

Michigan Disaster Relief seeking new volunteers

MIDLAND – Everything Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDR) volunteers do in a crisis, centers on not only meeting physical needs, but extending the invitation to receive eternal, spiritual Hope.

SBDR responds to a wide range of crises, primarily meeting critical needs in the aftermath of natural disasters. We are part of one of the largest disaster response groups in the nation, we fall under the auspices of Send Relief, which is a collaboration between the [International Mission Board](#) and [North American Mission Board](#).

This network of state-based volunteer teams does more than just clean up; we bring the healing of Christ to those whose lives have been impacted. Everything SBDR and Send Relief do to meet needs in the throes of a crisis centers on not only meeting physical needs but extending the invitation to receive eternal, spiritual hope.

When we go to a home to help, we try to have a volunteer chaplain on every team that interacts with a homeowner. This is regularly the most important person on the team. While the other volunteers focus on physical needs, the chaplain interacts more with the homeowner. They listen to them, let them tell their stories, and are ready to share the good news about Jesus. Those that are not saved are usually amazed that we travel as far as we have and do this work, at no cost to them, because we love them in Jesus' name.

To be a Chaplain, you must be trained in another Disaster Relief discipline. We want our Chaplains to understand all aspects of a disaster and recovery. The Chaplain serves the needs of the volunteers, as well as survivors of a disaster.

On the physical side, teams from Michigan focus on three main areas: flood relief, chainsaw and feeding.

Flood recovery, sometimes referred to as "mud-out" involves removing furniture, appliances and personal belongings that were affected by flood waters. We try to reclaim what we can and then aid in disposing of what can't be saved. It may include shoveling mud from homes. We tear out sodden drywall and insulation and take everything down to the studs. We then apply disinfectant to the affected areas of the home for mold remediation. Our goal is to leave homes "contractor ready", as livable as possible while the homeowners wait for rebuilding.

Chainsaw, as the name implies, is the cutting and pulling of trees, limbs and debris that have fallen due to high winds. It also includes putting tarps on roofs that have been damaged. We focus on trees that are blocking drives, doorways, and houses. Cutting the wood is just half the job. It takes just as many volunteers to help pull the brush and pile the cut wood so that it can be eventually removed. This much needed part of the task can be done by those that are not comfortable running a chainsaw.

Feeding involves preparing food. It is for the volunteers that are assisting in cleanup. It may also involve feeding the community at large if they have been impacted by larger scale outages of utilities such as electricity or water. We may be working in a church kitchen or a mobile kitchen unit. We follow health department requirements, similar to those in a commercial kitchen such as a restaurant or school cafeteria. We don't always know what food will be available to prepare so the feeding team regularly must get creative with the menus. There is a camaraderie among the volunteers that is hard to explain. The work is not "fun". It is tiring, and frequently we are in unpleasant conditions. However, you are working side-by-side with others that know and love the Lord. You are doing what He has called us for, to help those in need and show them God's love in real and tangible ways. Those we help have very real needs. They frequently tell us they are blessed by our assistance. What we learn however is how true the Scripture is when it says it is better to give than receive (Acts 20:35). We also come away blessed.

Training in all these areas is offered on a regular basis for those that may be interested. We urge you to attend and find out if this may be for you. **We are looking for additional helpers to add to the pool of volunteers.** Typically, only a fraction of the Michigan DR volunteers are available to travel to any particular disaster area when we are called out. We don't know when a disaster will occur, so we always need to be ready.

Among the places (and types of disasters) Michigan SBDR volunteers were called to in 2022 include:

- **Ohio** – tornado - feeding and chainsaw
- **Colorado** – wildfire - feeding
- **Florida** - hurricane relief – feeding
- **Michigan** – tornado damage assessment and chainsaw

We ask for your prayers for the homeowners and the survivors. They have been devastated and need the strength and hope of Christ. Pray that the witness of our volunteers across all our locations will be strong, powerful, and visible.

If you would like to join us or want more information, you can find it at the Michigan Disaster relief website at <https://bscm.org/dr> or call (810)714-1907.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill LaFollette and his wife Linda live in Midland. They have two adult children and two grandchildren. They volunteer with community organizations and attend Sunrise Baptist Church.

Our next step might be a step back

SOUTH LYON – The writer of Ecclesiastes said that “there is nothing new under the sun.” He was right. The more that I see and hear about new things, the more I realize we’ve been this way before. With ministry, you always want to be fresh and have fresh ideas.

Last week, I was in my office talking to a man who comes in just about every day. I asked him if he would like to go with me to visit with a woman who is now in her 90’s. We left and drove just a short distance to her house and rang the doorbell. It took a minute or two before she was able to get to the door, but when she opened it up, her eyes lit up, and her hands and arms flew into the air. There was a smile from ear to ear.

She had just decorated her house for Christmas and couldn’t wait to show us her Christmas trinkets. All with stories behind them. We stayed for a while, ate cookies, talked, and prayed with her. Her smile was all I could think about that day when I got back to the office.

The next day, I decided to drive over to an assisted living place in Northville. One of the ladies from our church had just moved in the week before, and she was trying to adjust to her new way of life. As I made my way through the hallway, I finally found her room. I knocked on the door. It didn’t take her long to open it. She smiled and I asked, “how are you doing?” She was quick to say, “I’m bored to tears.”

She invited me in, and was glad to see me. Her place was a little bigger than my office at the church. Her bedroom, kitchen, and living room area were all the same room. A far cry from the two bedrooms, two floor place that she moved out of.

We visited for a little while and when we were done, she said that she would walk me down to the door, that it would give her an excuse to get out of the room.

My heart went out for both women, and my mind went back to the days when they were at church every service. Both of them were teaching Sunday School, rocking babies in the nursery, encouraging our young ladies. And now, life is a lot different, much quieter, much lonelier.

In our quest sometimes to become younger with our church attendance, we tend to forget those who, in days gone by, were a big part in many of our churches. They worked hard to build and clean, many sacrificed money and time to reach out to those in need. Some were probably even the ones who shared the love of Jesus with you, and prayed with you to receive him into your heart and life.

If we are not careful, these people become the forgotten, and they aren’t thought of much until you get the call that they have passed, and then the memories of who they once were comes flooding back again.

One day, someone asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was? He said, “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And the next,” he said, “is much like the first. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

There are folks out there who just need someone to say, “I thought I would stop by today to see how you are doing?” Let’s not forget to reach out to them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randy Weaks is the Associate Pastor at First Baptist Church South Lyon.

Lifeway trains leaders, builds momentum for VBS 2023 at VBS Previews

NASHVILLE, TN – For many, Vacation Bible School (VBS) is the best time of the year, and many ministry leaders and volunteers are already preparing for VBS 2023. To help prepare these leaders to make next summer a game changer, Lifeway Christian Resources is hosting VBS Preview events to train, equip and encourage leaders.

According to [Lifeway Research](#), 6 in 10 Americans say they attended VBS growing up, and 7 in 10 parents say they would let their child attend VBS at someone else’s church if they were invited. VBS remains one of the most popular church programs in America—and for good reason. Most American adults who attended VBS as children say they have positive memories of VBS and that it helped them understand the Bible better and positively influenced their spiritual growth.

That’s why Lifeway will host five VBS Preview events in four cities in January 2023. Each preview will include both English and Spanish breakout sessions to provide ministry leaders with opportunities to develop their volunteer team, gain valuable training and build momentum and excitement for “Twists & Turns” VBS.

“VBS Preview is the first opportunity to get an in-depth look at the resources and theme and get a jump start on planning,” said Melita Thomas, VBS and kids ministry specialist for Lifeway. “Plus, when you bring your team (or key leaders) to a VBS Preview, everyone gets on the same page and leaves pumped up and ready to get started.”

Three cities will host two-day VBS 2023 Preview events, spanning Friday and Saturday. VBS Preview events in Nashville will be single day events. 2023 dates and locations include:

- Friday, January 6 – Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, Tennessee
- Friday, January 7 – Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, Tennessee
- Friday-Saturday, January 13-14 – Sugar Creek Baptist Church, Sugar Land (Houston), Texas
- Friday-Saturday, January 20-21 – Travis Avenue Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas
- Friday-Saturday, January 27-28 – Ridgecrest Conference Center, Black Mountain, North Carolina

Registration is open at vbs.lifeway.com.

VBS Previews are designed to equip VBS teams for success. Leaders get to experience what a worship rally and family night can look like, learn VBS music, preview videos, dig into resources, hone their skills as a teacher or director, bond with their team and network with other VBS leaders.

Each VBS Preview event will feature a VBS Event Store where leaders and volunteers can shop for “Twists & Turns” curriculum and decorations. It’s the only place to shop for VBS materials in person. Leaders will get Preview-only discounts on VBS shirts and have opportunities to pick up exclusive VBS swag.

Through main sessions and breakouts, VBS experts train VBS teams with the tools they need to make this summer’s VBS a game changer, including helps for developing classroom skills, providing a safe environment for kids and recruiting and mentoring new leaders. Leaders will leave inspired to plan and execute a VBS that impacts lives for eternity.

“Trained leaders have a different perspective of their roles and responsibilities during VBS. They see their work through the lens of the gospel and understand how their roles present unique opportunities to build relationships with children that lead to gospel conversations,” Thomas said. “They understand how the pieces of VBS strategically come together to maximize evangelistic opportunities. Trained leaders learn how to share the gospel effectively with children and readily recognize ‘gospel opportunities’ throughout the week.”

Lifeway’s VBS isn’t just for kids. It includes age-appropriate Bible study and rotations for students (7th-12th grade) and adults. VBS Preview events offer sessions on these resources as well as best practices for leading Student VBS and Adult VBS.

“The more leaders and volunteers who catch the vision and embrace the ‘why’ of VBS, the more effective their VBS will be at reaching children and families for Christ,” Thomas said.

“There is tremendous opportunity for reaching entire communities with the gospel through VBS.”

For more information about Lifeway’s 2023 VBS Preview events, including how to register and get discounted hotel rates (for a limited time), visit vbs.lifeway.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marissa Postell is a writer for Lifeway Christian Resources.

ABOUT LIFEWAY CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

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

Legal matters should concern churches, expert says

Editor’s Note: The latest episode of the BSCM’s podcast [“Punching Holes in the Darkness”](https://www.bscm.org/podcast/episode/f5611368/navigating-the-changing-culture) addresses the issue of the local church and legal challenges. It also shares how the BSCM is helping local churches protect themselves from legal challenges. To listen go to: <https://www.bscm.org/podcast/episode/f5611368/navigating-the-changing-culture>

LAYTON, UT (BP) – When God created Gary McKean, He gave him flat feet, and gave Southern Baptists McKean’s legal expertise.

The flat feet canceled McKean’s dream of being a Naval officer. He turned to law instead because it “intrigued me, especially after taking an undergraduate Constitutional law course.”

McKean was honored during the recent annual meeting of the Utah Idaho Southern Baptist Convention for 15 years’ service as a volunteer on the state convention staff, but pre- and post-retirement as a county attorney he has served Southern Baptists for more than 45 years, including an eight-year stint (2006-2014) on the SBC Executive Committee.

“Gary’s work with our churches and legal guidance has saved our churches thousands of dollars and many headaches,” UISBC Executive Director Rob Lee told messengers to the two-state convention’s 58th annual meeting. “Without Gary’s legal guidance our state convention of churches would not function as effectively.”

One of the things McKean does each year is post in the December issue of UI Connections, the state convention's online communications tool, three things churches need to do in December, and the one to be done in January.

He tells church leaders to check the applicable laws and procedures for their state or local governments and confirm their compliance for the following before the end of the calendar year:

- Confirm that a corporate renewal form has been submitted to the state.
- Designate by resolution the housing allowance for pastors for the coming year.
- Confirm the renewal of the church's property tax exemption with the county tax assessor.
- In January, provide receipts or statements to all donors confirming each donor's giving in the last year.

McKean talked with Baptist Press about how knowledge of legal matters is essential for pastors and churches these days.

"This is something that is generally not taught in seminaries," McKean said. "The essential factor is that any given church has two natures: the spiritual or ecclesiastical and the business or corporate. Each engenders legal aspects.

"It also means churches need to understand distinctions of function and responsibility between ecclesiastical leaders and corporate officers," McKean continued. "Trustees have corporate duties and fiduciary roles that often are not understood by churches."

He notes that many churches are concerned with liability. Traditionally that has been based on claims of negligence, but today it may also be in terms of non-compliance, such as child safety. That necessitates well-considered risk management consisting of four basic components: having policies, training on those policies, monitoring compliance with these policies, and keeping records of all of that.

"More governmental regulations have to be dealt with, such as with property, zoning, tax exemption, employment, sex abuse, religious liberty and more," the longtime attorney said. "The need for legal advice and legal awareness on such regulations and other laws is increasing exponentially.

"As long as there have been churches there have been legal matters to be addressed by the church. Over the last 30 to 40 years, the legal climate has been changing."

In today's litigious climate, churches face a greater possibility of legal claims.

McKean listed several hot-button cultural issues that 10 years ago wouldn't have been significant: transgender bathrooms for youth and children, same sex weddings, armed church security, various types of discrimination and the ongoing struggle to preserve religious liberties.

Courts will generally recognize a "ministerial exception," meaning that the court will not rule on a theological or spiritual doctrine, but courts can and often will find there are secular aspects the court can rule on.

As stated in McKean's report at the 2022 UISBC annual meeting, "Each church should take the time to review its governing documents, its articles of incorporation, constitution/statement of beliefs, bylaws, and policies. Churches should be made aware of legal trends, developments, and concerns as these may impact the church's ministry."

Churches need to be aware that when churches close or disband, there is a legal responsibility to lawfully dissolve the church entity and properly dispose of any assets, McKean told Baptist Press. For example, trustees are responsible for those assets and could incur personal liability if they were to give assets to another church rather than applying those assets to a church debt or give any assets to individual church members.

McKean helps churches with all these issues, leads legal seminars and provides legal resources on the UISBC website.

"When we talk about legal things with churches, I try to impress on everybody that the purpose of the church's governing documents is to encourage and enable the church to fulfill its mission," McKean said. "The mission is everything."

"It's important to understand what the law is, and what resources are available. There are a lot of Christian lawyers around the country. One important source for me is the Christian Legal Society. I've been very active in it for years. One reason is its central emphasis on fulfilling Micah 6:8."

CLS serves Christ through the practice of law, the defense of religious freedom, and providing legal aid to the needy, according to its website. McKean and other Christian attorneys operated a CLS Legal Clinic in Layton for 20 years.

Insurance companies, Christian and religious liberties firms, Southern Baptists' Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission and many state conventions make available resources, videos, webinars and more for churches.

"These can be very informative and helpful," McKean said. "Churches need to have a heightened awareness of the law and factor into that what they need to do next." What to do if a suit is filed against a church? Don't panic, the attorney said.

- First, contact and listen to an attorney, preferably a Christian who has some knowledge of how churches work. CLS can help locate an attorney.
- Second, notify the church's insurance company.
- Third, designate a team and leader to deal with the suit. (Typically, that should be the trustees and their chairman.)
- Fourth, keep the members informed.
- And fifth, maintain a Christian witness through what can be a tiring and lengthy process.

Churches ought to regularly review their governing documents – in particular their policies – and make sure they are following those policies, McKean suggested. They can have their local fire and law enforcement departments visit and inspect their facility for safety and security and provide training as well. They can consider having Christian attorneys or other experts lead seminars on children's ministries, risk management, security, sexual abuse and more.

"A church's respect for the law will reflect the faith, character, and witness of the church and certainly its trust in God," McKean said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen L. Willoughby is a national correspondent for Baptist Press.

Viva la difference

PLYMOUTH – People are different. I can hear your reactions right now: "Yeah, Duh! Real genius statement there Tim." And yes, it is very obvious that each human being is as unique and varied as a snowflake. Different in appearance. Different in thought. Different in cultural conditioning and social bias. Different in ethnicity and race.

There are so many differences, yet for some reason we pastors and leaders fall into the erroneous mindset that everyone should think, perceive, and believe as we do, and view matters from our perspective. We so easily fall into the "trap" of believing this that we are of the opinion that the way we communicate will reach, be understood, and be accepted by all. That is why I must remind myself on a regular basis that PEOPLE ARE DIFFERENT.

A good example of this is me and my sweetheart Sabrina. When I first met Sabrina, I could see that she was "really different" and boy, did I like the difference! "Viva la difference'." But it was

not until we had been married for a few weeks that I began to understand how different we were. The full understanding of these differences has been and will continue to be a lifelong living and learning experience.

One example I have come to realize is that I want to get the full experience of situations, people and places, and Sabrina wants to get the exposure. Now that might not make much sense to you, so bear with me a moment and allow me to explain.

When we travel to different places and countries, I relish the idea of soaking in all the ambiance, culture, and the “moment”. I want to feel the temperature and atmosphere as well as take in the aromas, colors, sounds and uniqueness of a place. I actively seek out those experiences and try to implant them in my memory. I don’t want to get in a hurry and rush through something.

Sabrina loves photography and wants to capture an exposure of that place on her camera. That has been her quest since she began years ago using film to do this and now does so digitally. She wants the picture. Exposure. I want the Experience. Is one better than the other? No. They are just different. Each of us view things from a different perspective.

Sabrina tells me she doesn’t want to forget those places, so she captures them in a digital media. I don’t want to miss anything, so I use all my senses to help me remember. This is just one of our many differences.

This year I want to be keenly aware and sensitive to the unique and varying differences in each of us. I want to apply the principle of “seeking to understand before seeking to be understood” that I learned many decades ago but have somehow forgotten to consistently apply. It is a basic desire of all humanity to be heard and understood. All of us want to be truly seen and not just viewed.

If I am to be a true communicator of the Gospel, then I must be acutely aware of those to whom I speak. I must watch and carefully observe the person and not just look at the human. This will take hard work and practice. Patience will be needed in abundance. It may take an inordinate amount of time to truly get to know and understand someone, but the effort will be more than rewarding. It could very well make an eternal difference in their lives.

I don’t make New Year’s resolutions, and this is not one. This is a choice. It is a choice that every Believer could and should make. To seek to truly understand others in order that we may be better communicators of the Gospel. It is not a resolution, but it will take great resolve.

May this be a great New Year for you and the Gospel.

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.

Embezzler's new beginnings

PLYMOUTH – During the mid-1980's my wife and I served the Lord as house parents for Kentucky children, ages first grade through high school graduation, while I attended Southern Seminary in Louisville. Being house parents means that we lived in a cottage with ten girls for three days, followed by three days in a boy's cottage before having three days off for recovery. With our first-born, we moved from one cottage to another then to our, on campus, efficiency apartment. We were on call 24/7.

In our second year of service, I was enlisted to serve as the campus pastor for the entire population of students and staff in a rural setting of rolling hills near Glendale, KY. The setting was serene and spacious with a local nearby Baptist church that was a valuable partner in helping the children learn about how the Lord can guide people out of generational family bondage toward a new way of life in Jesus Christ.

Though the setting was peaceful, the conflicts the children faced were chaotic and confusing. The children lived on campus for years, being cared for by Kentucky Baptists because their parents were unable to get their lives under control. The poor decisions and actions of the parents led to horrible outcomes in the lives of the children. The children should have been able to rely on their parents and family members to guide them toward safety, success, and salvation in Jesus Christ, but that security seldom arose, so Kentucky Baptists loved and provided for the children, replacing what the children's families failed to do.

During the regularly scheduled, in-home, family visits we repeatedly saw the children and teenagers regress into poor or dangerous behaviors weeks before their departure and then helped them, through therapy and biblical counseling, to overcome their poor and sometimes violent behavior after returning to campus. It was exhausting and rewarding.

Today, as we look at a new year getting underway with 2023 upon us, I had a vivid recall of an annual conference we set-up for the teenagers at the children's home during the 1980's. The event was labeled, "New Beginnings." It is worth noting because the event could help someone you love, your church, or you. Please, take a few more minutes and let me describe the simple set-up and its implications. Let me explain how the event grew out of one man's renewed life.

In that local nearby Kentucky church, the children and teenagers we served were amazed when on a sunny autumn day, a former local bank manager returned to the church after years of imprisonment for embezzling funds from the small-town bank. The former bank manager stood before the church on that Sunday morning with his wife and children at his side confessing his desire to start a renewed life in the community and the church. With emotion and well-chosen, tender words the former banker thanked the members and the pastor of the church for their unwavering support and love during his imprisonment.

He replayed how he, years ago, had confessed his dishonesty in court after his arrest and through a handwritten letter to the church before going to prison. Now upon his return to his family and community, he wanted to restart his life. The former bank manager confessed his former felony without any excuse and asked for a chance to prove that his faith was strong enough to form a new life of integrity and Christlikeness.

After the former banker spoke, the pastor prayed over the family and invited members of the church to greet and welcome the former banker back into the church and the community. I was startled out of my own deep reflections over the bold confession, as I took note that it was the children and teenagers from the children's home who rapidly streamed out of the pure white pews with red velvety cushions toward the former banker, his wife, and children. They were first in line. The handshakes were awkward, the words were few, but the actions of the children from broken homes spoke so loudly that even the hardest heart in the sanctuary would have been ashamed to refuse a second chance to the former banker and his family.

From the response of the children at church, I knew there was something to be gained by focusing on this spiritual lesson at the children's home. That impression was further confirmed by weeks of discussions during daily cottage devotions with the children who were amazed at the confession of the former banker. They admired his declaration of failure. As a staff, we realized that the children we served were surrounded by family members who never confessed personal failure, so the children consequently thought they were the ones, with shame and guilt, that had failed their unhealthy, immature, and neglectful parents.

The entire staff mobilized to organize what we called the "New Beginnings Conference." The guest list included the former banker, a recovering addict who worked on the campus, the campus activities coach who promoted healthy practices, a social worker who mapped out lessons on change, and the director of the children's home, Mr. Buckley, who was a former longtime resident of the campus forty years earlier. We discovered the children were inspired more by those who dug themselves out of previous failures than the stories of those who appeared to live perfect, pristine lives.

Let me finish with some questions for your private reflection:

- 1. Does your life and church provide a culture that, while we all strive for devoted Christlikeness, allows for someone to confess failure immediately followed by**

personal spiritual guidance toward godliness without exclusion?

- 2. Who guides and promotes the culture of redemption in the church and is that redemption process often described publicly so people know that deliverance from sin and its consequences is a process available at the local church?**
- 3. Would an event in your church setting, with this theme, among the adults and teenagers be worth creating, conducting, and evaluating?**

You might wonder, will it help? My response is that it led to healthy transparent conversations that led toward biblical solutions for the children and teenagers.

Here is a short story that explains the new culture's impact. Billy was an older teenage resident at the children's home. We nicknamed him "The General" knowing that he was in control of most of the teenagers' actions. Billy had the most violent past. One night he ran off campus for a nighttime party at a nearby river park. After the discovery of his transgression, Billy was brought before the director. Billy explained his failure and his success that night with these words, "Mr. Buckley, I understand I did wrong. But I made better choices than I usually do. While at the party, I could have been with a girl, taken drugs, and drank beer – but all I did last night was drink beer. I am making progress because of what I am learning here at the children's home!"

Does the culture in your life and church allow others to make spiritual progress within the biblical community that you provide? This may be worth discussing with those in church.

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.

BSCM helps churches that are past the curve

PLYMOUTH – As 2022 was nearing the end, I reflected on the illustration a well known speaker made to a gathering of pastors. He described our life cycle in four quarters and gave some common characteristics of each quarter. Based on his analogy and the life span he used to divide the quarters, I'm in life's 4th quarter. Ouch! Of course, the way my mind is wired, I immediately thought of making it to overtime.

Churches have a life cycle too. It's most often pictured as a Bell Curve with the start on one side and the end on the other. At the topmost point of the curve is when the church is thriving and healthy. People are coming to faith in Christ and growing as disciples. It is a time of growth - spiritually and numerically. Vision drives everything as more and more disciples are made. Organizational structure is developing in such a way that it maximizes vision and discipleship. The focus is on reaching people with the Gospel and making disciples, not maintaining the organization. Mission and ministry go forward hand in hand as the church enthusiastically embraces the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

This is the proverbial "Mountain Top" new churches long to reach in the beginning or existing churches look backward toward during a period of decline.

As you look at the Bell Curve, where would you place your church? If your church is on the downslope, you're not alone. The overwhelming majority of churches are looking backward toward the mountaintop. The closer your church is to the peak on the downside, the easier it is to turn things around. The further the church moves down the slope, the greater the downward momentum pulling your church toward life support. If the church doesn't experience revitalization, it will die.

The good news is: **CHURCH REVITALIZATION IS POSSIBLE.**

Your church can experience renewed vision and vitality. It's not easy. It will probably take longer and cost more than you expect, but revitalization for your church is worth what it takes.

The BSCM exists to help your church take your next step to accelerate the Gospel movement. For many churches that is a step toward revitalization. That's why we have partnered with Dr. Rob Peters of Corpus Vitae. Corpus has a proven record of helping churches experience renewed vitality. The tools and processes Corpus uses were born out of the local church, and are rooted in Biblical principles. They come alongside local church leaders with practical resources they can use on the revitalization journey.

Let me point out two quotes from the Corpus website (<https://corpusvitae.org>) that capture the heart of their ministry:

"Corpus exists because church leaders need help. Leading a church through the revitalization process can be challenging and overwhelming. We are here to help."

"Corpus is a church-based ministry. All the products and services we provide have their origination within the church and are then customized for your individual church. We are not an ivory tower of theory and experimentation. Rather, we are practitioners, and our primary calling is to serve the local church."

Dr. Rob Peters is going to be in Michigan on Monday and Tuesday, March 27-28. to meet with pastors who want to learn more about Corpus Revitalization. We will organize his schedule based on the pastors that are interested in talking with him. Please contact mike@bscm.org so we can make the most of his time with us.

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.

9 ways to encourage your team

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – When I visit churches in my new role, I like to ask staff and lay leaders alike what encourages them most about serving in their church. The result has been a journey of discovery! Allow me to put my learnings into language that may help other pastors and church planters.

1. Be generous in recognizing contributions to the team.

When someone on your team makes a slam dunk, celebrate it together as a team. Acknowledge them when your team is together. Give a shout-out at staff meeting. Write an encouragement card. Give her a \$10 Starbucks card.

2. Hang out with your team.

No agenda whatsoever. Just enjoy each other's company. Have fun together. Ask families over for dinner. One administrative assistant I spoke to said, "Being able to laugh and tell jokes around each other is encouraging, because we can be ourselves."

3. Give hand-written notes of encouragement.

We are in the habit of writing notes to the people we work with across the state. I hear from pastors every week who tell me their card came at "just the right moment!" Not a coincidence, for sure. We pray over every card before we send it, and ask Jesus to lift people with it.

Pastor, it doesn't take much time to write a heartfelt thank you to the selfless servants of God in your church, and they will love you for it.

4. Trust members of your team with important stuff.

When you give significant projects to a member of your team, with sufficient information and corresponding authority, then trust them to carry the ball. It helps them strive for excellence knowing that the stakes are high. Celebrate the win when it's all over!

5. Ask about stuff that is going on outside of work.

Encourage and support your colleagues to pursue their dreams for ministry inside and outside the church. Ask also about their lives, their dreams, their families, their hobbies outside of work. As I spoke to someone last week, I could see and feel the pain as they spoke about a pending surgery. Ask questions that go beyond Sunday's football game.

6. Affirm God's call in their lives.

A director of worship and creative arts told me she is inspired to strive for excellence by knowing that it's what God has called her to do. "It's not about man, or job descriptions, goals, or anything of the like! It's merely knowing by experience that God is a God of excellence, and He desires excellence from us." Affirming God's call and God's anointing in the life of staff members (paid or unpaid) will produce great results and encourage them to do their best for God's glory!

7. If you can make a decision with your team, then make it with your team.

One church staff member listed "collaboration and group decision making" at the top of what she values in a work environment. Hmmm. That's challenging for me because I'm the type of leader who wants to set the course and then go for it. No collaboration for this cowboy! I'm learning that is not the most productive or helpful way to lead.

8. Nurture flexibility with accountability.

Leaders in our churches are encouraged when they know we can be flexible with schedules, meetings, time away from the office, vacation time, etc. But it must be flexibility with genuine accountability in order for the team to fire on all cylinders. One without the other makes an unhappy workplace.

9. Practice taking risks with your team.

Baby-boomer leaders need to learn how to take risks with their younger, gifted, millennial counterparts. We must give them room and encourage them to think outside the box, give them permission to try new things, take risks, and learn from their mistakes.

And a few don'ts to follow:

Don't micromanage.

Nuff said. Leaders hate to be micromanaged. Passionately hate it.

Don't shift the blame.

If you blow it, own the mistake. Don't shift the blame to another team member or an administrative assistant.

Do not tolerate "the meeting after the meeting."

The staff needs to talk openly about "stuff," not behind closed doors.

Don't "use" people to accomplish anything.

The people you work with are not stupid. If you use them to accomplish your dream, your goal, your objective, your target, your aspirations, it will flop. Guaranteed. Work with your team, not around them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Garth Leno is a Planter/Pastor Care Specialist for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. He always works in a similar role with the Canadian National Baptist Convention. A graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Bethel Theological Seminary, and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Garth loves to serve, lead, and preach for the sake of the kingdom.

What's keeping you from your new beginning?

ROSCOMMON – Happy New Year from Bambi Lake! We anticipate 2023 being exciting as we witness God using Bambi Lake in amazing ways.

A new year for many of us often marks a "New Beginning". An opportunity to rethink or re-tool our everyday life and our plans for the future. Maybe a new year sparks new dreams or prompts us to refresh old ones in a new way. However, as we approach this "New Beginning" it will most likely require a reboot to our thinking.

How we view our finances, our health, our relationships, our family - we must look at these through different lenses. I recently had to start taking diabetes medicine and taking an insulin shot every morning because I have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. Honestly this

diagnosis made me angry because in my mind only unhealthy eating and obesity causes diabetes.

Obviously, this thinking was incorrect because I am neither of those two. For some time I had begun feeling slow, lethargic and my eyesight was blurry at times, and I knew something was amiss, but I didn't want to admit I was sick. Nevertheless, I finally went to the doctor.

Making the decision to go to the doctor and be examined required a new mindset. I had to acknowledge my body was not functioning properly, and decide this was no longer acceptable. As silly as it may seem, this required admitting I was getting older, needed to go to the doctor, probably having to take pills (one more thing to remember), paying for something I don't want, etc, etc....

Nevertheless, I decided my need was greater than my pride. This was my "New Beginning" moment that ushered in a new reality. Which brings me to this question - Is pride keeping you from a "New Beginning"? Is pride keeping you from a "New Reality"?

I have no way of knowing the area of life that you desire a "New Beginning", but allow me to encourage you with this thought, this reality - "Grace Has Overcome!". Grace wins!

What a liberating and life altering reality to live in! However, it requires a new mindset. It requires surrender. Humility is the key that unlocks this "New Beginning" in our lives. We have to acknowledge our insufficient strength and resources to handle life on our own. Only by completely surrendering and relying on the work of God's grace can we truly have a "New Beginning" in any area of our life.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" Ephesians 2:8 (ESV).

Grace saved you, let it change you! Let it permeate every breathing moment of your existence. Choose a "New Beginning" with grace. Live in the reality that your striving is insufficient, BUT His grace is sufficient!

*My only hope is in the cross, my Savior died, He paid my cost
A slave to sin my soul in chains, until His grace, flowed down like rain
Amazing grace how sweet the sound, when Your grace like rain comes flowing down,
It's a beautiful sound!*

*Your Grace, Your Grace has overcome, overcome!
Your Grace, Your Grace the battle won, the battle won!
Forgiven I stand in victory, for the glory, of my Savior King,
Your Grace has overcome!*

(Grace Has Overcome-Michael Schatz)

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.

Broken to made new

MACOMB TOWNSHIP – Recently I learned about the art of the Japanese Kintsugi. In this practice, when a piece of pottery breaks, instead of discarding the pottery, the broken pieces are glued back together by gold or silver lacquer. In this way, the pottery is now made new. Not only was it recreated, but now it is more valuable due the gold or silver lacquer, becoming a one-of-a-kind piece of pottery.

The more I think about this style of art, the more God uses it as an object lesson in my own life.

Brokenness.

This is not a topic we like to discuss. We don't gather with our families and friends, and go around the room sharing about our struggles and brokenness. We don't typically meet a new person and lead with our failures and shortcomings. We like to show that we have it all together, and put our best self forward. Sometimes, we become so entrenched in living behind the mask and showing others the "social media" version of ourselves that we get caught up in the treadmill of trying to hold it all together.

Failure and brokenness go hand in hand. Since we never want to let others know we are broken, we try to do anything from failing thus creating even more brokenness in our lives. This is the mindset many of us have around brokenness. Instead of viewing failure in a negative light, what if we shift our perspective and learn from our failures so that we can readjust and succeed out of our brokenness? What if we began to share with others what God taught us in our failures?

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

– 1 John 1:8-9 NIV

We are all broken. We must recognize that and come to a place where we realize we need Jesus. We don't have to strive to show perfection! Who can relate to perfectionism? No one is

perfect this side of Heaven. Truth is, we will relate to people more when we share out of our vulnerability and brokenness. Just like the Japanese Kintsugi bowl, the cracks make the piece more valuable and defined. It is the same with the brokenness in our lives. When we offer the broken pieces of our life back to God, He can use them in a mighty way.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!
– 2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV

God will take our broken pieces and make them new. For this to happen, we have to get real with God, name our brokenness, and own it. We must confess it to God and ask for Him to heal us, and restore us to become the person he wants us to be in Christ. When we try to hide our brokenness and cover it up, we are doing ourselves and others a disservice to the Kingdom of God. Perfectionism is too high of a standard for people to reach. As Christians, if we always come across as perfect, then unbelievers will feel as if they can never achieve it. This is not the gospel!

The gospel is coming to God in our brokenness and relying on Him to change us and make us new. It is then that we can share with others what God has done in our lives. We can relate to their struggles and give them hope that our good Father wants to meet them in their brokenness as well.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 5:3

Embrace your brokenness and allow God to use you to make a difference for the Kingdom. You are a new creation made by broken pieces held together by God's grace and mercy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

New Year prayer

GRANDVILLE – Lord, I recognize that some are reading this and are discouraged, would You encourage their heart today. Some are reading this and are not sure they can go another

Sunday; would You strengthen their heart today. Some are feeling overwhelmed by a decision or with a person. Would You give them wisdom today? Some are wrestling internally; would You give them peace and rest today. And Lord, others are reading this and simply enjoying a sweet season of ministry, would You give them continued fruit in the days ahead.

Lord, wherever we are at, on the mountain top or in the valley, excited or exhausted, we know this: that we all, like the Psalmist in Psalm 40, are “poor and needy.” We know that without You we are nothing and apart from you we cannot do anything.

Father, we know that this work that You have called us to (yes, you have called us to it!) is beyond us, but it is not beyond You, because You are the One who promises to build Your church and sustain Your church. It’s Your Son who is the foundation of the church, the focus of the church, and the Savior of the Church! Not us. So, Father, would our churches across Michigan be all about Jesus, the Greatest One who has done the greatest thing!

Father, we have seen You do some incredible things over these past few years. And we want to ask, collectively and humbly, would you do it again! Would you do even more! Lord, millions of people in Michigan still need you. So would You use us here in Michigan to help birth a massive Gospel movement that eternally impacts millions; I pray, one that the history books could not ignore. Not so that our name could be attached to it, but so that Your Kingdom would be advanced through it — that the spiritual landscape in Michigan would be changed, that the lost would be saved, that those running would return, that your disciples would be equipped, that more leaders would be raised up, that more servants would be sent out, and that more churches would be planted, mobilized, and multiplied! Father, we are asking You to advance a Gospel movement in and throughout Michigan, for your glory!

And so today, would You encourage our hearts, would You fuel the mission, and refuel each Michigan leader, and through it all would You “accelerate Gospel movement”.

So together we pray Ephesians 3:20-21, *“Now to You who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to You be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Thompson is a Church Planting Catalyst with the Send Network and one of the founding pastors at Redemption Church in Grandville, Michigan. Matt has been married to his wife Bethany for 16 years and they have three boys: Caden, Brennen and Aaron.

Studying theology in secret – Part II

Editor's note: The following story is the second in a three-part series about the challenges of training pastors under the Iron Curtain in Romania.

Because our training program called Biblical Education by Extension (B.E.E) was organized and taught by foreign teachers and the Romanian communist regime was xenophobic, we had to keep the program secret.

Our "assistant principal" Doru Popa (future pastor and leader) was responsible to go to the train station, at a pre-scheduled date and hour. There, he had to identify the teacher who was supposed to wait around the ticket selling area. We never knew where the teachers came from. The agreement was that they were supposed to carry a typical Romanian bag (a "rafia") and a postcard in their hands. It sounds simple now, but it was risky since everything seemed suspicious then.

To confuse the secret police, the teachers would buy their train ticket for a more distant city than their real destination; if the cashier reported them as suspicious and the police wanted to wait at the destination on the ticket, the teachers were already off the train.

To keep our network secret, we created a system with several levels. After the first year, a student would become a "teacher" for the second generation of students; then, the second generation would teach the third one, and so on. While only the first generation met the foreign teachers, the other generations also received the books, and this increased the risks.

The secret was getting harder and harder to keep with each new generation of students. Therefore, we had to select trustworthy students, as the Bible teaches us in 2 Tim 2:2. Even with all these precautions, we still had moments where our organization was almost found out.

One time during summer vacation we were holding conferences, the Militia came to the mother of the pastor Sorin A wanting to find out what meeting was held at her home. The poor lady had no clue what happened the day before at her house. I didn't tell my parents either about B.E.E.

The secret police did not intervene against us until November 17th, 1987, when the Militia interrupted our meeting. To downplay the significance of this incident, the Secret Police did not show up, but sent the regular Militia to investigate. In addition, the Militia did not indicate in their report the presence of foreign teachers. "Why didn't the Secret Police ("Securitate" in Romanian) intervene in full force to stop the seminary?"- I asked myself. I didn't know how much they knew about us.

At that point, our study system (B.E.E) was widespread in the country and the incident clarified that they were watching us, and that we had to be more careful. It was also possible that we

had a mole amongst us, and we were betrayed. It was only the good hand of the Lord that stopped them for the moment.

During those days, there was one of the extremely rare political riots against the Romanian regime. The Romanian dictator Ceausescu was afraid to increase the tensions in the county at that moment. Therefore, the order was to kick all the foreigners out of the country (our teachers included) and to simply warn us not to engage in this kind of “illegal” activities anymore. We were lucky this time, although we knew that they would come back after us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doru Radu is one of the elders at Golgotha Romanian Baptist Church in Warren, Michigan. Radu immigrated from the communist Romania and likes to write stories about the good hand of our Lord who protected us during the 45 years of communist persecution.

Buffalo churches react to deadly snowstorm

BUFFALO, NY (BP) – A historic snowstorm that dumped over four feet of snow and brought at least 31 area deaths has left residents and churches acting to respond as best they can.

“There’s not much we can do but take care of immediate needs,” said Michael Flannery, missionary for [Frontier Baptist Association](#) and state Disaster Relief director.

Two churches received extensive damage through burst pipes.

Pastor Dan Trippie [announced](#) in a Facebook post that Restoration Church will meet this Sunday, but at a local hotel after extensive flooding occurred at the 12-year-old church. Several inches of water can be seen in a downstairs children’s area in [a video he posted](#) on Christmas Day.

“Brothers and sisters in the Christian community [have] reached out to us in this time,” he said, “as well as those in other faith communities in western New York.”

Ridgewood Bible Church, a seven-year-old congregation, experienced water damage as well, said Flannery, adding that church leaders also discovered graffiti, which police are investigating.

Regional Disaster Relief coordinators are maintaining contact with emergency responders, he said.

“The intensity of the storm was so great that for two days all I could do was look out the window at it blowing 40, 60 miles per hour,” said the 73-year-old Flannery, who has lived in the area for nearly 30 years. “At some point, you just have to dig yourself out.”

Send Relief is monitoring the situation.

“In coordination with state and local emergency responders, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDR) and Send Relief have not been requested to participate in the Buffalo response,” said Josh Benton, Send Relief vice president of North American Ministry. “Send Relief is in communication with churches and local officials in the area and is prepared to provide support as needed.”

Southern Baptist Disaster Relief has a history in the area. An October 2006 snowstorm, Flannery said, knocked power out for eight days and resulted in some 900 Disaster Relief chainsaw jobs.

The blizzard’s devastation in an area accustomed to heavy snow [is being attributed](#) to occurring days before Christmas when many were traveling and many emergency response personnel were off for the holidays.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” said Erie County Sheriff John Garcia of the devastation.

A deadly mass shooting in May led to the nation seeing how the [Buffalo community bands together](#) amid tragedy. Flannery has already witnessed the same this week.

“Churches are helping dig each other out. People help their neighbors in distress,” he said. “I helped a neighbor, and he helped me. I delivered a Christmas ornament back to him and we struck up a relationship.”

With temperatures climbing near 50 today (Dec. 29), Flannery said the next concern is flooding that may come with the heavy snow melt.

“We’ve done flood recovery many times,” he said. “We may have to do it again.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

‘Never seen it like this’: El Paso churches continue ministry amid crowds of migrants

EL PASO, TX (BP) – Southern Baptists are joining other groups here to respond to large numbers of migrants that can quickly and easily spiral into a humanitarian crisis.

“We’re averaging 2,500 crossings a day,” said Larry Floyd, executive director of the El Paso Baptist Association. “Shelters are full. I’ve never seen it like this.”

The recent crowds at the border can be linked to the upcoming Dec. 21 deadline of Title 42. Originally enacted as part of the Public Health Service Act of 1944, Title 42 regards the “suspension of entries and imports ... to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.” President Donald Trump cited the COVID-19 pandemic when he enacted Title 42 in March 2020, thus leading to the rapid expulsion of migrants at the border.

[Floyd and others braced](#) for a flood of immigrants last year as Title 42’s deadline neared, but the Biden administration ultimately decided to continue the policy.

At that time, the El Paso Baptist Association had just opened its migrant ministry center. Since then, the center has worked with the local government as well as the U.S. Border Patrol and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in helping 60-100 migrants each week.

The current crisis happens, though, as the association’s migrant center is closed down for the rest of the month. Primarily, the closure is due to a lack of the center’s regular volunteers, who will be serving at their respective churches during Christmas.

“There are churches going out on their own and handing out items like blankets,” Floyd said. “Pastor Ariel Martinez and Del Sol Church have been active in this.”

The migrant center will reopen in January.

“I’m hoping this surge creates a bigger sense of the need for volunteers year-round,” said Floyd, who added that the center remains “spiritually-based” and meets those needs alongside humanitarian ones. Families and individuals typically spend 24-36 hours there before being processed out.

Brent Moore, pastor of Life Church in El Paso, is one of those churches active at the migrant center.

“About a third of my church works with the government, so we’re ministering to them during this as well as those crossing the border,” he said.

Moore said government officials need to act. “There’s a way to be compassionate while calling your local officials to uphold the law. We’re ministering to our people who are putting in the overtime as well as migrants.”

Coverage of the border situation and talk among lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have picked up considerable steam. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) [called President Biden’s chief of staff](#) over the matter, according to reports. On Dec. 13, Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) joined others in calling on Biden [to extend Title 42](#) beyond its Dec. 21 deadline.

In addition to full homeless shelters, Moore has observed “shantytowns” of migrants springing up around gas stations. He has spoken to air marshals who have been pulled into border patrol duty. There are valid concerns of migrants being trapped into human trafficking.

The situation is an unprecedented one for Floyd, an El Paso native.

“Normal migration in El Paso is pretty substantial, but well-maintained. When the border patrol is dropping off migrants in the streets, like now,” he said, “something is seriously wrong.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

Kentucky pastor plans to teach, encourage potential pastors

FRANKFORT, KY (BP) – A Frankfort pastor whose small church has members who regularly supply pulpits in the Franklin Baptist Association is planning training in 2023 for those interested in preaching and teaching the Bible more effectively.

Scott Van Neste, who has been pastor at Bellepoint Baptist Church for 15 years and graduated from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said the church makes it a habit to pray for brothers and sisters in the association.

“We have a burden for pastors without churches and churches without pastors,” he said.

Van Neste said the church has been involved with an organization in Memphis that trains pastors that are sent around the world. “I thought, ‘Why can’t we figure out a way to do that here?’”

He thought Bellepoint Baptist was the best place to start since they have been providing pulpit supply to sometimes multiple churches every week. They currently are doing interim work at North Benson Baptist Church.

“We’re talking to the young ones who want to pastor and going to have what we’re going to call a preacher school where we can train our guys to be able to do more pulpit supply and help the churches in our association,” Van Neste said. “We want to help the churches around us by having more guys than we can send out.”

The idea, the pastor said, is to raise up young men who understand better how to assemble a sermon or outline a passage and help those with some basic training and teaching for those who may feel called to someday be a pastor.

“Rural churches are struggling around Frankfort,” Van Neste said. “If they don’t have a man willing in the church to step up and preach or be a pastor, that church can really suffer. We have a lot of churches whose pastors are bi-vocational.”

Doug Hamblin, the associational mission strategist for the Franklin Baptist Association, said the training could be invaluable for those who are considering the call to be a pastor.

“I think it can be very valuable training for these men who are feeling called to the pastorate,” he said. “We are looking to grow the Kingdom, not just a church or an association. This exposes these men to what they need to understand about being a pastor or filling a pulpit. It’s almost like spiritual formations preparing them.”

Hamblin said the 30-church association has three churches without pastors but that the turnover of pastors has been growing. He said this training could benefit pastoral search committees that are looking for godly men, too.

Van Neste said in the past 3-6 months they have had one of the men from the congregation preaching somewhere. The training will only enhance and improve these potential pastors for the future. He said even if someone doesn’t want to be a pastor, the training will benefit Sunday school teachers, too.

He said they plan to start sessions at the end of January for church members or others in the community who might want to come. He said the sessions will be two Saturdays a month with three-hour sessions. Van Neste said it would take about six weeks to where they would be comfortable preaching a passage. Several other men in Bellepointe will also be involved in the training.

“It’s accessible to men who have never preached but also meaty enough for guys who have had no experience,” he said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Maynard writes for Kentucky Today, www.kentuckytoday.com, where this article first appeared. Kentucky Today is a news resource of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Missionaries provide a listening ear in Colombia

BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA (BP) – It's the listening ear. It's the soap and shampoo, the fuzzy socks, the melody sung by a compassionate Christian. It's the prayer for God's protection and healing that means so much to the men, women and children staying in a medical shelter in Bogotá.

It's these things and more that International Mission Board missionary April Byron and her national partner, Salomé, provide when they visit the shelter each week.

April and her husband, Donnie, minister to university students, the displaced and people seeking medical treatment in Bogotá.

Salomé is a missionary commissioned by the Denominación Bautista Colombiana, the Baptist Convention of Colombia. The convention started its own missionary training center this year, and Salomé was in the first training group.

People from rural areas come to the capital to seek medical care for ailments that cannot be treated where they live, and the government provides housing for them during their medical stay.

April and Salomé visit a shelter that hosts between 35 and 70 guests. Every time they go, they take hygiene kits containing soap, shampoo, deodorant. They also provide infant formula, wipes and diapers for mothers.

They often strike up conversation with the age-old go-to – the weather. At 8,660 feet, the weather in Bogotá is much colder than the regions where many of the visitors are from. It's pumpkin spice and flannel-shirt weather year-round, April said.

April and Salomé come ready to distribute "fuzzy socks." Churches also donate jackets and warm-weather clothing.

Each visit is a continuation of communication, asking how a doctor's visit went, celebrating answers to prayer and praying for ongoing and new requests.

“A lot of times they’re sad, they’re lonely, they just want to talk to somebody about their medical journey,” April said.

Some people stay long-term, some come one week and are gone the next, making interactions brief but intentional.

A husband and wife who stayed in five different shelters during the wife’s journey to beat cancer told April this was the first time someone came to visit them and that it was such a blessing.

Because of the transiency of those in the shelters, their visits are often the entry point where seeds of the Gospel are shared. Follow-up and church formation will happen in their hometowns.

Last month, April, Salomé and 30 church members from a local congregation visited the shelter. During the visit, shelter guests sifted through clothing church members brought, enjoyed worship music and listened to the pastor give an encouraging message. Salomé shared the Parable of the Sower.

April and Salomé had been praying the Lord would provide someone to minister with them. After the church’s visit, Felicia, one of the church members, approached April and asked how she could be involved.

The week after the church’s visit, April, Salomé and Felicia went to find the daughter of one of the women they spoke with in the shelter. They didn’t find the woman’s daughter, but they were given permission to come back and share Bible stories at three other shelters.

“It was a hunt, but it was a very fruitful hunt,” April said.

Join April and Salomé in prayer that the ministry will expand to other shelters and that their witness will extend. Pray for more opportunities to share Bible stories and pray that people’s hearts will be open to the Gospel.

Optimism

NASHVILLE, TN – What makes you happy? Not a trick question: many cannot easily answer that! One of America’s sweethearts has this to say about it, “Optimism is a happiness magnet.” Does Mary Lou Retton have it about right? If that’s the case though then it begs the question...

what creates “Optimism?” This is where you may disagree! It is the conviction of this author that one thing stands out as the perfect champion of being an “Optimism Builder” and the winner is -Being truly listened to.

People who are actually heard feel valued. People who are valued feel appreciated. People who are appreciated feel hopeful and people who are hopeful simply feel optimistic! It’s not rocket science. So, see if something in these next few paragraphs can make you a champion listener. Challenge yourself to learn to engage others at the highest level—just maybe you will then create a world of happiness for someone.

“When we listen, we hear someone into existence,” Laurie Buchanan. That is only the genesis of the awesome power one has—just by being silent and listening. Laurie also noted, “One of the benchmarks of great communicators is their ability to listen not just to what’s being said but to listen to what’s not being said as well....they listen between the lines.” Truly, there is great influence in effective listening.

Does God know that? Of course, He does. The Psalmist actually penned these words—“I love the Lord because He hears my voice.” Did you ever really realize this axiom? Why does our Lord repeatedly have to remind us—“listen then if you have ears.” Here’s a thought: “It’s hard to engage in listening with empathy to another person if you are waiting for the spotlight to shine back on you.” So says psychologist, Ramani Durvasula.

If you would desire to increase this coming year—you may need to decrease first! Become the person others long to communicate to. Agatha Christie quipped, “An appreciative listener is always stimulating.” By the way—Jesus is always listening, not to catch you in something bad but because He loves you so good. But the fact that the Sovereign of the Cosmos is listening should in fact—stimulate you to greater optimism!

Could it be that God does value you? Bryant H. McGill said, “One of the sincerest forms of respect is actually listening to what others have to say.” Your perfect Heavenly Father does value you, respect you, and always listen to you! It has nothing to do with you being “Naughty or Nice.”

Lastly, Henri Nouwen gave us this, “Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure.”

Are you possibly disturbed when God seems silent and distant? Ahh dear friend, just stop and listen—listen—shhhh—listen. That is simply His way of drawing you near!! That is worth sticking to!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. David L. Thompson holds an undergraduate degree from Belmont University in Psychology and Religion, a graduate degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Education,

and a doctorate in Counseling and Pastoral Psychology. He has served as a chairman of the Church Planting Group and Executive Committee Chair at the North American Mission Board for 10 years. He has been a Police Chaplain since 1991 and served as a Corporate Chaplain to the Coca Cola Bottling Company in Nashville, Tennessee where he resides with his wife. He has six children and five grandsons.

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

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