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Celebrate Christmas

by Tim Patterson

PLYMOUTH, MI – Much about Christmas remains veiled and puzzling. Not the actual birth of our Lord, but the celebrations that surround it. The celebration itself, harbors a mystery of faith, and the event has a rather checkered history.

For more than 300 years after Jesus walked on earth, Christians celebrated his resurrection but not his birth. This did not preclude a very strong and firm belief in His miraculous birth, but it was just not the focus of their celebrations. The later Christmas festival and celebration that began to have prominence in following decades was even banned in 17th century England and in early America.

The observance of Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Christ, first began in fourth-century Rome, timed to coincide with a midwinter pagan festival honoring the imperial army's sun god, Mithra. This midwinter festival was so popular and ingrained in the culture that the December date was taken over to celebrate Jesus' birthday to help Christians move away from any pagan practices and to shift the focus from a false god to the true and living God.

The day He was born is unknown and even the precise year is uncertain. However, it was not in the year 1 A.D., as the calendar's "Anno domini" (Year of the Lord) suggests. This is agreed upon by the vast majority of conservative Biblical scholars.

The dating system derived from an error about the year of Christ's birth by a sixth-century monk in Rome, Dionysius Exiguus, in working out the starting point of the Christian era. Scholars have since calculated that Jesus' birth took place in about 6 or 7 B.C., meaning paradoxically "Before Christ". The revised time was determined partly by the fact that Herod the Great ruled Judea when Jesus was born, and history records that Herod died in 4 B.C.

In what month the birth occurred, or on what day, has been a matter of speculation for centuries. Possible dates include, January 6, February 2, March 25, April 19, May 20, October 4, November 17. A British physicist and astronomer, David Hughes, has calculated that the date was September 17, 7 B.C., based on various scientific evidence, including that of a conjunction of two planets, Jupiter and Saturn, in the constellation Pisces on that date.

He concludes in a book that this extraordinary celestial display was the "star" seen by the distant wise men. The 17th century German astronomer, Johannes Kepler, of the now famed Kepler Deep Space Telescope, similarly had calculated a three-planet conjunction, including Venus as well as Jupiter and Saturn, in the same constellation in 7 B.C. In any case, a variety of months and days have been used over the centuries in different parts of the world to celebrate the occasion.

Some Eastern Orthodox churches still celebrate Christmas on January 6. As I mentioned earlier, Christmas was banned in 17th century England when Oliver Cromwell and his puritan followers gained temporary rule, forbidding what was called the "heathen celebration of Christmas." The holiday similarly was banned in colonial New England. Christmas wasn't made a legal holiday in Massachusetts until 1856. Many of the hot-hearted evangelists that were responsible for spreading the Gospel in early America, were adamantly opposed to the practice of celebrating Christmas, and their fiery condemnations can be found in the historical archives of many of their sermons.

For all of the clouded chronology and legal background of Christmas, however, the biggest mystery, or should I say wonder, is in its message – that God has entered the human race in order to live among us a sinless life and become the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of all of mankind. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,".

That is the mystifying core of Christmas, an awesome concept that has challenged the hearts and minds of humanity since. Why would God so love someone like me or you, so much so that He would sacrifice His only Son on our behalf? Why would He leave the comforts of heaven and come to us? The sinful wretches that we are, are completely undeserving of His love. Yet, without pause "He Gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever would believe in Him would have everlasting life."

The giving of that wonderful Gift is well worth celebrating no matter how you do so. So, may I encourage you that no matter what the history and practices of the past Christmas celebrations may have been, celebrate the birth that changed the world and our eternities.

Your celebrations may include trees, tensile, lights, bows, fat jolly men in red suits, dancing reindeer, carols, sentimental songs of seasons past, stockings stuffed with candy, huge meals, exchanging of presents, holly, mistletoe, and the list could go on and on with as many variations as there are cultures and ethnicities. How you celebrate is not so important. That you celebrate is important!

What a Gift! Let's celebrate Christmas!

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.

U-turns

by Tony L Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – Peace and joy come from the Lord and are a result of obeying God. We learned that lesson four months into our marriage after we took a giant spiritual U-turn during 1977.

We canceled plans where I was going to become a rich engineer after God called us to ministry during the month of April. From April through August, we abandoned old plans and made new ones. I enrolled in a university I had never visited. We rented our first furnished apartment without ever seeing it. We headed to Missouri without knowing if there would be any employment for us. The U-turn was fast and furious. We had less than a thousand dollars between us when we started our marriage; yet, we were happy to be on our own with the Lord leading us.

A little over one-hundred days in Missouri, we found ourselves without the funds to return to Michigan to be with family during the holidays. Jamie worked at a pants factory, where she almost lost the tip of one of her beautiful fingers, and I worked at two part-time jobs while attacking my first semester like a madman. Nevertheless, there was a contentment.

I think we purchased the shortest, fattest, most oddly shaped Christmas tree on a local lot. It was all we could afford. As we dragged the pitiful pine upstairs needles fell out onto the steps. Realizing we had no decorations for the tree, Jamie's brainstorm was to cradle Christmas cards from family members into the bare spots of the tree. The mailbox envelopes were slit open, day after day, revealing Noel cards with glitter, handwritten notes, corny sayings, and inspirational wishes from our loved-ones in Michigan. The tree became a perch of testimonies of those who wished us well on our spiritual adventure. Their prayers, I would like to think, brought us that peace even though we were 800 miles away from the life we once knew.

One evening, a giant, gift-wrapped, sausage-shaped present with my name on it was under the tree. I knew it was mine because the note on the paper in Jamie's handwriting said, "To my husband." Jamie on some evenings placed the mysterious package in my open hands and asked, "Can you guess what it is? You cannot squeeze it. You cannot shake it. Just feel the weight. Can you guess what it is?" I was puzzled until Christmas Day.

I was stunned upon opening the gift! It was a blue pup tent for our collegiate camping trips with friends at a nearby river. Jamie had saved her \$5-per-week-allowance to buy the surprise present for me. Because of her creativity and generosity for three years, we shared many a Friday night camping with collegiate couples like us who had little, but somehow sharing what we had over a campfire made all the difference in the world. Acquaintances became friends who became family because we shared life.

As 2020 with COVID-19, racial tensions, and election chaos stretches out, again and again, reminding us that we do not control as much of life as we would like to believe, I hope you will remember that peace and joy come from the Lord and are a result of obeying him, no matter where he leads, calls or pushes. Just go with the Lord, even if it is a fast and furious U-turn because deciding to obey God is something you and I can control in life.

We still hold to that indescribable peace and joy. During this past year, I assured our three precious adult children, their wonderful spouses and our nine grandchildren that no matter what comes, we would sell everything we have in order to help anyone in trouble. During this past year, we said good-bye, for a while, to Jamie's last living parent, her Christian mother. While her mom was with us we assured her mother that we would sell everything if her needs called for our help. Even now on occasion, after visiting my mom in a memory care facility then visiting with my father at his home I say, "Dad, have no worries about the future. If you or Mom need anything, we would sell all we possess in order to take care of you." We want others to know that peace and joy that comes from the Lord.

You see back in 1977 with less than \$1,000 to our names, we started our lives following the Lord. Four months into the marriage, we celebrated our lives with a crooked tree, glittery cards and a blue pup tent that we set-up in the living room of our apartment on Christmas evening and slept soundly with smiles on our faces and peace and joy in our souls. If we ever have to start over with less than we had in 1977, we would do it with peace and joy because the Lord still guides and we just follow.

Jamie and I wish you and your loved-ones a Christmas filled with peace and joy even in the midst of fast and furious U-turns! Merry Christmas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Lynn is the State Director of Missions for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as lead pastor for more than six years at Crosspoint Church in Monroe, Michigan. He and his wife, Jamie, also served with the International Mission Board in Africa and in Europe.

Mission Impossible

by Mike Durbin

PLYMOUTH, MI – Snowflakes are falling and so too is the temperature. We are quickly approaching what the classic song calls, "...the most wonderful time of the year!" A recent headline caught my attention, "Hallmark Is Premiering 40 All-New Christmas Movies This Year."

Shar and I have already watched one and I suspect there will be many more in the days to come - something like 39 more!

That's ok. I'll watch all the boy-meets-girl as they tackle some impending difficulty and fall-in-love movies that Shar wants. She knows, however, that at some point I'll have cried too much and will need to interject an action movie filled with international intrigue, clandestine operations, and the fate of the world hanging in the balance. Something that starts perhaps with the familiar words: "Your mission should you choose to accept it...." Oh yeah!

The Mission Impossible movies are just as make-believe as the Hallmark ones and yet there's something about the storyline of love overcoming difficulty or good overcoming evil that draws us to them. God wired us that way. That may be why so many people love the Christmas season. It is the ultimate declaration that love overcomes and that good triumphs. Unlike the movies, Christmas is real. It is real people experiencing a real God on Mission Possible to save us from our sins.

No one experiences Christmas quite like Mary, the mother of Jesus. Christmas starts for her when the angel Gabriel appears to her and tells her that she's going to have a baby. It's a conversation that's going to change the world, especially her world. As they talk, Gabriel says: **"for nothing will be impossible with God"** (Luke 1:37). Mary is going to experience the truth of these words over and over again in her life.

"For nothing will be impossible with God," is a refrain God writes on her heart. It's a promise that He will be with her wherever she goes, whatever she faces, or whoever she encounters. It's a promise that will sustain her all the way from the cradle to the cross.

God's promises make the difference in how we face life's difficult moments. They strengthen us and sustain us. Gabriel tells Mary that she is blessed among women, but that doesn't mean that her life would always be easy or without pain. In the same passage, the "blessed" one becomes the one "troubled" in heart.

During that first Christmas season, Mary will survive the talk of the town about her pregnancy, giving birth to her firstborn son where they kept the animals, and fleeing to Egypt to escape the madness of Herod. These are not painless experiences, but in everything she goes through, Mary knows that "nothing will be impossible with God." She will rely upon Him for strength when she has none, direction for when she doesn't know where to turn, and comfort when she is troubled.

For most of us, this Christmas is going to be different than any we've ever experienced. COVID-19 has guaranteed that. We're being asked to stay home and minimize our contacts with others to as small a bubble as possible. Hopefully this will be our first and only virtual Christmas. We'll make the best of it. Though it will be different, we can still experience Christ. Nothing can take Him from us. Somehow, some way, despite all that is happening in the world, we will experience Christmas because, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Merry Christmas!

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.

Good news, great joy, for all people!

by Mick Schatz

ROSCOMMON, MI – Greetings from Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center and Merry Christmas!

As I am writing, 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 sheepherding 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 heart 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.

“Punching Holes in the Darkness” sits down with IMB president

by Staff

PLYMOUTH, MI – Tim Patterson sits down with International Mission Board (IMB) President Paul Chitwood in a December episode of the “Punching Holes in the Darkness” podcast. This year the IMB is celebrating its 175th Anniversary with a goal of \$175,000,000 for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering (LMCO).

The annual offering makes up nearly 60% of the IMB's revenue every year, and supports the Southern Baptist mission sending organization's 3,535 missionaries around the world. This year's offering is especially important because of the many unexpected expenses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chitwood shared with podcast host Tim Patterson the many challenges the IMB has faced as a result of the pandemic, including the need to bring home and house many of the organization's missionaries and their families.

The IMB president had encouraging news as well. He told Patterson that the first few months of the pandemic they initially saw a reduction in giving, but then Southern Baptists began generous giving to bring their donations to similar levels of last year.

To hear more of Chitwood and Patterson's conversation just go to the "Punching Holes in the Darkness" podcast at www.bscm.org/podcast or where ever podcasts are played. The podcast is produced by the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) with the purpose of sharing the impact of Michigan Baptists across the state and around the world.

A refreshed strategy

by Michael Guyer

ANN ARBOR, MI – When COVID-19 hit and swept across the nation, we scrambled to move services online and pressed pause on a lot of our normal routines. We still gathered regularly (and virtually) for small groups, discipleship, prayer, and fellowship, but there wasn't much structure or order to it. We pressed pause on our strategy or goals, and we clung to the Lord and one another to walk through this trial. However, even in this chaotic time, we rejoiced in the fruit that was borne – relationships within our young Body were strengthened. Our church served one another sacrificially. We gathered virtually multiple times a week during lunch for prayer. We found ways to meet tangible needs in our community. We prioritized worship and hearing the preaching of the Word. We were trying to figure out how to share the gospel with our neighbors and friends virtually.

This entire season has been marked by prayer, but our prayers increased as we sought the Lord for wisdom for how exactly we were to go forth. We had no meeting space – the public schools canceled all building reservations. We looked for spaces to rent on our own, but that was a dead end too. However, we knew that we were no longer facing a season that we needed to grin and bear it. **We had to find a way to grow and thrive.**

We went to the drawing board – assessing the needs of our church family and community and aligning those needs with our mission and our vision. After a few weeks, we came out with a fresh strategy for ministry this year.

We started to unpack the boxes and get settled into this new life, and we called those in our church to join us in the process.

Our Refreshed Strategy

We developed a few ministry focuses for this year:

- Prioritize gathering with our church family on Sundays for worship and preaching of the Word.
- Cultivate healthy, biblical community within our church through virtual small groups and organic relationships.
- Establish Men's and Women's Discipleship ministries to add focus and support in growing our members in their relationships with the Lord and one another.
- Focus on strengthening our families with children as well as reaching new families this year.
- Continue to be present in our community – sharing the gospel, meeting real needs, and seeking the welfare of Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and the University of Michigan.
- Remain committed to developing leaders and sending our members out on mission in their everyday lives.

Here are a few ways these things have happened:

Sunday Worship

- During the months of August and September, we gathered for corporate worship outside at a local park. This was such a blessing to us after months of isolation. We were able to take the Lord's Supper together, worship and sit under the preaching of the Word together, and connect in-person with one another. We also were able to welcome new guests and visitors more easily who have since become more integrated into the life of our church.
- In October, it gets cold and the weather can be very unpredictable and will remain that way until May (However, God has been gracious to give us a few days in the 70s this November!!). We transitioned our Sunday morning gathering to a virtual format – live-streamed online – but we are urging all members to gather together at host homes to worship together in small groups of 10. We currently have 4 host homes on Sunday mornings.

Fostering Biblical community

Right now, this is one of the biggest joys of ministry at TCC. God is knitting together our hearts, forming deep friendships across life stages and generations. We are seeing a lot of momentum and excitement with [college](#) students, [young professionals](#), and [families](#) with children. Our church genuinely loves one another, is encouraging one another in our walks with Christ, and

sacrificially serving one another. We recently added two new members to our church, and we have quite a few who are in our membership process preparing to join. One of these individuals recently said, during her membership interview, "I wrestled with the idea of church membership, but after gathering with you for a while now and seeing you up close, I am realizing how similar TCC is living life like the church in the Book of Acts. It's just really cool and transformative to witness. I really want to be a part of something like this." *(We tried to hold back our tears and keep it together-- I'm not sure it worked.)*

Growing our ministry to men, women and families

This year, our church started a [Men's Discipleship](#) ministry and a [Women's Discipleship](#) ministry that focuses specifically on gender-specific learning environments and discipleship. These are in addition to the Equip Classes that we began last spring for co-ed learning. These new avenues of ministry-- particularly in the form of Bible studies and book discussions-- have produced a lot of fruit. We have seen brothers and sisters in Christ grow in holiness together. They have also been pathways for leaders to be developed (they have been led or co-led by non-staff members) as well as pathways for visitors and unbelievers to participate. This past summer, we had 4 unbelieving women participate in our women's Bible study through the book of James with a few of our members who invited them to join. It has provided several opportunities to talk more about the gospel, and those women are still remaining connected at TCC.

We also have invested significantly in ministering to families. We have reimaged our [Kids Ministry](#) to meet the needs of families in this unique and difficult time. We are doing this through a few key ways:

- Kids Classes
- An all-new [Jesus Kids Club](#) aimed to facilitate family discipleship
- Serving parents through providing free date nights, blessings, and resources to encourage and equip them
- Beginning a gospel-centered Kids Library for families to use.

In October, we hosted a free family outing at a local farm. This was a huge success for us as it provided us an opportunity to connect with lots of new families in our community (whom we are following up with now), and it allowed us to be a blessing to unbelieving families that we have been building relationships with for the past two years.

Gospel-Witness In Our Community

While everything during this season tells us to turn inward and focus on your "bubble," the gospel compels us to face outward towards our neighbors, friends, and community. In this season, our church is regularly serving at the Maize and Blue Cupboard (food pantry for University of Michigan students), Peace Neighborhood Center with their weekly food distribution, and has been a part of discussions about racial unity in our local community. We

also had the privilege of providing 300 USDA food boxes to local non-profit organizations to distribute to families in need.

A lot of amazing gospel-work is being done out of the limelight too. We are hearing stories of our members sharing the gospel for the first time with friends, neighbors, and family members. Specifically, our family has been focusing a lot of time on building relationships with our neighbors and fellow parents in our daughter's school. During this time of darkness and difficulty for so many, our family is committed to being a light in that darkness. We want to be a blessing to other families – loving their children, listening to their struggles, and offering hope through Jesus Christ. Many of our friends are closed off to the gospel, but we pray that we can love them so genuinely that we would be allowed the privilege to be let into their deeper struggles and tenderly offer them the hope we have found through Jesus. We can see the Spirit is at work in their lives. We know He is pursuing them. Would you pray for them with us?

How can you pray for us?

Are you wondering how you can shoulder burdens with us during this time? Below are a few ways you can pray:

- **Pray for gospel fruit.** Many of us are sharing the gospel with friends, neighbors, and co-workers, and yet, many still remained closed to the Lord. Would you pray that the Lord would open their eyes and save our friends?
- **Pray for wisdom.** We need wisdom on how to lead through this difficult time. Pray for us to depend on the Lord for every decision, to discern where He is leading, and step out in faith when it is time.
- **Pray for a meeting location for corporate worship.** While we know that the Lord has led us to gathering in small groups of 10 for worship in host homes on Sunday, we desperately want to worship together corporately in a space of our own. Would you pray that the Lord would lead us to the right location, so we can gather again as a whole church family?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael started following Jesus when he was a teenager. Before starting Treasuring Christ Church, Michael served in various roles within the church, including missions, student ministry and college ministry. Michael is married to Emily, and they have three children Amelia, John, and Caroline. Michael loves serving alongside Emily, who oversees Kids Ministry and Women's Discipleship for Treasuring Christ Church. In addition to hanging out with his family, Michael loves a good cup of Ethiopian coffee, anything with peanut butter, and just about every sport. His greatest desire is to see Jesus treasured above all things and His church established right here in Ann Arbor and to the ends of the earth.

God's clear plan

by Jeff Glover

BURTON, MI – As I think about Christmas 2020, I see only potential. Events in this world are unfolding and it is no coincidence that soon we will be in the season where sharing the birth of Christ and the good news that brings flows naturally.

It seems that If my experience in life has taught me anything it is this. “He is God ...I am not.” I speak this truth as a survivor of abuse. One day many years ago, God took this truth and began to change it into something I am not sure I understand even still. To me, the story of my abuse was something that I would carry to my grave, God’s plan was different. At 28 years old I found myself in a place I could never have imagined before God's intervention. I was asked to attend a men’s retreat weekend by an older man from church. He was a mentor and a friend who helped to teach me so many basic things my secrets had robbed me.

It was only weeks earlier that after 15 years I had finally been able to share with my wife of 6 years. Before then, shame and anger had kept me from telling anyone, especially her. I swore I would never have my family share that part of me... that stain. I would keep it at all costs. What I didn’t know was that secret was destroying my marriage. Angry outbursts, lack of trust, and more were keeping me from intimacy with my Savior, and other people. Now somehow, I found myself at this retreat with hundreds of men. Staying the night, trying to connect, and feeling so completely anxious and alone.

I sat through the various sessions, heard different testimonies about how God was working. There was singing and generally it was safe enough until...

There came a certain point in the morning that the speaker stood and called for testimonies. The Lord spoke to me “you need to share” ... “God, I whispered. “I can’t do that, no way”. “God there are at least a couple hundred guys here. I couldn’t possibly tell” As they closed out the invitation, I was so relieved. I had managed to dodge the bullet.

That evening however, the speaker repeated the request and the Lord spoke again “you need to share.” The same wrestling came but finally I went up begrudgingly and very reluctantly to share. I told of my shame and that God had broken through, that God was doing something amazing. I was leading music and healing in so many ways. I cried; I broke in front of hundreds of strangers. Almost everything about the experience seemed wrong, but God was teaching me something about following Him. I often think about that experience and how the next morning, no less than 40 men came to me. Each one shared of abuse, and how God had begun to penetrate their pain as I shared mine.

Christmas 2020 will be just this. A chance to see things according to God's plan. It is not always clear in our eyes what God has in store or what he is doing in His way. That can be very scary. Yet His word is clear:

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Jeremiah 29:11

Jeff Glover is a husband, and by God’s grace, the Father of two amazing adults. He holds bachelor’s degrees in Christian and Crisis Counseling and serves Bi-vocationally as Pastor of Harmony Baptist Church in Burton MI spending his available time reaching out to young couples and survivors of abuse.

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Jeff Glover is a husband, and by God’s grace, the Father of two amazing adults. He holds bachelor’s degrees in Christian and Crisis Counseling and serves Bi-vocationally as Pastor of Harmony Baptist Church in Burton MI spending his available time reaching out to young couples and survivors of abuse.

Area-churches team up to provide 750 Thanksgiving meals away

by Mitch Hotts/[MacombDaily.com](https://www.macombdaily.com)

MOUNT CLEMENS, MI – A steady stream of visitors drove through the parking lot of St. Peter Catholic Church in downtown Mount Clemens on Monday evening to receive a free Thanksgiving meal.

In years past, that form of outreach fed about 250 families. For this year, that figure has grown to about three times that size, primarily due to the pandemic and its ripple impact it has had on local families.

"We started with the idea that we would help people get a meal that normally could not get one," said Chad Nelson, pastor of Journey Church in Mount Clemens. "I think we took that for granted: Three or four families weren't going to be able to enjoy a meal. That started it."

Journey Church hooked up with Lakepointe Church to launch a Thanksgiving meal giveaway event. They found the need for holiday meals kept growing. They invited other churches to participate.

And before you knew it, nine churches in total were part of the project with a focus on 750 families.

"We felt called to something, to help everyone," Nelson said.

"We knew that there were people within the church community who needed help, but we decided to focus on people outside the church and found the need was even greater. We all are on journey. We know that every person counts. And we've been lucky enough to receive some help in providing a holiday meal."

In addition to Lakepointe and Journey, other churches included St. Peter, New Anthem Church, Lord of the Harvest Church, Christ Community Church, Renewal Church, Fellowship Chapel Church and the Church at Clawson were on board.

They teamed up with sponsors willing to donate resources to a worthy cause. The sponsors included Thrivent, Meijer, Two Men & A Truck, American Speedy Printing, Wellcare, and Hungry for A Day.

The sponsors provided the meals --which included turkey, macaroni and cheese, yams, green beans, corn, potatoes and more -- and the churches provided the manpower. In all, there were about 150 people helping out making sure it all ran smoothly.

Scott Blanchard of Lakepointe Church wants to make next year's meals "even bigger and better." He said next year the goal will be 1,000 meals.

"There are a lot of people hurting because of COVID-19," he said. "People are struggling. They have no money because of unemployment. The big question we must ask ourselves is what does love look like? What does it require of us to do? If we all do something, this will be a better place."

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It's a COVID Christmas

by Dan Russell

SOUTHGATE, MI – As our churches get ready to celebrate the birth of Christ this month, it's the first Christmas in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and, hopefully, the last! But, even though circumstances are definitely different than last year, people's needs are the same. We need a Christmas that offers joy to both believers and seekers alike. Believers need the joy of Christmas to remind them that the Christ Child came to bring "peace and goodwill" to them. And, seekers need the joy of Christmas to remind them that the Christ Child came into the world to "save...people from their sins". Here are some ways to make this Christmas a blessed time for believers and seekers:

1. Pray that your fellow-believers will enjoy the Christmas season and not be distracted by news of the coronavirus.
2. Share positive Scripture verses about the joy of Christmas with your brothers and sisters in Christ, either in-person, by email, or text.
3. Be faithful in worshipping with other believers, either in-person or online.
4. Host a Zoom party with other believers to share your favorite Christmas tradition, or talk about your favorite Christmas story Bible character.
5. Do a Christmas card giving promotion for your pastor with thanks for his leadership during the pandemic and gift cards inside each card.
6. Make a special effort to invite unbelievers to your in-person or online Christmas services, with emphasis of being there for them during the pandemic.
7. Give the needy of the community around your church a Christmas basket of food, along with some literature that shares the Gospel and invites them to your church.
8. Provide online Christmas services that focus on those seeking the true meaning of Christmas and who Christ really is.
9. Do a Christmas card mailing to the households around your church that shares the Gospel and invites them to church, whether in-person or online.
10. Have everyone in the church prayerfully choose one unbelieving person to pray for during this Christmas season and commit to share the Gospel with by the end of the year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dan Russell is the Ministry Director for the Southeastern Baptist Association of Michigan. Dan has been in pastoral ministry for 40 years and currently serves as the Executive Pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Southgate. He is also the Send Network Coaching Coordinator for church planters in Greater Michigan, as well as being on the NAMB Assessment Team for prospective church planters.

When Christmas comes to your door

by Tom Bradley

GRAND RAPIDS, MI – It was a cold Thursday afternoon, late in December in Grand Rapids. Merri and I were doing our usual afternoon shift at the neighborhood coffee shop, where our church meets on the urban West Side. Christmas decorations were up, and the windows were frosted, with it being close to 20 degrees outside. The “after school rush” of neighborhood kids had already come through for their free hot chocolate. A couple of them still remained doing homework and playing Uno in the corner; the coffee shop was a great place for them to hang out till they were picked up by their mom. It was safe, and warm.

The neighborhood adult crowd was a little light, probably because it was just too cold to be walking around. That is why Merri and I were a little surprised when the young family walked in. Mama, daddy, and two little ones in a stroller. “You look cold, would you like a cup of coffee?” Merri asked. “Yes please!” We served them a couple of cups, free, because this is a coffee shop where it is always free.

When Merri turned around and looked at me, I could see the concern in her eyes, and I acknowledged it. We meet lots of people from all walks of life in our neighborhood here. We know the regulars, some homeless, many with struggles of various kinds, and just normal neighborhood folks. Many are our friends and neighbors, and often we have an opportunity to speak grace in their lives. For some, it is the only place where they hear it, and this couple that had just come in from the cold, seemed like they could use some. I went over, offered to refresh their cup and introduced myself. “My name is Tom. My wife Merri is behind the counter” “Thank you for the coffee. I’m LaShandra, and this is Deondre” (I changed their names) “I haven’t met you before on our Thursday shift. Are you new to the West Side?” “No,” Deondre said, “I grew up around the corner, but we have been on the other side of town for a while, but we are not there now.” “Coming back to the West Side?” I asked. “Well not exactly. We are not sure where we are spending the night tonight.” And just like that, the light conversation suddenly became serious.

Seeing homeless people is not unusual in our neighborhood, and often we offer them resources for area agencies if they are interested. This situation was different. The weather was dropping into the teens again tonight. We were immediately worried, especially for the toddler and baby. After a few minutes, Merri and I went behind the counter and talked about options. Shelters would take them. We could drive them. One thing we knew. We had to help them get somewhere tonight.

So a few nights before Christmas, we were able to find them a warm place to stay, and dinner from the local taco stand. Later we brought over a pack-and-play from our house and some food. Our West Side ministry team partners who run the coffee shop and neighborhood ministry were able to find them a more permanent place to stay, an apartment, right behind the coffee shop.

We became friends, they came to CrossWinds often, and the meaning of Christmas was presented in a special way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom and Merri Bradley are Send Network Missionaries, planting CrossWinds church in urban NW Grand Rapid. They are in their third year, but still in need of support partners, as urban plants often take longer to reach sustainability. If you would like to learn more or receive their newsletter feel free to contact them at pastortom@windschurch.net

How Southern Baptists can reach a \$175 million LMCO goal

by Paul Chitwood

The 2020 Lottie Moon Christmas Offering® goal is \$175 million. That number is significant because 2020 marks the 175th anniversary of Southern Baptists sending workers to the nations.

The annual offering makes up almost 60% of the International Mission Board's revenue and helps to support 3,535 missionaries and their families. Going back to 1888, the year Woman's Missionary Union launched the offering, Southern Baptists have given over \$4.7 billion through the offering.

Simply put, our company cannot exist without the Lottie Moon offering and this year's offering goal is a God-sized goal. We've never had a \$175 million dollar offering goal and never had a \$175 million offering. Last year's offering, the 3rd largest in history, was \$157 million. The largest Lottie Moon offering ever was \$165,798,000. That falls almost \$10 million short of this year's goal of \$175 million.

How do we increase giving by \$18 million in the midst of a global pandemic?

Here's how. We divide it up. We divide the increase among our churches and there are several ways that we can do that.

There are 47,000 Southern Baptists churches. To increase giving by \$18 million will require every one of those churches to give an additional \$383 this year. But only about half of Southern Baptist churches give to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. So if only loyal supporting churches give, they will have to increase their offering giving by about \$780 each.

Let's divide it up another way. You might know that Southern Baptists are the largest and most diverse protestant denomination in the U.S. Our churches report a membership of roughly 14 million people combined. Divided between that number of people, the \$18 million increase would require every Southern Baptist to give an additional \$1.29. Again consider that only half of Southern Baptists will give, so their giving increase would need to be \$2.58.

Here's my point: it's a big goal, but it's doable! We have the blessing of being supported by tens of thousands of churches and millions of church members. And every one of them and every one of us has the capacity to give a little more to see us meet this year's goal of \$175 million.

I am asking that if you have never given to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, that you prayerfully give this year for the first time. And if you regularly give, I'm asking that you increase your offering this year. I believe we can do this. I believe that we can reach record-level giving, even in a year like 2020.

I believe because God is leading us and because we are focused on His glory. May Revelation 7:9 remain our vision: a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Paul Chitwood is president of the International Mission Board. The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering® is a registered trademark of Woman's Missionary Union.

Ohio Christian Job Corps leader: Pandemic heightens need to engage local communities

by Trennis Henderson

CIRCLEVILLE, OH – VJ Sanchez doesn't mince words when she describes the significance of Christian Women's Job Corps and Christian Men's Job Corps in the life of a local church or community.

"I believe that every community should have a Christian Women's/Christian Men's Job Corps because of the great need across the United States," she declared. "Why would you not have a Christian Women's and a Christian Men's Job Corps where you can reach out to the real needs of the people in your community?"

Sanchez, CWJC/CMJC consultant for the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio, has been involved more than 20 years with the Christian Job Corps program coordinated by National Woman's

Missionary Union. But this year's coronavirus pandemic has added increased urgency to her mission.

Noting that many Christian Job Corps sites have had to put classes on hold or shift to online instruction, she acknowledged that "this COVID thing has really challenged us as it has everyone."

She quickly added, however, that "I see it as an opportunity to reach out to people who are in need and give them some hope because for many of them, the world's coming to an end in their eyes."

The ministry of CWJC/CMJC is designed to equip participants for life and employment through such training as high school equivalency diploma preparation, English as a Second Language classes, computer skills and job readiness skills coupled with Bible study and personal mentoring. Many sites also offer practical life skills in such areas as money management, personal relationships, parenting and nutrition/cooking classes.

Sanchez said churches that incorporate Christian Job Corps into their ongoing ministries "are able to reach out to the community around them," simultaneously sharing the love of Christ while equipping participants with vital life skills and pre-employment training.

In her role as a statewide consultant, Sanchez helps provide training and assistance to five Christian Job Corps sites across Ohio. She also serves as the women's director of Metro Columbus Christian Job Corps and as a CWJC/CMJC national trainer.

Describing CWJC/CMJC as "a place where we come alongside people who are in need," Sanchez said many participants enter the program "not knowing that their greatest need is Jesus."

In fact, "most of the folks who come to us do not have a relationship with God and actually they are angry with God or they think God hates them," she reflected. "My response to that is, 'Let's see what your Creator says about you.' We open the Scriptures and they see in the Word and honestly, it has to be the Holy Spirit that just opens their eyes and they believe."

Providing tools for success

Bernadette Hocking is the executive director of The Trellis CWJC in Circleville, Ohio, one of the five sites that Sanchez serves. Hocking actually began as a CWJC participant and then became a mentor and assistant director before being named executive director in 2018.

As a single mom with limited computer skills when she entered the program, Hocking said her path of CWJC participation, volunteering and leadership "was like the next step in my life. ...It just was a natural transition that I went through with the program."

Hocking said many of the women they serve are coping with mental health issues, addictions and even suicidal thoughts when they first come to The Trellis. Their experience in CWJC “makes a huge difference because they get the acceptance here that they don’t get a lot of other places,” she added. “We see a lot of change in our women.

“I think that God had prepared me for this ministry throughout my life, throughout everything that I went through in my life,” Hocking shared. “Just knowing where the ladies have been, I can relate to them and just want to help them out, pick them up and give them the tools so they can succeed in life.”

Watching participants blossom

Karen Baucum took a far different route to her involvement in CWJC, but the results have been similar.

“I took sort of a backwards path,” she recalled, starting out as a CWJC office volunteer and board member. After suffering two strokes a couple of years ago that affected her fine motor skills, Baucum asked the former director about enrolling as a CWJC participant to assist with her therapy. She said the director’s immediate response was, “I think that would be a great idea.”

Baucum said classes in computer skills, art and nutrition/cooking all helped her improve her motor skills. “Plus I got to see a different aspect of the program because being on the participant side, I got to see what the girls were actually experiencing,” she said. “It’s really worked well to be a liaison between the participants and the board and I’ve gained tremendous insights about the program as well.”

CWJC “is such a tremendous outreach to the women in our community. We can offer them so much and so many of the women in our area are strapped economically,” Baucum said. “They find out that we really are here to help them and to offer support in a safe place. ... It’s just been incredible to watch how the girls grow and blossom.”

Becoming the person God intends

As Sanchez works alongside Hocking, Baucum and others to enhance and expand Christian Job Corps sites across Ohio, she admits they face a daunting task. While the Circleville program is holding onsite classes this fall with social distancing, masks and other safety precautions, most of the other sites in the state are looking toward relaunching classes next spring either online or in person.

“I really would like to see us come into the classroom” if that’s a realistic option, Sanchez said. “Many of these people are isolated anyway. There’s something about being able to see one another and just be in fellowship with one another. It really helps.”

Reflecting on the long-term impact of Christian Women's Job Corps and Christian Men's Job Corps, Sanchez said their overall goals remain unchanged even amid the pandemic. "We give them the tools to be able to be self-sufficient," she explained, as well as "resources that will assist them in becoming the whole person that God intends them to be."

"When they find out their purpose in life, they realize that they are of value and that they can do many things that they thought they couldn't do," she concluded. "It's the most amazing work that I've ever been involved in."

To learn more about ministry opportunities through Christian Women's Job Corps and Christian Men's Job Corps, contact Lena Plunk, National WMU's CWJC/CMJC coordinator, at lplunk@wmu.org. To support the ministry of WMU, give to the Vision Fund at www.wmufoundation.com/vision.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

A perspective on Christmas 2020

by Kevin Finkenbinder

DEWITT, MI – As 2020 has progressed, there have been a lot of frustrations. Some have been vexed by the health crisis, others by the social milieu. Most of us have been sickened by the political controversies. 2020 has become a synonym of Murphy's law. We have been hit with so many frustrations that we have failed to see the presents God has placed before us. We fail to see the blessings in the midst of the storm.

Something tells me that Joseph may have had a similar year sometime around 2 A.D. (I know, we don't know the exact year of Jesus' birth, but after 2000+ years, I hope a $\pm 1\%$ error is acceptable.) Joseph probably started the Jewish new year on the 1st of Tishrei (late September) with hope and expectation. This was going to be the year that he married his betrothed bride Mary, and the year that his carpenter shop would make a profit. But then there were some crushing blows.

Joseph was working in his shop when there was an uproar from the community. The Romans were requiring every Jew to return to their ancestral homes. This meant he had to make plans to travel to Bethlehem, and while he was away he would probably lose business to Isaac who had the carpenter shop on the next street. He could lose his business because of a political decision.

The year got worse. A few months later, in the month of Sh'vat (early January), Joseph notices that Mary has a baby bump. Since she is betrothed to him and he hasn't touched her, he can only assume she was unfaithful. But being a good, compassionate man, he decides just to divorce her quietly instead of publicly shaming her, or even having her stoned. But still, his heart was broken.

Then the angel appeared and told him to take Mary as his wife, he was relieved that she had not been unfaithful, but had so many questions...so much he didn't understand. He needed to have a long conversation with Mary, but just when his thoughts had settled enough to talk, she traveled to visit her cousin Elizabeth whose husband Zechariah had been struck mute. While Joseph had compassion for Zechariah and his family in this weird year, he still had no way to talk to Mary until she returned in Nisan (early April) shortly after the birth of Elizabeth's baby.

A few months after Mary returns, in early Av (mid-July), Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem for the census. The travel is difficult, especially with Mary about to give birth, but eventually they make it to Bethlehem to register for the census. And then the bad year continues, there is nowhere available for them to sleep. The inn is full and the labor pains are starting. In desperation he looks around and finds someone that will let them sleep in their stables, actually more of an old cave that the animals use to find shelter, but better than nothing.

Joseph had a terrible year, if anything could go wrong it did...or did it? Joseph could count his blessings. Mary had been faithful, she had traveled to and from Judea, while pregnant, without troubles. They had made their way to Bethlehem, the stables were not only less crowded than the inn (most inns slept everyone in a common room), but actually similarly clean to the inn. And best of all, the baby Jesus.

The weirdness didn't end. Within 2 years, they were visited by Magi bringing them gifts, but also putting them in danger of death from Herod. They had to flee to Egypt, but again God had provided. The gifts from the Magi likely paid for their traveling expenses and gave them money to live in Egypt, at least long enough to get some carpentry jobs.

We don't know what eventually became of Joseph. After Jesus was 12, we have no biblical mention of Joseph. We don't know if he ever truly understood the significance of the baby that was born. The angel had said "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins," and he had done his part, but did he ever know what it meant for the baby to save the people from their sins? And if he did somehow understand, was his heart broken to see his adopted son suffering on behalf of people who didn't even know Him?

In this Christmas season, as we think about the birth of Jesus, don't just contrast it with the crazy year 2020. Instead, consider what Joseph went through...a very crazy year. Though Joseph didn't know what was happening and had to be frustrated, God had a much greater plan. We don't know what God is doing through 2020, but we know it is in His plans. Instead of being

relieved that 2020 is over, maybe we should view 2020 and embrace it as a gift from God. He is doing great things, great for His glory, great for His redemption plan and great for the lives of those who have salvation through His Son. Like Joseph, we may not see how it is great, but we can still rejoice and thank God for both the present of His Son and the present, mysterious as it has been, of 2020.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Finkenbinder has been in bi-vocational ministry for nearly 30 years, nearly 15 years in Michigan. In July 2020 he became pastor of First Baptist Church of DeWitt, Michigan. He shares his passion for ministry and caring for people with his wife, Amy, and their three kids.

"We need a little Christmas!"

by Ken Hale

HASTINGS, MI – WOW!!! Here we are coming to the close of 2020 and what a year it has been. Pandemic, presidential election, protest, paranoid people, and panic. It seems like the world is looking for someone or something to bring peace, joy, and fulfillment during these difficult times.

This sounds like a story I know from the Bible where people were looking for a political leader to save them from their situation of difficult times. In the middle of that, a promise would come out of Bethlehem to bring a peace people had not known.

Imagine a group of men sitting in a field watching livestock and all of a sudden, they hear,

"Do not be afraid, there will be a great joy which would be for all mankind!"

Then came heavenly voices praising and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among men."

They may have wondered what in the world was going on.

In the midst of it all was a promise fulfilled from nearly 7000 years earlier. These people, just as multitudes today, are walking in darkness, but there was a promise they would see a great Light and that Light would shine upon them. This promise was for a child to be born and the government would rest upon His shoulders.

"His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

Yes! We do need a little Christmas! Right here, right now, in the midst of turmoil, unrest, pandemic and politics. We need to celebrate the birth of our Savior and remember that it is Jesus that said,

"Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

We need a little Christmas!

I want to share with you a great Christmas gift that I received while I was trying to write this article. I received a phone call from a young man crying on the phone. It was one of my family members who had wandered away from the Lord many years ago. Through tears and weeping he said he was so sorry for the way he had treated family and He realized he wanted Christ and his father back in his life. Need I say that there were tears in my eyes and rejoicing in my heart as my wife and I had been praying and calling out our children before the Lord. I got a BIG Christmas!!

I got a little Christmas in a big way. God was showing me He is still on the throne and that He is still in control. God keeps His promises and yes, for many years we wondered what would happen to our children. God gives Christmas in ways that can't be bought.

So, if you find yourself needing a little Christmas, remember it is JESUS and what He is all about. In a year that has brought many ups and downs, I get to celebrate Christmas early praising God for what He has done with one of my children.

Do you need a little Christmas? Just remember that while 2020 has not been the greatest of years for many, God is still on the throne and working in people's lives.

Just remember, if you need a little Christmas, ***"Jesus is the reason for the season!"***

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Hale is pastor of Community Baptist Church of Hastings. He has been in ministry for more than 40 years and is married to his wonderful wife, Carol.

New York leaders face restrictions at every level

by Karen Willoughby

NEW YORK, NY (BP) – New York Southern Baptist leaders don't expect the COVID-19-induced limitations to change much before next spring, if then.

George Russ, executive director of the Metro New York Baptist Association, spoke of walking a week ago in a commercial district in Manhattan where a number of stores were boarded up, and later that Thursday being on a train platform in Queens that was virtually empty – at rush hour.

"It was eerie to walk and not see what you used to see," Russ said. "We're wondering what will be the fallout from this. The biggest hesitation for us: We don't know the economic impact of this."

Russ and Terry Robertson, executive director of the Baptist Convention of New York, headquartered in upstate New York, talked with Baptist Press about the challenges leaders, churches, associations and the state convention are facing.

Relationship restrictions

Pastors are beset on every side with an unrelenting series of crises in the church family, their personal family, and the community family, the men said.

"Quick" pastoral phone calls to members struggling with COVID-related isolation, financial strain or family strife might take an hour or more each. Funerals – COVID-related or not – take time. Longsuffering wives and school-deprived children take time. Learning and using new technology to stream services, Bible studies and daily or weekly online devotions take time.

And too often "immediate" needs take precedence over the pastor's essential need to spend time in personal prayer and Bible study, thus weakening him at a time he needs to be at his spiritual strongest, Russ and Robertson said.

The Barna Group's State of the Church report recently projected one in five churches across the nation will close in the next 18 months, Robertson noted, and researcher and author Thom Rainer recently wrote that the majority of current pastors are considering resigning.

"If that was true three weeks ago it's more true now with this added new wave of COVID," Robertson said. "Pastors across the state are carrying such a heavy load I am concerned for their well-being and the well-being of their families and the well-being of every Southern Baptist in New York state."

“Our pastors have been strong throughout this pandemic but with the current resurgence of COVID cases and the restrictions by state and local governments, some of our pastors are beginning to feel they are fighting a losing battle. Pray for them. God certainly knew this was going to happen and He has equipped us to go through it. Our hope and trust is in Him alone.”

Nonetheless, with 515 churches in the multi-state convention, if 100 of them – one out of five – were to close, “It would set us back at least five years,” Robertson said.

Economic restrictions

Boarded-up businesses, restricted business hours and the loss of perhaps half a million Metro New York residents this spring and summer reflect the financial turmoil in the city that as of January included almost 9 million people (22 million-plus throughout the metro area,) Russ said, citing numerous news articles.

“This is Ground Zero,” Russ said. “It’s a mixed bag. Some churches are doing very well because they’re embedded in their community, serving food relief. They might not be open fully but they have increased exponentially their footprint in the neighborhood.

“Churches with rented space often are not able to come together; others with a small space say it’s not worth it because of the limited capacity allowed. Another reservation we have is the warning of another shutdown on restaurants, gyms, spas and again, schools. Plus a lot of retail space for rent.”

The economic turmoil means more unemployment, which results in a decrease in tithes and offerings. Metro New York Baptist Association (MNYBA) is careful to spend less than half of what they budgeted last year, and too much of that is from the association’s reserves, Russ said.

“We’re operating at less than 50 percent of budget; that’s a big concern,” Russ said. “We really can’t continue this forever.”

The multi-state convention, BCNY, which includes parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts as well as New York, was doing better financially, in part because churches outside the five boroughs of New York were not as severely impacted as was metro New York. But region-wide offerings that had balanced out last spring’s losses withered in the wake of a recent new spate of COVID-closures and other restrictions.

“October hit us hard and we’re not sure what to expect for November and December,” Robertson said. “That being said, giving 30 percent [to missions through the Cooperative Program] indicates we as a convention and our churches continue to be very committed to the Cooperative Program.”

A hiring freeze is one way the state convention conserves its funds. Two men retired in February, before COVID changed so much of ministry. This leaves Robertson as the only vocational staff for 515 churches.

Gospel restrictions

In a normal year, dozens of short-term mission teams descend on the state to help Southern Baptist churches reach the millions of non-Christian New Yorkers who speak one or more of 640 languages heard across the state. But this year, not one team since the first of March, and “we’re not sure what will happen next spring,” Russ said.

Travel restrictions require quarantining for 14 days after arrival in or traveling outside New York, curtailing the work of those who only have a week or two to serve.

“This tough and unprecedented season has brought sickness, displacement and sorrow to so many, while at the same time creating an openness to the Gospel and opportunities for ministry,” Russ said, citing several churches immersed in food ministry.

“Crisis and opportunity is how I would describe the season we are in. It’s a crisis of life and death and an opportunity for Gospel proclamation and ministry.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

The Local Church is the Headquarters of the Southern Baptist Convention

by Ronnie Floyd

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – The SBC is a convention of churches. Churches plant churches and churches send missionaries.

Associations, state conventions and national entities do not plant churches or send missionaries. These regional, statewide and national Baptist bodies have the role of assisting churches in their Great Commission work.

The local church is the headquarters of our Southern Baptist Convention. Therefore, our Convention headquarters is not located in one of our 1,200 associations, one of our 41 state conventions or one of our 12 national entities.

If the Lord tarries, I cannot guarantee the organization of the SBC will exist when Jesus comes again. However, I am more than confident the Church will still exist when Jesus comes again.

Baptist bodies are not superior to local churches. Local churches are assisted and served by each of these Baptist bodies. Therefore, the last thing our Convention needs is for churches to be minimized and pastors demonized. We believe in the primacy of local churches and the high calling of pastors.

As the Scripture refers to the Church as the Body of Christ, we realize this forever family of God is composed of persons from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. Therefore, we give ourselves to the vision of reaching every person for Jesus Christ in every town, every city, every state and every nation.

While our Baptist bodies may record the work of our churches and report their work together to the people called Southern Baptists, these bodies are not the Church. There is nothing like the Church.

Where would America be without the Church? The SBC would have no reason to exist if not for the Church and Jesus' calling upon it to make disciples of all the nations. Why is this so?

Churches plant churches and churches send missionaries. Churches go and make disciples of all the nations. Churches baptize new believers and churches teach all things Jesus commands us to do. Jesus will be with His Church always, even to the end of the age.

Why is this so important?

If we ever invert this order in our mindset and practice, then we will begin a downhill slide that may become irreversible. Churches operate under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, not under Baptist bodies who exist to assist these churches in their work of the Great Commission.

I served as a local church pastor for more than four decades. God placed me in one of our Southern Baptist churches as senior pastor for more than 32 years. Upon my calling to the SBC Executive Committee in May 2019, that church sent me and placed upon me the humble privilege of being their pastor emeritus.

It was from that church I was called to my present role in order to assist churches in their Great Commission work and to encourage churches to work together in finishing the task of fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let me be more than clear: I deeply believe the Church is God's anointed people to take the Gospel to the world.

Furthermore, as a Baptist, I also believe when our churches voluntarily choose to cooperate in this grand task, we will do much more together than we will ever do alone.

There is nothing more dynamic and representative of our Lord than when we love Jesus with all of our hearts, love one another as He loves us and combine all of our energies to cooperate together to give the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole world.

Now is the time to lead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ronnie Floyd is the president and CEO of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention.
