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Telling the story
of Michigan Baptists

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The goodie is gone

by Tim Patterson

PLYMOUTH, MI – I am not writing about the pandemic. We all are in information and disinformation overload. I am not denying the severity of the situation, but sometimes we just need a break. Virus fatigue has set in and some are beginning to feel and see the effects of stress and anger leaking out. This situation has made for some very tough times.

If you are like me, you are probably experiencing a day or days when it seems as though all the goodie has been scraped out of your Oreo. A day when everything that could go wrong has gone wrong? If you are like me, you not only have those kinds of days, but those kinds of weeks, months and even years!

One morning you wake up to the startling realization that someone in the night has stolen the sweet child that you gave life to and replaced it with an alien. That alien has taken on the form of a hormone-crazed teenager and he or she may look like your child, but you are positive that this creature that has been transformed into an obnoxious, self-absorbed, rude, smelly, sleeping and eating machine that did not come from your loins!

Or could it be that one day the bank called and said that it is customary to have money in the bank if you want to write checks, and that the last ones you wrote were most likely printed on rubber. Many have received that phone call, letter, email or speech that says, "I don't love you anymore and I am leaving," or that really stupid one that says, "I love you but I'm just not in love with you." Puuuuleeeees!!!!

Or could it be that you have slipped into a time warp called the COVID-19 PANDEMIC where time and all life has been put on hold. Everything is upside down and reality has become one big blur? These are the kinds of events in life that can make you feel like the bird in this story.

One day, the woman was cleaning the bottom of Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner when the telephone rang. She reached for the telephone without removing the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner from the cage, which was a mistake. The vacuum cleaner nozzle got pointed in the direction of poor little Chippie, and he was suddenly sucked up into the machine.

When the woman looked back at the cage and realized what had happened, she was horrified. She dropped the telephone, turned off the vacuum cleaner and ripped open the dust bag to get to her little bird. Chippie was a real mess, but he was still alive. She raced to the kitchen sink and turned the water on full force on Chippie. The more she tried to wash him, the worse he looked, so she took him to the bathroom and started trying to dry Chippie with her hair dryer—full force and high heat. Finally, she got the bird dry and put him back in his cage. Several days later, a friend called and asked how Chippie was doing. "He's alive," she said, "but he just sits in his cage and stares out into space. And," she added thoughtfully, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore."

Just one question, do you sing much anymore? Have the enormous vacuums of life sucked all the joy and song from your heart? The best hope and answer I can give to you is the one that God gives to all his children. Keep your eyes on Him and off of your circumstances. They will pass away, but He will not.

Psalm 30:5 – "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning."

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.

Girl's 1960's blue bike

by Tony Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – Mom gently pulled pieces of gravel out of the skin of my bleeding knees and my swollen red palms. She worked one knee then another and then moved onto the palms in a circuit. She could tell by my silent trembling when I had reached my limit enduring the pick, pick, pick. After nearly twenty-minutes of cleaning my wounds the knees were numb, but the palms still burned. I recall my mother pouring peroxide then mercurochrome over the tender spots. Peroxide bubbled, but didn't hurt. The mercurochrome was red and had a pungent odor; it stung so badly the only cure was to furiously wave my hands in the air or blow continually on the wound until the sting subsided.

My childhood memories come from Flint, Michigan. I passed my earliest rites of passage there. Back then during 1960-something, children roamed the neighborhood freely from yard to yard. We dropped in on friends unannounced. We yelled through the screen doors into the house, "Mrs. White, can Jeff, Bruce and Philip come out to play?" The mother would reply from somewhere in the house without approaching the doorway, "Tony, as soon as the boys get their chores done I will send them down to your house." A commotion would start-up in the house as the three brothers raced to finish everything on the chore list.

As summer days lingered lazily onward toward nightfall, the parents throughout the neighborhood would instruct their children to return home with the same universal signal.

“When you see the porch lights come-on, you hurry your tails back home. Nothing good comes at night.” After returning home, each of the families would gather on their front porch recounting the day’s events to one another. Dad told a story about a mishap at the factory. Mom brought us up-to-date on news from talking with her twin sister over the phone.

On one of those evenings, there was enough daylight left that it was time for me to learn to ride a bike, which required the gravel be removed from my knees and hands. I’m not certain as to the origin of the 1960-something girl’s blue bicycle. It may have belonged to my older cousin who lived a block away from our house. She was older and at times seemed more like an aunt than a cousin to me. I guess that she had outgrown it and passed it down to our family.

The street in front of my childhood house was called Donaldson Boulevard. It sounds impressive, but it wasn’t. It was a simple roadway with gravel, potholes and a gradual downhill slope. It was a perfect practice site for someone learning to ride a bike. My father and mother took turns coaching me from the front porch as to how to roll the bicycle to the top of the street, then position the bike to face the downhill slope. Having a girl’s bike allowed me to locate the pedals so that I could push off when I started my ride. With the lower center bar of a girl’s bicycle, I could easily move my leg across the frame and place both feet on the pedals. By the way, did I mention that when I learned there was no such thing as training wheels?

After almost running into ditches, mailbox posts, and tumbling onto the rough surface I still recall the exhilaration I felt when I conquered balancing the bike without falling. Braking without putting my feet down. Pushing the pedals back to get the bike to stop. Coming to a complete stop without having to jump off the bicycle. In between falls there were moments of success! I was happy and felt like I grew-up a little more that day. My final ride that night was a careful turn onto the front lawn where I laid down the girl’s blue bicycle as the cool of the evening made the grass feel chilly and wet. To be totally honest, as a boy I felt like the cowboy in the western movie who had tamed a wild stallion. My confidence grew tremendously that night.

As the blue sky faded to black, the moon started to shine and the stars started to gleam. I joined my sister and parents on the cement porch in front of our square 30’x30’ house. The porch was still warm from the long summer day’s sunshine. Mom had already laid out a quilt for my sister and me to snuggle on, and wrapped us up like a giant taco. Taking a few seconds, my mother entered then returned from the bathroom medicine cabinet with the peroxide and mercurochrome. Before stepping back onto the porch, Mom turned off the front porch light since everyone was safe at home. When she did the obscure sky turned into a canopy of thousands of tiny white lights above our heads. It was stunning. It was calming.

This month, as all of us in our workplaces, families, churches and communities start to consider re-entering back into what we once called normal life, I hope we can find healthy ways to help our children replace their anxiety with calm and their fear with faith.

I love Psalm 78 (New Living Translation) because it reminds us to build confidence in our children when it comes to God. Verse 4 says, “We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders.” Verses 5-7 amplify that message with, “He commanded our ancestors to teach them to their children, so the next generation might know them – even the children not yet born – and they in turn will teach their own children. So, each generation should set its hope anew on God, not forgetting his glorious miracles and obeying his commands.”

In the new days ahead of us we may be able to build up the confidence of our children in the Lord through four simple ways:

1. Let’s speak prayers of assurance of God’s care over us as we start the day. The Lord is with us when the bike ride goes well and even when we fall braking ourselves with knees and palms.
2. Let’s read Scripture and biblical accounts of God’s people faced their tough times trusting God: Joseph of the Old Testament, David and his brothers or Psalms.
3. Let’s listen to and sing songs of praise at home, in the car and in the yard as we play outside in God’s creation. Replacing the news with praise will build up our kids.
4. Let’s allow older adults to share with little ones appropriate stories of moments when confidence in God helped overcome a personal crisis or obstacle.

Like my parents when I learned to ride a bike, the Lord is near us even during our trials. Children sometimes need to be reminded of God’s continual presence and power during frightful moments. My parents coached me from the front porch. They offered guidance and encouragement. They knew I would carry some scars from learning to ride the bicycle. They had a first-aid kit prepared to clean my wounds.

The Lord will do even more for today’s generations if we will remember to “tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders,” (Psalm 78:4, NLT).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony 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.

The Church is still the Church

by Mike Durbin

PLYMOUTH, MI – It's unbelievable - church buildings all over Michigan have been closed for weeks. These places where we gather to love God, each other, and the community around us, have been empty of the worship, prayer, community, and service we express to God when we're together. It's been hard for us as believers not to be in person with our church families. We have deep and abiding friendships in our church family, and we miss each other. It's been a surreal time and we are longing to be the church gathered once again.

And yet, closed buildings did not stop Michigan Baptist churches! You worshiped, served, connected, gave, and shared the Gospel during all this. You are the church of the living God. When the stories of what happened during this pandemic are written, they will tell of how you made difficult decisions and embraced new strategies to advance God's Kingdom. They will tell of how:

You expressed love by making the gut-wrenching decision to stop corporate worship gatherings.

It was an agonizing decision for pastors and churches to make. Little was known about COVID-19 in the early days. It was declared a worldwide pandemic and action had to be taken to "flatten the curve." For churches, that meant stopping the gatherings that define who we are as the called-out people of God. Closing buildings radically demonstrated your love for each other and your community.

You embraced radical change for the sake of the mission.

It's incredibly impressive how quickly Michigan Baptist Churches pivoted from worship services in buildings to worship services online during this pandemic. Change is hard. Radical change is even harder. It only took days for churches to embrace a new way of doing things. We adopted the changes necessary to stay relevant and connected. Change—radical change—is possible for the sake of the Gospel.

You reached out to help sister churches.

Churches all over our state are streaming services—many that had never done so before. You helped each other learn what needed to be done. Pastors helped pastors. Churches helped churches. You shared everything from equipment to best practices as you continued being the church. These online services will never replace the church gathered, but they did allow the church to stay connected. They have been a powerful resource for this time and moving forward.

You focused outwardly like never before.

Often, what happens in our buildings becomes the focus of what we are doing as churches. Leading a church takes incredible time, energy, and resources. If we are not careful, churches become inwardly focused. It becomes about what happens when we are together. As important as church gatherings are and what happens as we gather, so too is the mission of the church to make disciples of all people. God designed the church to be inwardly strong, outwardly focused.

COVID-19 has dramatically caused us to get the Gospel beyond the walls of our buildings and the result has been amazing. Churches all over Michigan are reporting that more people are engaging in online services than they had in attendance at their worship services. Some are reporting surprising increases. Stories are being shared of people from across Michigan, the United States, and other countries participating online with Michigan Baptist churches. That's incredible!

More people are hearing the Gospel and that's a good thing! People are placing their faith in Christ. Even though the use of our buildings has temporarily not been viable during this pandemic, it did not stop Michigan Baptists. Well done and to God be the glory!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Durbin is the State Evangelism Director for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before joining the state convention staff, Mike served as Church Planting Catalyst and Director of Missions in Metro Detroit since 2007. He also has served as a pastor and bi-vocational pastor in Michigan, as well as International Missionary to Brazil.

What we DO know

by Nancy Spears

ROSCOMMON, MI – Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center is currently closed. We don't know yet when it will open or what the rest of the summer looks like. It seems that we have said those words a million times. Staff meetings have been interesting here, as we try to plan and speculate what is ahead. Meetings end with these words "We Don't Know!" So we proceed doing what we do know.

The bathhouse is open and the campground has been inspected. When will we be able to open? We don't know.

The fallen tree by Pinegrove has been cut up and stacked for summer fires at Pinegrove. Will we be able to rent that space or use it for retreats? We don't know. Currently the building is winterized and ready for a long winter's nap in spite of the 90 degree temperature on camp today.

The bathrooms in Cabin 2 have a fresh coat of paint. Just a few more details are needed to finish the renovation that we began early this year. The on-demand water heater is going to be a money saver for that facility and met with guest approval in January. We will be ready for the influx of youth at summer camps if we are able to open. But for now You guessed it We don't know.

Staff housing has been rearranged, freeing up previously occupied spaces for rental. The beach house has a kitchen and room for lots of guests. Currently winterized, there is just one thing to tweak there. Should we be ready? Can we rent it this summer? We don't know. The water is getting warmer. We are preparing to work on the docks. Yes, the fish are biting. A swan is social distancing on the lake. Can you come here? At this point, day trips for family groups would be acceptable. All of our buildings are closed, but the bathhouse is open. Please let us know if you want to do a day trip so that we can discuss details and put it on our schedule.

No overnight stays, at least until June 12 if the current executive order is rescinded. Currently, vacation rentals are not allowed, (*Executive Order 2020-96, 13*) nor is traveling to vacation spots for short term stays (*Executive Order 2020-96, 8c*).

So, what about camps this summer? We don't know. Currently, the order is 10 or fewer for a group that can gather. For some of us, that is just our family group. And that is what is being advised ... only household gatherings. We all know that a camp of only 10 is not possible. We currently are waiting to see what the gathering numbers will be for the summer and will adjust as we can. Although many camps have already cancelled for the summer, we are still hanging on to a thread of hope.

This has been a difficult season for the Bambi staff. No doubt, there has been plenty to do with facility and property maintenance. But we had to cancel reservations for Memorial Day Weekend, a long standing tradition for many families. Girl's camp, youth camps and church camps, for those who have come year after year, are camps that people plan their summer schedule around. Are these going to be cancelled for the first time in 60 years? We don't know.

What do we know? God is still God, even with all of our questions. We will continue to follow the authority of the government, which is mandated in scripture ... It does not keep us from loving God and loving others. And we know who holds tomorrow and no one can snatch us out of His hand. Truly, what else matters?

UPDATE: So excited!! Executive order 2020-96 has been rescinded. Social distancing is still in effect for non-related family, but the outdoor gathering number has been increased to 100. We will open the campground on Monday, June 8th. Hopeful for August events!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy has been a Christian since 1978 and served in various positions in church and WMU. She began working at BSCM in 2013. Four years later, God placed a desire, then a call to serve at Bambi Lake where she is blessed to work with an excellent director and staff. God gives her opportunity at Bambi to use the hobbies she enjoys – to bake, sew and decorate for the camp, as well as some down time to knit, crochet and quilt. Nancy is married to Daniel, a wonderful and understanding man who encourages her to serve where God calls. She has 5 children, 13 grandchildren and one great grandchild. They all love spending time at Bambi Lake.

Southern Baptist leaders issue joint statement on the death of George Floyd

by BP Staff

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – Southern Baptist leaders have published a statement grieving the recent death of George Floyd and calling for the end of "racial inequity in the distribution of justice in our country."

The statement, co-authored by SBC president J.D. Greear and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary president Jamie Dew was unanimously signed by all SBC officers, entity heads and state convention executive directors.

Statement on the death of George Floyd

As a convention of churches committed to the equality and dignity of all people, Southern Baptists grieve the death of George Floyd, who was killed May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minn.

While all must grieve, we understand that in the hearts of our fellow citizens of color, incidents like these connect to a long history of unequal justice in our country, going back to the grievous Jim Crow and slavery eras. The images and information we have available to us in this case are horrific and remind us that there is much more work to be done to ensure that there is not even a hint of racial inequity in the distribution of justice in our country. We grieve to see examples of the misuse of force, and call for these issues to be addressed with speed and justice.

While we thank God for our law enforcement officers that bravely risk their lives for the sake of others and uphold justice with dignity and integrity, we also lament when some law enforcement officers misuse their authority and bring unnecessary harm on the people they are called to protect. We further grieve with our minority brothers and sisters in the wake of George Floyd's death, pray for his family and friends and greatly desire to see the misuse of force and any inequitable distributions of justice come to an end.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Bible speaks to matters of justice and human dignity. We are taught by Scripture that human beings are distinct among the rest of creation as those beings which bear the divine image. From the beginning of life to the end, all human beings, both male and female--of all ethnicities, colors and ages--are sacred beings that God values and loves.

Throughout the law, the prophets, the gospels and the entire canon of Scripture, murder is condemned and God's people are called to protect the vulnerable. The Bible further condemns injustice and the misuse of authority and force. And in the example of Jesus Christ, God's people are called to love others, care for their needs, grieve with them in brokenness and labor for the well-being of our neighbor. To follow Christ is to follow in these examples He puts before us.

Therefore, as a matter of Christian obedience and devotion, followers of Jesus Christ cannot remain silent when our brothers and sisters, friends and/or people we seek to win for Christ are mistreated, abused or killed unnecessarily.

Therefore, we pray for our local, state, and national leaders as they seek justice, and call on them to act quickly and diligently to ensure that these situations are brought to an end. As a people, Southern Baptists stand ready to help towards that end. May God give us His favor, help and strength in this effort.

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The concept of community

by Torion Bridges

REDFORD, MI – For many of us we're living in the new normal of being scattered, not gathered, and we're watching the very fabric of our lives being ripped apart. For some, a gathering isn't just about hearing the word, it's about the chance to be among folks who offer support, wisdom and love. For me, the concept of community was one I learned early. I was blessed to have an array of aunts and uncles, godparents, grandparents and friends' parents who looked out for me. Way before it was a catch phrase or a book title, my life was one that took root in the African proverb of "it takes a village to raise a child". It wasn't just my life that seemed to be like this, my friends by virtue of this rearing became extended family. Webster's Dictionary defines the word 'community' as: a unified body of individuals: such as; a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society. Yet to be honest, I never thought of it like that. I thought of a community simply as this: a place where love is.

For more than two months, we've been without our Christian community, simply put, we miss our church homes. See Burt Bacharach argued way before I was born that what the world needed now was love. But I'd like to argue that what the world misses and needs now is community. See COVID-19 isn't just a horrible virus for medical reasons, it's horrible because it's robbed us of our community and celebrations associated with it. We've missed our prayer meetings and church services. We've missed celebration services recognizing milestones in our families from birthdays to graduations. Yet the oddest part is seemingly this, we're not even able to mourn the loss of our loved ones.

On March 30th, our church lost a member, but I lost one of the members of my community when one of my best friends, Thomas Fields became one of the first COVID-19 fatalities here in Southeast Michigan. Thomas, an only child, a Navy Veteran who served his country honorably, a world class chef, father to Ethan, teacher at his old elementary/middle school, early supporter, consistent believer in and tactician in ensuring other people reached their dreams is now gone. Honestly, as his pastor, I know he's gone as I eulogized him. I planned the service. I picked the suit out for him to wear. But as a friend I somehow have hope that he's just gone on another tour of duty protecting this country abroad. A longstanding member of my community is gone, and it seems as if it happened before it was supposed to, after all he was only 32.

I had no idea when we became friends that his funeral would be the first funeral I'd ever preside over. I had no idea that my closest friends, family and church would be stunned by his death. I had no idea I'd have the strength to do any of the things I did during this time. Yet what I do know is this, GOD knew, and for such a time as this I'd have a new community to lean on, The Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM), North American Mission Board (NAMB), and my brothers in the Send Network. When word got out about Thomas's passing they went into action. Calls from all over the state and country came out of nowhere, and they weren't empty sympathy calls. My family and I felt loved. My big brothers in the faith, Shea Prisk, Tony Lynn, and Ken Nether as well as my entire cohort of planters in the Send Network Training came

around me and covered me. I drew strength from their love, their brotherhood, our community.

Due to the effects of COVID-19, we're missing the sense of community we seemingly took for granted. We took for granted the ability to gather, to love on, to care for one another. We took for granted our villages, and truthfully, we miss them. When I answered my call to church planting, my family and I auditioned or interviewed several networks and the Send Network and NAMB stuck out because they talked about two things: Brotherhood and Community. I knew I didn't want to walk this alone, and I didn't want my wife to feel alone either. Little did I know it would be in the midst of a global pandemic that my new community would step up for us.

As for Thomas's memory and legacy, we've taken on a greater role by supporting his son, and we're pushing forward with a program to provide hot meals for 150 families a week. Thomas envisioned Commonwealth Church to be a place where people would not only be fed spiritually, but physically, too. Through our kitchen we will provide hot meals, no questions asked, to 150 families in our community. We're thankful the project has the support of the BSCM, and Merriman Road Baptist Church. Our aim through this program is to fill a physical need for the 16 weeks of Summer while schools are closed and not able to provide families with additional food. It's in times like this that we should love our neighbors harder, and I'm thankful it's in times like this that my Michigan Baptist family hugged me tighter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Torion Bridges is the Lead Pastor of The Commonwealth of Faith Church in Redford. He and his wife Jasmine are the proud parents of Hunter (age 2) and Hannah (7 months). Torion is a bi-vocational church planter serving who loves using the art of storytelling to WIN souls for the Kingdom. If you are interested in partnering with the Commonwealth of Faith Church, please contact : info@commonwealthoffaith.org

SBC leaders commend CDC guidelines to churches

by Tom Strobe

WASHINGTON, D.C. (BP) – Southern Baptist leaders commended to churches the new federal guidelines for restoring in-person worship gatherings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, even as efforts to resolve conflicts between state governments and faith communities continue.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued interim guidelines May 22 that reminded state and local officials to take the First Amendment right of religious liberty into account when they institute reopening policies. No church or other religious group should be called on to enact "mitigation strategies" stricter than those requested of "similarly situated entities or activities," the CDC said.

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), said the guidance "seems reasonable and helpful."

"The tone is, appropriately, not a directive to churches but counsel based on the medical data," Moore said in a news release. "The CDC guidance is not a blueprint, but it is a prompt to help leaders as they think through what questions to ask.""

Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee, said the government should "trust the churches" as it does businesses and other entities, but urged pastors to carefully consider the CDC guidance in determining how to safely reopen their churches.

"Just as the government is trusting others to reopen businesses, sports and entertainment experiences, the government also needs to trust the churches who have been providing care and love for their communities during this crisis," Floyd said in written comments. "Pastors and churches should understand the CDC guidelines, work within their local contexts and take necessary actions to reopen their facilities in a safe and responsible manner.

"Also in this regathering process, each community of faith will need to operate weekly in a very agile manner to make any needed adjustments."

In developments after the CDC guidelines were released:

- Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz issued an executive order May 23 permitting worship services to resume May 27 at 25 percent capacity if religious groups abide by social distancing and other public health instructions. Walz's order came after some church groups said their congregations would begin meeting without his permission.
- A Southern California church has asked the U.S. Supreme Court, in an emergency appeal, for relief from Gov. Gavin Newsom's order so that it can resume corporate worship.

The CDC released its guidelines the same afternoon President Trump identified religious bodies as "essential" and called on governors "to allow our churches and places of worship to open right now," according to The Washington Post. Trump threatened to "override" them if they did not do so, according to the newspaper.

The CDC guidance offers various safety recommendations but stops short of across-the-board mandates. It encourages churches and other faith groups to promote social distancing, to urge

the use of cloth face coverings, to increase cleaning and disinfection of objects and facilities, and to reduce the sharing of worship materials such as hymnals.

Moore commended the guidelines, which are available at the CDC website:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html>.

"Such counsel is hard to make specific since practices differ so much from congregation to congregation, even within the same religion or denomination," he said. "Every church I know is working through a staging plan, telling their members what benchmarks they are looking for to know when to re-gather, how they will then phase that re-gathering in, and what steps they will take to ensure safety when they do.

"People want to be confident that when their church reopens every reasonable precaution is taken, and that's exactly what I see church leaders doing. The CDC guidance will come as a reassurance to many churches that their hard work in planning out the path back to worship is, in most cases, in line with the recommendations of health officials."

In Minnesota, Walz's previous executive order allowed 50 percent capacity in retail stores but limited worship services to no more than 10 people. In a May 20 letter, the Minnesota Catholic Conference and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in Minnesota wrote Walz to say that despite the order, their churches would resume worship services May 26 at 33 percent capacity with social distancing and strict hygiene rules.

In issuing the new executive order May 23, Walz said it was issued after consultation with faith leaders.

"As the CDC allows for places of worship to reopen, I have partnered with faith leaders to ensure there are clear public health guidelines to do so as safely as possible," he said.

Catholic and Lutheran leaders welcomed Walz's new order. Eric Rassbach -- vice president and senior counsel at Becket, a religious liberty advocacy organization representing both groups -- commended Walz "for seeing the light."

"Minnesota is setting an example by recognizing the importance of giving equal treatment to churches and other houses of worship, and that worship services can be conducted safely, cooperatively and responsibly," Rassbach said.

Leo Endel, executive director of the Minnesota-Wisconsin Baptist Convention, said after a May 22 conference call with Walz's office: "The general sense among the evangelical denominational executives is that we want to be careful, but we want a road map, clear guidance and churches being treated on an equal basis. Everyone plans to take precaution with social distancing, masks, sanitizing, etc."

In California, Newsom's executive order allows retail stores and restaurants to open with social distancing in Phase 2 of reopening but postpones worship services until Phase 3.

South Bay United Pentecostal Church in Chula Vista and its pastor, Arthur Hodges, asked the Supreme Court May 24 to grant an injunction that would enable it to hold worship services, Politico reported. The church's request of the high court came after a panel of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco refused to provide relief in a 2-1 decision May 22.

In a May 19 letter, U.S. Assistant Attorney General Eric Dreiband told Newsom: "Religious gatherings may not be singled out for unequal treatment compared to other nonreligious gatherings that have the same effect on the government's public health interest, absent the most compelling reasons."

Church United, a coalition that represents more than 2,500 pastors in California, has announced worship services will resume with their congregations May 31 regardless of the governor's order.

Bill Agee, executive director of the California Southern Baptist Convention, encouraged Newsom in a May 15 letter to move churches to Phase 2 of his reopening plan, according to a spokesman for the convention.

As of 12:30 p.m. EDT May 26, more than 98,400 deaths from COVID-19 and 1.67 million confirmed cases have been reported in the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The overwhelming majority of churches and other religious bodies have abided by government policies during the pandemic. This has resulted in such alternatives as online and drive-in services instead of in-person, corporate worship.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Strode is Washington bureau chief for Baptist Press.

COVID-19 hampers Michigan Baptist response to historic flooding

by Diana Chandler

MIDLAND, MI (BP) – Historic flooding in middle Michigan during the COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges for Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) disaster relief.

As the BSCM mobilizes flood response teams, feeding units, damage assessors and chaplains, BSCM state disaster relief director Bob Kiger says some volunteers might find the work too risky. Most volunteers are retirees in the age group most vulnerable to the coronavirus.

"That's liable to affect the amount of people we have, because we don't have a lot of young volunteers," Kiger told Baptist Press.

He's mobilizing aid to an estimated 10,000 people displaced from their homes when the Edenville and Sanford dams were breached after heavy rainfall. Flooding from the Tittabawassee River covered rooftops in Edenville, Midland and Sanford, small towns about 150 miles northwest of Detroit. Residents hadn't suffered such flooding since heavy rains in 1986, which had been described as a 100-year or 500-year event.

The BSCM is also challenged because many flood evacuees are refusing to enter shelters where disaster relief volunteers can most easily respond to their needs and concerns. Instead, some are sleeping near shelters in their cars.

"There are some shelters that are open, but people are hesitant to go into the shelters because of COVID-19, which is extremely bad up here," Kiger said. "A lot of people stayed in their cars outside the shelter. ... We don't want somebody sitting outside of the shelter and starve to death because they're afraid to go inside.

"What the church is going to be able to do is make sure these people have food," Kiger said, "and possibly guarantee them that they will at least be socially distanced from everybody else" inside shelters.

The death toll from the coronavirus has surpassed 5,000 in Michigan, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

Saxton, a 65-year-old disaster relief volunteer at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Midland, was forced out of his home as the dams failed.

Saxton said he is thankful the Tittabawassee River crested at about three feet below the forecast 38 feet, which kept flood waters about nine feet at his home. While his basement was flooded completely, the first floor of his home sustained about six inches of water.

"When the two dams failed, they predicted a crest of 38 feet, which is five feet higher than we had in 1986," Saxton said. "Yesterday afternoon, it crested at 35.08 feet, and it crested three hours early. ... If it had come up another three feet, that would have done another two and a half feet through my house, on the main living structure floor."

Saxton and his wife Joyce, both trained disaster relief volunteers, are sheltered at Emmanuel Baptist with about 30 residents and counselors who had to evacuate The Open Door of Midland rescue mission. The church has a dormitory-style area designed to house disaster relief volunteers and others, but Saxton is thankful he and Joyce grabbed two cots from their home basement as they fled the flood.

"We're in the same storm, but we're all in different boats," Saxton said. "But God's totally in charge of all the boats. Some people might be closer to shore and not be as troubled. Some may be out in the deep water with the bigger waves."

Emmanuel is one of 11 churches in the Bay Area Baptist Association, which serves 11 counties. Associational Missionary David Roberts said none of the church buildings was flooded, but many members' homes were damaged.

"Members in those churches have definitely been affected," Roberts said. "We're small in number, but we're large in territory."

No deaths had been reported, but mud-out work is stalled until the flood waters recede.

Kiger is coordinating Michigan Southern Baptists' response with state police, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other volunteer groups. Alabama and Missouri Southern Baptist disaster relief units have already volunteered to help, Kiger said, and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has offered protective gear for volunteers.

Kiger appreciates prayer.

"You never think it's going to happen to you, I guess, especially these people in Midland," he said. "Because they had in '86 the once in a 500-year flood, and we went up and cleaned out homes in 2017 because they had a flood then. ... And here it is again."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' general assignment writer/editor. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists' concerns nationally and globally.

Church replanters' online ministry strategy helps Indiana church bridge social distance

by Trennis Henderson

RICHMOND, IN – It wasn't quite the celebration that Dan and Chris Conrades had in mind as Crosspoint Church marked its 4th anniversary as a vibrant, growing church replant in Richmond, Indiana. But they still were determined to make the best of a challenging situation as church members sheltered at home and gathered online to mark the congregation's ministry milestone.

"I cannot believe that today is Crosspoint Church's 4th birthday!!!" Chris posted on her Facebook page May 1. "Four years ago today we officially opened our doors and began our ministry here in Richmond.

"Today, I wish we were gathering at the church for a big party or cookout," wrote Chris, Crosspoint's praise team leader. "I miss my church family. But I am celebrating all that I am seeing God doing even during this quarantine to grow our church's faith and to give them a deeper love for each other."

Declaring that "I can only imagine what God is going to do in this upcoming year," she added, "I will warn you now that there WILL be a party as soon as this is all over." In the meantime, the Conrades posted a video on Facebook highlighting church activities and achievements over the past year.

They also secretly installed yard signs on church members' front lawns with the message, "We are praying for you! – Crosspoint Church." Several families responded on social media with notes such as: "I absolutely love my church! I mean, what other pastoral families would sneak into my yard late at night to leave an encouraging little gift for my family to wake up to?"

As church replanters, being flexible isn't anything new for Dan and Chris. They quickly discovered, however, that the coronavirus crisis created a slew of new ministry challenges and opportunities.

"March 15 was the last day we were all together," explained Dan, who serves as Crosspoint's lead pastor. "That same week was when Indiana started shutting everything down. We've had to figure out creative ways to keep our people engaged."

Since mid-March, they have turned to Facebook, Zoom and YouTube to stay connected with church members and the community. A typical week includes live streaming Dan's Sunday morning sermon on YouTube, Chris leading a women's video conference call and their 16-year-old daughter Ellie leading a Monday Zoom call for Crosspoint's children and youth.

Chris, who also teaches preschool Sunday School, even hosted a Zoom call with her 3- and 4-year-old “little people,” an entertaining online experience she described as “a little bit crazy.”

Intergenerational missions focus

The Conrades also are coordinating a churchwide Family Missions night via Zoom each Wednesday evening. It has become the online version of an innovative missions program they launched last year to merge Crosspoint’s missions discipleship efforts into one intergenerational gathering.

Before social distancing kicked in, the basic premise was that “everyone is together in one room and we are using our Woman’s Missionary Union curriculum to pray together, do crafts and Bible studies,” Chris noted. She said a key attraction of the study is the congregation learning about missionaries and missions discipleship as an interactive group ranging from preschoolers to adults.

“One of the greatest impacts that I’ve seen is that people are just assuming that we are going to be doing missions,” she pointed out. “It’s not a question in their mind. It’s a given that that’s just a part of who we are.”

As sheltering restrictions gradually are lifted, the Conrades are committed to continuing some version of Crosspoint’s Family Missions emphasis, including Zoom gatherings and a Parking Lot Prayer Night. Their Family Missions focus “is a resource that helps our people learn how valuable missions is,” Dan said. “One of my heartbeats as a pastor is to get our people on mission.”

A strong heart for missions

The Conrades’ mission journey to Crosspoint started several years ago when they began sensing God’s call to serve as church planters. As natives of Baltimore who were serving at a church in southern Indiana, they anticipated that God might call them to the Northeast with the bonus of moving back near extended family. Instead, He led them just a few hours across the state to a small, struggling congregation in east central Indiana. It had dwindled over the years from 200-plus members to a remnant of only 12 active members and was on the verge of closing its doors.

When they met with the small group of core members, “we just fell in love with them and the fact that they were ready for God to do something in this building because they believed God was not done with this place,” Dan said.

The Conrades became church replanters in partnership with the North American Mission Board and moved with their four children to Richmond, a county seat town with a population of 35,000. They helped Central Baptist Church officially conclude its ministry and then reconstituted in the same facility as Crosspoint Church.

Linda Leas, one of the few remaining members at Central Baptist, recounted that “we were coming to the point where we were putting our church on the altar and offering it to God and He has returned it to us with more than we could have asked for.”

“Our vision was to really build a healthy church that was focused on getting the gospel out to people but also was very focused on discipleship,” Dan said. He and Chris also share a strong heart for missions, nurtured in part by Chris’ strong background in Woman’s Missionary Union organizations from Mission Friends, Girls in Action and Acteens to WMU involvement on the associational, state and national levels.

“Even though I grew up in Baltimore where there’s not a lot of Southern Baptist churches, I always was a part of a church that had a very strong WMU presence,” Chris explained. As an Acteen, she attended the National Acteens Convention in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1994 “and that is where God called me to vocational ministry.”

“WMU has always just been exciting for me,” she shared. “I know if it were not for WMU, I would not be who I am today.”

Even as a young church replant, Crosspoint has established an international missions partnership with a small congregation in Colina, Chile. “Our church has just seen the value of missions and they’re seeing what God is doing in a context that’s outside of Richmond, Indiana,” Dan said. “They’re seeing that God is the God of the nations.”

“God designed us for fellowship”

After two months of worshipping together online, Crosspoint is preparing to move back to in-person church services and activities as social distancing guidelines allow. But there still are lots of questions about what gatherings will look like in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

As churches navigate life and ministry amid the pandemic’s ongoing impact, “I think one of the things a lot of pastors are worried about through this whole thing is people will get comfortable in their homes,” Dan acknowledged. “It’s easy to wake up on Sunday, stay in your pajamas, watch the livestream.”

By contrast, he said he hopes people will view sheltering in place and social distancing as “a reminder that God designed us for fellowship, for unity. We see that in the Trinity between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that perfect unity.

“Zoom calls are fun but they don’t take the place of being together in person, they just don’t,” he emphasized. “We need one another. We need to speak into one another’s lives.”

“This humungous unknown that has just been thrown at us has caused so many people to stop and think, ‘Do I really trust God? Do I believe what I’ve said I believed about Him?’” Chris

reflected. "My prayer is that our people will come to the right conclusion that God is trustworthy, that He is exactly who He has always said He is and we don't have to be afraid. We can walk in confidence.

"God is just whispering to our hearts that you can trust Me no matter what the outcome is," she concluded. "No matter what the story gets written like, you can trust Him."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trennis Henderson is a freelance national correspondent for the Woman's Missionary Union.

Church plants that meet in school buildings face reopening challenges

by Tess Schoonhoven

ATLANTA, GA (BP) – As the state of Georgia continues on a path to reopening, Christ Covenant Church is cautiously planning to resume in-person gatherings. But decisions about when and how to return are complicated by where.

Christ Covenant has called Sutton Middle School its Sunday home for 2 1/2 years. The church, which averaged about 500 in attendance before the COVID-19 pandemic, will be ready to reopen before the school does -- which has Jason Dees, Christ Covenant's pastor, searching for options that might even include a local synagogue on a temporary basis.

The church plans to begin Sunday (May 17) holding small gatherings of perhaps 30-40 people at a venue known as The Collective, while continuing to livestream the services. Meetings of the full congregation likely wouldn't resume until August, but securing a larger venue for later in the summer hasn't been simple.

"A lot of them are saying, 'well you can't meet here until we meet here,' so whenever they're comfortable having people in their building is a factor also," Dees explained.

Christ Covenant's quandary isn't unusual. Although numbers weren't readily available, Travis Smalley, Send City missionary with the North American Mission Board and pastor of Lakota Hills Baptist Church in West Chester, Ohio, said the practice of church plants holding services in schools has become "a large part of church planting."

"There's a lot of renting and leasing agreements," he said.

For those church plants, the ability to reopen is tied not only to general guidelines and safety protocols, but to school district policies.

Smalley noted that in Ohio, for example, where some school districts are contemplating alternate scheduling for the fall semester in order to protect students from the coronavirus, some school officials are newly hesitant about renting their facilities to outside groups. Some church plants might have to find new venues to meet.

"What I've been really praying for is the strengthening of relationships between [church plants and] some of the established churches that are here," Smalley said. "Maybe they could provide space and alternative times to some of our church plants to meet."

He suggested those relationships might grow beyond agreements for use of facilities and create partnerships for prayer, encouragement and help with scheduling.

Some decisions will depend on relationships already built between church plants and the schools they've been using to meet. Mark Ford, pastor of Go Church in Ridgefield, Wash., said during the plant's 18 months meeting at Sunset Ridge Intermediate School, a friendship has grown with the school district's superintendent.

The reopening plan set out by the state of Washington would allow Go Church to resume regular in-person meetings in Phase 4, likely in mid-July. Ford said the superintendent had assured him that the church would be able to host services at Sunset Ridge even if the school is not yet in session.

"We're gonna do everything we can with each phase," Ford said. "There's a lot up in the air."

Ford said Go Church members, like so many others, are realizing that even as the pandemic has pushed and stretched them to the edge of what they're able to handle, they've also been growing in unexpected ways.

"That's the nature of testing. You've got to go past the point of where you think you can't handle it anymore to grow," Ford said. "God isn't finished yet. Even though we want it to be over, He's just not quite finished yet. There's another mile or two in the race."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tess Schoonhoven is a Baptist Press staff writer.

Praise in the pandemic

by Stan Parker

LANSING, MI – The whole world has been impacted by the COVID-19 virus. Our nation and neighborhoods have not been excluded. As Christians, we have to choose how we are going to respond. Will we complain as we have seen some in the nation do, or will we respond as Jesus would desire us to respond?

On March 13, 2020 children from the Potter-Walsh neighborhood approached some members of Faith Fellowship Baptist Church. They were hungry. The children said that their schools are handing out lunches, but they are unable to receive it because no buses were operating. The scripture, Matthew 19:14 came to mind for those members, "But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

As a result, the members took the children into the church and provided lunch. The following week the Governor closed all schools which meant children in the neighborhood would need to be fed. So, a call went out seeking volunteers who would be willing to come, and prepare lunches for the children in the Potter-Walsh neighborhood during the pandemic.

The call was answered, and the 'Lunch on Us' Feeding Program was born. A group of volunteers rotate each week, and prepare 300 lunches weekly. The children are being fed each week. We praise God. After seeing smiles on the faces, one of the volunteers asked, "Why can't we put smiles on their hearts, too."

The next week gospel tracts were prayed over and added to the lunches. The following Monday the father of one of the children, came to pick up lunches for his entire family, and said he was thankful for the help, but was more thankful to receive a bonus. We asked what the bonus was; Jeff stated the gospel tract which prompted his son to read the track, and then asked why we don't go to church? The dad said he really didn't have an answer, but once the church opens back up, he and this family will start attending. Praise God.

The praise reports have continued. A mother has started attending a small group Bible Study and says she will join us in worship once the doors of the church are opened. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has caused some pain, suffering, and even death, it has not shattered God's love. Thanks be to God we are able to praise him, even in the midst of a pandemic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Stan Parker, Pastor of Faith Fellowship Baptist Church Lansing, President of the Michigan African American Fellowship, married to Charlotte.

In the waiting

by Billy Walker

SOUTHGATE, MI – During this time of coping through COVID-19, I was reminded of a little song that we learned in the music class of my elementary school. The lyrics were, “Stop, look and listen, before you cross the street. Use your eyes, use your ears, then use your feet!” Beautiful, catchy lyrics with an equally compelling melody made this a huge hit with kids and parents alike.

Not really, but it was an easy song to teach and it was intended to help kids who were walking to and from school. You know, back when that was a thing! Is there a chance there is a scriptural and practical application from that long-ago tune that can help us as we move to the other side of this pandemic? For the most part, we need to concentrate on the first and last part of that song.

STOP

If this were a biblical story, it might start out as, “In the days of quarantine...” I was not prepared for hitting the pause button on life as we know it, but there can be no doubt that God has worked and still works through the stoppages. Noah building the ark, Joseph in prison, Moses in Midian, David as a shepherd in the fields. The periods of isolation were often preparation for what God was about to do. Even Jesus, at the beginning of His ministry, went off alone for 40 days. Sometimes it was by choice, but sometimes, there was no alternative. Ezekiel tells us that God stopped the progression of the Israelites in Egypt for a lengthy period of time because of their refusal to give up the idols they’d grown accustomed to and live up to His expectations (Ezekiel 20:7-8).

For the most part, we don’t like change – unless change comes by our choice. However, there are times when change is forced upon us for one reason or another. In WW2, curfews, rolling blackouts, and rations for food and gas became a way of life that most people did not choose, but realized its necessity. After 9/11, no more meeting your family at their arrival gate or getting to the airport 30 minutes ahead of time. Metal detectors and bag checks became the norm at theaters, concert venues and stadiums. Again, while not a personal choice, change had to occur. So, what changes will happen because of the coronavirus? And rather than think about how this is an attack on more of your personal freedoms, think about the church, your church and you. Why did God put a stop to life as we know it? Was there a lesson He wanted us to get? What about all of those spiritual disciplines that we often claim we don’t have time for? What did He want us to learn, but He had to stop the world so we would get it?

LOOK

Moses saw a burning bush, the Israelites saw the plagues converge on Egypt, Daniel saw what was to come, Elisha saw the mountains filled with angelic warriors. What does God want us to

see through this pandemic? He is moving the church forward – even through difficult days. The online service that we use to livestream our gatherings has seen more than 200,000 decisions for Christ since the beginning of the stay home stay safe order. And that is just one platform. We have had viewers and even gifts from across the country as the weeks turned into months. This type of ministry was not even on our radar at the beginning of 2020, but it was always in the mind of God. What does He want you to see?

LISTEN

1 Kings 19:12 says, “and after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice.” Isn’t there a chance that God had to stop the merry-go-round of our lives in order for us to listen to Him? I know I’m edging out on a weak limb here, but do you remember the high volume of disagreement that was being shared on social media pages even within our own denomination? THAT is what people were hearing. But within just a few days, a lot of that had stopped. We live in a world that often celebrates the one with the loudest voice (think political pundits on any major news network). But God speaks the loudest often in the stillness.

MOVE YOUR FEET

This is the final triumphant ending to the catchy kids’ lyric, but it has some serious spiritual weight behind it. MOVE YOUR FEET! What is the one question that was and is being asked by everyone in the entire world right now, including you and me? “When will we get back to normal?” I think you would agree that God has no desire for us to go back. He is looking for us to move forward. God is a merciful, loving God, but check out what happens in Exodus and Numbers when the children of Israel talk about going back. He is not having it! And what is it that moves the hand of God on our behalf? Our faith! Once you have taken the time to stop and look and listen, then you have to move out. You can’t cross the street without moving your feet! Go ahead, say it with me. “You can’t cross the street...” Well, you get the idea. I for one do not believe that God caused this pandemic, but I definitely think He is using it. Using it to get our attention, to reprioritize our lives, our family, our ministry. Using it to speak to us, if we will only listen. And using it to prepare us for an incredible wave of blessing, favor, and revival in our nation and around the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Billy Walker is the Lead Pastor of Calvary Church in Southgate, MI, the Vice President of the Billy Walker Evangelistic Association and a leader with the Church Strengthening team for the BSCM. He and his wife Laurie have two daughters and are lifetime residents of the downriver area.

Know that I Am God

by Odelle Cadwell

REDFORD, MI – God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea. These verses and the entire 46th chapter of Psalm helped us and is helping us as we recover from COVID-19.

My husband was diagnosed and hospitalized for a week at Oakwood Beaumont Hospital Dearborn. Although I was not diagnosed or hospitalized with the virus, I share his pain, symptoms and literally his quarantine as we both sought to recover. When I left Michael at the hospital that Saturday night both of us were uncertain as to whether we would ever see each other again on this side of the grave. Michael had survived triple by-pass heart surgery followed by a stroke 6 years ago. God was so gracious to us that no one could tell this by looking at him or talking with him that he had undergone these physical experiences.

However, the coronavirus was different. People were dying all around us. The news was keeping the death and illness statistics in plain sight daily. It was a definite time of uncertainty. I remember spending countless hours in prayer. I can also remember the comfort that can only be explained by the comfort of the Holy Spirit. In the midst of continuous phone calls and prayer support, I drew closer to God than I have ever done before in my life. I will say the first night away from Michael I slept better than I had in a long time. I was not constantly checking his breathing or his coughing. The second night, after I had rested, was horrible. I had spoken with him earlier in the day and all he would say was that he wanted to come home.

I spent this whole night in prayer and preparation for what God would have me to do, no matter the outcome. I meditated on Psalm 46:10a. "*Be still and know that I am God.*" The Holy Spirit showed me that this was a time in which I would have to live what I believe.

The next morning, the tone of his voice was nothing short of a miracle. I can remember saying to him jokingly "Do I hear bass in your voice?" From that day on, there was nothing but improvement. Every day he was stronger and stronger. I began to clean the house, because no one was in my way. I can remember being in the middle of scrubbing the baseboards in the den when I received the call from the hospital that he would be discharged within the next two hours. I was elated. When I picked him up, he asked if he could drive. We asked the nurse and she said if he felt like it, so he drove us home from the hospital.

All we can say is that God is good and He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Both of us understand that this could have gone another way. God in His mercy and grace chose to spare me the loss of my husband. I must say that even if He chose to take Michael home, He is still good. Both Michael and I are of the demographic where people are dying every day. Michael came home without needing the assistance of oxygen, and we are now walking and

riding our bikes when weather permits. Our God is a miracle worker, and I am eternally grateful for what He has done.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Odelle Cadwell has been married to her husband Michael, for 42 years. They have 2 sons, 2 daughters and 2 grandsons. They live in Redford, MI and attend Temple of Faith Baptist Church in Detroit, MI under their pastor, Rochelle Davis Jr. They have been members of this church for over 35 years. Odelle received the call to Christian Women's Job Corps in 2002. She developed a sight in downtown Detroit at the Hope Baptist Center. She retired from The Henry Ford Museum/Greenfield Village after working 15 years as a Guest Service Manager. Michael worked for Jervis B. Webb as an industrial photographer for 17 years. He is now retired and works closely with Odelle as they serve in their local church, association and State. Odelle is the newly elected president of the Women's Missionary Union for the state of Michigan.

Monopoly and quiet walks

by Staff

DETROIT, MI – You know these are stressful times when one of the ways you de-stress during a quarantine is playing Monopoly with the entire family. But that's how Pastor David Cox Sr says he does it. He adds that he also takes walks with his wife, Tiffany. Those walks probably come after the Monopoly game.

Cox is pastor of the Temple of Faith Baptist Church in Detroit. He says this time quarantine has given him one-on-one time with each of his immediate family members; his wife, his three children ages 20, 18, and 12, and his German Shepherd, Simba. Cox adds that after reviewing his budget, he learned a lot of his money had been spent on restaurants before the lockdown.

Those are some of the positives for his family during this unusual time. But like many of our Michigan pastors, there have been some painful times as well. Cox says one of the most difficult things is being unable to go to the hospital when a member is suffering from COVID-19, or even worse, not being able to mourn with his families when they experience loss.

Like nearly every church, Temple of Faith is finding ways to use technology to continue the ministry of the church. They are using conference calls for things like the Worship Service, Sunday School, and Wednesday night Bible study. The youth group, of course, is stepping up its technology game by using Zoom calls to do their service and Bible studies.

Cox simply is asking for God to give him wisdom, understanding, and good health. He asks that others would pray for the church to move according to God's will, and that they are able to adapt to technology and the coming change in culture.

Steadfast under trial

by Ameila Woods

ANN ARBOR, MI – Coronavirus, COVID-19, shelter in place, virtual anything, face masks, and social distancing were not common household words prior to March 2020. Now, even my three-year-old is becoming familiar with the term *virus* and grabbing her face mask before we head out the door to ride around.

When I think back to the week of March 9, I remember calling my husband, Chris, who was out of town for work in an attempt to relay all of the changes happening so quickly in our community. We welcomed him home with a renewed love and appreciation in the midst of a strange week in our nation. It was nice to end the night at a familiar family restaurant for our last out-to-eat meal. Little did we know what the next month would hold, but our Heavenly Father knew every detail that would unfold.

Chris came home that Friday with a mild sore throat, hoarse voice and a little fatigue. We chalked it up to travel and allergies as he had been around the beautiful, blossoming cherry trees in Washington, DC ahead of spring's emergence in Michigan. However, he suddenly lost his sense of taste and smell. The day we found out that was a symptom of COVID-19, I had already started with intense body aches and fever at 26 weeks pregnant.

For the next two weeks I became very sick with COVID-19 culminating in hospitalization for a couple days. I could recount all of my symptoms that mirrored the numerous news articles and stories. The phone calls to OB doctors in the middle of the night. Even the very unique symptoms that have allowed me to be a part of a database to help doctors learn about this novel virus. Instead, I want to recount the faithfulness of God through this trial as a child of God, a wife, and as a mother.

As a child of God, I saw His care towards me as the Great Physician. He oversaw the details of all of my care in the midst of a very confused medical system. On one occasion, I was sick and becoming severely dehydrated. Our children's pediatrician texted me and offered to pick up anything we needed from the store that day and drop it off on our porch. That was the day God provided broth for my nutrition.

I saw the Body of Christ in a great way across states as 1,500+ people from several different seasons of my life were lifting us up in prayer. I would receive texts of prayers and not see them until weeks later on the very day that I needed them. I could go on but suffice it to say these are specific examples of how the Lord cared for me as His child in the specific details of my life.

As a wife, I saw his faithfulness towards my husband when our local church stepped in with a meal train for a month. A church member dropped off two large trays of navel oranges and strawberries the very day we ran out. A neighbor dropped off a plate of fresh smoked BBQ to Chris for dinner the night he was exhausted from managing the kids and a household alone. To add to the specific details of God's care, that was the night he forgot to eat and sat down at 9pm hungry and too tired to make his own plate. An ER nurse from our church brought some Pedialyte with her meal the night I was on the verge of being hospitalized for dehydration. His provision continued to be perfect in the practical. The Lord was so near to us as we traversed this road.

As a mother, I saw God's faithfulness in the small sign that my seven-year-old made and hung on our bedroom door (this was the nearest they could be to me). The sign read, "getting well". I cherished those words as they reminded me of the progressive nature of God's sustaining love and care over me. I was *getting* well. Some days I wasn't sure how that would play out, would I get well on this side of heaven?

Some moments, I actually wondered. But I rested in the fact that my Savior had been down a road of suffering knowing the time of His own death. I am so grateful that I do not carry the burden of that knowledge because my sovereign God holds me and that knowledge for His glory and my good.

This season of suffering has taught me to number my days as the Psalmist says in Psalm 90:12 that I may gain a heart of wisdom. It has increased my desire to teach the Bible to my children. I have been reminded on a very real level that our days have been ordained since before the beginning of time, and we can rest in the God who is over our days.

It is our gospel hope that yet while we were sinners Christ died for us. He knew our need, provided for our deficit as sinners even before we knew we needed Him. He is perfectly capable of sustaining us in life and this pandemic just as he has in our salvation. He knows and will provide exactly what we need before we need it. Let us all turn to him more than ever, seek him as those who know and believe like James says in chapter 1 verse 12, "blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris and his wife, Amelia live in Ann Arbor with their 4 children and one on the way this summer. Chris is a lay elder at Treasuring Christ Church in Ann Arbor.

But, God

by Anthony DeMonaco

MADISON HEIGHTS, MI – A professional athlete, multiple business owners, executives of large corporations, best-selling author, motivational speaker, and eager disciples of each; these are the people who raised me. This is my family. This is a 'wish list' of mentors, worldly speaking. The spiritual lens, however, simply shows death. Death coupled with adulation, bravado, and a façade of importance. Death coupled with spiritual blindness.

I carry a burden for the 'successful' lost; the lost that are rarely found. The Lord called me to start a chaplaincy ministry for professional baseball players in 2016 and has blessed us graciously. There are now 10 of us serving, and He is using us in ways that I never would have imagined. The inquiry we get the most from the players, "Why are you guys always happy?" It's an amazing jump-off point.

Last September, the Lord led me through Colossians and Ephesians. I've spent months reading and praying through these 10 chapters. Individual study, corporate study, the individual's role in God's overall plan, the churches role in God's plan, etc. I began to teach through them this February to a men's group from my church, the chaplains, and a group of now retired baseball players. My grasp and communication of the Scripture was nothing special, however each group commented on the peace and joy they were witnessing in me personally. Praise the Lord.

On March 23rd, I was informed that a dear man that I knew and loved for 35 years, had 48 hours to live. He was a cancer patient, however this was completely unexpected. The quarantine did not allow for any form of 'see you later'. On April 1st, my wife was informed that her 43-year-old sister had gone into cardiac arrest during a routine treatment. She passed 2 days later. Again, unable to say 'see you later'. We also were not able to mourn with those who hurt with us. This scenario played out 6 more times in April. That is, we lost 8 people during the COVID-19 quarantine. The virus did not claim them all, and a couple of them could be considered expected. However, they all died alone and we were cheated out of our last moments. We were cheated out of being with our families to mourn and comfort. We were unfairly impacted, and everyone would agree.

But, God...

On March 27th, I received a text from a player that I ministered to last season. It said, "Tony, can you please help me to know God?" I hadn't communicated with him since October. We had a decent relationship, but he wasn't interested in the message. We spoke the following day about control, or really the perception of control. He wanted to know how to get off of the roller coaster. Achievers experience the highest of highs, but they tend to have lower lows, too. We got into the Word of God, we talked, we prayed; and on April 13th, he gave his life to Christ.

The phone kept ringing – ball players and family, alike. Losing their ‘path’ was dire. Their lives made no sense. How could anyone be stable without control? With each death we had to face, the Lord was able to show through us – to show that peace, love, and joy can be completely separated from conditions and circumstances. He let us experience the pinnacle of human existence. The Lord let us be a part of redeeming the lost.

What I take away from all of this is humble gratitude. The Lord began preparing me months ago to use us in an amazing way. Col 1:15-20; Eph 1:10; 2:10; 3:10. A significant amount of loss was allowed into our lives under circumstances that could have derailed us. However, those same circumstances opened doors to the Kingdom that we didn’t know existed. April 2020 will be remembered in our house for exponential growth in faith. Put on the eternal, spiritual lens. The view is perfect.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony and his wife Tifanie live in Madison Heights with their two children, Madison and Bobby. He serves as President of Stewardship Consultants, Executive Director of Champion Sports Ministries and treasurer of The Church at Clawson in Michigan.

June 7 designated Southern Baptist Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

by Ann Lovell

RICHMOND, VA (BP) – On average, eight Christians died for their faith every day in 2019. That equals more than 2,920 people killed for the cause of Christ last year, according to the 2020 annual report from Open Doors' World Watch List. In addition, 9,488 churches or Christian buildings were attacked, and 3,711 Christians were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced and imprisoned.

Open Doors reported that 260 million Christians experienced high levels of persecution in the top 50 countries on the World Watch List in 2019. The top five were North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Pakistan.

In recognition of the persecution faced by Christians around the world, the Southern Baptist Convention last year designated the first Sunday in June as a Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. This year, that's June 7.

International Mission Board President Paul Chitwood affirmed the necessity of intercessory prayer on behalf of Christians suffering for their faith.

"Prayer is our greatest resource in the Great Commission, and it is also the greatest act of compassion we could perform for our brothers and sisters around the globe who are enduring persecution," Chitwood said. "Just as the souls of those slain for their faith cry out in heaven, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood ...' (Revelation 6:10, ESV), we should cry out on behalf of those on earth who continue to suffer.

"We ask God to give them courage and hope. We know that their temporary suffering will be rewarded in eternity and pray that it will result in many being saved from among the nations."

Not without sacrifice

Throughout their 175-year history, Southern Baptists have maintained an uninterrupted witness among the nations, in spite of famine, war and civil unrest. This commitment has not come without sacrifice.

Since the founding of the Foreign Mission Board (now the IMB) in 1845, approximately 60 missionaries and children have died in violent circumstances while serving with the organization. Causes include accidents such as drowning, automobile and aircraft crashes and ships lost at sea. Others died as a result of war and criminal or terrorist acts. In some cases, the missionaries were targeted specifically because of their faith or missionary service.

Of those 60, more than 20 FMB/IMB missionaries lost their lives "as a result of human hostility in a cross-cultural setting," said Scott Peterson of IMB's global research team.

The first was J. Landrum Holmes, who served in China. Holmes and his wife Sallie were appointed by the Foreign Mission Board in 1858 and arrived in China in 1859. Less than three years later, Taiping rebels murdered Holmes and Episcopal missionary Henry M. Parker. Although family encouraged Sallie Holmes to return to the U.S., the young mother chose to stay in China with her newborn son.

Writing home, Sallie said at the time, "I think I might probably be instrumental in the conversion of more persons at home than here, but if I went home for that and other missionaries acted upon the same principle I doubt if there would be a missionary left in China."

Sallie Holmes went on to mentor one of IMB's most famous missionaries, Charlotte Digges "Lottie" Moon, for whom IMB's annual missions offering is named. Lottie Moon also died while in active service aboard a ship docked in Kobe Harbor, Japan, December 24, 1912.

Although both Landrum Holmes and Lottie Moon died while in active service, neither is considered a martyr.

"The IMB does not typically refer to or describe our personnel who have died in active service as martyrs," Peterson said. "In many cases, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if our personnel (who died due to violence) were targeted because they were missionaries or Christians."

Terminology notwithstanding, the sacrifice of those who died while serving cross-culturally -- regardless of the means or cause of death -- is no less significant than those who were targeted specifically for their faith, Peterson said.

"The fact that we do not use the term [martyr] does not minimize the significance of the lives and sacrifice of those who died while serving cross-culturally," he said. "We memorialize all of our personnel who die in active service regardless of the cause of death. Each of those is a sacrifice because of a life lived in obedience to Christ."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Lovell is editorial design manager for IMB.

Falls Creek cancels summer 2020 camp season

by Baptist Press Staff

DAVIS, OK (BP) – Leaders with Oklahoma Baptists announced today (May 18) that Falls Creek Youth Camp and CrossTimbers Children's Mission Adventure Camp will not hold any camp sessions during the summer of 2020, due to factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In April, Oklahoma Baptists had announced tentative plans for a delayed start and revised schedule, with the provision to continually evaluate the plans and make a final decision by May 18. Those plans have been canceled.

"With a heavy heart, and after extensive consultation with pastors, lay leaders and information from public health officials, we have made the difficult decision to cancel all Falls Creek and CrossTimbers-Davis and CrossTimbers-Grand Lake sessions for 2020," said Hance Dilbeck, executive director-treasurer with Oklahoma Baptists.

The Executive Committee of Oklahoma Baptists' Board of Directors unanimously approved the decision. Oklahoma Baptists' President Blake Gideon, who is senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Edmond, Okla., leads the committee.

"In light of the fluidity of COVID-19," Gideon said, "I affirm wholeheartedly the recent decision of the Oklahoma Baptist Executive Committee to cancel summer camps for 2020. During this time of uncertainty, safety and caution are of supreme importance. It is better to choose wisdom over desire."

Plans for Indian Falls Creek and LifeWay Collegiate Week, which were previously scheduled for late July and early August, also were canceled.

"While these beloved camps will not be able to meet on the campgrounds in 2020," Dilbeck said, "our convention staff is currently producing a ministry curriculum and localized event strategies to come alongside churches to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with young people across the state this summer."

The alternate summer outreach plans, which will be unveiled in early June, will be led by Todd Sanders, Falls Creek program director, and Charlie Gatton, CrossTimbers program director.

For information about Falls Creek and CrossTimbers, visit oklahomabaptists.org.

CSBC Executive Board recommends selling Jenness Park Christian Camp

by Terry Barone

FRESNO, CA (BP) – With mounting deficits and no revenue from a 2020 camping season, the California Southern Baptist Convention (CSBC) Executive Board voted to permanently shutter and sell Jenness Park Christian Camp.

The action calls for Jenness Park to be closed immediately and permanently shut down by June 30. The recommendation also gives CSBC corporate officers authorization to "take necessary actions" to sell the camp and its assets.

An amendment to the recommendation gives Southern Baptist churches and entities priority in purchasing the camp through June 30, 2020.

Jenness Park is a 160-acre camp owned by CSBC in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Sonora, Calif. The camp has been part of the California Southern Baptist family since 1953.

Victor Chayasirisobhon, chairman of the CSBC Executive Board and pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Anaheim, said the "decision to close JP is a very, very unfortunate situation.

Every effort was made to help the camp survive. With everything going on, including the global pandemic, this was a sad and difficult decision."

He added Jenness Park has played "a valuable part of CSBC ministry for many years and those blessed by JP's ministry will continue to live out its legacy."

Marc Tempesta, the CSBC's chief financial officer, told Board members the Jenness Park staff would be offered employment through June 30.

CSBC Executive Director Bill Agee said the decision to close and sell Jenness Park "was not easy, nor was it impulsive." Agee acknowledged the camp's history and importance to California Baptists but said the camp is financially unsustainable, adding: "We have exhausted every avenue we know to keep the camp afloat."

The camp had been operating at a deficit for several years, even while fully operational. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented the camp from operating, increasing the deficit to \$70,000 a month.

Agee said the camps' past losses were covered by CSBC reserves, but that "CSBC now has no reserve funds to cover the losses. With no revenue stream, Jenness Park is faced with insurmountable losses."

Agee noted CSBC has made significant strides to "live within its means" by trimming more than \$1 million from annual operating expenses.

Jenness Park was on a plan to balance its budget and become a self-sustaining CSBC entity by the beginning of 2021, but COVID-19 hit and derailed the plan. The camp also has a loan totaling \$1.4 million. Costs for the loan (interest only at this time) are included in the deficit figures.

After the recommendation was amended to give Southern Baptist churches/entities priority through June 30, the 26 members present voted 25 to 1 to proceed with liquidating the property.

An FAQ about the board's decision to sell the camp can be found here: <http://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/csbc.com/documents/Jenness-Park/JP-QA.pdf>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Barone is the CSBC communications team leader.

Texas Acteens group stays on mission amid challenges of social distancing

by Trennis Henderson

GARLAND, TX – Missions discipleship is personal for Mary Lou Sinclair and her Acteens group – even amid a pandemic.

Sinclair has served as the Acteens director at Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland, Texas, for more than 20 years. During that time, five of her Acteens have been named National Acteens Panelists and three others have been selected as Top Teens. They also have traveled extensively over the years to participate in mission trips, state and national Woman's Missionary Union annual meetings and Blume, a national missions gathering for girls.

A close-knit group that reflects the church's multicultural community, the Acteens describe themselves as family and thrive on frequent fellowship among the teens and their adult mentors. Based on their close connections, the 6th through 12th grade girls refuse to let coronavirus-induced social distancing and sheltering in place derail their missions and ministry focus.

"We can't begin to understand what is happening right now," Sinclair acknowledged, "but we, as Christians, can be sure that there will be some good that comes out of all of this."

Pursuing personal connections

On a practical level, Sinclair asked Marisol Sandoval, one of Freeman Heights' youth ministers, to set up virtual Acteens meetings online to keep the group connected.

Sandoval, a former Top Teen who grew up as a member of Sinclair's Acteens, now serves alongside Sinclair as an Acteens leader. In order to help transition the group's meetings to video conferencing, "I had to learn everything I could about Zoom," she said.

"It's worked out pretty awesome. The girls are adapting well," Sandoval added. "They want to be with us. They want to see us. They want to hear from us. It's been really neat that we have the ability to use technology for our Acteens meetings."

Sinclair said their virtual meetings still include several typical features such as "praying for people in our church, praying for national and state WMU, having our lesson and having Bible study."

Along with using available tech options to stay in touch, the teens and their leaders continue to plan a variety of missions projects, including a virtual prayer walk of their neighborhood using GPS mapping. They also plan to sew protective masks for residents in area apartment buildings

and send letters of encouragement to members of a local Chinese Christian church who may be feeling ostracized as some Chinese-Americans are harassed on social media and elsewhere.

Sinclair said the goal of the letters simply is to say to fellow Christians, “We’re praying for you, we’re so thankful that you’re here and safe and we want you to know that we care about you.”

Practical missions impact

Long before the widespread impact of the coronavirus crisis, the Freeman Heights Acteens have been known as one of the most active youth mission groups in Texas Baptist life. The girls regularly volunteer at the ROC (Re’Creation Outreach Center), a community ministry center that provides such resources as a food pantry, clothes closet, after-school tutoring, Bible studies and a host of other ministries and activities for children, youth and adults. Even while observing social distance restrictions, the Acteens have helped fill bags of groceries for families to pick up at the door of the ministry center.

“The ROC is really the home base for several faith communities in the Garland area. Ultimately, it’s a hub of gospel ministry within the area,” explained Adam Wood, director of the ROC and lead pastor of The Neighborhood Church in Garland.

“One of the marks of effective community ministry is when the people you are serving become people who serve. One of the places we’ve seen that most is with this strong group of teenagers,” Wood said. “This group of girls has become servants, not just those who are served. I think it’s in large part because of their connection with Mary Lou and the Freeman Heights youth group.”

As her Acteens navigate a new normal, Sinclair plays a huge role in encouraging their ongoing missions commitment.

“Mary Lou is one of those people who does whatever’s needed,” emphasized Larry Venable, her longtime pastor at Freeman Heights. “What she has done with Acteens is fabulous, just teaching them spiritually, getting them involved in mission activity and growing. ... She’s definitely captivated by her relationship with Christ and the gospel.”

Nayely Vallejo, one of the National Acteens Panelists nurtured by Sinclair, also helps lead Acteens alongside her mentor. Affirming the opportunity to “just live on mission with my fellow Acteens girls, showing people who Christ is and showing people our servants’ hearts,” Vallejo said, “Because of Mary Lou and because of how she’s raised us as GAs and Acteens, it’s just natural for us to serve everyone any chance we get.”

Growth amid challenges

With this summer’s national WMU annual meeting cancelled and Blume postponed until 2021, Sandoval said their Acteens “are sad but they’re fine.”

While coping with social distancing, loneliness and disappointment, “I think there’s been a lot of growth spiritually,” Sandoval reflected. “This has definitely taken us out of our comfort zone. We know from looking in the Bible that whenever we’re taken outside of our comfort zone, there’s growth and we learn to trust in God. We learn how important relationships are.

“It’s hard because we can’t really go and hug them,” she shared. “That’s one of the hardest things for this social distancing because you just want to hug them and just comfort them and you have to trust God that He’s there to comfort them and love on them.”

Before the current crisis erupted, Sinclair said she was involved in event planning with a group of state WMU leaders who “talked about being the hands of God and being able to use the tools that we have in our hands to do ministry.”

During a recent follow-up video conference call, “we talked about how the things in our hands are totally different than what they were before,” she said. “But God finds a way and we just have to be looking for how He can use us to do His ministry.”

Even amid the turmoil of a global pandemic, pursuing new and creative ministry opportunities is precisely what Freeman Heights’ Acteens continue to do – just as Mary Lou Sinclair has faithfully taught them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trennis Henderson is a freelance national correspondent for the Woman's Missionary Union.