment

ADRIAN – Have you ever considered that our modern calendar has built-in opportunities for alignment?

It is a good chance that your answer is yes. For example, daylight Savings serves as a good reminder to change the batteries in our smoke detectors. Chilly evenings remind us to think about transitioning to our winter wardrobe. Equally, there is another clothing transition when afternoons become warmer. There are a host of other calendar dates and seasons that prompt certain action, so we are ready to jump into the next season of life.

These alignment opportunities are not unique to our modern calendar. We read in Leviticus 23-25 how our Lord established important opportunities for the Israelite nation to pause and be aligned before they moved on in life. In some instances, families were to gather and remember where they had been before they considered where they hoped to go. In other instances, the entire assembly gathered to honor their history, remember those who have gone before them, and to prepare for the future. Even property ownership was part of the realignment process. When Israel obeyed what the Lord established, years of blessing followed.

Leviticus 23-25 provides three important principles as we are launched into 2024. They apply to families and congregations alike.

First, set aside time to remember the previous year.

Some people are disciplined in their ability to journal throughout the year. Some people use social media to record the events of life. Some people write a Christmas letter that recalls key events from the year. The form that one uses to record our history is not as important as being intentional about doing so. However, recording our history is only part of remembering. When your family gathers, talk about what has been exciting or brought joy in the previous year. Family gatherings also provide necessary moments to unpack the parts of our year that have been less than joyful. It is possible that Thanksgiving and Christmas had newly empty chairs around the table. It is possible 2024 will have a birthday that is no longer celebrated as it was in the past. Seize the opportunity to remember every part of your year together.

Second, set aside time to write down goals for the upcoming year.

Personally, I try to make goals that require lifestyle changes in a way that will help us have a great today and a better tomorrow.

Third, self-care is the glue that holds all of it together.

For about the last ten years, I have used the week between Christmas and New Year's Day to evaluate how well I am caring for myself. During this process, I look to make lifestyle alignments that will protect myself from myself while being able to give my best to my family and my church, in that order. This process is only successful through the grace of our Lord and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

There are five practices that I use to determine healthy self-care and then make some decisions for the following year. Any individual can participate in them.

1. I open my weight tracker spreadsheet to see how my weight has fluctuated throughout the year. Did I hit the target? Am I close? Was there a month significantly higher than other months? If so, what happened in that month that might have caused weight gain? Does anything trigger that I didn't eat well?
2. I open the exercise app on my phone to see how consistent I was in the past year. My target is 30 minutes of exercise 3-4 days per week, a number given to me by a nutritionist many years ago. There are many reasons why people exercise, not including weight management. Start slow. Continue consistently.
3. I look to see how frequently I honor my time off. How rested do I feel? When is our vacation time for the upcoming year? We have found that planning vacation time in advance ensures that we have time for rest.
4. I order a new Bible that is different from the version I preach from. My goal is to read through the Bible once every year. Using a different version reminds me to pursue personal growth.
5. I look to see if our financial picture is better than it was at the beginning of the year. Where are the opportunities to increase saving for this calendar year? Many years, January has been a spending fast for non-essential items.

I believe that God has graciously given mankind natural opportunities for realignment. Even the most efficient person, family or church has regular alignments in the life or organization, which is the reason we think they are efficient. I encourage you to spend an hour remembering where you have been in the past year, consider where you are going in the next year, and make some decision to care for yourself well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Peoples has been in full-time ministry since 2000 and has served Trinity Baptist Church in Adrian since 2021. He has been married to Bridget since 1997 and have four children.

A life and vision to glorify God

DETROIT – On December 4, 2023, Pastor Rochelle Davis, Jr. had completed his earthly assignment and was welcomed into the heavenly kingdom.

On December 16th, 2023, his beloved Temple of Faith Baptist Church in Detroit hosted a beautiful home-going service of celebration and repast for Dr. Rochelle Davis, Jr.

The following was written by him for that service:

I, Rochelle Davis, Jr., was born February 24, 1936, in Shreveport, Louisiana, to the union of Luella and Rochelle Davis, Sr. I was born premature, at seven months and the seventh child of twelve children to this union.

I was reared in a Christian home. My father was a deacon, and my mother was the church's clerk. I received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior in August 1947. I was baptized and became a member of Elizabeth Baptist Church under the pastorate of the late Rev. H. Wilson. I was active in many of the church activities. However, in my late teens, I became a backslider influenced by peer pressure.

I was educated in the Louisiana school system attending Grand Bayou Elementary and graduating from Springville High.

On April 26, 1958, I married Mariah Drayton. We were blessed with three children: Alonzo, Reginald, and Frieda.

I continued to further my education and attended Boyce Bible School, Detroit Bible College, Institute of Holy Land Studies, Southern Seminary and many workshops, conferences, and seminars. I love the Bible and Hebrew and Greek languages.

In my early twenties, I professed my calling into the ministry, November 1963. I was ordained at Temple Baptist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana August 1965.

In 1968, God gave me a vision to develop a people to glorify God. The Temple of Faith Baptist Church was revealed and planted into my heart long before it became a reality. The Temple of Faith was established in the family home and became a reality. The church did not come into existence from a church split, but from a vision God gave to me to share with others who were willing to participate in developing a people to glorify God and advance His Kingdom on earth.

Throughout my ministry, I have served as the Community Block Club President, Community Councils, Association Moderator, Convention President, Boards, Local and National Committees. I have also participated in many overseas projects. From 1986 to 1987, I served as President of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This story was written by Baptist Beacon staff.

A mighty oak has fallen

PLYMOUTH – In recent days a massive winter storm moved up the East Coast leaving in its wake incredible damage from the result of tornados, floods, snow, ice, and tremendous winds. I was reading one news article relating to the storm front, and it included pictures of massive trees that were toppled like blades of grass under the weight of a boot filled by some behemoth of a man stomping through a field. It also showed trees that were experiencing the same storm, but stood strong and remained rooted because they had grown close to one another, and their roots systems had become entwined. Since that storm rolled up the coast, another great oak among us has fallen as well.

This great tree that stood so many years in our midst did not fall because of a saturated ground, ferocious storm, or because “his roots” were not strong and deep enough, or those roots were not interlaced with others. In fact, it was quite the contrary. This great tree had deep roots. This great tree has weathered more storms than most of us will see in a lifetime. He stayed close to others and especially the local church. This great oak fell because God in His sovereign will, chose to bring him home so that he might worship his Savior in person and enjoy the rewards of his labors.

This great oak was Dr. Rochelle Davis Jr. and his influence in this state, nation, and for that matter, the world, will be felt for decades to come.

On this terrestrial ball on which we live **influence** can and is felt by all creation. The influence of the sun's rays warm that which would be cold and lifeless without it. It illuminates our days and

its reflection guides us during the dark of night. The Moon's gravitational pull influences our creation as it moves the waters of the oceans helping to keep it teeming with life and its currents flowing. The constant rotation of the earth, its tilting, and resultant temperature variations give us winds and weather thus keeping the cycle of life on its course, the direct result of influence. Influence is felt all about us but none more so than the influence of a life well lived.

Dr. Rochelle Davis Jr. had a life well lived and his influence is evidenced here today. He, like so many others, was a member of the last *great generation*. This is the generation that made it possible for us to freely assemble today and to speak English and not German or Japanese. His is the generation that built this country into the industrial, technological, and agricultural giant that supplies the world, that maintains the peace and sets the standards for that which is good and moral. Many referred to this generation as the Hoover generation.

As I recall Dr. Davis' life and the life of those who are people of influence, I find there are some basic characteristics that are almost universally shared by them all.

- **Consistency.** These great influencers are not restless flashes in the pan—here today and gone tomorrow. Neither are they given to fads and gimmicks. Those who impact lives stay at the task with reliable regularity. They seem unaffected by the fickle winds of change. They are consistent.
- **Authenticity.** Probe all you wish, try all you like to find hypocritical flaws, and you search in vain. People who impact others are real to the core; no alloy covered over with a brittle layer of chrome, but solid genuine stuff right down to the nubbies. They are authentic.
- **Unselfishness.** We cannot forget this one. Hands down it's there every time. Those who impact us the most watch out for themselves the least. They notice our needs and reach out to help, honestly concerned about our welfare. Their least-used words are "I," "me," "my," and "mine". They are unselfish.
- **Tirelessness.** With relentless determination they spend themselves. They refuse to quit. Possessing an enormous amount of enthusiasm for their labor, they press on regardless of the odds...virtually unconcerned with obstacles. Actually, they are like pioneers—resilient, always plowing ahead. They are tireless.

Southern Baptist locally, nationally, and globally owe a great debt to this great fallen oak. His influence changed the face, the focus, and the future of our denomination. Dr. Rochelle, you will be greatly missed but your influence will linger for generations.

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.

Someone's finish is someone else's start

PLYMOUTH – Someone's finish is someone else's start.

Please, repeat that first sentence aloud a few times. Someone's finish is someone else's start. Someone's finish is someone else's start. Someone's finish is someone else's start.

In relay races, the baton from a runner who is finishing his leg of the relay rapidly, but carefully entrusts the baton into the open hand of another runner who is just starting his leg of the race within a 20-meter exchange zone. If the runners do not match running speeds, during the momentary exchange, they may never make a successful exchange. There are judges who watch carefully to make certain the baton exchange is done carefully and fairly, palm to palm.

During November and December 2023, I experienced the passing of four dearly-loved people. In some ways, their passing reminds me of relay races where baton-exchanges take place.

- November 28, my mother passed away.
- December 2, my mother's younger sister, Betty, passed away.
- December 4, Pastor Rochelle David Jr. of Temple of Faith Baptist Church, Detroit passed away.
- The fourth occurred during the third week of December needling me to write this column, Wade Anthony Wimberly, at the age of 42 passed away. Anthony is the twin brother of church planter and founding pastor, Antonio Wimberly of One Mission Church, Westland.

Track and field events where relay races take place can be chaotic. When I was in high school I used to watch track and field events from the stands while my longtime friend Mike Durbin and recently-retired teammate for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan competed in events. Track and field events are extremely different from other sporting events because at any given moment a number of competitions can simultaneously take place. Competitions in a relay race, a high jump, a long-distance jump, and the shot-put can all be done at the same moment between a variety of teams.

Track and field events are filled with faces, voices, hopes, frenzy, disappointments, victories, and heartaches. Depending on who you are at the event, the depth of the impact is experienced at different levels. I find the transitions of those leaving this world for heaven kind of like a relay race in the midst of a busy track meet.

The passing of my mother, my aunt, Pastor Davis, and Anthony touched my life during the Christmas season and into the transition of 2024. Why? Because the earthly finish of these four well-loved people is someone else's start.

Hope

My mother was one of six girls in her family. Mom was quieter than her sisters and deeply connected with people one-on-one. Holding her two palms around a mug of coffee, Mom carried on tens of thousands of personal conversations across the dining room table encouraging people with the hope that the Lord could lead them to brighter, happier days. She would watch her guests leave the driveway of our home, kick off her slippers from her feet, pull her legs under her in her favorite chair by the picture-window of our home, and with her eyes wide open pray for the ones who just drove away looking for hope.

Compassion

My Aunt Betty was the baby of the family while being the boldest adventurer of six sisters. Aunt Betty was the ever-present champion for the underserved, neglected, and forgotten. When a woman in her church was too poor and too alone to have a burial place at the time of her death in Montrose, Aunt Betty gave away her burial site next to her husband for the woman's remains to be buried. My Aunt Betty instructed her children, "Have my cremated remains buried above your father's casket and next to my friend." That is Aunt Betty.

Service

Pastor Rochelle Davis first met Jamie, my wife, and I when we returned to serve the Lord in Michigan during the 1980s, making our friendship with Pastor Davis forty years long. Pastor Davis' connection with Jamie started while both of them served on the state's board and as Pastor Davis continued as an officer of the state convention. When he spoke to my wife, he had a way to draw out her name, "J-a-m-i-e, how are you?" His pause was intentional, creating a calm frozen moment allowing her to express what serving the Lord was like at that precise moment in her life. Pastor Davis served tens of thousands of people in that same manner for years, calling each one of us to a moment of review as to how we were serving the Lord. His call to disciple others in Christ by pointing to the Bible is part of his fame.

Loyalty

My spontaneous interactions with Wade Anthony Wimberly, the twin brother of church planter and founding pastor Antonio Wimberly started with the birth of One Mission Church, Westland. When I attended services or dropped by on occasions, Anthony was faithfully taking care of something that he could do leaving Antonio to concentrate on the tasks of a pastor. One of my favorite occasions was sharing life with Antonio, Anthony, and their precious grandmother in her home. Meet someone's grandmother who poured her faith and life into her grandsons, and you will understand the young men better because you will see the loyalty, devotion, and sacrifice one will make for another family member. I watched loyal Anthony time and again

quietly, attentively with no desire for attention take care of thousands of things for his twin brother so the Lord's kingdom would come to Westland, Inkster, and Romulus.

Paul, the outstanding missionary of the Book of Acts and the New Testament, while clarifying the distinction of the mortal life of King David of the Old Testament from eternal Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind says, in Acts 13:36, "After David had done the will of God in his own generation, he died and was buried with his ancestors," (New Living Translation).

As I reflect on the impact of four people whose lives were transformed by Jesus Christ, then found their own respective ways to express their personal faith and service to the Lord, I wonder, "As these four finished, who will start?"

- Who will continue what was not finished by the others?
- Who will build something brand-new on the foundation the others built?
- Who will continue, in the family, what is now missed?
- Who will continue, in the Lord's service, what is now absent?
- Who will display hope, compassion, service, and loyalty now the others are gone?

Paul, in Acts 13, goes to great lengths to impress that the eternal worth of a terrestrial King David was not found in himself but rather in the resurrected Savior Jesus Christ's promises. The four mentioned above would testify to the same power if we could hear their voices of praise from heaven now. Someone's finish is someone else's start.

I encourage you to look back on 2023 to the lives of those who set examples for us, and to ask yourself, "What can I, or should I start in 2024?" There would be nothing better to put on our tombstones at our finish of our leg of the relay than the phrase, "After having done the will of God in his or her own generation, he or she was buried," (based on Acts 13:36, New Living Translation). There will be those selected by the Lord's providence to continue the good work the Lord starts in us.

This column is dedicated to the loved ones of my mother, my aunt, Pastor Davis, and Wade Anthony.

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.

God is with us

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – Christmas is over and the New Year has dawned. We took down the tree, put the ornaments away, stored the Mikasa Christmas dinnerware and mugs for another year. But I refuse to step on the bathroom scale after all that turkey and dessert!

My wife, Patty, absolutely loves having family, friends, and fellow believers around her, especially during the holiday season. The art of hospitality seems to be waning in our culture, so I'm glad I married a woman who absolutely loves to cook and entertain. We enjoy a full house at Christmas with oodles of different food, delicious drinks, decadent desserts, and Michael Bublé belting out merry tunes on an endless YouTube playlist, and "White Christmas" on the TV with no sound.

The kids in our family love to dramatize "the Christmas story" from Luke 2, complete with bathrobes, broom sticks for shepherd staffs, and a tin-foil star that guides the shepherds to Bethlehem. Grandpa serves as Narrator. Yep. We're all in, and we love it!

When it's all over, and the house is quiet, it's usually too quiet, right? You know how it is. You watch the last set of taillights head down the street, turn the corner, and disappear into the night. You slowly walk back in the house and start the clean-up. But once the reparations have been made, and you've demolished the last three Lindt chocolates, the house is still again. It's now too quiet and it does not take long for our hearts to ache again for the joyful noise, the baby cooing, and the jingle bells rocking.

Why is that?

The obvious answer will be that we love our families deeply, even with their mild dysfunctions and crazy uncles, and when we are not together after being together for a day or two or five, we miss them. Of course.

The not-so-obvious answer is that God made us for this. He made us to be social creatures. He made us in his image (Gen. 1:27), and he is a Trinity, with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit eternally living in community with each other. To be made in the image of God, therefore, is to long for significant socialization, or meaningful fellowship, as we prefer to call it in the church. We have a deep need to be in relationship with other human beings!

We crave the comfort and camaraderie that come with rubbing shoulders, engaging in conversation, and finding ridiculous things to laugh about. Whether it's my wife, grandchildren, a close friend, a colleague, or even a neighbor, having flesh-and-blood folks around gives me a particular kind of joy as well as a reminder of the promise that God will never leave me nor forsake me (Heb. 13:5).

When the Father sent his Son from heaven to earth, he gave him the title “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” (Is. 7:14; Matt. 1:23).

Of all that could be said about Jesus, the one thing Matthew shines the light on is this name or title of Jesus. “God with us.” It means that God is near. He is not merely the God who created the heavens and the earth. Jesus is more than the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). He is not just the Son of God come to earth. He is not only my Rock and my Redeemer, but God with us. He is the only one who can fill the empty spot that you feel in your heart when everyone else has gone home.

All the other names we have to describe Jesus are good and true and need to become ingrained in our hearts so that we have the fullest picture possible of the person and work of Jesus. Alpha and Omega, Branch of Jesse, Chief Cornerstone, Desire of Ages, Eternal One, Friend of Sinners, Great I Am, and every other name or title from A-Z.

But every year, when Christmas comes around, the name of Jesus that we love the most is “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.”

Our Father, in his eternal love and mercy and grace, did not only send us a powerful Prophet, Priest, and King. He didn’t only deliver a Savior to become a propitiation for us (Rom. 3:25) or make peace with God for us (Rom. 5). Our heavenly Father sent us a person who is able to sympathize with our weakness (Heb. 4:15); one who would be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

January is the month for new beginnings. When you realize the house is much quieter than you’d like it to be, remember, you have God with you, Immanuel.

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.

Your best year ever

ADRIAN – Do you want 2024 to be your best year ever? There is one thing you can do right now and the better you keep it the better year will be. Put Jesus first in your life.

That sounds simple, but it is not. Everything in life screams for first place. Many of those things are good, like family, ministry, and health. But there is a promise that is one of the greatest promises Jesus ever gave.

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33)

Jesus commands that our first priority be His kingdom and His righteousness. What does this mean?

Our Focus

Matthew 6 defines three key issues in life: shelter, clothing & food. We spend at least half of our waking hours with these things. We have probably more concern and focus on these things than anything else. But those who personally know God should not be anxious over them.

Our Choices

Jesus indicates that there are two priority choices: our kingdom or God’s kingdom. Generally, we give ourselves first priority. We give too little attention to God’s things. Maybe we expect He will take care of it. But He promised if we take care of His kingdom, He will take care of our kingdom.

Our Goals

When we go after “all these things” we place the priority of our energy and effort into providing for ourselves. But when we can go after God’s kingdom and righteousness, we seek God instead of things, spiritual as opposed to the material, and eternal instead of the earthly. “Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:11).

Our Priorities

Jesus does not teach that having or pursuing things is wrong. It is not wrong to go after “all these things”. Jesus said, “Seek first,” not let it be the one and only thing you seek or go after. God expects us to work and live. What Jesus is teaching is to let your first priority be following Christ.

Our Denials

Apparently there are two ways of getting things. You can make them the object of life and struggling for them. Or you can have them added unto you. God will always add what we need to our life. Seek first the kingdom and leave the secondary matters to God. If God’s priorities

become our priorities, He will take care of our needs. First we seek the kingdom, and then everything else will fall into place.

Our Daily Life

We must not expect God's specific blessings where He is not first in our life. If the first priority in your daily life is not God's kingdom and righteousness it may explain some unproductive living. This concentration on doing God's will is the positive answer to worry. Don't expect God to bless you, if you are not going to put Him first. We must give God control over our daily lives. This is where the real issue lies. Will we live by faith in Christ, or will we walk by the sight?

Set your eyes on the things that advance God's kingdom and contribute to the establishment of His righteousness. Allow God to keep His promises concerning the rest of life. Seek first the kingdom and everything else will fall into place. That is His promise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Burdine is the senior pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Adrian, Michigan. Faith Baptist Church is part of the Lendale Association of the Michigan Baptists.

We serve a God of endless chances!

INKSTER – 2023 was a difficult year for me personally. I'm sure some of you may relate and maybe you've often found yourself entangled in the thorny feelings of defeat, anger, discouragement, and continuously falling short of God's expectations. Yet, even in spite of ourselves, God continues to forgive, bless, and most importantly, He desires an intimate relationship with each of us.

Through God's mercy and loving kindness, He continues to give us endless chances of forgiveness to become more like Him. God's word is intricately brimming with stories of endless chances. As a matter of fact, the story of Simon Peter is a great testament to the relentless love of the Lord and His willingness to give us a fresh start anytime.

In John 18:15-27, Peter literally denies that he even knew Jesus and he did it three times! Despite Peter's denial of Him, Jesus saw the potential within Peter and chose him to play a significant role in establishing his church. This serves as a reminder that no matter our past mistakes or shortcomings, Jesus offers us endless chances and opportunities of redemption and reconciliation. It's a beautiful example of God's unconditional love, and his ability to transform lives.

So, wherever God chooses to take you in 2024, be encouraged and remember, however we feel, fall, or fail Him, He is there to pick us up. God's grace offers us a new year filled with exciting new adventures and experiences.

Micah 7:18 says "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger forever, because he delighteth in mercy."

Trust in the Lord my brother and sister, and know the God we serve, is a God of endless chances!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LaShonna Hitchins is the dedicated Office Administrator of Middlebelt Baptist Church in Inkster, Michigan, under the inspiring leadership of Pastor Larry E Johnson. Besides her professional commitments, LeShonna finds joy in her role as a loving mother to three incredible kids, Nyla, Malaki, and Benjamin, and as a devoted wife to Dennis.

May we see greater things

MIDLAND – This past year, I've had the privilege to partner with Send Network to plant Damascus Church in Midland. What a ride it has been! I can only hope in years to come, the whirlwind of planting and pastoring a church may slow down a bit. Nonetheless, may God strengthen and sustain us.

With all the preparation and strategizing that comes with planting a church, there was one key element I knew that we needed – discipleship relationships. I think we all can attest that we took great strides in the faith when we were surrounded by other godly people, who were locking arms with us as we pursued Jesus. I hope that can be the culture at Damascus.

We have a men's and women's discipleship group that meets every other week to try to facilitate this. In our last men's discipleship group, we studied John 1:43-51. In this passage, Jesus recognizes Nathaniel under the tree and states his name and identity before formally meeting him. As anyone would be, Nathaniel is astounded, recognizing Jesus to be no mere man, and replies "You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!". And Jesus responded to this soon-to-be disciple – "Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this."

After reading this passage, we all got out our study notes and learned that Jesus is likely referencing a dream that Jacob had (Gen. 28:12), where he saw a ladder coming from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending upon it, to show that he was the fulfillment of a true ladder to heaven. He is the only mediator between man and God. Jesus is the ultimate “Jacob’s Ladder” to get us back to God and the disciples would witness this firsthand!

The life of a disciple is about praying for and expecting God to do greater things (Eph. 3:20). I posed this question to the men: “What would it look like in your life if you believed God for greater things, and served God in greater ways?” “What would it look like for Damascus Church to be praying and asking God for greater things – that will advance his kingdom across the earth?”

Here are the greater “kingdom” things Damascus Church is praying for, hoping for, and asking God for in 2024 and beyond:

1. That God would raise up more teachers, preachers, pastors, and evangelists to do the work of ministry and to live out the Great Commission mission right where they are (Eph. 4:11-12, Matt. 28:18-20).
2. That God would call more people to plant churches locally, nationally, and globally and empower them in faith to step out and join him.
3. That God would stir like-minded Christians and churches toward greater kingdom collaboration and partnership across the region, nation, and world so that we may plant more churches, see the church be trained up for the work of ministry, and then fulfill the mission of making disciples.
4. Then to see the whole cycle above repeat itself as God gets all the glory for advancing his name and kingdom across the earth!

Will you join with us in praying and pursuing greater things, that we may be astonished as Nathaniel was when God uses ordinary ol’ people like us to advance his name and Kingdom throughout Michigan, the U.S., and beyond? God let us see greater things in 2024!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nate Yurgaites is pastor of Damascus Church in Midland, MI, a new church plant in 2023. He is married to Betsy and they have five children: Desiree, Brianna, Calvin, Judson, and Haddon.

A new beginning

TAYLOR – In September of 1990, my wife and I, together with our five children ages from three to eleven, left the Philippines to start a new life and ministry in Michigan. While praying, we first received an impression from the Holy Spirit to accept the call to pastor to what was then known as First Filipino Baptist Church in Dearborn Michigan (the name was later changed to Philippine International Baptist Church).

In obedience to His call, we sold our properties in the Philippines to purchase our airfares and relocate to Michigan. We left our friends and loved ones and the church we started and led for seven years. It was not a simple decision. We had to consider whether we were ready to start a new life in a new country, or if we simply wanted to stay in the Philippines surrounded by the people we knew and loved.

We had mixed emotions. Our children were excited. But as a father I had concerns. Would we be able to make it? Could we stand the cold winter in Michigan? We must learn to trust God, and that He who has called us would provide. Believing it was God's will for us, we moved.

When we arrived in Dearborn, we found three things; first, a late notice for two months of the church's building mortgage; second, a note from the bank that the church had bounced a check; third, a note from the telephone company for more than \$700 of unpaid telephone bills.

The church could not give me any salary for three months. The Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) sent us \$500 and an additional \$300 monthly salary supplement which was a timely help for our family. We bought used clothing and other things we needed from Value World.

I went to the Social Services of Michigan to request health insurance for our children. The social worker was very helpful and even offered to provide us with food stamps, which I declined. Instead, I went to Newburg Baptist Church every Tuesday to get food for ten cents a pound.

My wife and I had to get a job to provide for our family. For three years, we struggled. But in the fourth year, the church was able to pay off the mortgage and increased my salary. The church provided us with health and life insurance and a retirement plan through Guidestone Financial Services. In addition, the church gave us yearly vacation allowances. The church also provided us with a brand-new Dodge Caravan.

For the first time in four years, our family went on vacation to Florida. We stayed in a beautiful resort in Sebastian Florida for one week, graciously provided by our member who owned a timeshare plan. Our children enjoyed the beach, and of course, we went to Disney World.

Over the years in partnership with the BSCM, the Lord enabled us to start five other churches.

Now, my wife and I enter a new chapter of our lives and ministry. I retired from being the senior pastor of Philippine International Baptist Church. Our children have their own families and are all doing well. We now have eleven grandchildren and another one is coming.

The Lord has been good to us. True to His promise, He never left us nor forsake us. It is our prayer that God will continue to lead and guide us according to His will. We pray that God will use us to be an encouragement to others especially to younger pastors and Christian workers both here and in the Philippines.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roberto Santos serves as Pastor Emeritus at Philippine International Baptist Church in Taylor, Michigan.

The goodness of God

BELLEVILLE – As a Pastor's wife, I want you to know that God's goodness is evident throughout your lifetime whether everything is going good or bad in the ministry or personal life, God is good all the time!

Because of Covid, it had been more than three years since we were able to visit our family and loved ones, especially my husband's siblings in the Philippines. Finally, God opened the door for another visit. Three weeks before our flight, I had postmenopausal bleeding. It was not good timing to experience this medical surprise. Our doctor did a pap smear with normal results. *Thank God!*

My doctors advised me to get an ultrasound and MRI exam. I had an ultrasound and found that I had a large cyst near my ovaries. This overwhelmed me and I had so much going-on in my mind at that time. With a family history of cancer (my deceased sister, my mom, and two aunts), I had this frightening thought "what if this cyst is cancerous?" Doctors and some friends advised me not to go on my trip or travel to the Philippines during this medical concern.

On the other hand, the joy of the Lord flooded my soul and spirit. I knew my life was in God's hands. Whatever my medical crisis, He is Sovereign and knows what He is doing. To get an MRI exam appointment is unbelievably difficult – it was fully booked. My endometrial biopsy didn't happen either.

My peace always comes from our Lord Jesus, who is the Prince of Peace. We went ahead and flew to the Philippines in August not knowing what was next for me. There are days that I felt very tired, and bleeding came consistently each month.

Upon arrival in the Philippines, we had a memorable family bonding with Aaron's siblings, and traveled six hours by bus to see Aaron's uncles and aunts whom we have not seen for 29 years. God used us to be a blessing to loved ones and friends and three churches where Aaron spoke.

When I returned, I was finally able to get my MRI exam, and the result was the same — big cyst. The nurse called and asked me to come right away so I could do a Cancer Antigen test. On the way to the clinic that same day, God let me hear the beautiful song "Gonna Be Alright" by Ryan Ellis: *"Everything's gonna be alright; You hold me in Your arms, until my storm is gone. And everything's gonna be alright; Your love will be my song, till all my fears are gone. And everything's gonna be alright."*

Honestly, my body was shaking, and I couldn't calm down. I cried on the way to the clinic. This song helped me to be at peace. I prayed and asked, "Am I ready to face the truth"? The results came the following morning, and my tumor markers were within normal limits. Rejoicing in the Lord, I cried again listening to my favorite song "Gonna Be Alright".

My endometrial biopsy results were normal and negative for hyperplasia or malignancy. GOD is so good! The prayers of the brethren meant so much to me - they are precious.

Rev. 5:8b said "...Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people."

Pray for my recovery from the surgery that removed the cyst on December 27th, and that there won't be excessive bleeding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy Tanap, a Pastor's wife here at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Belleville. Married to Aaron for 43 years with three adult children and five grandchildren.

Spread of Gospel at stake in Russia's war on Ukraine, Baptist leader there says

KYIV, UKRAINE (BP) – Christians in the U.S. should remember the spiritual dimensions of Russia's war on Ukraine, especially as military aid to Ukraine grows uncertain, an Ukrainian Baptist Union leader told Baptist Press.

"You should remember the spiritual dimensions of this war, especially the attempt of the evil one to use Russia to destroy Ukraine as a goalpost for Christianity in Eastern Europe," said Igor Bandura, vice president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, shortly after a December trip to the U.S.

"This is not only a war of Russia against Ukraine," he said. "This is a war for Christian values, for the possibility to spread the Gospel in freedom, and to fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus."

Bandura describes Ukraine as "the home of evangelism and missions in eastern countries," pushing back against a post-Christian climate.

The spiritual dimensions of the war are notable, Bandura said, as the U.S. considers continued military aid to Ukraine, and as Hungary blocked a \$50 billion aid package to Ukraine from the European Union.

The Baptist Union has lost 300 churches in Russian occupied territories including Crimea, he said, which Russia has occupied since 2014.

Entire congregations fled for safety in the wake of the February 2022 invasion. Displaced pastors have planted about 100 churches in the European Union to serve Ukrainian refugees, he said, and additional displaced pastors are leading churches that were already established abroad.

As congregations persevere, Southern Baptist missionary Michael Domke, based in Hungary, works with Ukrainian pastors Rustam and Anatoly to train men who hope to plant churches, teaching methodology through Generation Ministry.

Pastors enrolled in the program are planting churches in areas where they live spanning the entire country, overcoming infrastructure damages of war.

"Ukrainians are very resilient, and the condition of a building is not something that stops them from doing church work," Domke said. "I've been in churches in wintertime with no heat, and it's been full of people. That doesn't stop them."

Before the war, Generation Ministry typically trained five or seven church planting teams a year, but today is conducting three schools simultaneously, hoping to train 24 church planting teams through September 2024, Domke said. Those enrolled complete about seven two-day, three-night sessions spread over a year. Most will plant churches with no compensation.

“One of the major motivations,” Rustam said, “they feel the calling and the duty that they’re supposed to do that for the nation of Ukraine in these hard times.”

Church planters secure meeting spaces by applying for government facilities at no cost, or repairing older church facilities.

At least one pastor currently enrolled in Generation hopes to plant a church in Bucha, the scene of mass civilian carnage when Russia occupied the city for a month in February and March. Rustam attends Bethany Baptist Church in Bucha, which is recovering after 80 percent of its members fled during Russia’s occupation.

Bandura pastors Bible Church in Irpin, one of the first areas Russia captured and Ukraine has since recovered. All of Bible Church’s members evacuated during Russia’s attack, Bandura said, but about 70 percent have returned. Bible Church actively serves surrounding communities through six volunteer centers the church established. In cities surrounding Irpin, Bandura counts three new churches plants.

As the war endures, churches are challenged to remain hopeful.

“The last few months were very difficult for us emotionally and spiritually, because our expectation that the war would ... end was not fulfilled. The war is still here,” Bandura said, “and there is no understanding when it will be finished.

“We all started to realize that the war would be going on at least the next year, unless God will work a miracle.”

Congress failed to pass a December aid package that would have included \$61.4 billion for Ukraine. Instead, Biden pledged \$200 million in available drawdown funds for weapons, artillery and ammunition, [urging Congress](#) to do more.

Ukraine is suffering shortages of 122mm and 152mm artillery shells. Russia is conducting artillery fire five to seven times more often than Ukraine at the war’s frontlines, the Institute for the Study of War reported Dec. 18, based on reports from Ukraine’s military officers.

Bandura expressed strong gratitude for the love, commitment and support of Baptists in the U.S., and appreciates continued prayers until God provides a solution to the war.

“If Ukraine (does) not survive in this war ... what we are sure is that there would not be room for Baptist churches,” Bandura said. “Baptists like me and other Baptists would either run away

from the country or we would be arrested and killed.”

He encouraged Baptists to advocate for Congress to find a way to continue aid to Ukraine, terming such aid a matter of life or death.

“This is what we are praying for, and we are hoping for help from the United States because it’s very difficult to live under threat and discouragement a long time.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

ERLC signs letter urging religious liberty in Nigeria

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) recently joined several human rights organizations and religious freedom advocates in signing a letter urging Congress to address the ongoing religious persecution taking place in Nigeria.

The [letter](#), signed by ERLC President Brent Leatherwood, was sent to members of Congress on Tuesday (Dec. 12) and officially entered into congressional record by Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.).

The document comes in advance of the U.S. State Department releasing its annual list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs), which documents nations where religious freedom is limited or religious persecution is experienced.

Nigeria was [omitted](#) from the CPC list the past two years after being included in 2020’s list. Hannah Daniel, policy director for the ERLC, said the letter urges Congress to return Nigeria to the CPC list.

“It is reprehensible that the U.S. government has repeatedly turned a blind eye to the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in Nigeria, and we continue to urge them to use all tools available, including the Country of Particular Concern designation, to push back against this evil,” Daniel said.

The letter was also signed by other religious and human rights advocacy groups such as Alliance Defending Freedom, Global Christian Relief, Family Research Council, Religious Freedom Institute, American Association of Evangelicals and more.

When presenting the letter to Congress, Rep. Smith stressed the immensity of the situation in Nigeria.

“Mr. Speaker, I include in the record the following letter, drafted by respected experts — including former members of Congress — in the field of religious freedom, and sent to members on Capitol Hill today, underscoring the dire state of religious freedom in Nigeria, and calling for that country to be designated a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998,” Smith said in his remarks.

“Their stark appraisal of the situation, and the immediate threat to the lives of thousands of Nigerians, merits immediate action by the Biden Administration.”

The letter asks Congress to “urgently respond to the Department of State’s failure to adequately address egregious, systematic, and ongoing religious persecution in Nigeria.

“We specifically urge Nigeria’s designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the IRFA and the appointment of a special envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region,” the letter states. “Additionally, we urge you to support and cosponsor the bi-partisan legislation authored by Rep. Chris Smith and Rep. Henry Cuellar House Resolution 82, which calls for the State Department to carry out these two steps.

“As Africa’s most populous country and its largest economy, Nigeria wields significant influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. By allowing religious persecution to proliferate within its borders, Nigeria is compounding already heightened regional insecurity. Both American interests and the International Religious Freedom Act require a response.”

[House Resolution 82, introduced](#) by Smith in January, calls for the Biden administration to add Nigeria to the CPC list, as well as appoint a Special Envoy to Nigeria and the surrounding Lake Chad Region to “monitor and combat atrocities in the region.”

Smith serves as a senior member on the Foreign Affairs Committee and chairman of its Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations Subcommittee. Additionally, he serves as the co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

In a press release regarding Resolution 82, Smith said “the Biden Administration’s totally unjustified decision to retreat from the noble and necessary fight to protect victims of religious persecution puts even more people in jeopardy.”

Smith once again [pressed the administration](#) over the matter during a congregational hearing he led this June regarding the state of religious freedom around the world.

“I am concerned that the U.S. State Department is not using all the tools provided to hold guilty parties accountable,” Smith said about the on-going persecution of Christians and other faith groups in Nigeria.

During the past two years when Nigeria was not given the CPC designation, [frequent reports](#) of Christian [persecution](#), often times carried out by terrorist groups, have [come forward](#).

In 2023, [media reports](#) state [hundreds of Christians have been killed](#) in terrorist attacks that have often targeted women and children.

In May of this year, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) [wrote in its annual report](#) that Nigeria, along with four other countries, should be added back to the CPC list.

USCIRF cited Nigeria as the most dangerous country for Christians to live.

The recent congressional letter, also signed by a USCIRF representative, cites statistics from persecution watchdog group Open Doors, which state 90 percent of all the Christians killed for their faith worldwide in 2022 were killed in Nigeria. This is an increase from the 80 percent it reported in 2021.

More than 5,000 Nigerian Christians were reportedly killed for their faith in 2022.

According to [media reports](#), USCIRF leaders recently met with Secretary of State Antony Blinken to once again urge him to place Nigeria on the CPC list. Reports say the State Department is expected to release the 2023 CPC list in the coming weeks, although some expected the list to already be published by Friday, Dec. 15.

Daniel said advocating for Christians in Nigeria is a necessity.

“As believers, we know that if one part of the body suffers, we all share in that suffering. The cries of our brothers and sisters around the world experiencing severe persecution and even death for clinging to the truth of the Gospel cannot be ignored,” Daniel said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Cockes is a writer in Nashville.

Street evangelism works in East Asian megacity

“Street evangelism just doesn’t work here.”

That’s what Markus Feirer was told by members of the church he was training in evangelism. The International Mission Board missionary didn’t believe the church members were right.

Walking up and down the streets of the East Asian megacity, people were everywhere, yet they were so disconnected. Looking down at their phones while they boarded buses and metros. AirPods in ear as they crossed the street. No one stopping — all laser focused on reaching their next destination.

But there is a special space where the hustle and bustle of city life ceases — the parks. Ponds, playgrounds and walking paths welcome people to slow down. Turtles and ducks coexist in their natural habitats. Trees shield the serenity of the park from tall buildings lining the background.

It’s an oasis, and there, away from the stresses of life for just a moment, sometimes people are more open for a stranger, with a welcoming smile and a Gospel tract, to start a conversation about what they believe and why.

Street evangelism isn’t always Feirer’s preferred method of sharing the Gospel. He loves building relationships and sharing the Gospel organically. Throughout his 24-year ministry with the IMB, the missionary, who claims that he doesn’t have the spiritual gift of evangelism, has found street evangelism effective.

Feirer and his wife Mary spend their days training churches in evangelism and discipleship in East Asia. The missionary couple also focuses on cross-cultural missions mobilization, sending national church members to unreached peoples in neighboring countries.

As the couple visited a large church for the area — around 300 members — they decided to investigate, with the church, if their theories about street evangelism were correct. They headed to a local park to spread the Good News. Only four or five showed up for the first evangelism excursion. The ones that did show were hesitant.

Feirer prayed before the group went out. He didn’t want to overwhelm these believers. He wanted this park evangelism trip to be a valuable experience — one they’d want to repeat over and over.

God answered his prayers.

Feirer approached a young man looking down at his phone.

“Has anyone ever told you that God loves you?” Feirer asked.

“No,” the young man responded.

“I have a story I’d like to tell you that shows how much God loves you,” Feirer said.

Taking a “Gospel Cube” — a cube that explains Christ’s sacrifice and how it reconciles sinners to God — the pair spoke for 10 minutes.

“Are you willing to make Christ your Savior and Lord?” Feirer asked.

“Yes,” the man responded.

Feirer prayed with the young man to receive Christ and left him with information about the church so he could plug in and grow in his newfound faith.

The five from the church watched in amazement from a distance. How could this foreigner do this? After about half an hour of having meaningful conversations with strangers with Feirer’s guidance, one of the church members decided it was time.

“Let’s break in groups here. Let’s try to do this now,” the member said. They went out, two-by-two, into the park and shared the Gospel, cold turkey — something they’d never known was possible.

It’s been two years since this training. But still, week in and week out, the church is faithful to go share the Gospel.

One member, a chef, has dedicated herself to this practice. Each week, when the church goes out, they end in a time of debrief. The street evangelists have learned to not even wait for her to join them, because she’s always out late. Whether she’s just handing out Gospel tracts or presenting the Gospel, this member is excited about the work and effective in what she does.

Because they stepped out, even while doubting, and tried a new approach to evangelism, this East Asian church is impacting its community with the Gospel, every Thursday, like clockwork. They know they’ll be rejected at times but what joy they do have when someone hears and accepts the message!

“It’s become part of their DNA. I give glory to God for that,” Feirer said.
Some names have been changed for security purposes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myriah Snyder is senior writer/editor for the IMB.

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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