



## Women's Harvest Retreat October 13-15

**GARDEN CITY** – I just got back from a popular music festival called “Alive” in Ohio I have attended almost every year since 2008. For most people, the big draw is the main stage artists that headline each of the three nights of concerts. This year did not disappoint, drawing crowds of 6000 fans to sit on the grass or stand in the mosh pit to cheer, dance, jump and sing along with the likes of David Crowder, Lauren Daigle, TAYA, Mac Powell, Need to Breathe and, yes, even the 80's hair band Stryper.

Families, youth groups, their leaders, as well as couples and groups of friends of all ages attend. The artists proclaimed God's love, faithfulness and the hope that is found in Christ in song, testimony and infectious energy. I love to see God's faithfulness as He brings His people to worship together under His sky, surrounded by His handiwork.

My original reason for going was an opportunity to take my teenagers to see some of their favorite bands and spend time with their friends. But I was surprised to find that God used the time at Alive Festival with Him and my co-leader friends (who are further along the journey), worshiping under the canopy of nature, and hearing His truth from a different perspective. It was for my good, my growth, and my healing as I came face to face with God.

He pointed out the truth of who He is, His character and His faithfulness as He drew me into His loving arms in a way that changed my perspective. As I leaned in, God uncovered hurt and sin, but provided peace by being near and whispering words of hope in scripture that I could hang onto for dear life. As He showed me a new way of living, one that was centered on Him, I received a purpose to point to the only One who can rescue from the lies of the evil one.

This was my last year at Alive, but my journey is not over. As any loving Father would, He continues to give good gifts to me. One of the gifts that I am looking forward to is seeing what He has to say to me through Ellen Harbin at the Women's Harvest Retreat, October 13-15 at Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center.

Harbin will be speaking on the subject, 'Face to Face', explaining how God's presence shifted the gaze and focus of those in scripture. Having their eyes fixed on Jesus, from a face-to-face encounter with Him, allows proper perspective through the hardships in life, perfect peace amid our scattered pieces, and passionate purpose God reveals through the disruptions of life. This is available to us, too.

I invite you and your friends to join me for the 2023 Women's Harvest Retreat at Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center. [Register soon](#) as we expect a full retreat. Go to [Bambilake.churchcenter.com](http://Bambilake.churchcenter.com) or call Bambi Lake (989) 275-5844. Cost range from \$139.00-\$149.00 before 9/30/23. Scholarships are available. Please contact [darlene\\_walsh@yahoo.com](mailto:darlene_walsh@yahoo.com).

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mickey Gross lives in Garden City, MI and is a member of Resurrection Church in Lincoln Park. She has devoted years in church leadership as a children's ministry director, praise team member, pianist, facilities coordinator, and event planner. Mickey loves camp ministry and has had the privilege of spending time at camp as a camper, serving as a volunteer, and operating on the leadership team for Harvest Retreat.

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## **God is at work in Frankfurt**

**PORT AUSTIN** – 0.1%... That is the estimated percentage of evangelical believers in Frankfurt, Germany.

Let that sink in for a moment.

A city just a few hours away from where the Protestant Reformation began is now almost completely unreached. In fact, the number of believers in Frankfurt is so low, that the government doesn't even recognize them as a group in their statistical studies.

If these estimates are correct, 99.9% of the people in Frankfurt are lost—without God and without hope.

99.9% of the people in Frankfurt have not entered the joy and satisfaction of worshipping our triune God. They are not giving Him the glory that is due Him.

As heartbreaking as this reality is, there is hope. God is at work in Frankfurt, pursuing people through faithful missionaries who are there, engaged in the work.

Recently, I had the privilege to visit some of these missionaries in Frankfurt through our partnership with NAMB and IMB. It was an incredible opportunity and I'd like to share three takeaways from my trip.

### **1. The Nations are in Frankfurt**

One of the most surprising things about my time in Frankfurt was how diverse the population was. As I walked through the streets of the city, I saw nationalities from all over the world. I later found out that the majority of people in Frankfurt actually have a non-German background.

This is partly because Frankfurt is a key financial and transportation hub for Europe. Along with this, Frankfurt is a central location for refugee placement. And during our time there we got to visit a group of refugees who are being ministered to by IMB missionaries. All of this makes Frankfurt a strategic multi-cultural mission field. In other words, if we want to be involved in what God is doing to reach every tribe, tongue, and nation—then we need to be involved in Frankfurt (Rev. 7:9).

## 2. God is at Work in the Darkness

The lostness in Frankfurt was overwhelming. While we were there, we had the opportunity to walk the streets and do cultural surveys. We saw poverty-stricken lostness in the red-light district followed by blissfully-ignorant lostness in the financial district. However, even in this darkness, I was encouraged by how God was at work. Specifically, we saw how local churches were putting God's kingdom above their own individual ministries to try to collectively push back the darkness in Frankfurt.

Our primary contacts for this trip were IMB missionaries Kelly and Janice Seely. They have been a part of several church plants in Frankfurt and are now helping lead the Main Projekt. This is a collaborative effort among churches and individuals to see a movement of the gospel in Frankfurt and Offenbach. I was so encouraged to see how God had used the overwhelming lostness to birth a desire for collaboration in the city.

## 3. All of Us Can Get Involved

How should we respond to the heartbreaking reality of lostness in Frankfurt? The IMB has helped us with this question by pointing us to three clear, biblical ways that we can get involved.

- **First, we can pray.** Will you pray for the Seely family as they lead the Main Projekt? Will you pray for the refugee ministry in Frankfurt? Will you pray for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done in the city?
- **Second, we can give.** Through the Cooperative Program and the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, churches and individuals have the incredible privilege of being a part of what God is doing in Frankfurt through giving.
- **Finally, we can go.** The harvest in Frankfurt is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Will you pray for God to send laborers and consider going yourself?

God is worthy to be worshiped by all the peoples of Frankfurt and you have the opportunity to get involved for His glory. So, what is your next step?

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that His way may be known in Frankfurt, His saving power among all nations.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Michael Goforth serves as the Lead Pastor of Mercy Hill Church in Port Austin, Michigan. He has been married to his wife, Shannon, for eight years. Mercy Hill exists to spread a passion for the glory of Jesus in Port Austin and beyond.

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## **Dear God: Why?**

**MONROE** – The question so many followers of Christ ask themselves, yet a question that we like to think does not exist: God, why? If there has ever been a question that I have asked of God more times than I care to admit, it is God, why?

When I look back on my personal life and take inventory, I begin to get overwhelmed as I think of all that life has sent my way. By the time I was 29 years old, I had lost both of my parents to a heart attack and cancer, I lost two of my grandparents, I was called to preach, completely changed career paths to pursue God's call on my life, got married, had two wonderful children, began to pastor at two different churches, and the list just goes on.

In absolutely all of these situations, I found myself asking God why? Amidst these times of change in my life, the hardest hitting most certainly was the loss of my father. Next to my wife, my father was the best friend I ever had and my greatest supporter. The day before my father passed, I had just finished my field training program in law enforcement, and the following day, I was going to begin solo patrol. In addition to being on solo patrol, my father and I were going to have the opportunity to work the same shift together, which felt like a hard-working dream that was finally going to come true.

As I prepared for my first shift, I sat on the floor in my living room shining my dress boots. I was so excited to make sure my uniform was in tip top shape as I prepared for that first day. Little did I know that during this routine moment, I would have the last conversation this side of heaven with my dad. As we briefly chatted, I am so grateful that the last words we uttered to each other were "I love you".

The next morning, which was like many other Sunday mornings, everyone in the house prepared to go to church. As the preacher began to end the service and begin a time of invitation, my father bowed his head, and suffered a massive heart attack. Despite the efforts of the congregation and even some nurses who were there, my father passed away that morning. Even as I write this story, I so vividly remember the raw emotions I felt that day and still feel at times.

On that day and many days thereafter, I began to ask God the question of why? As I have traversed the many ups and downs, I believe that God has truly answered my question of why, but not in the way I expected.

God has shown me that the answer to why is not found in material things of this world or an itemized description of why he allowed something into my life, but instead is found in his response through one of his attributes, and that is peace.

Peace is that inner state of rest, tranquility, quiet, and alignment with the Holy Spirit through the provisions of God. I love how Paul encourages the church of Philippi in Philippians 4:7 to remember that God's peace passes all understanding.

God does not always show us the reasons why things happen in our lives, but he does provide a place of comfort and strength as we navigate our trials, and that is his peace. I can truly testify that in all my situations of life, I have never completely understood the timing of these things, but thanks be to God that even on my worst day, he was at his best!

As you have read my story, I hope that it can be a point of encouragement for you to not focus on your circumstance but focus on the place of Peace that God provides to all of his believers who seek him!

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Matt Foley is Senior Pastor of Liberty Missionary Baptist Church of Monroe, MI, and he is a recent graduate of Liberty University with a degree in Biblical and Theological Studies. Matt is married to the love of his life Lindsey, and they have two children.

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## **Shecks in the UK**

**BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND** – Kevin and Keri Sheckler have been reaching Africans and others with the IMB for 10 years. They started by serving in the Horn of Africa for the first 2 years of their ministry.

But then they moved to a place that might not seem obvious for reaching Africans. For the last 8 years the Shecklers have been ministering to immigrants in Birmingham, England. Birmingham is the second largest city in the United Kingdom, and it attracts a diverse array of internationals including people from places like Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea.

The Shecklers serve at the Bloomsbury Hope Centre where they offer things like Homework Clubs and English Classes. Hope Church was launched through the Centre's ministries.

Kevin Sheckler says, "Hope Centre gave them access to people, and Hope Church gives those people access to God."

Kevin was raised in Sparta, Michigan before he and Keri met at California Baptist University. The Shecklers and their three children; Sofia, Selah, and Isaiah, return to Michigan when they are in the US to visit family and to enjoy camping by Lake Michigan. The entire family will be here in Michigan during the month of August.

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## I don't want to ever grow up

**PLYMOUTH** – I have often thought about Jesus' words; "Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." (Mark 10:15 KJV).

At times that principle has been a great comfort to me because those who know me best have said that I have never grown up. I suffer from PPS. Peter Pan Syndrome. I'm a little child at heart in a grown up and rapidly deteriorating body. Well, the parts that have been replaced are in good shape, but the remaining "stuff" is questionable or makes terrible squeaking noises.

If I had it my way, I would play all day, eat junk food and sleep until I wanted to rise. I would still believe in Santa Claus and truly want birthdays to come around. If I could get away with it, I would keep a good supply of water balloons in one of my filing cabinets just in case a need for them might arise.

I can't tell you how many times these would have come in very handy as negotiating tools where opposing opinions had come to an impasse. I am also still of the opinion that "recess" should still be scheduled twice a day and Saturday mornings should be reserved for cartoons. But like most adults my age, life, and my view from its current perspective, has drastically changed.

That childlike innocence, faith and unquestioning love that once was firm and secure, has been tainted by time and the frailty of fallen humanity. Thank goodness there are still children in this world. Children who still love unconditionally and trust totally. Children who believe what they are told and see life simply.

This immovable kind of childlike and loving faith that children possess is reflected in the experience of one such child. Some years ago, a little girl named Liz was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her 5-year-old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness.

The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the little boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. He hesitated for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, "Yes, I'll do it if it will save her." As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, seeing the color return to her cheeks as the transfusion began its miraculous work.

Then his face grew pale, and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, "Will I start to die right away?" Being just a child, the little boy had misunderstood the doctor. He thought he was going to have to give his sister all his blood in order to save her.

I don't know about you but I'm a "pretty selfish" individual compared to that brave young boy. I want to think that I would do the same thing for someone else, but could I? Or would I if I could?

When I see life from the eyes of a child, then I begin to better understand our Lord's admonition to become as a little child. He was God's child in a grown-up body. Oh, how I want to live my life like God's Child in a grown-up body. Don't you?

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13 KJV)

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tim Patterson is Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Elected unanimously in May of 2015, Patterson formerly served for 9 years as pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. He also served as trustee chair and national mobilizer for the North American Mission Board.

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## Arabic church impacts many

**PLYMOUTH** – One Arabic church sets the stage to create three new Michigan churches. Pastor Amgad Beshai of Evangel Baptist Church of Troy, a pastor, and a key strategist in the state’s Arabic ministry, is leading the way toward church multiplication among Arabic language communities. Two new church starts are projected to begin in the suburbs of Metro Detroit, and another church will be launched in another large city elsewhere in Michigan.

Beshai, and the church members at Evangel Baptist Church already launched a new church start during 2023 in Troy. North American Mission Board endorsed church planter David Selou and his wife, Rawa, received the needed sponsorship by Beshai and the congregation due to their longtime relationship. The Selou couple and their congregation share a space generously provided by Northfield Hills Baptist Church of Troy and Pastor Stephen Husava, which allows the English-speaking children in both congregations to attend Bible study together while the adults worship in separate services in their heart-languages.

Beshai and the members of Evangel Baptist Church boldly display one of the treasured values of Michigan churches, which is, “Normalize sentness because the urgency of the Gospel mission demands it.” They are not content to simply gather on Sunday, they believe their days should be filled with actions where they take the Gospel to others.

Beshai and the church established an impressive international, online presence years before others did during the pandemic. Beshai, a humble man, would hesitate to tell you about the thousands of followers he has on social media, but we can report it here. Beshai explained in a conversation one day, “I post things to bring people’s attention to the Lord, but I do not respond to comments online. I made that decision years ago, understanding that a personal conversation is much more valuable than a public post.” Beshai has on his heart the spiritual well-being of many throughout the Arabic communities in Michigan and overseas.

Earlier during 2023, members of Evangel Baptist Church returned from visiting family members in the Middle East. Reporting to Beshai that members of the families in the Middle East were suffering without food Beshai reached out to Tony Lynn, Church Planting Leader with the Send Network of the NAMB to ask what could be done. The church collected thousands of dollars, and Lynn created a direct connection with personnel with Send Relief and the International Mission Board to Beshai which made it possible for the funds to be directed to the need. The Southern Baptist Convention network responded rapidly and effectively due to the ongoing connection between local churches and worldwide efforts of relief and missions.

Lynn reports, “The missionaries were so impressed with the church’s actions and Beshai’s network with other Arabic speakers that they invited Beshai to visit Southern Baptist relief efforts in the Middle East. They want Beshai to see how he and others like him might come alongside Send Relief to disciple those who are coming to know the Lord in relief centers and refugee camps. Tony and Jamie Lynn have also been invited to join Beshai, at the end of 2023,

on a vision trip to the Middle East to see how the Christian Arabic community in the United States can assist others throughout the world.”

Beshai and his family, who are originally from Egypt, experienced a call from the Lord to come to the United States. Beshai could have chosen a career and then served the Lord through his local church with his remaining time and energy but Beshai could not deny the Lord’s calling to come to the United States to serve as a pastor, so he pressed forward with his plans for ministry.

Before coming to the United States with his wife and children, Beshai traveled the Middle East in multiple countries helping in benevolent ministries, studying then teaching others, and sharing the Gospel as an evangelist.

Lynn explains, “Pastor Amgad Beshai and his wife Eman, along with their three adolescent and young adult children are shaping the direction of one of the most critical areas of ministry across the globe. We are thankful that their compassion, their wisdom, and their service found a home in Michigan. We are better with them in the ministry.”

If you are interested in assisting Pastor Amgad Beshai by contributing to strengthen any of the church starts, either as a one one-time gift or as a recurring contribution, you can write directly to Pastor Amgad Beshai at [pastor@churchoftroy.org](mailto:pastor@churchoftroy.org).

#### **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.

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## **Put your hope in God**

**WINDSOR, ONTARIO** – When I was a young pastor, I confided in a dear saint who attended our church. Retired, traditional beyond measure, and a spiritual legalist, he loved Jesus deeply but carried some weird ideas about ministry and the Christian life.

He told me it was a sin for a pastor to be discouraged. With his thick German accent, he chided me for feeling blue that day. It took me a long time to shake the guilt and shame that he piled on my shoulders, and from time to time I still think about that interaction.

Charles Spurgeon faced a lifelong battle with discouragement. Spurgeon saw discouragement as such a normal part of ministry that he included a lecture called “The Minister’s Fainting Fits” in his *Lectures to My Students*.

“Our work, when earnestly undertaken, lays us open to attacks in the direction of depression. Who can bear the weight of souls without sometimes sinking to the dust? Passionate longings after men’s conversion, if not fully satisfied (and when are they?), consume the soul with anxiety and disappointment. To see the hopeful turn aside, the godly grow cold, professors abusing their privileges, and sinners waxing more bold in sin—are not these sights enough to crush us to the earth?”

(<https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-ministers-fainting-fits/>)

Put this way, it would be unusual *not* to feel discouraged as pastors. We all battle with feelings of discouragement or despair.

Spurgeon went on to say,

“By all the castings down of his servants God is glorified, for they are led to magnify him when again he sets them on their feet, and even while prostrate in the dust their faith yields him praise. They speak all the more sweetly of his faithfulness, and are the more firmly established in his love.”

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote a classic book on this subject entitled *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*. The central text of the book is from Psalm 42:5.

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Just as the psalmist rebukes his own soul over the gloom that has cast it down, reasoning with himself that God is still worthy of praise, Lloyd-Jones makes this observation:

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: ‘Why art thou cast down’—what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: ‘Hope thou in God’—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: “I shall yet praise Him...”

(D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, [Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures](#), pp. 20-21)

Pastors are not the only ones who get discouraged, of course. Doctors, accountants, schoolteachers, and retail salespeople all face discouragement too. But pastoral ministry has its own set of unique pressures.

It's why, when Paul listed his sufferings — “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked” — he finished the list by saying, “I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:24-28 NIV).

The churches were a source of joy to Paul, but they also produced concern or *anxiety* (ESV) for him. So, we pastors are not so different from Paul in this regard. We experience the highest highs and the lowest lows by virtue of being pastors in the glorious church of God!

If you're a pastor, expect to be discouraged. It's not necessarily a sign that you're doing something wrong, that you have sinned, that everyone is against you, or that your ministry is over. It is par for the course.

Even while prostrate in the dust, put your hope in God and praise him (Psalm 42:5 NIV).

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Garth Leno is the Pastor/Planter Care Specialist with the BSCM. He serves in a similar role with the Canadian National Baptist Convention, and he is the founding pastor of The Gathering Church in Windsor, Ontario, a church he planted with his wife, Patty, and a few of their friends.

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## **The day my dad got saved... in his own words**

**TECUMSEH** – On July 7, 1992, my dad went to Heaven. A few years later, my mom found a note he wrote hidden in some of his stuff. It was a handwritten letter to his children (Dick, Joanie, Mike & me) about the day he became a Christian. He never gave it to us, but my mom gave us all a copy. Here's part of it. I hope it encourages you.

*What I'm going to tell you now is not what I did for you, but rather what God did for you.*

*When Greg & Dick were about 3 and 4 years old, I began to think what a challenge me and your mother had before us raising a family. Then came a daughter and, Mike, when you came along, I really got serious. Although I wasn't a Christian at the time, I began*

*praying for each of you. That you would grow to believe in God and that you would become Christians. I didn't know at the time that I was actually praying for myself.*

*Then one August in 1970 God began talking to me. So, one Wednesday evening when your mother thought I had lost it (my mind) I decided to go to a Wednesday night Prayer Meeting. I had never been to church on Wednesday in my life, so I took Greg and Dick with me for support. I began going to church for the next 2 or 3 months pretty regular, thinking I would change a lot of my habits and clean myself up a little and be a better person and father for going to church.*

*After 3 months I couldn't see much change, so I decided to give up on God. I called your mother from work one Saturday night and told her of this and that if she wanted to go back to the Presbyterian Church and keep you children in church it was fine with me. I was through with God and the Baptists.*

*That Saturday night after I got home, God gave me what I believe today was a last chance. So that night while everyone was asleep but me, I began to fight, pray, cuss, cry, and everything else I could to put off God. So, after 3 or 4 hours of this I accepted Christ just like I was... standing there looking out the window on Decker Road. No hymns being sung by a choir or a preacher standing up talking or no one praying for me (maybe my mom in Kentucky)... just me and Jesus.*

*The next morning your mother got us up, unaware of my nighttime experience and asked if I was going to Sunday School. The last she had heard was I was through with God. Even after I had accepted Christ that night, I still wasn't ready to tell anyone. But decided to go to Sunday School with every intention of leaving Sunday School, skipping church and pick you all up afterwards. But when Sunday School was over, for some reason, I walked into the chapel and there was one seat left, beside your mother and next to the aisle. No place to hide.*

*I don't remember the sermon but on the first verse of the altar call, when I asked your mother if she was going with me, she thought I was going out the door. I made public then what happened to me earlier in the night.*

*The Lord has spoken to me twice pretty strong, where He really had to get my attention, and this was one of them.*

*One of the reasons I went into detail was to let you all know that God worked with me by using you four. Although I wasn't blinded or seen a great light from the sky that night, my salvation was just as dramatic and meaningful to me as Paul's was to him.*

*With that decision to accept Christ I was able to turn you children over to Him and enlist His help in rearing you. I think He has done a fine job.*

You can also read another article about my dad: [Today I Am As Old As My Dad Ever Was](#). or Judy's dad: [Remembering my Father-in-law](#).

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Greg Burdine has been senior pastor of Faith Baptist Church since 1994. He has been married since 1981 to Judy, a preschool teacher in Tecumseh. They have four children and ten grandchildren. Greg's passion is teaching the Word of God. He received his Bachelor's degree from Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri and his Master's and Doctorate degrees from Louisiana Baptist University in Shreveport, Louisiana. He has been in full-time ministry since 1982, serving churches in Iowa, Ohio, and Michigan. He likes to read, run, and play with his grandchildren.

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## **How one church got smaller, leaner, more effective**

**INDEPENDENCE, MO (BP)** – Ten years ago Brian Grout accepted a call to be the pastor for what would soon become The Church at Three Trails.

Approximately 200 people were on the membership role. That number has dropped by half since then. On the surface it can appear to be a negative, but the surface hardly tells the whole story.

When Grout arrived, the church hadn't baptized anyone in at least five years, but there have been approximately 55 since.

Attendance hovered at 15 to start. Now it is consistently at 75-80. Leaner yet stronger, there are opportunities to grow internally and outwardly.

The steady growth was all but wiped out by COVID, but the church slowly built back. Three Trails ministers in an area where 60 percent of the populace makes around \$29,000 or less per year, Grout said. There is also a lot of turnover in residents.

The Church at Three Trails offers a sense of stability through sharing the Gospel as well as focusing on where the church can best contribute to its community at the moment.

"COVID killed a lot of things for us," Grout said. One of those was a strong partnership with a nearby school that included monthly, home-cooked breakfasts by senior adult ladies delivered to teachers. Church members also took part in a school-connected program that encouraged

relationship-building in families through simple means such as having dinner together and engaging in conversation with each other.

The church has four official staff members, all bivocational. Grout's full-time job is as a field missionary for the Multiplying Churches group with the Missouri Baptist Convention. His wife, Sarah, has been a key leader in the women's ministry. She had led worship before the arrival of associate pastor Chris Bailey and still fills that role whenever needed.

Grout estimates that 70 percent of his church members serve in some role, from teaching to greeting.

"We [highlight our volunteers](#) about once a month through social media and videos on Sunday morning. They explain what they do and the reward they get from it," Grout said.

There are steps to ward off burnout among volunteers. Sunday mornings, for instance, are dedicated to worship with Bible study classes typically taking place throughout the week when best suited for participants. Should groups want to hold theirs at the church on Sunday mornings, that would be fine as well.

There is value to ministry developing organically. The large-scale outreach events that Three Trails used to host are fine, but crowds of attendees weren't leading to new church members and disciples.

Instead, church leadership focused on encouraging members to think of themselves as missionaries.

"We have discipleship programs on Wednesdays and things like that, but we don't want there to be something at the church every night," Grout said. "We want our people engaged with others, inviting them into their homes, building relationships and being a missionary whether it's on the softball field or riding Harleys."

That's a real example of a Three Trails church member. Another one who was a recovering addict asked to host a support group at the church. The missionary mindset has also led to beginner guitar classes for children and a Hapkido self-defense class.

"We encourage our people to be the Gospel light wherever they are," Grout said.

It is healthy for churches to [assess their ministry gaps](#) and effectiveness, noted a recent Lifeway Research post.

"Maximizing disciple-making in today's world requires agile, responsive leadership that cuts past the noise of models, and instead focuses on real-time evaluation of outcomes (or fruit) on your people's journeys," wrote Clint Grider, author of "Mind the Gap."

“I’m the guy who doesn’t want to repeat what other churches are doing,” Grout said. “When I first got here our people suggested we start a food pantry. I pointed out that there were four churches within a mile who did that, so instead of starting another one let’s support them.

“We want to be flexible, to evaluate and not get bogged down in things that are ineffective. If we try something new and it doesn’t work, at least we gave it a shot.”

As a pastor he is called to lead, but also called to listen.

“Know your people. Love your people. Serve your people,” he said. “And encourage them to know their friends, love their friends and serve their friends.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

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## **Prayer needed for Cubans ready to go to the nations**

Cuban Baptists are poised to go to the nations. International Mission Board teams are eager to receive these missionary candidates as Global Missionary Partners. But it’s sometimes difficult for them to get visas, and at times, when they do, they’re finding it hard to renew them.

Prayer is desperately needed as these potential Cuban Global Missionary Partners face obstacles in procuring visas, in many countries, and sufficient funding.

Currently, more than 50 potential missionaries in Cuba are preparing to go. These missionaries, backed by the mission boards of the Cuban Baptist conventions on the eastern and western sides of the island, are largely sent by funds provided through the Cubans to the Nations project.

Cuban GMPs ready to serve include Saul and Dora. This couple was working with the lost in Colombia. Both the husband and wife are musicians, and they’ve been able to use their musical giftings to compose songs, sharing the gospel in the musical style of each of the people groups. They’re now back in Cuba awaiting reassignment because of visa issues.

Another Cuban missionary family also worked with unreached groups in Colombia. The husband is a doctor, and he was able to provide medical and gospel access to several communities. The wife is a musician. She was able to work with the other GMP musicians to



share the gospel through music. Currently, they are also back in Cuba waiting to be reassigned because their visas were denied.

There are other candidates ready to be deployed, but they're awaiting visa approval and funding to enter their assigned countries.

These missionaries can bring gospel access to places many Americans have trouble reaching with their U.S. passports. This is largely due to governmental relationships between Cuba and various hard-to-access countries, Roy Cooper, an IMB team leader in Latin America, explained. He and his wife, Dirce, have worked with the Cuban church for more than 20 years.

Ronald and his family are examples of Cuban GMPs who still have valid visas and are impacting lostness in the "circle of silence" in Mexico. That area is believed to be less than 2% evangelical. It's filled with unreached people groups just a few hours south of the American border. In just over one year in this hard-to-reach place, GMPs have seen three baptisms and a church planted.

Hector is another Cuban GMP serving in Uganda. He works with IMB teams there. He evangelizes, disciples and trains young leaders, using sports to connect with refugees in camps there.

Oscar and Yolanda are Cuban GMPs who are using sports, music and other tools to take the gospel to unreached communities in Colombia.

Not only do Cuban passports provide different avenues of access, but shared traumatic experiences uniquely equip Cubans to go to hard places.

"God has just so specially prepared Cubans because of the kind of pressures they've had to face in their churches as believers preaching the gospel," Cooper explained.

Instability and unrest dominated the political landscape in Cuba. Association with an evangelical church was frowned upon. Even something as simple as getting permission to leave the country to be a missionary seemed out of reach for most Cubans for years.

In the early 1990s, Cuba began to open its borders and religious liberty was more widely accepted. The fear of practicing evangelical Christianity openly abated. And home missions flourished in Cuba.

Around 2014, the Cuban Baptist conventions on both sides of the island reached out to the IMB to help facilitate the training and sending of their candidates to the nations.

Cooper acknowledged that God uses these tragic circumstances Cubans have endured for His glory. Now, these Cuban missionaries "have been prepared to go into hard places and can identify with folks who are hurting and who have gone through challenges," he said. Things

back home in Cuba still aren't ideal, but "I think that God, in a very special way, has been preparing a missions force to be able to go to these places."

With international travel being more open, Cubans are understanding the missionary task, and they're ready to go.

While some Cuban GMPs have been allowed to remain on the field, others are struggling to renew or maintain visas. They need prayer to fulfil their calling to the nations.

Would you pray for Cubans who are eager to go to the nations and partner with IMB teams?

- Pray God will continue to call Cubans to reach the lost around the world.
- Pray He will give leadership, guidance and clarity as they assess and train potential missionary candidates.
- Pray that the right places will be open for them to go, and they will be granted visas to enter these difficult places.
- Pray that God will call many partners who will share in this vision to help send and sustain these GMPs to the nations.

You can give to help Cuban Baptists take the gospel to the unreached world as Global Missionary Partners, working alongside IMB teams.

\*Some names may have been changed for security purposes.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Myriah Snyder writes and edits for the IMB.

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## **Teen gender transitions hit roadblocks in Europe**

**NASHVILLE (BP)** – European nations and scientific professional societies are rethinking the wisdom of adolescent gender transitions.

"The experience of gender dysphoria has existed for many years. The recommended treatment for gender dysphoria, however, has changed significantly," said Lilly Park, associate professor of biblical counseling at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. "European medical and mental health communities are paying attention to studies and testimonies that disprove the

efficacy of surgery and hormone therapy. We're hearing more stories of regret and long-term health problems as a result of surgery or hormone therapy."

Following a wave of legislation over the past two decades permitting so-called "gender-affirming care" for minors, Norway, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom are among European nations that have backtracked on hormone and surgical treatments for children who struggle with gender identity.

In Norway, the government's Healthcare Investigation Board [recommended](#) earlier this year that legal guidelines be revised to define adolescent hormone therapy and gender-reassignment surgery as experimental and not supported by sufficient medical evidence. Finnish health authorities conducted a [systematic review](#) of evidence and concluded there is low certainty that hormone treatments will help minors questioning their gender identity. Subsequently, Finland restricted hormone therapy access for adolescents.

In Sweden, the government's National Board of Health and Welfare [said](#) last year that hormone treatments for minors "should be provided within a research context" and offered "only in exceptional cases." The U.K. is conducting an [ongoing review](#) of gender dysphoria treatments for minors that has put a hold on hormone and surgical treatments for some teens seeking gender transitions.

The groundswell of medical hesitation about gender transitions for youth led 21 clinicians and researchers from nine European countries to take their case to The Wall Street Journal. In a letter to the editor, they took issue with a claim published by The Journal in early July that "gender-affirming care improves the well-being of transgender and gender-diverse people."

"Every systematic review of evidence to date ... has found the evidence for mental-health benefits of hormonal interventions for minors to be of low or very low certainty," the medical professionals [wrote](#). "By contrast, the risks are significant and include sterility, lifelong dependence on medication and the anguish of regret. For this reason, more and more European countries and international professional organizations now recommend psychotherapy rather than hormones and surgeries as the first line of treatment for gender-dysphoric youth."

Further, "there is no reliable evidence to suggest that hormonal transition is an effective suicide-prevention measure," the European experts said. They called the "politicization of transgender healthcare" in the United States "unfortunate" and urged American policymakers to follow the science.

Europe's penchant for socialized medicine may have something to do with its retreat from adolescent gender transitions, said Debbie Steele, professor of Christian counseling at Gateway Seminary. Each minor in America who makes a gender transition will generate approximately \$60,000 for pharmaceutical companies over his or her lifespan, she said. That leads to tremendous pressure from the pharmaceutical industry on U.S. politicians to maintain the

availability of hormone and surgical therapies for minors. European nations with government health care are insulated from some of that financial pressure.

“Endocrinologists and other medical professionals in socialist countries are rethinking,” said Steele, who lived in the former Yugoslavia for 12 years. “They have a different relationship with the big pharm companies than politicians and the medical community have in America.”

At least 19 U.S. states have placed limitations on gender transitions for minors, but those restrictions typically are enacted by state legislatures and not medical authorities, as in Europe.

The issue was the subject of a [hearing held Thursday](#) (July 27) in the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee. The committee heard testimony from at least one well-known “detransitioner” – 19-year-old Chloe Cole. Cole, who began attempting to transition to a man at age 12 and underwent a mastectomy at age 15, testified that she has suffered “lifelong, irreversible harm” and called medical gender transition of minors “one of the biggest medical scandals in the history of the United States of America.”

The increased reticence to let teens attempt to change their gender has led some to wonder if Christianity offers a better approach to gender identity struggles. Park and Steele say it does.

The first step to helping with youth gender confusion is treating the struggling teen “as a person going through a difficult time,” Park said.

“Listening and asking good questions are essential to better understand a person’s struggles,” Park said. “We want to demonstrate love in how we engage with the teenager but also be true to the Bible’s teaching on sexuality.”

Park’s approach aligns at least partially with that of Riittakerttu Kaltiala, chief psychiatrist at one of Finland’s two government-approved pediatric gender clinics. Eighty percent of teenagers who struggle with their gender identity will come to terms with their biological sex eventually, Kaltiala [said](#), advocating mental health care instead of rushing into medical treatments.

Steele added that Christians should “be trained to validate and normalize the emotional pain and despair that teenagers are experiencing.” Believers should exhibit “care and compassion” without “accepting this barbaric practice of mutilation.”

“Family therapy makes sense for these kids and their families,” Steele said. “Teenagers can have their real-life struggles addressed without normalizing the need for mutilation, permanence and sterility.”

In June, SBC messengers in New Orleans adopted a [resolution](#) “opposing ‘gender transitions.’” The resolution stated that Southern Baptists “condemn and oppose ‘gender-affirming care’; and all forms of ‘gender transition’ interventions.”

That biblical wisdom bears remarkable similarities to what European clinicians seem to be discovering through trial and error.

“Health care should not provide interventions that we do not know to be safe and beneficial,” Mikael Landén, a professor and chief physician at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden told U.S. News and World Report. “From the lack of evidence follows that a conservative approach is warranted.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

David Roach is a writer in Mobile, Ala.

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## **Health concerns related to Ohio train derailment remain months later**

**EAST PALESTINE, OH (BP)** – Joe Sheely had a doctor’s appointment yesterday. It was for previous issues, such as a hernia. But he also found out during a CT scan that there are tumors on his lungs.

The news made for a night of little sleep. It also came five and a half months after a Norfolk Southern [train derailment containing hazardous materials](#) took place near his home.

“I’m not one to struggle with depression and anxiety,” said Sheely, pastor of Solid Rock Community Church in Salem, Ohio. “But my wife had a mild heart attack in May and now she’s on medication. With all of this, it feels like one attack after another.”

He and his wife, Carolyn Sue, left their home soon after the derailment and a “controlled breach” that produced a large fire and resulting cloud that settled over the area, including the Sheelys’ home.

“They called it a controlled burn, but it wasn’t. It sent that plume into the air and it came and rested right over our property,” Sheely said.

Hazardous carcinogenic chemicals such as vinyl chloride were in the derailment. Sheely can’t claim the chemicals contributed to his recent diagnosis, but he also can’t help but think about it. He and his wife moved back home after Norfolk Southern assured them it was safe.

“They found traces of vinyl chloride in our water, but told us it was already there [before the derailment],” Sheely said.

Norfolk Southern has created a page online titled [“Making it Right”](#) that chronicles its steps toward addressing the aftermath of the derailment. That includes daily air monitoring and testing the drinking water in conjunction with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

Despite those assurances, Purdue University professor Andrew J. Whelton is less than convinced.

“Toxins released by the derailment have caused acute health impacts,” Whelton, professor of Civil Engineering and Environmental and Ecological Engineering, told Baptist Press Tuesday (July 25).

Whelton has led research teams to the area to chronicle what he says Norfolk Southern and the EPA are refusing to acknowledge – assessing the danger to the long-term health of area residents is far from over.

Tensions remained high in East Palestine following the derailment, with citizens [expressing their frustration](#) to Norfolk Southern representatives. Seven members of a government investigative team in early March [became ill while studying](#) the crash site for possible health impact.

The University of Kentucky and Wayne State University have likewise studied the area. Whelton’s team from Purdue followed one made up of researchers from Carnegie Mellon University and Texas A&M.

His concern is that the data exists to show the likelihood of ill effects from long-term exposure to harmful chemicals, but that those responsible don’t want to know about it.

“In my interactions with the EPA and Norfolk Southern, they have not been responsive,” he said. “Norfolk Southern has responded in no way that is helpful. The [Making it Right] website has little value for people to try and understand what happened and what to do about it.”

Contaminated water under buildings eventually contaminates the buildings themselves and the air inside, he noted. The USEPA never tested buildings and deferred to Norfolk Southern, who didn’t use the appropriate equipment and generated information of little value, Whelton charged.

“I sent emails to them notifying them of this,” he said. “I also sent data but it has not prompted any change. I’ve contacted congressional representatives and implored them to act on their constituents’ behalf. They told me they have been in discussions with the agencies involved. I also contacted the White House because the USEPA was permitting some residents and business owners to be chemically exposed inside their buildings.”

At a July 6 information meeting, [citizens expressed frustration](#) over a lack of coordination among national and local agencies. This is leaving those who are sick without needed resources, they said.

“Somebody has dropped the ball,” said one community member. “... People in East Palestine and surrounding areas are sick. There should be some collaboration in what’s going on.”

For instance, she had heard representatives from the Center for Disease Control were knocking on doors, conducting a study on the well-being of those inside.

“Well guess what, they went down Taggart Street. Never came down my street and asked us what’s going on. I’m very sick,” she said.

Though that speaker had insurance, many others do not, she added.

Whelton said he has repeatedly encouraged residents and business owners with contaminated buildings to contact the USEPA.

“They said they did and the USEPA came and visited some buildings, but won’t test indoor air,” he said.

He added that business owners also claim Norfolk Southern won’t help them unless they drop a lawsuit.

The need to conduct focused indoor air testing and building decontamination is urgent, said Whelton.

“I’ve recommended this to them before. They’ve simply chosen to do nothing instead. It’s a wholly fixable problem, but the longer they delay, the less chance those people exposed will understand what they were harmed by.”

Looking for answers will continue, but competes with responsibilities that existed prior to the derailment.

The day after learning of his tumors, Sheely prepared to drive the 16 miles to Solid Rock Community Church to meet with someone. He admitted he felt weak, but it didn’t matter.

“I made a commitment to them,” he said.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

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## Puerto Rican Baptists brace for hurricane season

As we enter the Atlantic hurricane season, Southern Baptists are intentionally preparing at-risk communities to navigate the perils of natural disasters and their aftermath.

In Puerto Rico, many are weary from the past decade of nearly 20 back-to-back tropical storms.

Families hardly have any time to recover from the physical loss and emotional trauma before another storm breaks on their shores. This perpetual state of exhaustion is pervasive, so Send Relief and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief partnered together to hold a preemptive disaster response training for almost 250 Spanish-speaking trainees, as well as 10 coaches, this month.

“Volunteers here were extremely enthusiastic about the training,” said Send Relief Crisis Response Director Coy Webb. “It greatly strengthens the ability of Puerto Rican Baptist churches and trainees to be equipped to respond when crises arise in this new hurricane season.”

Last year during Hurricane Fiona, hundreds of trained Puerto Rican Baptists partnered with Send Relief teams to deliver food, water, laundry services and temporary roofing to those impacted, and these teams are prepared to replicate last year’s projects in the wake of the current earthquake, flooding and storm predictions.

Over the last three years, Send Relief, in partnership with Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, has been able to train more than 800 volunteers in crucial project management for mass feedings, mobile kitchen maintenance, chainsaw response, debris clean-up, flood recovery, roof tarping, initial damage assessment and—most importantly—spiritual and emotional care.

“I’m excited that Send Relief had the opportunity to partner with local churches to offer them and strengthen local believers in their efforts to provide real help and hope to those suffering and devastated by disasters,” Webb continued. “As we minister, it enables us to demonstrate the love of Christ as 1 John 3:18 teaches us to – both ‘in actions and in truth.’”

Pray for Puerto Rico and the disaster response teams in place to be given extra measures of peace and comfort as they re-enter hurricane season.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natalie Sarrett writes for the [Southern Baptist Texan](#).

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## Puerto Rico convention ‘a demonstration of what Southern Baptists can do’ together

**SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO (BP)** – Southern Baptists have hidden treasure in the Caribbean: the Convención de Iglesias Bautistas del Sur de Puerto Rico (CIBSPR) – in English, the Convention of Southern Baptist Churches of Puerto Rico. But it won’t be hidden for long if Luis Soto and Félix Cabrera have anything to do with it.

As Baptist leaders on the Spanish-speaking island of Puerto Rico, they are determined to hold up God’s little-known work in the U.S. territory as a model of cooperative ministry for the entire Southern Baptist family.

“Puerto Rico is a great example of shared resources and joint ministry,” said Cabrera, vice president of Send Network Español, the Puerto Rico-based Spanish church planting ministry of the North American Mission Board (NAMB). “Here is a demonstration of what Southern Baptists can do when we work together.”

The advance of Puerto Rican Southern Baptist work over the past five years has been remarkable – spurred in part by increased focus on the island following Hurricane Maria in 2017. Soto, the CIBSPR’s executive director, reported on the progress last month in New Orleans at a [meeting of the National Baptist Hispanic Fellowship](#).

- Baptisms reported by Puerto Rican Southern Baptist churches are up 68 percent since 2017, according to data from the SBC’s Annual Church Profile.
- The number of churches in Puerto Rico has increased more than 60 percent over five years to nearly 60 congregations. A joint goal of NAMB and the CIBSPR is to have at least one church in each of the territory’s 78 cities.
- The CIBSPR’s Cooperative Program giving to SBC causes has increased 278 percent from approximately \$4,800 in 2015-16 to more than \$18,000 in 2021-22. The convention forwards 18 percent of its CP receipts to SBC causes.

The Puerto Rico convention also is active in collegiate ministry, with a presence on at least four university campuses. The Woman’s Missionary Union of Puerto Rico hosts three women’s events per year.

Baptist work in Puerto Rico has been a case study in cooperation. While NAMB helps fund church planting and Send Relief supports compassion ministry, the local convention funds the island’s other ministry endeavors.

“The [Puerto Rico] convention is strong in its work with pastors,” Cabrera said. “But we recognize that we don’t have to reinvent the wheel. If NAMB has a process for church planting

and for compassion ministry, or to help us with chaplaincy or student ministry, we unite forces to work together.”

Last year, a [Send Relief Ministry Center](#) opened in Puerto Rico, culminating the compassion ministry that had occurred since Hurricane Maria. The center helps coordinate the work of mission teams from the continental U.S. To date, dozens of churches have participated in Puerto Rico mission trips.

But can progress continue at this pace? Yes, says Soto, if Southern Baptists will continue coming to help.

“We know where the needs are in our local churches,” Soto said. “We need help in construction, evangelism, in establishing economic partnerships to bring missionaries from your churches.”

Amplifying the need for ministry partners, he said, is the reality that “most of our pastors are bivocational. Sometimes they don’t have the financial support to expand various ministries of the church. Sometimes they don’t have a team to do evangelism or work at VBS.”

The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention (SBTC) is among the Puerto Rico convention’s ministry partners. Texas Southern Baptists have begun a multiyear partnership focusing on church revitalization. The partnership kicked off in February with a team from Texas leading a marriage retreat for Puerto Rican pastors and their wives.

“Our aim in the partnership is two-fold,” said SBTC missions mobilization associate Colin Rayburn, “to mobilize our churches towards disciple-making movements and take years off the runway for the Puerto Rico convention to achieve their Great Commission goals.”

Among other state conventions to launch or consider Puerto Rico missions partnerships are Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Michigan and the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Send Puerto Rico invites pastors to see the partnership opportunities in church planting and compassion ministry for themselves on vision trips each February and November.

Churches of all sizes and from all 50 states can join the labor in Puerto Rico, Soto said. Mission trips can be coordinated by contacting either [Send Relief](#) or the [CIBSPR](#) through their websites.

Benefits of Puerto Rico missions are not confined to the territory’s churches, Rayburn said. Their example inspires Southern Baptists on the mainland.

“I would encourage the churches and conventions across the SBC to not neglect missions for other more localized ministry needs,” Rayburn said. “Domestic and global missions are the perfect way to keep our local church from becoming too inwardly focused.”

Visiting Puerto Rico also is easier than many imagine, Soto said.

“One unique advantage of doing mission work with the churches here is that you don’t need a passport,” he said. “It’s like traveling to any state of the United States.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

David Roach is a writer in Mobile, Alabama.

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## **Pastors report feeling more loneliness, less support, Barna finds**

**NASHVILLE (BP)** – A growing percentage of Protestant pastors report experiencing increased feelings of loneliness and isolation, while simultaneously feeling a decreased sense of support from people close to them, according to research by Barna.

[According to the 2022 survey](#) of more than 500 pastors done by the Barna Group, 47 percent of pastors reported they “sometimes” felt lonely or isolated in the past three months, while 18 percent said they “frequently,” experience these feelings.

This total – 65 percent – of pastors reporting these feelings is an increase compared with the 42 percent of pastors who reported the same in a 2015 survey, where 28 percent answered sometimes and 14 percent answered frequently.

Mark Dance, director of pastoral wellness for GuideStone Financial Resources, said the COVID-19 pandemic may have played a role in the increase in feelings of isolation, but the issue has been around for ages.

“I think isolation has been a challenge on-going for decades, and of course that challenge was exaggerated during COVID,” Dance said.

“I’m not sure that isolation is unique to the ministry. I just think isolation is a challenge for everyone. What makes it unique is that pastors are surrounded by people constantly, and so in my opinion, isolation and loneliness are among the most preventable challenges a pastor has.”

Dance said one factor in the survey data may be a younger generation of pastors who are more willing to be transparent about their feelings or ask for help. He even wonders if some of the percentages should be higher.

“I wonder if the other percentage are being honest with themselves,” Dance said. “It is very normal to sometimes feel isolated. Some times are better than others. I would expect them to say sometimes they are lonely.”

The same survey showed 49 percent of pastors reported they frequently felt “well-supported by people close to you,” within the past three months. This is a noticeable decrease compared with 68 percent who answered such in the 2015 survey.

Dance said he often challenges pastors that feeling isolated starts with them, and they need to take an active role in seeking out people both inside and outside of their church who can “refresh” them in their ministry.

“When I speak to pastors, which is almost every week, I remind them of how dangerous isolation can be, but also challenge them to embrace the responsibility to change that,” he said. “Isolation is downright dangerous, but it is avoidable.

“The pain of isolation exceeds the awkwardness of church friendships, whether it’s staff friendships, member friendships or other pastors in your community. As Southern Baptists, we’ve got associations and state conventions that would absolutely fall over themselves if you called them or showed up for one of their events.

“We have people cheering us on from every corner of our convention, so if we are feeling isolated, make sure that we are not isolating ourselves, because it is one of the most preventable challenges out there.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Timothy Cockes is a Baptist Press staff writer.

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## **Churchgoers less familiar than pastors with deconstruction, more likely to see it in their pews**

**BRENTWOOD, TN (BP)** – Many churchgoers are not familiar with the term “deconstruction,” but if they are, they’ve likely seen it within the church pews they sit in on a regular basis.

A [Lifeway Research study of Protestant churchgoers](#) in the United States found more than 1 in 3 (36 percent) are familiar or very familiar with the concept of deconstruction. Meanwhile, more than 1 in 4 (28 percent) have not heard of the term before.

A [similar Lifeway Research study](#) shows pastors are more likely to be familiar with deconstruction. Among U.S. Protestant pastors, more than 2 in 5 (46 percent) are familiar or very familiar with the concept of deconstruction, and 14 percent have not heard the term.

However, among those who have heard of the term, churchgoers are more likely than pastors to say they have seen attendees of their church methodically deconstruct their faith (37 percent v. 27 percent).

“It’s not surprising the majority of churchgoers are not very familiar with the term ‘deconstruction,’ since it often describes a person’s private journey or one that’s shared within a limited social set,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “The fluid nature of the term and its affinity among those on social media or podcasts distances it from many Christians. The term can be used both to represent a total abolishing of one’s faith or to describe one’s personal questioning and working out their salvation to greater faith.”

### **Familiarity with the term**

There is a correlation between the churchgoer’s age and their familiarity with the term “deconstruction.” Churchgoers over the age of 65 are the most likely to say they have not heard the term “deconstruction” before (51 percent) and the least likely to say they are familiar or very familiar with the term (12 percent). The younger the churchgoer, the more likely they are to have heard the term before and be familiar with it.

Similarly, younger pastors, those 18-44, are the most likely to say they’re very familiar with deconstruction (36 percent), while pastors 65 and older are the least likely to possess that same level of familiarity (12 percent).

“The study did not ask churchgoers the characteristics of those they see deconstructing their faith, but strong age patterns in those noticing the dissection of their faith imply it is more common among those under age 50,” McConnell said.

African American pastors are more likely than white pastors to not have heard of deconstruction (24 percent v. 13 percent). Within the pews, however, white churchgoers (33 percent) are among the most likely and African American churchgoers (16 percent) are among the least likely to say they’re not familiar with the term.

Churchgoers with evangelical beliefs are less likely than those without these beliefs to be familiar or very familiar with the term “deconstruction” (33 percent v. 39 percent) and more likely to have not heard the term before (32 percent v. 26 percent).

### **Deconstruction in the pews**

More than 1 in 3 churchgoers who have heard of deconstruction have seen it play out among church attendees in their congregations (37 percent). The oldest churchgoers, those over 65, are the most likely to say they have not seen it in the pews of their churches (64 percent). And younger churchgoers, those age 18-34 (48 percent) and 35-49 (49 percent), are more likely to say they have than those age 50-64 (31 percent) and over 65 (15 percent).

Denominationally, Methodist (19 percent) and Restorationist movement (29 percent) churchgoers are among the least likely to say they have not seen deconstruction among attendees in their churches. However, the majority of Methodist (63 percent) and Restorationist movement (55 percent) pastors say they have not seen people in their congregation deconstructing their faith.

“While the majority of churchgoers have not seen anyone in their own congregation deconstructing their faith, the numbers are not insignificant,” McConnell said. “When a culture moves away from God, individuals question the teachings they have received.”

Similar to the fact that evangelical pastors are more likely than mainline pastors to say they haven’t seen deconstruction taking place in their churches (72 percent v. 62 percent), churchgoers with evangelical beliefs are more likely than those without evangelical beliefs to say they have not seen someone in their church deconstruct their faith (54 percent v. 43 percent).

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

## **Methodology**

Lifeway Research conducted the online survey of 1,002 American Protestant churchgoers Sept. 19-29, 2022, using a national pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attend religious services at least once a month. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to more accurately reflect the population. The completed sample is 1,002 surveys. The sample provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.3 percent. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Comparisons are made to a Lifeway Research [phone survey of Protestant pastors](#) conducted Sept. 1-29, 2021.

“Evangelical beliefs” are defined using the [National Association of Evangelicals and Lifeway Research evangelical beliefs research definition](#) based on respondent beliefs. Respondents are asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced-choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Those who strongly agree with all four statements are categorized as having Evangelical Beliefs.

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

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Marissa Postell Sullivan is a writer for Lifeway Christian Resources.

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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](http://BaptistBeacon.net).

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