

The stinger is gone!

by Tim Patterson

PLYMOUTH, MI – At times when I write, I do so from an overflow of recent experiences and residual emotions. I may do so because I have just watched the sunrise from my back deck and sensed the wonder of the Creator God and His use of colors from a palette that only He possesses. It could be the results of an encounter with a Believer who is far and away more passionate about his or her position concerning being a VAXER or ANTIVAXER, than being passionate about sharing the Gospel. (As you can tell I am a bit reactive to that one!)

This past month, Sabrina and I have had our share of family and friends passing from this life to the next. None were the result of COVID-19. One was expected, though we are never prepared for the inevitable and the other was very unexpected. Both were heartbreaking.

I participated in the internment and services of both individuals and shared the following life event in each of the memorials. To illustrate and give impact to the great hope we find in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, I told a story from my childhood. The focus is on the first stanza of verse 55.

Our Final Victory

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O Death, where is your sting?

O Hades, where is your victory?”

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

As A result of being reared in West Texas, as a young boy I had to find creative ways of entertaining myself. The area around the hot little hamlet in which we lived was composed of sand, mesquite bushes, jack rabbits and oil wells. Not much else. So, my options of self-driven entertainment were limited.

My mother would send us out to play in the mornings and lock the screen door behind us. We could return for lunch and a quick respite and then it was out the door we would go for the afternoon. Sometimes, if it was unbearably hot, she would show mercy and allow us back in, but we would be confined to our bedroom. (It was a small house, and we could get “under foot” easily.)

One such hot afternoon, my best friend Ricky and I came up with the grand idea of catching wasps in wide mouth Mason Jars. The process was simple but precarious. Locate a good-sized nest of wasps on the eave of a house and make preparations to capture them.

The first step would be to punch small holes in the flat part of the two-section metal lid. Then we would take a step ladder and carefully approach the wasps. With the lid removed, we would very gingerly and slowly place the large open jar over the nest and move it side to side and dislodge the nest. It would then fall into the jar, and we would slide the thin lid between the eave and the top of the jar, not allowing any wasps to escape.

After the daring capture, we would retreat to the bedroom and begin the most difficult part of our adventure. With the second jar prepared we would very slowly slide the lid on the jar containing the wasps to the side, just enough to allow a wasp to push its antennae and head out of the jar. I would then, using a pair of tweezers taken from mom's dressing table, grasp the wasp and hold it. With another pair of tweezers my friend would remove the stinger. Once the stingers were extracted, they would be placed in the second jar.

Many of you may be thinking that this does not seem like great entertainment. It was good, but it was not great. The great fun happened when we had collected twenty or thirty stinger-less wasps in a jar and took them into the kitchen where my mother was preparing dinner.

It was then that we would fain an accidental loss of the jar lid and release the very angry and agitated wasps into the atmosphere. That is when the real entertainment began!

My mother began screaming and swinging whatever was in her hands as she ran around that small, little kitchen. We only became concerned when she tried to go through the screen door and it was still locked. That is when Ricky and I began to yell, “there’s no stinger, there’s no stinger! They can’t hurt you.”

It is at this point in my message I will say, “Though we may be terrified of the sting of death, and fear may cause us to lose all sensibilities, the fact is, that Jesus has removed the sting of death and those who know Him as Lord and Savior, have nothing to fear.”

In a time of such uncertainty, fear and death, in which we now live, may you know the “peace of God that goes beyond all understanding,” and that the sting of death has been extracted and victory over death, hell and the grave has been given to all who believe.

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.

Holy Scripture plus Holy Spirit

by Dr. Tony L Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – “Holy Scripture plus the Holy Spirit equals holy confrontation or holy transformation.”

Recently during a random conversation, I repeated the simple formula above to highlight my confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture to transform lives. During the decades, I’ve said simple things like, “Salvation is found in Jesus Christ, not Jesus Christ plus something else nor Jesus Christ minus something else.” I created those talking points because, in the past, I often found myself discussing spirituality with those who followed other religious paths. Out of deep concern for my friends’ spirituality, I would summarize the discussion with one Bible passage and a short memorable statement in their heart-language (Zarma, French, or English). I would entrust the persuasion and conversion to the Holy Spirit following up with prayer and further relaxed spiritual conversations.

Living in North America now, I surprisingly find myself using a similar approach with a Bible verse and a simple statement more frequently in my conversations among those who already follow Christ when it comes to clarifying theology and the application of Holy Scripture to life. I believe my tradition comes from seeing the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others around me during decades of ministry. I have seen the miracle of transformation in people who formerly knew nothing about Christ and within days, weeks, or months became spiritual warriors of evangelism and discipleship. So, can that same approach work moving a believer in Christ to a new, bolder level of dedication? I believe so.

Acts 4:29-31 (New Living Translation), “Give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the Word of God with boldness.

If I had to choose only one book of the Bible to read for the remaining days of my life it would be the Book of Acts. The words explode with divine power every time someone, in the face of

adversity, fear, or persecution allows what little they know about Holy Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the sacrifice and resurrection of the Holy Son to radically embolden them to preach and teach Christ!

Haruna was the only believer in his village in the Niger Republic where I served for six years. Illiterate, Haruna would listen to sermons and lessons about Christ with dedicated attention. He would repeat Bible verses over and over embedding them in his memory. I was moved to tears when he told us about how, after his conversion to Christianity, his family and friends refused to talk with him or trade goods with him. Each week, Haruna would travel a half-day's journey and conduct business elsewhere and meet other Christians then return to his home village to constantly repeat what little he had retained in his most recent Bible lesson. Haruna was unstoppable and lovingly patient waiting for others to come to Christ.

Richard, a Frenchman, became our friend in Paris as we were learning the language. Our frequent spiritual discussions seemed to swirl in circles like someone stirring brown sugar cubes into a strong coffee – a lot of motion without anything being absorbed; then, one day everything became clear. Richard dropped by after his workout at the Luxembourg Gardens, he perched on the edge of our small apartment brown sofa, and gushed, “I understand it all, now. I wanted to come by and let you know that I need to explain to my wife that I have become a follower of Christ. I received him today under a tree after my workout. I prayed just as you said and now, I understand.”

I could go on and on about dedicated men and women in Michigan who took on the task of leading established churches or creating new churches as lead pastors and wives. In their cases, it was not about the multiple volumes of books they read nor the long lessons or sermons they heard. It was their obedient response to some miraculous, divine moment where Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit called them to a new level of commitment or dedication or reset that transformed who they were.

Do not get me wrong. I believe in education, discipleship, sound preaching and teaching. I went to nine years of school after high school focusing on ministry improvement, but my pivotal moments of change and those pivotal moments I see in others are usually punctuated with an “AHA” experience that redefines the person. The ten prayerful words of Acts 4:29, “Give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word,” are the kind of explosions I want to hear myself speak repeatedly. I am confident that we can rely on Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit to get us through whatever is ahead of us.

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.

Baptism Sunday

by Mike Durbin

PLYMOUTH, MI – September 12 is Baptism Sunday. It's a time when Great Commission Baptist churches collectively celebrate the professions of faith of those who are being baptized. Resources for planning this special moment are available at namb.net/baptismsunday.

Baptism is a special moment for the person publicly professing his or her belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord! It's encouraging when the church responds with heartfelt "amens" or thunderous applause. It is also a reminder that Jesus called us to be "fishers of men!"

"Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men"

Jesus, Mathew 4:19

Follow Me...(Invitation)

The invitation of Jesus first heard on the shores of the Lake of Galilee continues to echo across the shores of the Great Lakes state of Michigan. Michiganders, known for using our hands as a map to show where we live, for our diversity, work ethic, and innovative spirit have heard His call and are following Him. Jesus unites us in churches from the northern shore of Lake Superior, to the western shore of Lake Michigan, and the eastern shores of Lakes Huron and Erie. His never ending invitation - Follow Me - is faithfully shared from the pulpits of Michigan Baptist churches to the individual platforms of believers who follow Him. We live in cities, towns and rural areas, and yet, we are one spiritual family following Jesus together.

And I will make you...(Transformation)

Jesus makes us into something we can never be without Him. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" John 1:12. Receiving Christ transforms us and draws us together as God's children in churches across Michigan. It is unity in Him that brings together the wonderful mosaic of people known as Michigan Baptists. On any given Sunday, a diversity of people gather in a variety of settings around Him, demonstrating that the Gospel transcends cultural, racial, and economic lines. Together, we are the children of God. We are a living portrait of the transformational power of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus!

Fishers of men...(Mission)

Making disciples of Jesus is forever the mission of Michigan Baptists. We are driven to advance God's Kingdom through sharing the Gospel, Church Planting, Church Strengthening, Church Revitalization, and cooperative missions in our state and beyond. His mission is ours until "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever" Revelation 11:15.

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.

Worry; it's waste and worthlessness

by Coye Bouyer

LANSING, MI – Jesus says, *“for this reason, I say to you do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat, what you will drink nor for your body as to what you will put on...”*

In this paragraph, Jesus highlights one's worry with regards to what one eats, drinks or wears. He says, “Don't worry.” While at first glance this statement seems silly no matter who is saying it, Jesus does not flinch or fumble over his words when telling His followers not to be concerned with their basic needs.

Why would believer's not need to worry about their basic needs in this life? Jesus uses two illustrations to validate His statement. The first one comes from the animal kingdom as He describes the actions of birds. He says, *‘birds do not sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, yet the Lord feeds them.’*

In other words, birds do not engage in the agricultural process of tilling the ground, planting seed, or harvesting and storing crops; yet they still eat. Why? Because God is in the agricultural process, and He provides.

Jesus is not suggesting that the birds do nothing, idling waiting for food to fall from the sky, rather they look for it and they find it. Jesus' point is not about the bird's work to obtain food, rather the bird's expectation that they will find food.

Likewise, you and I don't sit idly by just watching, rather we look for it, because we can expect it. This illustration teaches the listener to not waste time worrying about food and drink because God will provide it.

Jesus takes it one step further in v. 27 when He approaches this same thought from another angle, and draws attention to the limitations of human achievement. He says, *‘and who of you being worried, can add one hour to your life? As if to say, “you don't have the power to extend*

your life for even one hour, so why are you worrying about something that is out of your control.

Worry will not lengthen one's life any more than worry can put food on the table. Isn't it ironic that worry cannot lengthen life, but it can sometimes take away from one's life?

The logical conclusion is seen in vv. 31-32 where Jesus informs them that their doubt is considered as a dis on the character and care of God. Jesus comes back to His main point of the worthlessness of their worry by reminding them of the worries of the Gentiles (non-believers) to provide for themselves. Moreover, in reminding them of the Gentile's worries, He also reminds them that it is God's job to supply their basic needs.

In closing, what if my 7-year-old son came into the house telling me how stressed he was because he had to find a part-time job over the weekend to pay for his school clothes and school lunch on Monday? Not only would this be ridiculous for him to think, but as his father I would be offended by his lack of confidence in me to provide these essential things for him.

In a similar manner the Lord wants us to know that not only is our worry a waste and worthless, it's also offensive because we fail in relying upon Him to provide our basic needs as His children. So, as you look at your life and the needs in it, stop wasting time worrying, worthlessly wondering about things that aren't your responsibility. Just let God be God, doing what only God can do.

Who knows, you might live a little longer!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor Coye L. Bouyer is the founding pastor of Kingdom Life Church in Lansing, MI where he has served since March of 2010. Pastor Bouyer recently stepped into the Diversity Ambassador role for the BSCM and firmly believes that he was not only called to Preach the Gospel as part of the process of reconciliation of man to God, but also using any platform as a bridge of reconciliation of man to man, and even more so amongst the brethren. Pastor Bouyer and his lovely wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1) have been married four over 20 years and have four children; Sierra, Seth, Cayla and Coye II.

What if we said, “Even if”?

by Mick Schatz

ROSCOMMON, MI – Have you ever been stuck in the quicksand of ‘what if?’ The more you ponder “what if” your mind seems to travel further down the road of endless and sometimes even bizarre possibilities.

You feel paralyzed, unable to move and every thought seems to pull you down deeper and deeper until you are drowning in fear. This is, of course, the negative side of “what if” and if we are honest, most of us are usually quick to run to the scary side of “what if” versus the optimistic perspective. It’s how we are wired.

It’s a good reaction when it gives us pause and caution, but not so good when it paralyzes us in fear. It’s a good question when it keeps us safe and stops us from making a regrettable decision. However, it can be very toxic to our spiritual life when it keeps us from obeying God.

Personally, I have at times let “what if” keep me from obeying God and experiencing His grace, presence, and power in my life. “What if” has kept me from trusting the prompting of the Holy Spirit to pray for someone, share the gospel, give sacrificially, forgive, love, stand-up and speak out - the list could go on.

Like Moses, reacting to instruction from God through the burning bush, I highlight all the reasons I’m not good enough, and all the reasons I’ll fail and look stupid. You see, pride is the real motive behind most of our “what if” dilemmas’. It’s me/you looking at the situation and how it will affect me/you.

The goal is to stop defaulting to “what if” and start proclaiming “even if”. “Even if” means looking at God and how He will affect the situation.

Just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego responding to King Nebuchadnezzar II in Daniel 3:16-18 (NASB):

*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego replied to the king, “Nebuchadnezzar, we are not in need of an answer to give you concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But **even if** He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods nor worship the golden statue that you have set up.”*

What an amazing example of faith, trust and worship! That’s the reality in which God is calling us to live.

I like how Paul says it in Philippians 1:21 (ESV): "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*"

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus gave us the ultimate example of “even if” when He was praying to His Father in Matthew 26:39, *“And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”*

Being able to say “even if” when our pride and ego is on the line can be difficult, but in surrender we experience God’s abundant grace and power to overcome our fear and follow Him along the path He is leading.

“Even if” places our focus directly on the source of our strength and refuge and leaves the outcome in His hands - there are no better hands. What if we said “even if?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mick Schatz serves on the staff of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. He is the State Director of Spiritual Enrichment and Retreats and lives at Bambi Lake.

Making a difference

by Sue Hodnett

CLINTON TOWNSHIP, MI – Michigan Baptists have always been relentless in their support to the Frances Brown State Mission Offerings over the years. The 2020 state mission offering validated the sacrificial giving and faithfulness of our churches by taking the offering to an even greater level. Some of the same pastors who over the years faithfully encouraged their churches to contribute to the state mission offering became the receivers of the donations. For so many pastors and their families the global pandemic made for financial hardship for so many pastors and their families.

But...in the faithful custom of Michigan Baptists when approached with a need, provisions are shared at an overwhelming capacity. Your giving and prayers are making a difference for the families of our pastors!

Watch this video to see just a few of the thank you statements.

The 2021 Frances Brown State Mission Offering and Week of Prayer for State Missions is September 12th – 19th. This year's offering will be for the Pastors & Churches Relief Fund that will be used to help Michigan churches. We have some churches and pastors that have been struggling financially since the pandemic shutdown. This year's gifts will help pastors and

churches that need help getting back on their feet so they can continue to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their communities.

Our offering goal for this year is \$70,000. Will you help us reach it?
Will you join us as we continue, “Making a Difference”?

Go to bscm.org/smo for details, the video & a free downloadable flyer.

Week of Prayer Emphasis Guide

“Pray over Michigan”

- Sunday, September 12th – Grief from COVID -19 Deaths
- Monday, September 13th – Churches in the Aftermath of the Pandemic
- Tuesday, September 14th – Family Stress/Anxiety
- Wednesday, September 15th – Children – School (in person/ online)
- Thursday, September 16th – Loss of Jobs & Income
- Friday, September 17th – Racial Relations
- Saturday, September 18th – Churches as They Serve Refugees
- Sunday, September 19th – Starting New Churches / 500 churches by 2025

Michigan WMU will be hosting an online Prayer Meeting, Tuesday, September 14th at 7PM.

You are invited: Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87553851466?pwd=Q2c3c1ZUV0Y2bnNEZ0RwTOVDTGp1QT09>

Meeting ID: 875 5385 1466

Passcode: send email request to: wmu@bscm.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Hodnett serves as women’s ministry leader for the BSCM as well as WMU Michigan Executive Director. She has dedicated her life to ministering to women in Michigan.

State Mission Offering: “Strong medicine for my wounded spirit”

by Staff

PLYMOUTH, MI – The Frances Brown State Mission Offering will again be used to help pastors struggling with health and financial issues because of Covid. But this year, the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) has decided to add churches to the eligible list of receiving funds.

BSCM Executive Director, Tim Patterson says. “The pandemic isn’t over and churches are struggling with the impact of Covid just like pastors are.”

Over the past year, Michigan Baptists have been able to give thousands of dollars to pastors and their families in need through the state mission offering. Those needs included helping to cover medical bills to those struck with Covid, or supporting pastors who either lost income when the offerings at their church decreased, or were laid off from other jobs.

Patterson says, “One of the great joys of being executive director is to be able to hand a check to a person who is in great need and see the change on his face.”

The BSCM has received many letters of thanks for the support that Michigan Baptists have given through the State Mission Offering. One note read:

“The gift from the missions fund was like strong medicine for my wounded spirit.”

Another said, “the BSCM has put love for pastors into a tangible offering that really blessed me and my wife.”

The state mission offering in the coming year will be used to provide continued support to Michigan churches and pastors. Patterson adds, “let's give to the state mission offering where it really will make a difference.”

The Frances Brown State Mission Offering is September 12-19. Church leaders who are interested in promoting the offering in their church can go to bscm.org/smo for resources.

And here is a quick video designed to be in worship settings and online to promote the video to your church.

Pastors or church who need the help of the offering can request it here. bscm.org/pastorrelief.

Journey into new

by Jason Loewen

FLINT, MI – After 21 years of faithfully serving the SBC churches in our area as the Director of Missions, Pastor Jim Marcus announced that his time in this role of leadership was coming to an end. The changing landscape of church because of the changing culture and the way that the COVID pandemic accelerated the change that was already taking place only affirmed his decision to land the plane. He wanted to finish well and pass the baton to the association's new leadership.

The challenge was laid before us. There were about 10 men from various churches in the association to seek the face of the Lord and identify what was next for us. We spent the next six months being brutally honest about what was, what worked, what didn't work, things that had an eternal impact and the impact of territorialism on the church. A clear vision to set aside the old ways and to be the church, to cooperatively pursue a Kingdom agenda emerged from these six months. Through this process we grew in our love for one another and desire to see our county transformed by the hope of the gospel.

In January a transition team was formed to explore a new leadership structure, develop a system that would invite accountability, find spiritually motivated leaders, and help the association effectively make this transition. The Lord in His kindness connected us to some key leaders from Be The Church, a new organization that was being formed on the west side of the state. Be the Church is passionately pursuing the revitalization of the Church by developing leaders and establishing a pipeline for new leaders. It was as if the Lord knew what was going on, and He connected us at just the right time to accelerate His Kingdom agenda.

In the middle of the summer we made the transition in leadership and structure. Where previously there had been fewer than ten participants show up for a board meeting, now there are more than sixty from the exact same number of churches. For the previous three years the average number of pastors who were involved consistently was 10, now there are 15. Previously at a training event that was offered to the churches there were only 25 that showed up, now there are more than a hundred. Expectations are higher, accountability is anticipated, there are assignments given each month, and we launched in the summer.

The Lord is in the business of transforming lives, and I believe that as pastors and leaders we are the ones most in need of that transformation. It is time for pastors to stop being chaplains, and begin actually leading the bride of Christ. We have an enemy and it's not the church down the street. Transitioning our association to Be The Church didn't require overhauling our constitution or bylaws, it didn't require more meetings, it didn't require more money. Actually, this transition has freed up time, it is putting 60% more money back into evangelistically focused ministry, we cut the HR expenses by 54%, and we have already seen more cooperation among pastors and energy in our churches. And the Lord is just getting started.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Loewen is a pastor of Union Flint Church. He has taken the new role as Assistant Director of Missions for our association to transform Flint and the surrounding areas.

Outside the box: Gainesville's praying pastor has a whole town talking

by Roger Alford

GAINESVILLE, GA – Nearly 50,000 vehicles pass by New Holland Baptist Church every day – one about every 1.7 seconds.

For the past month, Pastor Brian Stephens has been sitting beneath a canopy tent overlooking the bustling thoroughfare, praying for the passersby.

Just quietly praying.

Stephens has sought no attention. He made no public announcement. He didn't advertise. Yet, people here have taken notice of his simple act of obedience after he perceived God directing him to pray outside his church for a month, from 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., every day, through the heat and humidity of a Georgia summer, through thunderstorms with gusty winds that threatened to turn his tent into a huge kite.

He kept on praying.

"People say I'm outside the box," the pastor said. "I suppose people say that about anyone who does something that's even slightly different."

But Stephens, as a lifelong pastor, knows the power of prayer. He said he has witnessed it firsthand in his life and in the lives of fellow believers.

"God can do more in a moment that we can do in an entire lifetime," he said.

Townfolk have started coming to join Stephens in prayer and to be prayed for. So far, about 200 people have tapped their brakes and pulled to a stop in the church parking lot.

Some pray for wayward children. Some pray for physical healing. Some pray to cope with the grief of losing loved ones. Some pray for the heartbreak of broken relationships. Some pray for

American military personnel serving abroad. Some pray for friends and family caught up in drug and alcohol addiction.

Some just wanted to be supportive of Stephens, bringing him breakfast, lunch and dinner and keeping him supplied with water.

“I certainly haven’t gone hungry out here,” he said. “I’ve gained about seven pounds.”

As he sits in the shade beneath the canopy, passing cars honk their horns.

Someone asked if he knows all those people. “No,” he said. “Those are just people offering their encouragement. Honking is the new ‘amen’ for what we’re doing.”

A huge cross, hammered together with heavy four-by-sixes, is covered with written prayer burdens. A staple gun is handy on a nearby table, ready to nail the next burden to the cross when the next person stops by.

“There seems to be something happening in our community,” Stephens said on Day 30 of his month-long prayer initiative. “I’m sensing a move toward Jesus, a move toward prayer.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger Alford is the editor of the Christian Index which was founded in Washington, DC in 1822 by legendary Baptist leader Luther Rice. The Christian Index is the nation's oldest continuously published religious newspaper.

The world at our doorstep

WYOMING, MI – Our busy Summer was kicked off with two weeks of neighborhood Middle and High School teens' ministry, a combined effort with Bridge Street Ministries, and Campus Life. It was demanding, tiring and amazing. We spent days reading the Bible while serving in our neighborhood, camping, eating, playing games and talking a lot about Jesus.

In my particular group of six young men, four were working with English as a second language (from four different languages). This brought me pretty quickly to the realization that just reading the English Bible presented a challenge. As any ordinary person would, they were reluctant to express not understanding particular words, but as we developed trust, the atmosphere changed. After reading a passage I would just say "ok, words", and they would ask the meaning of different words in the passages, which took our study to another level. After

doing this a number of times, the young men started seriously engaging with God's word, and asking questions. Some great discussions ensued. The picture below captured one of these moments.

On the last evening, after explaining the gospel, one of the teens made a decision to follow Jesus. This teen happens to live on the end of my street, so we have ongoing contact with him and his family. Please be praying for our neighborhood teens as CrossWinds West Side continues to minister to them.

A new threshold

We are currently teaching a series called BLESS. It is a way to remember our strategy to bring the gospel to our city.

Begin with prayer

Listen

Eat

Serve

Share

After a couple of years of practicing BLESS in this neighborhood, we are having lots of opportunities to share. Now, neighborhood teens arrive in our backyard as a group, hanging out on our deck. We sit, eat and have great conversations.

One neighbor I have known for over three years, told me the other night he was thinking about knocking on my door to talk about a traumatic experience he had at work, where a customer overdosed in front of him. He just said, "can I have a hug" and he cried. It's not something a lot of men my age say to one another. God is really working in his life. Pray as seek to get to the last letter in BLESS with our neighbors

Thanks for taking a minute

Because of the financial limitations of the communities that CrossWinds serves, we very much appreciate those who are able to participate in our kingdom work. For you giving partners, Thanks again for taking the time.

How small groups can help our churches

by Dan Russell

SOUTHGATE, MI – A good question for pastors to ask is, “How can small groups help our churches?” Whether your church’s small group model is Sunday School, small groups in homes, or a combination of the two, these gatherings can make an awesome impact on the ministry of our churches!

Here are some ways that small groups can help our churches

1. **Discipleship** – Small groups provide opportunities for new believers, as well as seasoned believers, to learn about the Christian life and how to be dedicated followers of Christ. (Colossians 2:6-7)
2. **Assimilation** – Small groups give new members and regular attenders a way to get better acquainted with the church’s teachings and build relationships with others in the church, therefore increasing their long-term status in the church. (Acts 2:41-42)
3. **Evangelism** – Small groups are safe and comfortable settings for believers to share their faith with unbelievers, thus being a place for friendship evangelism. (2 Timothy 2:24-25)
4. **Bible Study** – Small groups are excellent places for in-depth study of the Scriptures and can be enhanced with a vast selection of study guides and video-driven series material. (2 Timothy 2:15)
5. **Accountability** – Small groups can be close and confidential to the point of giving group members the option of being accountable to one another, which makes for more transparent relationships and personal ministry. (James 5:16)
6. **Hospitality** – Small groups provide an atmosphere of close fellowship that opens the door to the “giving” and “receiving” of Biblical hospitality, whether the groups are happening in the church building or in homes. (1 Peter 4:9)
7. **Prayer** – Small groups promote the opportunity to share prayer requests, praise reports, and to have conversational prayers that encourage everyone to pray. This can also include seeing answers to prayer as a group, which is a tremendous bonding experience. (Acts 12:12)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dan Russell is the Executive Pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Southgate, Michigan, a Church Strengtheners for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan, and an adjunct professor in the Christian Ministry Department of Spring Arbor University at two campuses in southeastern Michigan. He has 36 years of pastoral experience, including lead pastorates in Missouri, Kansas, and Michigan. He and his wife, JoLinda, live in Brownstown, Michigan, and have three adult children, along with seven grandchildren.

Entrepreneur. Investor. College student?

by Roy Hayhurst

DALLAS, TX – They may not sound like they go together, but for 19-year-old Matthew Noss, they are absolutely intertwined.

The college freshman not only launched his own lawn care business — he picked up his first client at age 14 when his mom would drive him to the house to mow the yard. Now tending some 30 yards and employing up to 14 people, when he's not on a job site, he's networking with a roofing contractor, local real estate agents and learning the importance of referrals to business success.

Whether it's cleaning gutters or spreading ice melt on walkways and driveways after a Kentucky ice storm, Noss is learning the rewards of hard work.

He's also learning the discipline of investing. As he's working hard and earning money, he's also begun investing \$1,000 per month out of his earnings through an investment account at GuideStone®.

“My dad said you're getting older and making some money, so it's time to start investing,” Noss said. “I've always heard that in investing, it pays to start early.”

So early, in fact, that Noss is the youngest investment account holder at GuideStone.

Noss' introduction to GuideStone came in 2011 when his father, Dr. Wesley Noss, an associate pastor at Buck Run Baptist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky, joined the GuideStone Board of Trustees.

“Through the years my dad served on the GuideStone Board, I became acquainted with financial information and education,” the younger Noss said. “It feels good to have the ability to do something like this, and GuideStone is the perfect place to start.”

Individuals can invest with GuideStone Funds® directly with GuideStone, as Noss has, or through independent financial advisers who access the Funds through investment platforms. (Learn more about our options for [individual investors](#).)

For Noss, it was the connection to GuideStone's heritage and history — like GuideStone's commitment to pastors through Mission:Dignity® — and shared values that drew the younger Noss to putting his investments with GuideStone.

“I invest in GuideStone because of the integrity of the organization, the consistent positive returns on my investment and the fact that their funds are socially-screened,” Noss said.

GuideStone Funds do not invest in any company that is publicly recognized as being in the alcohol, tobacco, gambling, pornography or abortion industries or any company whose products, services or activities are publicly recognized as being incompatible with the moral and ethical posture of GuideStone. Additionally, GuideStone strives to be an engaged shareholder, advocating for the values the Funds' investors live. That is done through targeted outreach that encourages the adoption of Christ-like business practices and seeks to influence the way companies interact with their employees, customers and communities.

An additional component Noss cited was GuideStone's commitment to impact investing. Upon learning about the new Global Impact Fund, Noss immediately invested in it, as well.

GuideStone Chief Investment Officer David Spika explained that the Fund is meant to be the next step in GuideStone's model, which continues to include its faith-based funds and advocacy efforts.

"We are putting our values into practice by making strategic investments in organizations that seek to create positive impact — and in doing so, we are serving the underserved while promoting the growth of God's Kingdom," Spika said. (For more information on the Global Impact Fund, visit [the website](#).)

Spika also echoed Dr. Noss' advice to his son, advice Spika said is important for every investor to consider.

"Invest as early as you can, invest as much as you can while living within your means, and stay invested are the three pieces of guidance I provide my own children," Spika said. "The earlier you start investing, whether as a 19-year-old, which is simply incredible, or as a 25-year-old or even in your 30s, the longer you have to put money aside and watch it grow.

"And even if you didn't — or couldn't — start as early as you should have, the next best time to start is right now."

That was guidance Matthew Noss took to heart as well.

"Since I started young, I don't have as many expenses as I'll have when I'm older," said Noss, who has paid his cell phone and car insurance bills since he was 16. "By establishing this habit now, I'll hopefully carry it through my life."

Noss is preparing for a career in finance — he is currently studying at the Bluegrass Community and Technology College. The coursework allows him to focus on school 1-2 days each week and work the rest of the week.

"I am a people person, and this business is all about connections," Noss said. "My office is wherever I am working that day."

His advice for his peers — and their parents — is to start now, wherever they can.

“You should treat investing like any other item in your budget; it’s just as important as those other items,” Noss said. “I’m learning that consistency and hard work pay off.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roy Hayhurst is director of denominational and public relations services for GuideStone Financial Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Mutual fund investing involves risk, including the possible loss of money.

There can be no guarantee that any strategy (risk management or otherwise) will be successful.

All investing involves risk, including potential loss of principal. Diversification does not ensure a profit or protect against loss.

You should carefully consider the investment objectives, risks, charges and expenses of the GuideStone Funds before investing. A prospectus with this and other information about the Funds may be obtained by calling 1-844-GS-FUNDS (1-844-473-8637) or downloading one at [GuideStoneFunds.com/Funds](https://www.GuideStoneFunds.com/Funds). It should be read carefully before investing.

Building the Cheerful Giver

by Heath Tibbetts

MACHESNEY PARK, IL – You know God’s in the middle of something when your church experiences both its lowest year of attendance and highest year of giving at the same time. This was our experience in 2020, and the realization caused me to take stock of how he brought us here. Truly, I believe God is the great provider for the church, doing that work most often through the obedience of his people. Not an obedience of emergency, but of discipleship and partnership revealed in an unexpected moment.

In my home church, tithing was taught as a rigid requirement for all believers. While I believed giving was important, parting with 10% of my income as a college student seemed like an impossible standard. When I did manage to tithe, I rarely felt any joy or worship in the effort. Even as I later settled into a place of consistent tithing, it usually felt like a “have to” instead of a “get to” moment for God.

Fast forward to my early days as a pastor when I began to wrestle with a fuller understanding of giving from Paul’s letters to the churches. I’d previously been moved by statements that God wanted the law written on our hearts (Romans 2:15) and that physical circumcision never

compared to heart circumcision (Romans 2:29). Then a fresh reading of 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 revealed to me the heart aspect of giving I had been missing.

“...whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

For years I had given with cheerless compulsion, and I resolved to avoid that mistake in the congregation God would give me. Giving cannot be about instant demands. When we demand a percentage based on Old Testament law, we lead people by judgment instead of joy in their giving.

I realized that just as we patiently grow disciples in their reading of God’s word and prayer, so must generosity be treated as a spiritual discipline for people to grow into. Isn’t 1% with the heart better than 10% without it?

When I arrived at First Baptist Church Machesney Park, giving had been significantly below budget for years. Convinced that a balanced budget was necessary, we entered a season of salary freezes and budget cuts until we finally accomplished it. We also began to see new attenders during this time, many of whom were unchurched or had been out of church for years.

Some long-term members wondered why this influx of new people didn’t translate into higher giving. I responded that instant demands were not going to be more effective than steady discipleship. One mentor challenged me that if I wanted to see rapid progress in my church, I had to teach the tithe as a membership standard. I politely declined the advice, again stressing the need for discipleship.

As our budget came into balance, God also provided me with vital insight through the Auxano church consultants on the discipleship and partnership of giving. Their four-step path to disciple members as investors and not just attenders was the language I had been seeking.

1. **Potential Giver:** Teach that everyone can and should give something to support their church.
2. **Priority Giver:** Lead the giver to commit that no financial distraction will interrupt their giving potential.
3. **Proportional Giver:** Help them move from random generosity to strategic giving, perhaps even a tithe.
4. **Partnering Giver:** Guide givers to be ready to additionally respond to unexpected kingdom investments.

It would have been easy for our membership to divest through this season of Covid. Instead, they showed a tremendous care for the staff and ministry of their church. A time of great

testing has produced a great testimony of people who decided in their hearts to live as disciples and partners for the sake of the church.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heath Tibbetts pastors First Baptist Church, Machesney Park, Illinois
Used with permission from the Illinois Baptist.

Vaccine mandates raise religious liberty questions

by David Roach

MONTGOMERY, AL (BP) – As more and more pastors are being asked to provide confirmation of a religious exemption from the COVID-19 vaccine, they are drawing a range of conclusions about whether refusing the vaccine can be a religious liberty issue.

When the vaccines became available, there was a feeling of “initial distrust and skepticism” among the congregation at Taylor Road Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala. But “the mood has changed quite a bit” as 2021 has progressed, pastor Daniel Atkins said. Despite being in the least vaccinated state in the U.S., with 38 percent of the population fully vaccinated, vaccine opposition waned as church members concluded their Christian faith didn’t pose a reason to refuse the vaccine.

Atkins himself moved from initial skepticism to taking the vaccine in April. Though he recognizes vaccination as a “matter of conscience,” he challenges Christians who claim their refusal to be vaccinated as a matter of religious liberty. “People are so quick to pull that religious liberty card,” he said. If “you can show me from the Scripture how your taking this vaccine or being forced to take it by your employer” has “Gospel implications and is against the Christian worldview, then maybe we can talk about religious liberty.”

Atkins isn’t the only one facing such religious liberty questions. It’s a growing concern among evangelicals, including Southern Baptists.

“The SBC Executive Committee has received numerous inquiries from Southern Baptists around the country about authorizing religious exemptions for vaccine mandates,” said Jonathan Howe, the SBC EC’s vice president of communications. “However, this is not an assignment given to the EC by Southern Baptists due to the autonomous nature of our Convention.”

Evangelical ethicists and legal scholars agree that many followers of Christ object to the COVID-19 vaccines, but they’re split on whether any of the objections commonly articulated among

believers constitute religious objections. The distinction between religious liberty objections and more general objections could become a key issue as more businesses require employees to be vaccinated.

The SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission says the COVID vaccines are "safe and effective" and has cautioned pastors against endorsing hasty appeals to religious liberty by vaccine skeptics.

"We must not allow or give support to mere personal or political preferences masquerading as religious liberty claims," [wrote Jason Thacker](#), ERLC chair of research in technology ethics. "Indeed, doing so is not only morally disingenuous but also can do long-term damage to the credibility of pastors, churches, and Christian institutions in our communities. At the same time, pastors should graciously and patiently consult with those seeking such exemptions or accommodations in order to determine whether the request is predicated on sincere religious grounds."

ERLC trustee Jon Whitehead, a Missouri attorney who specializes in religious liberty cases, expressed a similar perspective.

"Most Baptists will listen to Scripture, facts, and experts they trust and decide to take the vaccine. I am among them," Whitehead said. "Many vaccine objections are grounded in Constitutional interpretation, concerns about government power, or even about how to analyze data. Some of these concerns might be prudent, but not religious."

"People who don't understand religious liberty might fear that religious accommodation opens Pandora's box. But that fear isn't supported by the long legal record in the United States," he said. "Baptists believe in protecting religious liberty for all...Baptists should remain united against government religious discrimination. And Baptists should oppose government retaliation against people who ask for exemptions."

If polling is any indication, the issue of vaccines and religious liberty isn't just a theoretical concern. In June, 56 percent of white U.S. evangelicals said they had been vaccinated or planned to be as soon as possible, according to a study by the Public Religion Research Institute and Interfaith Youth Core. That's up from 45 percent in March but lagging behind the 71 percent of Americans in general who either are vaccinated or willing to be.

Southern Baptist bioethicist C. Ben Mitchell said biblical arguments for taking the COVID vaccine include "the healing ministry of Jesus," "stewardship of the body" and "neighbor love." Arguments against the vaccine concern safety, efficacy and the use of abortion-derived cells in design and production.

An [analysis](#) by the Charlotte Lozier Institute concluded the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines rely more heavily on abortion-derived cells than the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines. A December 2020 [analysis coauthored by Mitchell](#) found that "no abortions occurred in the

development of the COVID-19 vaccine” though “the cell lines involved in developing and confirming the viability of COVID-19 vaccines” resulted from previous abortions.

Today, the objections “seem to have been answered, the evidence of which is that I’m not aware of a major pro-life group or Christian denomination that opposes vaccination against COVID per se,” said Mitchell, an ERLC research fellow and distinguished fellow with the Tennessee Center for Bioethics and Culture.

When it comes to religious liberty, “I can understand a religious objection to being forced to get vaccinated, but I, frankly, don’t understand a Christian objection against voluntary vaccination,” he said.

“I can defend someone’s right not to get vaccinated against their consent, but I have a very hard time defending their decision not to get vaccinated given what we know now about COVID and the safety and efficacy of the vaccines,” Mitchell said. “Every indication is that, unless advised against it by your physician, you should get the vaccine for your own sake, your family’s sake, and for the sake of those around you.”

Still, concern over vaccines and religious liberty seems to be mounting. In Hawaii and Kentucky, pro-family groups sent emails to supporters in August reporting swells of concern over vaccine mandates by private and government employers. At least two Christian legal organizations – [Alliance Defending Freedom](#) and [First Liberty Institute](#) – have released guides to help believers navigate the issue of COVID vaccines and religious liberty.

Rebecca Demaree, a Tennessee labor and employment attorney, said courts and employers tend to “give deference to someone saying they sincerely have a religious belief that they do not want to have the vaccine or wear a mask.” The key analysis is whether “the particular rule or law or requirement unduly infringes on that belief,” not whether the objection truly is religious in nature. If someone claiming a religious objection can be accommodated without undue burden on the employer, the objector possesses a reasonable likelihood of prevailing in court, she said.

Winning a legal battle, however, is not the only issue to consider. Apart from the legal issues, Mitchell urged Christians not to entertain vaccine conspiracy theories in the name of faith or religious liberty.

“The anti-science and anti-public health rhetoric in American political life [surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine] has been absolutely breathtaking,” Mitchell said. “I’ve never seen anything like it in all my years of working at the intersection of science, ethics and public policy. Instead of reasonable caution, some have turned to radical conspiracy theories. Instead of prudence, some have turned to presumption.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Roach is a writer in Mobile, Ala.

Multi-church outreach ministry gears up for possible Afghan refugees

by Diana Chandler

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – Pastor Terry Dale Hudgins was in chapel at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary 27 years ago when he thought he heard God’s call to international missions.

Tusculum Hills World Outreach Pastor Terry Hudgins, standing right, joins missionary Kori Bailey in teaching a life skills class to Karen children, showing them how to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as an economical, nutritious meal.

“I heard a foreign missionary speak, and he talked about knocking on a hut and the children yelled ‘It’s the Jesus man,’” Hudgins said. “And I just felt God was calling me to become a Jesus man. Being diabetic, the mission board turned me down, so I thought I’d misheard what God would want me to do.”

Decades later, as the world prepares to accept thousands of Afghans fleeing Taliban rule, Hudgins is seeing God’s call realized as he directs the Nashville World Outreach Partnership, a refugee and immigrant ministry based at Tusculum Hills Baptist Church in a diverse community with 20 nationalities and languages.

“We were just talking about we need to get ready for Afghanistan, because more than likely there’ll be some making their way to Nashville,” Hudgins said. “We’re just assuming there will be because of when the Kurdish population was brought to America (in 1996), most all the Kurdish people ended up in Nashville, and we have the largest population of Kurdish in the country.

Wednesday evenings, as many as 60 children from the diverse South Nashville neighborhood served by the Nashville World Outreach Partnership participate in the Freedom Children’s Choir at Tusculum Hills Baptist Church.

“We don’t know that they are coming here, but we’re going to certainly prepare as though they are coming. Then we’ll see what happens.”

In addition to Tusculum Hills Baptist, the partnership is comprised of Forest Hills Baptist Church in suburban Brentwood and the downtown Nashville First Baptist Church. Both Forest Hills and Nashville First contribute to the ministry financial gifts, volunteers and administrative support. The Nashville arm of Urban Promise International and Legacy Mission Village are among community-based partners.

“Tusculum is centrally located to all the refugees and immigrants coming into Nashville. ... Just about everybody on Nolensville Road uses the big blue neon cross we have as the landmark,” Hudgins said. “Even when we meet Muslim individuals, they all know about the big blue cross.”

Tusculum Hills hosts several international congregations, including Zomi from India, Karen from Burma and Thailand, Chinese and Sudanese. The most recent addition is a Spanish congregation birthed in cooperation with the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board.

Kori Bailey, center, a missionary to international families served by the Nashville World Outreach Partnership, poses with two Karen women among the 500 to 600 people the partnership serves weekly from about 20 different people groups.

Forest Hills, about 10 miles west of Tusculum Hills, began volunteering in Tusculum’s ministry about 10 years before the partnership was birthed in 2017, said Chad Mize, Forest Hills associate pastor of teaching, missions and evangelism.

“God opened doors there to where we began co-laboring in ministry,” Mize said, beginning with a summer international children’s choir camp that morphed into the Children’s Freedom Choir that meets weekly.

“God opened door after door after door,” he said. “... It’s been amazing to see people come to Christ.”

Sharing the Gospel is the partnership’s ultimate goal, but Hudgins describes the outreach as a marathon that begins with building relationships, providing education, food and clothing, and includes help in basic life skills that refugees need to survive in a foreign land, such as navigating government offices, medical facilities, utility companies and apartment living. Volunteers from partnership churches help in all areas of the ministry.

“Everything we do, that is our end goal is to share the Gospel and then enable them to share the Gospel with their family and friends, whether they’re here or they get to go back to Burma or Thailand or Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan,” Hudgins said.

Frank Lewis, senior pastor of Nashville First Baptist, said partnering in the ministry helps the church fulfill scriptural mandates to help those in need.

Tusculum Hills World Outreach Pastor Terry Hudgins, standing left, and missionary Kori Bailey, right, shown with a Karen refugee, are among those helping prepare the Nashville World Outreach Partnership for the possibility of serving Afghans fleeing Taliban rule.

From the Old Testament, we are reminded that God’s people are to treat the foreigner in our midst with care because once we were foreigners in a strange land,” Lewis said. “By ministering to these individuals who are refugees, we are caring for the hungry, naked, and neglected stranger in our midst. When we do this faithfully, Scripture says we are doing it unto Christ.

“Toward that end our Missions Committee has committed a very generous amount of money from our Missions Budget,” Lewis said. “We continue to support the Cooperative Program as our primary missions budget line item, but with this international mission field in our backyard, we have prioritized this ministry as a critical need.”

In preparing for Afghan refugees, the partnership will first look for a leader or pastor who knows the culture and speaks the various Arabic dialects.

Mize sees opportunity in the partnership to use all of the gifts God has placed in the church body.

“It’s been a joy to link arms with Tusculum and with First Baptist, and it’s just neat to see how God uses all of our gifts as churches,” Mize said, “and to see the Gospel go to the nations who God created and for whom He died and longs to redeem, from every tongue, tribe and nation.

“It’s the heart of God, and we want to mirror His heart in the way we serve our neighbor.” Hudgins believes refugee and immigrant ministry is accessible to many churches, even those with limited resources.

He wants others to know that refugees are here legally, and have passed a detailed vetting and application process through the U.S. government.

He describes refugees as hard workers who have fled violence and simply need friends who can help them navigate life in their new home. Many are not familiar with such things as changing lightbulbs and securing utility service.

Tusculum Hills often relies on children of refugee and immigrant families as interpreters, as they are enrolled in English classes and are also familiar with native dialects. Google translates is also helpful, Hudgins said.

“There are internationals in every community, for the most part,” Hudgins said. “It’s so simple. If they see that you care, they’ll open up and you can find out what their needs are. We’ve found that it’s a marathon, not a sprint.

“It’s taken a long time to earn their trust. We’ve had one of our Kurd children who is now a young adult tell us she wants to go back to Thailand to the refugee camps and tell others about Jesus. They can reach people that we never will.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

Med student starts anti-trafficking ministry after volunteering with Baptist Friendship House

by Timothy Cokes

NEW ORLEANS, LA (BP) – After spending time this summer volunteering at the [Baptist Friendship House in New Orleans](#), medical school student Megan Duggins knew she had to take a proactive approach to the issue of human trafficking.

Currently a student at Eastern Virginia Medical School, Duggins spent multiple days a week volunteering with the Friendship House this summer and assisted with caring for survivors of trafficking. She soon realized her training was lacking.

“It was very glaring to me that I wasn’t necessarily the best prepared to adequately respond to the situation,” Duggins said. “It showed me the level of care we need to provide for those victims, and it just really put two questions in my head: How am I as a future physician and my colleagues preparing to respond to these really delicate situations, and what can I do about it?”

Duggins started [From Red Flags to Freedom](#), a non-profit whose purpose is to “educate and empower future health care providers to identify the red flags of human trafficking and how to care for victims with dignity.”

All of the paperwork and non-profit tax information was filled out by Duggins herself, and she assembled the board of advisors (made up of counselors, physicians, ministry workers and government leaders) through networking. She had it completed within two months of her time with the Friendship House.

Duggins serves as the president of From Red Flags to Freedom and said the first goal is to create a training program, complete with videos and assessments, for future or current health care providers. The organization’s leaders will begin meeting this week to plan out the first training curriculum with a plan to launch early next year.

Duggins said health care professionals are not completely unequipped to handle situations involving trafficking, but hopes that additional training will help rising physicians feel more confident in dealing with situations when they arise.

“It’s better to be overprepared and know how to respond, than to say it’s never going to happen to you and deal with it poorly,” Duggins said.

After initially resisting the call to From Red Flags to Freedom, she said her faith compelled her to take action.

“I didn’t want to initially do it and it was kind of scary, and I thought that I was just a medical school student so what do they care what I have to say,” Duggins said. “But I don’t think it was a mistake that this need kind of came into my thought process. I’m really just trying to be faithful to the fact that I see a need and I want to meet a need with a level of integrity and care.

“I’m learning as I’m going. I’m not the expert, but if I can be the person that brings the experts to my fellow students then that’s what my role is supposed to be.”

One of Duggins’ main influences during her time with the Baptist Friendship House in New Orleans was executive director Kay Bennett. The Friendship House has served the New Orleans community for more than 75 years.

Bennett is also a Send Relief missionary and helps the Friendship House [partner in ministry](#) with Southern Baptist entities such as the North American Mission Board (often through its Send Relief Center in New Orleans) and the Woman’s Missionary Union (often through on-site training relating to trafficking).

Bennett said Southern Baptists have a huge role to play in the prevention of trafficking in their local area.

“If we as Southern Baptists could become educated about human trafficking so that we can take preventative measures, such as reaching out to people that are vulnerable, maybe living in poverty, folks that are experiencing homelessness, or folks that are just vulnerable because of abuse or things like they may have experienced,” Bennett said, “if we can be preventative in those ways then we can help to stop human trafficking.”

Duggins said Bennett noticed signs regarding human trafficking situations that she was not able to pick up on, which is one reason she asked Bennett to serve on the advisory board of From Red Flags to Freedom.

Duggins said the fact that every person is loved by God is what drove her to begin praying about human trafficking and then ultimately, to becoming part of the solution.

“When you pray bold prayers, don’t be surprised when God gives bold answers and be prepared to do something,” Duggins said. “Don’t pray big and then not respond, because that’s a lack of faith. Delayed obedience is still disobedience. It’s one thing to pray but another to take practical steps of obedience.

“God made every person with intrinsic value and loves everyone without partiality. That should transform how we view each and every person, and the things that would break Jesus’ heart should break ours.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Cockes is a Baptist Press staff writer.

Christian effect still possible during religious freedom crisis, speakers say

by Tom Strode

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – Christians are not without means of effective ministry while religious freedom is under siege in countries such as Afghanistan and China, speakers said Thursday (Aug. 26) in a Southern Baptist-sponsored online conversation.

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) brought together specialists in missions, international relations and religious freedom in a webinar titled “Baptists & the Nations: Religious Freedom Challenges Around the Globe.” Video of the event is available [here](#).

The discussion took place only hours after terrorist bombs killed 13 American troops and at least 90 Afghans outside the Kabul airport, where a massive evacuation effort is under way following the Taliban takeover of the country. The extremist Islamic group reportedly is already targeting Christians and other religious minorities, as well as Afghans who aided the United States the last 20 years.

“This has been one of the greatest setbacks for international religious freedom that we’ve lived through,” Paul Miller told the webinar audience. The Taliban “will not respect religious freedom or any human rights,” said Miller, professor of the practice of international affairs at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. He previously served as director for Afghanistan and Pakistan on the White House National Security Council.

Todd Lafferty, executive vice president of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board (IMB), said, “There are posters of believers now across the city of Kabul, and we know that [the Taliban is] going after them.” In addition, young daughters of Afghan Christians have already been taken from their families and given to Taliban fighters, he said.

IMB is “doing everything” it can “to try to help facilitate getting people out of the country,” Lafferty said. “We hope and pray that our government on the ground will help facilitate that as well.”

Chelsea Sobolik, the ERLC’s acting director of public policy, said the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities “will continue to increase as the United States falls back.” The Taliban’s treatment of women and girls also is “deeply, deeply concerning,” she said.

In response, IMB is working to help with the refugee crisis caused by the Taliban’s takeover, Lafferty told participants in the webinar.

“[T]here is a great opportunity for the church to rise up and minister and serve” during these crises, he said. “This gives us an opportunity as the church to reach the nations that have come among us.

“So we need to pray that Christians here would receive them with open arms and see this as God’s appointed time ... where we actually have an opportunity to minister to people that we would never be able to touch because they are behind closed borders and hard-to-reach places.”

Southern Baptists have given generously recently through Send Relief to help Afghan refugees, Lafferty said. Send Relief is the SBC’s compassion ministry conducted through the cooperative effort of IMB and the North American Mission Board (NAMB). Send Relief has seen “a strong, continuous and generous giving response from hundreds of churches and individuals in a matter of days,” a NAMB spokesman told Baptist Press.

Sobolik told the audience, “[I]t can be tempting when we see these images and videos to feel utterly, utterly helpless, but we’re not. As Christians, we can get on our knees and pray on behalf of vulnerable people in Afghanistan and around the world who are facing persecution.”

Christians also can pray “that people would share the Gospel” with the persecutors, in this case the Taliban, and “that they would come to know Christ as their Savior as well.”

It is “appropriate to focus on the immediate need” by seeking to help through IMB and other charitable organizations or to aid in resettling refugees, Miller said.

In addition to meeting immediate needs, Christians should focus beyond the headlines, he said. “There are a lot of other emerging and important issues that may not feel like today’s crisis and yet they are deeply concerning, deeply worrying,” including the rise of China as a world power, Miller told the audience.

China has exercised oppressive practices against Christians and other religious groups for decades, but it has turned its attention in recent years toward Uyghur Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities in the far western region of Xinjiang. The United States has declared the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) campaign against the Uyghurs as genocide. The CCP’s policies have included detention in “re-education” camps, forced labor, coercive organ harvesting, and forced abortions and sterilizations.

“I think it’s important to keep in mind that the way a government treats its people reveals its character,” Miller said in reference to China. “And that character will eventually also be revealed in how it treats other nations.”

When the CCP treats the Uyghurs and other groups “as disposable without any rights or dignity, you can bet that sooner or later the Chinese government will also take that same attitude and apply it to its neighboring countries,” he said.

Regarding the human rights/religious freedom crisis in Xinjiang, Sobolik said, “Christians should be on the forefront of advocating for dignity and human rights of all people, and we cannot remain silent in the face of injustices.”

Lafferty told the audience, “[P]rayer is one of the biggest ways that we can continue to impact the Chinese government, the Chinese world at this time. But I tell you what, it’s exciting what God is doing across that land. That work is not stopping. The Chinese believers want to see their group grow by 10 fold in the middle of this persecution. They know that it’s coming.”

Other countries that are not drawing as much attention but raise concerns about religious freedom and human rights, speakers said, including Belarus, Cuba, India, Nigeria and, as Miller described them in a follow-up email, “countries in which populism and nationalism hold sway, like Hungary, Poland and Brazil.”

During the webinar, speakers also addressed inter-country adoption, guidance for missionary personnel during crises and the Great Commission’s effect on their work. Brent Leatherwood, the ERLC’s chief of staff, moderated the discussion.

Among the resources on the crisis in Afghanistan produced by the ERLC is a prayer guide, which is available [here](#). The SBC Executive Committee partnered with Send Relief to issue a [prayer guide](#) Thursday on Afghanistan.

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