

Dr. Garth Leno joins BSCM

by Dr. Tony L Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – Pastor Tim Patterson, the Executive Director-Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM), is pleased to announce that Dr. Garth Leno has joined the state convention to help churches take their next step to accelerate Gospel movement. One of the highest values of the state convention is to strengthen leaders because they shape the culture and set the pace. That is why Leno will serve as the Pastor/Planter Care Specialist throughout Greater Detroit and Michigan. Patterson states, “Garth and Patty are two of the jewels in the crown of Canadian Baptist work, and will continue to shine brightly as they minister in the Canadian Convention and the Michigan Convention as well. We are beyond blessed to have such an exemplary couple help us accelerate the Gospel movement here in Michigan.”

Pastor Mike Durbin, the church strengthening leader for the state convention, offers his response to Leno’s arrival on the team. “With decades of transformative ministry experience as a pastor and church planter, Garth is uniquely gifted and positioned to use his gifts and abilities to encourage pastors in both Canada and Michigan. He and his wife Patty know firsthand the joys and challenges pastors and their wives face over the long-haul of ministry. Both conventions will be blessed in Garth’s role as Pastor/Planter Care Specialist.”

Pastor Wayne Parker, pastor of Merriman Road Baptist Church, Garden City, and the Send City Missionary for Send Detroit, responds with his observations when he says, “Our pastors have so many negative voices speaking into their lives, what a blessing to have an additional member of the BSCM family with encouragement as their primary ministry. Garth Leno and his wife Patty have servants’ hearts and a wealth of pastoral experience. Cindy and I count them as dear friends and know their investment in our pastors will be an encouragement to all of us.”

Dr. Tony Lynn, the church starting leader for the state convention adds, “I observed for seven years how people were drawn to the Lenos when they saw them at gatherings. I also heard others mention spontaneously how they were assisted or encouraged from their conversations with either Garth or Patty. So, when we learned about Garth’s impending retirement from the pastorate, I was hopeful we would find a way to redeploy their gifts and experience to benefit our pastors, planters, and their family members in Michigan/Detroit. I’m elated that many of us appeared to have the same dream and it is now reality.”

Dr. Leno, reflecting on his increased service in Michigan/Detroit says, “We planted a church with the Send Network in 2014, and ever since day one we have been encouraged and supported deeply and consistently by the Send Network and BSCM. It’s a great honor for us to care for the pastors and planters of Michigan.”

Leno most recently was the founding pastor and church planter of The Gathering Church in Windsor, Ontario, Canada until his recent semi-retirement. While increasing his family time

with his wife, his children, and grandchildren, Leno will serve the pastors/planters and their families in the Canada National Baptist Convention and Michigan.

Leno received a Master of Divinity Degree and a Master of Theology from Trinity Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He was awarded the Doctor of Ministry Degree from Bethel Theological Seminary in 1993. After planting The Gathering Church in Windsor, Ontario, Leno went back to seminary to study church planting, and in 2018 graduated with a Master of Arts Degree in Church Planting from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

Garth and Patty have served the Lord together since they were married in 1980. Leno led a small church while attending seminary in Chicagoland. Then they moved to Canada to lead established churches in Alberta and Ontario before planting The Gathering Church in 2014 in Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

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.

The Good Person test

by Alin Patularu

WINDSOR, ON – The last 2 and a half years have been hard on most people. The pandemic and ensuing restrictions have had a ripple effect throughout our culture, and it's been mostly, if not entirely, negative. This year has been exceptionally hard for my family and ministry. We've experienced decline in attendance, burn out of leaders, and countless, compounding residual challenges resulting from the response to the covid pandemic.

As I reflected on what happened and what God was trying to teach me through all this, the one theme that kept emerging was, gospel generosity. What people need now more than ever before, is a clear display of gospel generosity, and what better time than Christmas to display that?

As a church we don't have a ton of disposable income, if any, but I knew that didn't matter. If Church planting teaches you anything, it's that God's math is not like our math. After all, our King fed 5000 hungry people with a little kid's lunch. The next challenge was, how to use what little money we had, to express gospel generosity to our neighbors?

I was talking this over with our pastoral apprentice and he had an idea, “Why don’t we offer to buy coffee for people if they can pass the good person test, like you used to do at local festivals?” That was it, what a perfect idea. The next day I got to work on a sign that would hopefully attract people to come and talk to us. I made a sign saying, “Christmas Quiz. Pass & Earn \$5.”

I came up with some generic, Christmas ice breaker questions. I finally end with the “Charlie Brown” question, “What is Christmas all about?” After they answer I say something to the effect of, “What if I told you that Christmas is only necessary because of human evil?” This is a shock to their system and causes them to ask, “What do you mean?” With that I transition to the final challenge, the good person test popularized by Ray Comfort. I tell them that if they can pass the good person test, they will win the \$5. I then walk them through the 10 commandments and demonstrate that they have broken God’s law. Unfortunately, they failed the test and don’t deserve the \$5.

Most people at this point are disappointed and I ask, “Do you know what God did for guilty sinners?” This is when I explain that Christ was born that first Christmas morning because of the evil of humans. He died and rose from the dead to redeem and restore us back to good standing with God. At this point I hold out the \$5 bill and say, “You don’t deserve this. You did not earn it; you failed the test. But I am offering it to you as a free gift, if you will only reach out and take it.” When they reach out and take it, that’s when you clarify the gospel by saying, “In a much more significant way, Jesus paid your debt for all your sin. You can’t earn it and you don’t deserve it. All you must do to receive this gift of eternal life is reach out to Him in faith and receive it.”

The look on people’s faces is priceless. One night we were able to share this gospel message with 9 people in 1 hour. It cost us a total of \$20 because only 4 people took the quiz while their family and friends eagerly stood around listening in on what was happening. In this way we are able to stretch our dollars further and get straight to the point of the Gospel while displaying generosity as well. Give it a try, share the Good News and make some new friends this Christmas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alin Patularu is from Windsor Ontario Canada and planted Life-Giver Church in 2016 with the Send Network. He’s been married for 8 years to Shelly and is the father of twin boys, Jack and Henry.

Lifeway survey: 'Tis the season for church pews to fill up

by Aaron Earls, Lifeway Research

NASHVILLE, TN – The closer it gets to Christmas, the more likely it is church pews will be filled.

Half of U.S. Protestant pastors (48%) say a Christmas Eve service is their churches' largest event during the holiday season, according to a [Lifeway Research study](#). The frequency of the highest attendance events builds up to Christmas Eve and then tapers off into January. "Christians have many different Christmas traditions, and so do their churches," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. "Family and church traditions are most likely to coincide for Christmas Eve services, but many evangelical churches see the highest holiday attendance earlier in December."

Few pastors point to an event the first week of December or earlier (6%) or a service during the second week (10%) as their most well-attended. Around a quarter (26%) say an event during the third week of the month is top.

While it may not be true for most congregations, early December is the high-water mark for Christmas season attendance at Harrisburg Baptist Church in Tupelo, Mississippi. Senior pastor Rob Armstrong said attendance starts off strong in December, with their Sunday services the first two weeks of the month being their most attended events. "Excitement about the Christmas season feeds into the higher attendance in the first few weeks of the month," he said.

Their Christmas Eve service is also well attended, but he said the Sunday closest to Christmas and the Sunday closest to New Year's Day have the fewest people show up. With that, they're in line with most other churches. Few U.S. Protestant pastors see the largest crowds on Christmas Day (7%) or an event during the first week of January (5%).

The Christmas season is a prime season for church attendance. Traditionally, Christmas is the second highest attendance time of the year behind only Easter, according to a [2012 Lifeway Research study](#). In 2014, more than 3 in 5 Americans (63%) said Christmas activities should include [a visit to a church service](#), according to Lifeway Research. In 2015, Lifeway Research found a similar percentage (61%) said they [typically attend church during Christmastime](#). Even among those who don't attend church this time of the year, 57% said they would be likely to attend if someone they knew asked them.

High-attendance events during the Christmas season vary from church to church. Pastors in the South (39%) are least likely to say Christmas Eve. Pastors at congregations of fewer than 50 (19%) are the least likely to say they have the most people attend an event during the third week of December.

Mainline pastors are more likely than their evangelical counterparts to say their most attended service is on Christmas Eve (60% v. 44%), while evangelical pastors are more likely than mainline ministers to say their highest attendance event is during the third week of December (30% v. 17%).

Denominationally, some churches fare better earlier in the month, while others see their crowds grow as the season wears on.

Pentecostal (18%) and Baptist (15%) pastors are more likely than Methodist (3%), Restorationist Movement (2%) and Lutheran (1%) pastors to have their highest attendance during the second week of December.

For the third week, Pentecostals (45%), Restorationist Movement pastors (37%) and Baptists (35%) are more likely than Presbyterian/Reformed (20%), non-denominational (17%), Methodist (13%) and Lutheran (7%) pastors to have the largest crowd of the season. Lutherans (84%) are the most likely to say their high-attendance event this season happens on Christmas Eve.

Restorationist Movement churches are unique in that 21% say their most popular service is an event the first week of January. John Dobbs, pastor of Forsythe Church of Christ in Monroe, Louisiana, says there is a resistance to celebrating Christmas among the autonomous Christian and Church of Christ congregations. "That is based on the truth that we are never actually told in Scripture to celebrate the birth of Christ," he said. Dobbs also noted that pastors and members at Church of Christ congregations have diverse opinions on how to approach the Christmas holiday.

While many Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas in January, the first part of the year also provides a natural time of reflection and focus. "Given the aversion to holidays among many traditional and conservative churches, a day of renewal and beginning again becomes a day of emphasis and engagement," Dobbs said.

At Harrisburg Baptist, attendance on the Sundays closest to Christmas and New Year's Day are some of the lowest attended of the season, according to Armstrong, as many are out of town visiting family. Despite what may be smaller crowds, he still believes churches should gather on those days. "Churches should have worship on Christmas Day or any Sunday close to it," he said. "It's OK to have low attendance on those days because people travel."

"Pastors are always eager to see people attending church services, and the Christmas season is one time of year they get to see most of their congregation as well as visitors," McConnell said. "But the nature of those traditions varies by church with some seeing attendance culminating in a special Christmas Eve service, others a Sunday morning service and others a special musical experience."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Earls is a writer for LifeWay Christian Resources.

Longing At Christmas

by Michael and Shannon Goforth

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year...”

PORT AUSTIN, MI – At our house, you might catch us singing this classic as early as October. It has also become standard operating procedure to deck the halls the day after Halloween. Judge us all you want, but we absolutely love Christmas and everything about it. In fact, we were married on December 19th with a Christmas-themed wedding. Can you guess what song played after the preacher pronounced us husband and wife? Yup, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” by Andy Williams.

But what do you do when this time of year is not wonderful? What if this time of year reminds you of the empty seat at your table? Or the magical childhood you never had? Or the bills that seem to keep piling up? Or the trial that you are currently enduring?

As we write this, we’re reminded of several families in our church who lost loved ones this year. We know this season will be especially difficult for them. We’re also reminded of the heavy trial of our own that we’re currently walking through. To be honest with you, as much as we love Christmas, this year is difficult for us. We are struggling with infertility, and this will be our fifth Christmas of praying and hoping for a baby that God has yet to give us.

So, what do we do when this time of year is filled with longing instead of celebrating? If this is you, we want to encourage you with something: You are actually stepping into what this season is all about. Historically, Christians have referred to this season as “advent” which means “coming” or “arrival.” In other words, this season is all about waiting, longing, and yearning for the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

After thousands of years of longing and waiting, Emmanuel had finally come. This is why we celebrate Christmas. Jesus, God with us, had arrived. At his first advent, Jesus came to die for our sins and rise again so that we could be restored into a relationship with God.

Now, because of Christ, God is with us, by his Spirit. But if we’re honest, we still experience heartache, brokenness, and longing. This is because we are still awaiting an advent, the second coming of our Lord—when our Savior returns to wipe the tears from our eyes and make all things new.

So here is our challenge for you: Let the coming of that baby in a manger fill you with hope this Christmas. Why? Because he’s coming again. Like the saints of old, we wait. This waiting can be confusing, sorrowful, and sometimes unbearable. But because of Christmas, it is never without hope. God is with us, right now, in our pain. He walks with us, between these two advents. He sees every tear that we cry and ensures we are never alone. And best of all? He is coming to rescue us from this sin-cursed world. So, if you’re hurting, broken, and longing this season, let

that longing point you to this glorious reality: Emmanuel has come, and He has promised to come again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael and Shannon Goforth have been married for eight years and serve together at Mercy Hill Church in Port Austin, Michigan. They led a team to plant this church in 2016 and Michael currently serves as the Lead Pastor. Mercy Hill exists to spread a passion for the glory of Jesus in Port Austin and beyond.

Destitute and crying, Central Asian man makes desperate plea

Because you give, a desperate plea was answered with gospel solution.

Damir sat by the side of the road, destitute and crying. He prayed God would either help him or let him die. His employer hadn't paid him; he couldn't pay his rent and his family disowned him because they remembered the days when alcohol ruled his life.

Damir just graduated from an alcohol rehabilitation program in Central Asia that helped him kick his crippling habit, but he struggled to get on his feet after he left.

After dropping his car off at the repair shop, Yuri, a Central Asian Christian, saw Damir by the side of the road and invited him to House of Hope, a halfway house for recovering alcohol and drug addicts. This is what Damir, and many other Central Asian men need.

Yuri and his wife, Elmira, realized many men relapsed after graduating from the alcohol rehabilitation centers. Men had trouble finding a job, getting back on their feet and staying clean. They opened the House of Hope as a remedy.

House of Hope provides a place to stay, job skills training and fellowship for Christian Central Asian men who are recovering addicts. Men staying at the House of Hope participate in Bible studies and prayer times, and learn how to weld, which gives them a marketable occupation. They also raise and sell rabbits and grow vegetables for sale.

The men are mentored and disciplined so they can grow in their personal faith and also impact the vast lostness in their region.

Four local churches, national believers and International Mission Board missionaries Aaron and Melanie Stoval are present, living alongside these men to invest in their healing and discipleship.

Aaron visits House of Hope and studies the Bible with the men. He said national believers are leading the effort, which is one of the goals of the IMB — local ownership of the gospel task.

Aybek is one of these local leaders. He was once a Soviet soldier in a neighboring country and that's where he fell victim to the vice of vodka. Back at home, he became a police officer but lost his job due to alcoholism. He committed his life to Christ in a rehabilitation center. He's now the director of House of Hope and he joyously guides the men toward Christ. Everyone Aybek talks to — whether it's the vegetable seller or the vendor who buys the rabbits — hears his testimony of how God transformed his life.

Because you give to the [Lottie Moon Christmas Offering®](#) and [House of Hope's special gift fund](#), men like Damir are set up for success so they can be gospel witnesses in their community. Damir is now a successful welder. He has a place of his own and is thriving.

Aaron and Melanie thank you for giving to Lottie Moon. It allows them to support and encourage Aybek and Yuri. Your generosity supports the House of Hope, which answers the desperate pleas of men like Damir.

Some names may have been changed for security purposes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tessa Sanchez writes for the IMB.

Have you been Scrooged?

by Tim Patterson

(Scrooge. Noun: a mean or miserly person, a curmudgeon in Dickens' Christmas Carol.)

PLYMOUTH, MI – Have you taken a survey of our nation and its present culture recently? Or for that matter, the world? I am not an alarmist, nor do I have a personality or character that focuses on the negative, nasty or the talking head nincompoops of our day. In comparison to most, I'm a relatively positive guy. I truly do look for the best in people and want to believe that

they are honest and truthful, but the fact is that humanity as a whole and individuals in particular, seem to be a mess.

At the writing of this article, I have lived on this planet for 25,254 days outside of my mother's womb and from my perspective, longevity and experience, mankind is not improving but is declining rapidly.

Meanness and madness seem to be the defining characteristics of this era. Reason and truth have been replaced with circumlocution and ambiguous uncertainty and self-centered authority. Standards for decency, morality and ethics have been jettisoned for what appears to be a free for all rugby match of "if it feels good do it", with no rules.

Every year during the Christmas season, Sabrina and I watch an inordinate amount of Christmas movies, and I read 10 to 15 Christmas themed books. (OK! We like Christmas. Don't be hatin' on us.) It is during this period that I read and watch various adaptations of A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens. Some may argue differently, but I am fully convinced that A Christmas Carol is a Christian allegory.

In this novella that was first published December 19th, 1843, Mr. Dickens was writing to address and to expose the depravity and self-centeredness of man, and how we must have an inward change of heart that is evident in an outward transformation of our actions, attitudes and demeanor. To not do so would leave us in a state of condemnation that would end in an eternal punishment in which there would be great distress and suffering.

Today society has taught us to deflect and blame others for our maladies and missteps. Our failures are not our fault, nor the result of some internal flaw but they are the direct result of others, especially those with whom we do not agree or who may hold a different world view. No matter what popular opinion may proclaim, it is our own sin-pocked past that haunts us today. It is not the sins of others and not the failures of friends and family but our very own actions and attitudes that condemn us. Contrary to popular belief, mankind is not really "good at heart."

Humans have been Scrooged since we first walked in the cool and comfort of God's garden where we could bask in the warmth of His love and provision. We rejected His love and disobeyed His commands. As a result, our souls now live in separation, isolation, and loneliness. Miserable, cold, and hard. No peace with God. No peace with mankind and certainly no peace within.

The truth is that deep within each of us resides the sin-cankered soul of an Ebenezer Scrooge. Peering out the ice-covered window of our spirit, it glares with disgust and hate at the precious and beautiful Gift of Christmas. Those who hate true Christmas do so because they hate the true God. This rejection and hatred is revealed in actions and attitudes. It is the result of being Scrooged.

Our society has little by little pushed the hope of Christmas aside. It has said no to the wonderful gift of a Savior. It is my prayer that every Christian would seize the opportunity to share the Hope found in Christmas, and bring every man, woman, boy or girl into the warmth of our Fathers forgiveness through the Gift of Jesus our Savior.

The good news is that it does not take four different ghosts and a long winter's night to bring us to a time of transformation and salvation. All it takes is personally receiving the Gift of a baby born in a manger who would pay for our sins on a cross and offer us eternal life.

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.

1970's Christmas fun

by Dr. Tony L. Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – During the 1970s, before streaming, DVD's, video-recorders, and devices that play whatever you want to watch, whenever you want to watch it – watching colorful Christmas specials on the one night they were broadcast on national TV was a national pastime. I can remember a chorus of us pleading, as school children, begging our moms not to take us Christmas shopping but instead to remain at home so we could watch the Christmas cartoons. We knew our favorite Christmas special would be on for thirty-minutes and if we missed it, we would have to wait an entire year before we could drift into Christmas fantasies and dreams again.

I recall friends and cousins playing together in the snow just before our moms yelled, "It's time to come in for the Christmas special." Minutes before 8:00 pm, we rushed into the entrance of the house crowding shoulder to shoulder trying to catch our balance as we leaned on one another pulling off our snowy boots by pushing down on the heel of one boot with the toe of the other boot. Bath towels were laid on the floor by our wise mothers to capture the snow making our every lean and move all the tipsier. It was hilarious!

With each child down to insulated underwear and a heap of scattered, soggy winter outerwear covering the entrance floor, we scurried to our bedrooms to change into our pajamas while mothers magically made the snowy, wet mess at the doorway disappear into the washer and dryer. I still remember my mom bringing clothes and towels from the dryer and cascading an

avalanche of warm, floral smelling loads of laundry on us to warm us up. My sisters, while giggling, would grab as much of the toasty laundry as they could and cover themselves as they inhaled the aroma.

As we perched on the sofa in front of the TV, from the kitchen the scraping sound of a large spoon circling the bottom of a pan on the stove could be heard as Mom methodically kept the Nestle's Quick from sticking to the bottom of the pan. She would carefully heat the milk to the warmth where it would thicken, but never become so hot it would burn us while we sipped it. I have never forgotten her ritual of love.

I also have a lingering question about Christmas tree tinsel, or as our family called them, "icicles." Whatever became of the mountain of tinsel stacked-up as blue light specials at K-Mart? As I look back on my childhood, I think Dad had a package of tinsel or two set out near the Christmas tree all season long. Why?

Tinsel packages were there for two reasons. First, because the tinsel would disappear from the tree. Static electricity would make the tinsel stick to clothing or hair of those who got too near the tree while shaking wrapped boxes. I also remember my parents pulling tinsel from the coats or clothing of guests at the backdoor before they departed from merely stepping too close to the Christmas tree to look at the ornaments. Second, my dad from the vantage spot of his favorite living room chair, would see a bare spot that needed more tinsel. He would quietly rise, take a sip from his cup or a break from cracking walnuts or pecans, and slide tinsel from the package then strategically lay the icicle on a branch, one-tinsel-at-a-time. That was his ritual of love along with providing all the walnuts and pecans one could eat.

So now that you have read about a few rituals of love during my childhood, I must ask, "What rituals of love are you going to share with your family and friends this Christmas season?" Having trouble identifying some? Here are some suggestions for your consideration:

1. Close devices & open the oven

Candy, cookies, and crumbles! There are all kinds of recipes that can fill a family night. It is not about being an expert chef, it is about exploring the kitchen with loved ones while devices are set to silent or turned off and stowed away. Make that semi transparent candy that you break up like broken glass. Bake cookies with aromas like ginger. Take a big risk and make your own Baptist eggnog. Set-up and cleaning the kitchen are part of the activity. Everyone will go to bed with smiles on their faces.

2. Shovel driveways & play music

For those looking for fitness or mission driven activities, clear the sidewalks or driveways of those you want to invite to church or into your lives to discover Christ. Take that portable speaker from home with you and Bluetooth some great Christian music while the snow is piled up. Take along a lawn chair or two and invite the person you are helping to sit outside with you

in conversation while you work. It is not just about clearing away the snow, it is about the connection with a person or people.

3. Snuggle up & watch Christmas specials

Has life been too busy? Did self-care slide low on the priority list? Then create a makeshift cozy living room or family room where everyone can wear their comfort clothes while they snuggle up around an uplifting Christmas special or Christmas movie classic. Turn down the lights and burn some candles. Remember to make it simple and easy with great snacks and drinks. Adjust the temperature to make the blankets and throws necessary. It is about snuggling, cuddling, and finding that calm.

4. Play games & ask questions

Playing an aggressive game of chaotic spoons then transitioning to quieter box games or Uno or Crazy 8 or pairing off with chess and checkers is a great way to listen to the latest updates on the lives of those around you. This tradition is about remaining aware of what those closest to you are going through. Too often, as adults, we drive conversations when it is more important to listen to others talk about themselves. Here are some helpful questions to ask of your adult children, your grandchildren, and friends.

- Looking back on this past year, what was the biggest change or discovery for you?
- Where did you see God at work in your life this past year?
- Want to tell me about any new friends in your life or about someone who has become an even better friend?
- What were the biggest challenges you faced this past year?
- Can you tell me what is keeping you busy because you must do it, and what is keeping you busy because you enjoy it?

5. Read Scripture & pray generously

Search google for "Advent Scriptures" and read daily either alone for private reflection or with others as part of a shared anticipation for Christmas. Advent is that season between November 27 to December 24 when we celebrate God becoming man in the flesh and anticipating Christ's Second Coming. This holiday season offers us as Christians an obvious platform upon which we can talk about our readings and our prayers for a better world. Others expect us to celebrate what is important to us. Let us not disappoint them. May we express with sincere enthusiasm and compassion our love for the Lord and for others through our personal rituals of love.

I hope your reading this far has invoked some pleasant rituals of love from your earlier years. Even more, I hope rekindling your ideas will inspire you to set aside time for those in your life.

Your rituals may supply what they need in the future, or it may inspire them to create their own rituals of love. This celebration is a tradition worth highlighting.

John 1:14, says it best, "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son."

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.

A time of remembering

by Mike Durbin

"For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." – Isaiah 9:6 (CSB)

PLYMOUTH, MI – Decorating the Christmas tree has always been a family project for us. Some seasons, Shar and I do it together, others involve our children or grandchildren. Without fail, every season we talk about ornaments and the stories behind them - almost always the stories we share are about a special person in our lives. It's a time of remembering.

The Durbin family Christmas tree took on a new look last year when Shar wrote some of names of Jesus on bulbs before hanging them on the tree. We've done this before, but last year we took it to the next level. Many thoughts entered our minds as we remembered the names of Jesus together. Names like the verse above: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

Names carry special significance in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Not only do they help us identify one person from another, but they also give us insights into things like a person's character, personality or mannerisms. The names of Jesus help us remember the essence of who He is, His constant presence in our lives, and the strength He gives us in good times and bad. His names help believers navigate the many challenges of life in a broken world.

This gave me an idea for Christmas that your family might consider. How about gathering around the table and making a list of the names of Jesus as a family. Write those names on bulbs and hang them on the tree together. We've done that and it's fun. They probably won't be works of arts, but they will be remembered long after the presents under the tree are forgotten.

It might add fun to make a word search puzzle of the names of Jesus for everyone to do. Older children could be challenged to find a verse in the Bible that uses that name of Jesus. Parents could share testimonies how that name for Jesus has helped them in their lives. For instance, in our verse above, Jesus is called the "Prince of Peace."

No one ever experienced peace like Jesus. His world was filled with different versions of the same problems that plague our world today. Jesus faced conflict, drama, false accusations, misunderstandings, betrayal and more. And yet, He experienced inner peace in the midst of it all. He wasn't the Prince of Peace because He lived a problem free life. That doesn't exist for anyone. He was the Prince of Peace because of an inner peace - a peace of mind - that helped Him face life's challenges.

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.

We are one

by Coye Bouyer

LANSING, MI – A pastor friend of mine here in the city always asks me this question when he sees me, "How can we play together?" When I think of his question, my mind is drawn to an image of two individuals at the park playing basketball on opposite ends of the court, both practicing to better their individual games.

When Jesus prays for believers, "that all of His disciples may be one," His prayer is analogous to the oneness He enjoys with the Father. Jesus further fleshes this out when He says, 'just as you are in me and I am in you (v. 21),' as if to say we can think and function as one. Here, Jesus is drawing our attention to the biblical concept of Oneness.

When we think about the concept of oneness, it is a concept that does not start with Jesus in the Gospel of John, rather it flows throughout the Bible. In creation God says, it is not good for Adam to be alone and so God makes Eve, a helper who is suitable for Adam. Adam then declares that “a man shall leave his father and mother and cling (be bonded) to his wife as the two become one flesh (2:24). When Adam makes this statement part of his point is that he and Eve will perform (function) as one together.

In the New Testament, we see Jesus telling Peter that He will build His church (Ekklesia) on this rock (Matt. 16:18). Church is not plural but singular speaking of one Church. And while there are many local assemblies, all local assemblies still represent the one Ekklesia (church). Moreover, in Ephesians we read that Jesus takes both groups, Jew and Gentile and reconciles them both back to their God and Father.

Jesus reconciles them by the same means, the Cross and preaches the same message to both (those who were far off and those who were near). This is significant because while they are two separate and distinct groups, Christ has brought them into one body making peace between the two (2:14).

Paul informs the Corinthian church that the servants of Christ are one (3:8) symbolizing that while they, their works, and even their rewards are distinct, their purpose is one. Paul’s point is that they possess the same goal, and that is to see God grow the seeds they either helped to plant or water. Moreover, Paul also informs the Corinthian Church that the church must work in peace as opposed to division when it comes to the diversity of gifts given to the one church body.

All of this is important because Jesus’ words for us to be one as He and the father are one (Jn. 17:22) is something we can experience, because God experiences it. Remember while the Father and Son are distinguishable and distinct, they are still One (Deut. 6:4). Furthermore, Jesus desires for us to walk as One because when the world sees the church walking as one (in our Performance, Purpose and in Peace), then our witness confirms that we are His disciples and even causes them to believe Jesus and His message.

For the display of unity is so compelling and so un-worldly, that our oneness becomes explainable only through the message of Christ. What if those two young men at the basketball court working at opposite ends for the same purpose, to get better, decided to play together. Not only would they increase the chances of their purpose, but they would perform better together giving others a positive example of what can happen when the two work together in peace. So church, today let us walk as one, because ‘We Are One.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Coye L. Bouyer is the founding pastor of Kingdom Life Church in Lansing, MI where he has served since March of 2010. Pastor Bouyer recently stepped into the Diversity Ambassador role for the BSCM and firmly believes that he was not only called to Preach the Gospel as part of the process of reconciliation of man to God, but also using any platform as a bridge of reconciliation

of man to man, and even more so amongst the brethren. Pastor Bouyer and his lovely wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1) have been married four over 20 years and have four children; Sierra, Seth, Cayla and Coye II.

GOOD NEWS!

by Mick Schatz

ROSCOMMON, MI – Greetings from Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center and Merry Christmas! As I am writing this, the snow is lightly falling and there is a quiet hush and calm over all the camp. I imagine it is much like the night (no snow, of course) the shepherds were gathered around a fire, swapping sheep herding stories, and keeping watch over the sheep. This is one of my favorite scenes in the Christmas story.

The gospel of Luke records it like this – “In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:8-11.

Now I don’t know about you, but I have been in a field at night when all you can see and hear is the fire and the wood cracklin’ and every sensory receptor in your body is on full alert. If an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared before me, I’m sure I would have lost full control of my faculties and died right on the spot. At best I would have “freaked out” like the shepherds and been paralyzed in fear. Wow! What an entrance! However, imagine the relief when this glorious angel said, “Do not be afraid; for behold I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people...”.

I love the fact that God the Father chose lowly shepherds to be the first hearers of this Heavenly announcement. This message of hope was not restricted to the religious elite, socially favored, or financially secure. It did not single out only those who dressed to impress or looked the prettiest. This clarion call did not resound for those of a particular ethnicity, skin color, privileged background, or ancestry. **THE GOOD NEWS AND GREAT JOY OF JESUS CHRIST WAS ANNOUNCED FOR ALL PEOPLE! HE WHO IS EVERYTHING CAME FOR EVERYONE!**

All people have been invited to join in and celebrate Christmas. Right from the beginning of our Savior’s life here on earth, we witness the banner of love for all being heralded across the sky. We hear the heart of a loving heavenly Father calling out to His creation declaring a provision of

hope and redemption through His son, Jesus.

As Christians we bear the responsibility of continuously declaring this Good News and Great Joy. In a world full of selfishness, fear, confusion, and sadness we have Good News and Joy to bring to those around us. In a culture filled with noise and hopeless messages, the Gospel is the only announcement loud and powerful enough to stop people in their tracks and captivate their hearts and minds with a love and joy that changes everything. Celebrate Christmas by sharing the Good News and Great Joy of Jesus Christ!

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.

An Invitation from Jesus

by Karen Blanchard

MACOMB TOWNSHIP, MI – As I sit down to write this article, I have just gotten back from a retreat with my mentor and another pastor’s wife. Several years ago my mentor first asked me to go away with her on a retreat, and I gave her all the excuses of why I couldn’t go:

“I was too busy.”

“I had to take care of my kids.”

“The timing just wasn’t right.”

God began working on my heart and I finally said “yes” to the invitation. This past weekend was the second personal retreat I have been on. This time when my mentor asked me to go, I didn’t hesitate. I said “yes” right away.

Jesus tells his disciples, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”
– Mark 6:31b NIV

This is Jesus’ personal invitation to get away from our day-to-day activities and demands of life to simply rest. The two aspects of rest I want to cover are physical rest and spiritual rest.

Physical Rest

Physical rest is vital for our body and our minds. This year has been a very difficult year for me, and God has shown me recently how I never take time for physical rest. This is a problem that I

am working to change, even though in ministry, the “work” is never done. Author Shelly Miller shares in her book Rhythms of Rest,

“The work you have to do while on this earth is never fully finished. There will always be unfinished work. Don’t let it be a reason not to rest, or you never will.”

If we keep putting off physical rest because of our “to do” list, there will come a time where we will be forced to rest. I have experienced this a few times in my life. If we constantly push ourselves to the limits, our bodies will pay the price. A bible study I was recently taking part in covered this topic and challenged me to think of rest in this way: What if we switch our mindset on how we rest? Instead of working to our limits and then resting, we can rest first and then work from our rest.

Author Jennifer Dukes Lee states, “We were designed to rest first, so that our work can flow out of our rest.”

We see this example in the Bible with Adam and Eve. God created Adam and Eve on day six of Creation and then they rested on day seven. The first humans rested before they ever had a day of work!

Spiritual Rest

While it is important to have physical rest for our bodies and minds, it is also important to have spiritual rest for our souls. A few years ago God gave me this acrostic when it comes to spiritual rest. This is an easy way for me to remember how to REST in Christ:

- R** - Resist the desire to be in control
- E** - Escape to a quiet place to be alone with God
- S** - Sit, be still, and listen to God
- T** - Talk to God

By taking time to rest in Christ, we unplug from the busyness of this world just to connect with Him. This is more than our quiet time each day. This is a time to intentionally shut out distractions, sit in His presence, share the deep desires, and hurts on our hearts, and receive from Him what He wants to speak to us about. We have to be intentional to create a quiet space for this to happen. It is in the stillness we hear God’s voice!

On my retreat this weekend, I was able to get away from all the tasks of ministry, voices of others, and responsibilities. I unplugged from social media and emails. I was able to get physical rest that I needed as well as spiritual rest.

God is always pursuing us and speaking to us. Sometimes we can’t hear Him or recognize His work in our lives because we are too caught up with the demands of life. I encourage you to take inventory of your life and begin to recognize where life has been controlling you. Don’t get so caught up in the “here and now” that you miss what God is wanting to do in and through

you. The next time you feel God pulling you away to a quiet place, go! He has something He wants to tell you. The more we choose to accept His invitation, the more intimate our relationship with Him will be.

The invitation is always open, will you accept it?

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!

What the Incarnation means for your ministry

by Seth Springs

WATERFORD, MI – The Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) family is a diverse one. Across our network you will find churches of different sizes, ages, models, and ethnicities. But, with all our differences, the Gospel is greater, and continues to move us forward together. One Gospel-infused word that we often hear this time of year is the word “incarnation.” And, no matter our church's size, age, model, or ethnicity, the Incarnation has serious implications for our ministry.

While you won't find the word incarnation anywhere in your Bible, the Latin verb *incarno* means “to become,” and this perfectly describes what we see prophesied throughout the Old Testament and fulfilled by Jesus in the New. As John writes in his Gospel, “The Word *became* flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14). Jesus came for us by becoming one of us. Out of love for us and a desire to please the Father, Jesus felt what it was like to be hungry, to be thirsty, to be tempted, to lose a friend, to be betrayed, and to die. I love the way Paul describes this great act of love in Philippians 2:5-8...

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,
who, existing in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God
as something to be exploited.
Instead he emptied himself
by assuming the form of a servant,
taking on the likeness of humanity.

And when he had come as a man,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient
to the point of death—
even to death on a cross.

Did you notice how the Apostle started his poem? *“Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus.”* The incarnation speaks to the way we live. The incarnation speaks to the way we interact with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And, whether we’re a new church or an established church, whether we call ourselves missional or attractional, the incarnation speaks to how we relate with those who are yet to experience this Gospel reality for themselves.

There is plenty of room in our network for the missional church and for the attractional church, but what could happen in our state if every church adopted the same attitude as Christ Jesus and became an incarnational church? What kind of life-change could we see if each church asked the question, “How are we strategically placing ourselves within our community this Christmas season” and planned accordingly? Every church can become a neighbor. Every church can put on flesh and minister to those within arm’s reach. Every church can empty itself, assume the form of a servant, and make a Gospel difference in its community.

As pastors and ministry leaders, we set the pace. Here are a few ideas of how families in every church, no matter size or model, can live incarnationally this Christmas season:

- **Deliver Christmas treats to the few homes around you.** (You may even include a handwritten note expressing your care for them.)
- **Invite a neighbor over for a holiday dinner during the month of December.** (Biblical hospitality opens the door for great conversations!)
- **Volunteer at a Holiday Event already happening in your city.** (It’s not too late to jump in and you’ll be surprised how much a couple extra volunteers means to those organizing the event.)

No matter your church’s size or shape may the incarnation speak to the way we do ministry this Christmas and beyond.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Springs started Transformation Church Waterford four years ago after moving from North Carolina. He and his wife, Taylor have been married for 9 years and have 3 crazy, beautiful children, Layla (6), “D” (3), and Lily Joy (3).

During the wait

by Angela Wells

PORTAGE, MI – Have you ever heard of a paper pregnancy? My husband and I have experienced it twice! Our paper pregnancies consisted of almost ten months of filling out papers, filing papers, getting stickers on papers, and waiting on other people to push papers through the proper channels so we could adopt two children.

Although different from what we experience during the Advent season leading up to Christmas, it was still a time of waiting for the coming: the coming home of two beautiful daughters.

Much like the Christmas season, this time in our lives was filled with contradictory feelings and events. There was the joy of seeing a baby's face for the first time and then the second time stumbling across it on the internet and thinking, "There is my daughter!" This was quickly followed by the sorrow of knowing where she was, but not being with her.

There was the peace from God knowing the financial burden would be met and the turmoil from knowing that the next set of papers brought a fee we could not pay. There was the satisfaction of dotting i's and crossing t's and the frustration when a caseworker said, "You are doing things too quickly; slow down."

The longest part of our process was about forty-five days waiting for our Letter of Acceptance from our daughter's birth country. During this time, there is nothing to do but WAIT (and refresh email 1000 times per day). There are no social worker visits to endure, no plane tickets to buy, no fingerprints to take, and no wondering who your child will be. There is only waiting for the coming of this letter.

Although there was a stillness in the wait, there was chaos in my mind and spirit about what was coming. As I drove around for work, I listened to the news. There was yet another story about a country across the world making nuclear threats. Countries were on alert, trying to negotiate, and taking precautions. All I could think was that we would be flying right into the battle zone to pick up our daughter. My thoughts were spiraling during the 4-mile drive to my next school. I admit I was not praying, simply worrying, entertaining the thousand "What if's" in my mind.

The Lord was so kind to me in this moment of not waiting well. His voice exploded over the airwaves and He asked me, "Would you lay down your life for this child?" Only by His grace could I say, "Yes, Lord" and immediate peace followed. On this day, Jesus' voice was so clear. He had given the purpose, provision, and protection for us to go get our daughter and to Him goes the glory.

I have not found myself in such a dramatic season of waiting recently, but actually each day I live is spent waiting for His coming. When I do not look to Him, I live in contradictions: yearning

to see His face and praying He will tarry; wanting Him to administer justice and asking Him to give mercy; being still to know and going to all the world.

In Him, though, the waiting is simple and straightforward: wait in strength, wait in hope, wait patiently, wait wholly, and wait actively (Ps. 27:14, 33:20, 40:1, 130:5, Matthew 24:42). He is asking you like He asked me, “Will you lay down your life? Will you take up your cross?” During the wait, every day, every moment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela Wells is the wife of Chad, pastor of FBC-Portage. You can read about how God worked during their adoptions on her long-neglected blog praiseandfireworks.wordpress.com. These days you can find her caring for a family of 7, working as a speech-language therapist, and taking much-needed Sunday naps.

Studying theology in secret

by Dora Radu

Part One – Behind the Iron Curtain that separated the Soviet communist block from Western countries, it was difficult to study theology. Officially, there was religious freedom, but Christians were still persecuted and discriminated against. The state had to approve everything church related, including the number of students at religious seminaries.

The sole Baptist Seminary in Romania used to get approval for only 3-4 students every other year. The government kept a tight control on books and other publications—resulting in a small, limited library at this Seminary, and made it difficult to establish a high academic standard. Church activity was developed at 2 levels: an official government sanctioned activity/gathering, and the unofficial activity/meeting called “underground church”.

Because of the small number of pastors, each pastor had to serve in several churches. Seeing this great need for pastors and Christian workers, American missionaries came up with a smart idea: an unofficial, moving seminary called Biblical Education by Extension (B.E.E.).

This type of education was used in communist Poland for unapproved university studies. I was part of this secret system of training, and I think that today when we see expanding restrictions in the US opposing religious freedom, it might be interesting to take a brief look at the education and life of Christians in communism. Many Americans are more and more attracted to socialism and communism due to the neo-Marxism that dominates American college

teachings. These students believe that this is different from former Soviet Union socialism, but the basis is the same.

The secret seminar (B.E.E.) that we were part of was a real blessing despite the many risks involved. The teachers came to us from the missionary base in Vienna by rotation to confuse the suspicious and xenophobic border officers. In addition, those with dual citizenship used different passports alternately. We never knew the teachers' real names. To do not draw attention, they dressed as Romanian as possible and avoided any interactions with the locals I had a B.E.E. student number, which might seem conspiratorial even though it wasn't. No pictures were allowed; the only proof I have is the Certificate issued after communism fell.

The Americans had been smart. For instance, the book storage for the students from my city of Arad was in another town—Simleul Silvaniei. And the book warehouse for those in Simleul Silvaniei was in Arad. We only found out about the existence of the book warehouse in Arad (which supplied books to another center) by chance; the Militia was about to search for the Zene family. That's how I found out about the warehouse. Mr. Zene was a perfect choice to host a secret book storage. He was discreet, spoke German, and lived in a remote area. We owed him a lot of gratitude for the job he did. Due to so many precautions, I thought the Secret Police ("Securitate" – in Romanian) didn't know anything about us, but it wasn't like that.

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.

"Gotta serve somebody"

by David Thompson

NASHVILLE, TN – There really is something about Mary. Mary was about to marry a man named Joseph, and suddenly found herself expecting a child. Yet she had never known a man intimately. It was her response to the angel that is almost as miraculous as what was happening to her.

Let us remember that nothing like this had ever happened before—and surely has not since. Her response to this news is so classic and yet so timely and yet so perfect. Also keep in mind, Mary was just your everyday teenager that wanted to get married and have a family. But now her plans have been altered, immediately, drastically, unbelievably—ahh.

But she does believe it! And her response is amazingly and overwhelmingly overlooked in most narratives and homilies concerning the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus—the co-creator, eternal, self-existent, second member of the Trinity, Son of God and Deity Incarnate! (That Jesus)

What would you have said if given such life altering news? The Good news is that this was Good News to her and guess what—Mary nailed it! Here is Mary’s truly amazing response, “Behold—the bond slave of the Lord...be it done to me according to your word.” WOW! Mary got it right! (Some versions have it as the handmaiden of the Lord). In essence, Mary is acknowledging her relationship to her Lord. She is saying simply...I am your slave!

A what? A Slave! Mary could not have known that no one in the 21st century would be a fan of that word. But her Son would. In fact, Jesus was a fan of the word when he noted, “Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin.” This young virgin named Mary understood that— she knew that she could be a slave to her selfish desires...Or whatever she wanted in life...Or she could completely and utterly surrender all that she was to all that God is. Now, in my own personal estimation, that’s exactly what it means to be in Christ and for Christ to be in you.

So, here’s the rub, in a world where NO ONE and I mean NO ONE wants to be a slave!!! Absolutely everyone and I mean everyone is in fact a SLAVE! How do we know? Pretty simple really— we are all sinners. The proof is that we do two things...we cast a shadow (something angels don’t do) and we die!

The facts are the facts—the proof is in the pudding—and of all people, Bob Dylan got it right when he wrote the song—“Gotta Serve Somebody”. The lyrics are simply—“you gotta serve somebody...it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord—but you gotta serve somebody.”

So, in a world where everyone thinks they are always right and it seems almost no one is mostly right, let us take a cue from a young Hebrew girl, and let us for once in our lives say, “Lord Jesus—I totally and completely surrender everything to you...in essence...(I am yours)...And no one else’s.

You see dear friend, God loves you just like you are and not like you ought to be. He understands all there is known and unknown about you. Yet he made you to enjoy life (by way of) your surrendered relationship to Him.

Don’t be afraid to follow Mary’s example—trust Jesus unequivocally...give yourself completely without reservation to Him. Jesus will take it from there. He will make something so beautiful with the crumbs you give up. You will be amazed! And you will never, ever, ever regret it!

'Tis the season! Just try Jesus!

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.

'Tis the Season

by Jason Livvix

OSCODA, MI – 'Tis the season to be jolly, fa ra ra ra ra ra ra ra! This is from one of my favorite Christmas movies, "A Christmas Story". While the movie is full of silly humor it gives us the reality of what Christmas is all about to most people. I just want this material item that will make me happy. We know Christmas is much more than that. I want to encourage you to take advantage of the season. There are two things I want to encourage you to do.

1. Tell others the reason for the season.

I know this is the "Sunday School" answer but there is not a better time of year than this to tell people about Jesus. If you are praying for someone for salvation, take them a small gift and then explain to them the gift of salvation.

Wherever you happen to be, workplace, holiday gathering, even shopping, and a conversation comes up about Christmas, chime in and let them know about the real reason for the season. It may surprise you how many people might not know the real meaning of Christmas.

2. I encourage the Church to celebrate the Christmas season.

At Fresh Start Fellowship we have a variety show. Some people sing Christmas songs, some read poems, we have comedy, and most importantly we have fellowship while giving praise to Jesus for the greatest gift of all, salvation.

If you are thinking you don't have enough people, just know that we have been very small in numbers some years, but it has always been encouraging and it is a great time to invite a friend. It has been a good way to get a spouse that does not come or a friend that is unsure about coming to church to rub shoulders with the church in the building and have fun.

Each year I play the Charlie Brown Christmas scene where Linus explains the real reason for the season and then we take some time to pray for our community and the year to come.

I will leave you with this. I am reminded each time I go on a mission trip to a third world country that material things are really not that important. I have been in homes where the roof does not keep all parts of the house dry, and it has a dirt floor. The walls are rough sawn wood, and the size is that of my shed out back. The family barely fits in the dry part to sleep, each is grateful that they have some kind of shelter at all. Despite everything, they have an attitude of gratitude for salvation and they understand that with it they have everything.

They can look past the lack of physical possessions to that of eternal position. With Jesus they have hope, not for wealth or stuff, but for promises of His Word and eternity itself. Let this Christmas be the one where we forget about commercialism and get back to what Christmas is all about; sharing the greatest gift of all time, the Good News of Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor Jason Livvix is the Planter/Pastor of Fresh Start Fellowship of Oscoda since 2013. Serving with his beautiful wife Tracy and their four wonderful children, Madeline, Wyatt, Joel and Sophia. The oldest three have moved back to Illinois where he's from originally.

First-Person: What's next for the ERLC?

by Brent Leatherwood

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of traveling to multiple state conventions as they hosted their annual meetings. To say it was a joy to be with our SBC pastors and leaders in person is an understatement. There is something to be said about being in the same room with these brothers and sisters with whom we've linked arms for the purpose of the Great Commission.

Two months ago, the trustees of our entity turned over the reins to me as president of the ERLC. Since that time, I have been busy calling and connecting with pastors from all across the country to—first and foremost—listen to their ideas, challenges, and experiences. In doing so, I believe this foundational work ensures that the ERLC will be able to keep speaking *from* our churches, just as it has since its inception. The ERLC is an institution that dates back over a century, and it belongs to Baptists—the pastor, the minister, and the individual in the pew who faithfully and sacrificially gives to the Cooperative Program.

But this heart isn't unique to me. It comes directly from our mission statement. The ERLC exists to speak with and assist our churches in understanding the moral demands of the gospel and, at the same time, to speak from our churches about the pressing policy issues that we all face in the public square. This includes issues such as the dignity of life, religious freedom, protection of conscience rights, the sanctity of marriage as God has defined it, and the defense of human dignity. This ensures that, even as we work alongside a number of partners and peers in our work, we'll continue speaking with a thoroughly Baptist voice about the issues important to the SBC.

What matters most

As we reconstitute and rebuild this team, I know that if my vision for the ERLC is not aligned with what our churches actually need right now, it won't work. So as new staff members are brought aboard, new initiatives are designed, and new resources are created, know that each of these steps are undertaken so our entity is fashioned in such a way as to address the feedback we are receiving from our churches.

One thing that will not change is our ministry assignment; one that we are privileged to carry out. This specific task has been given to us by our convention, so that means where our churches have spoken, this Commission will also speak without wavering. This is vital because a deep, abiding, and consistent voice of moral clarity is needed in the confusing times we find ourselves in. That's what will set us apart. While there are other organizations in this space with competing motivations, this ministry will be firmly rooted in Scripture and guided by our Baptist Faith and Message.

What's next?

It's natural to wonder: What will this new version of the ERLC look like, and what comes next? There will be many updates to come on that front. I'm eager to tell our churches more in the weeks and months ahead. The best way to stay informed is by joining us at [ERLC.com/updates](https://erlc.com/updates).

Signing up for email updates allows you to hear directly from us about our work and ways we are serving you on the issues that matter most to Southern Baptists. You'll learn about our advocacy in our nation's capital, exciting new partnerships with our state conventions, and the ways we are working across the SBC with our sister entities.

As we move forward in this next chapter, know that our churches are first in our hearts and at the top of our minds. We are taking each next step with a Mark 10:44 mindset: to be a servant of all. I cannot wait to hear from you and be alongside you as we take the gospel to a chaotic public square that is in desperate need of the hope and peace that can only be found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brent Leatherwood is the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Operation Christmas Child ministers to children in war-torn countries

by Garth Leno

Jasmina stood in the foyer of the beautifully decorated Pentecostal church in Belgrade where children from that fellowship and the Baptist church conducted eight performances of the Christmas play that was written for the occasion. Operation Christmas Child shoe boxes from Samaritan's Purse were made available through the magnanimous ministry of local missionaries. With a tear in her eye, Jasmina repeated, "Nothing brings them in like shoe boxes!"

The church was packed with 1,500 eager participants—mostly refugees—for each of the eight productions. Men, women and children from Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo watched in hushed silence and sheer delight as the children from the two churches performed the play.

Strangers in a Foreign Land

It was the simple story of Jesus' birth. It was a profound demonstration of God's love. It was the transforming gospel in a child's play. The audience was full of doctors, farmers, professors, uneducated housewives, economists, writers, carpenters, and lawyers. Yet, they had one thing in common. They were all displaced people. Refugees. Strangers in a foreign land. Just like Jesus.

After each performance the children in the audience were invited to come forward to receive colorfully wrapped shoe boxes full of small gifts such as stuffed animals, candy, hygiene items, small toys, and school supplies—boxes that had been generously packed by Christians in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Every year pastors and planters throughout Michigan and Southwestern Ontario wonder aloud how their churches can celebrate Christmas in a way that makes a difference here and abroad. This is it!

In a special report, Samaritan's Purse reported that in 2021 more than 9.1 million gift-filled shoeboxes were distributed to children in need all over the world at over 81,000 outreach events.

I worked for Samaritan's Purse Canada from 1999-2003. I have seen the shoebox distributions in person. In Serbia, for example, I saw with my own eyes what years of ethnic animosity has done to the people and to the nation. I also witnessed the devastation in Kosovo. I saw the burned-out homes and businesses. I listened to the heartbreaking stories. Nothing seems to open the hearts of children and families in crisis quite like these simple shoeboxes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garth Leno lives in Windsor, Ontario Canada, with his wife and one daughter, Jamie. Two more children, Nathan and Kristin, are married with families of their own. Garth is the senior pastor at The Gathering, which he planted with friends in 2014. He also is on the Send Network Canadian Advisory Board and serves as Pastor/Planter Care Specialist for the BSCM. He has a doctorate from Bethel Theological Seminary and loves to preach.

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