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The most miserable time of the year

CLINTON TOWNSHIP – Christmas is often hailed as the most wonderful time of the year. However, for many, the season is far from joyful. More than a few people would rather sing Blue Christmas than Joy to the World. Studies indicate a surge in loneliness and depression during the holidays compared to other times of the year.

The reality is Christmas, for many people, is anything but a joyful time of year. There are any number of reasons why people suffer from the Christmas Blues - death of a loved one, divorce, memories of holiday abuse from past years, and even mental illness or depression. While most people are basking in the warmth of memories from past Christmases, some are shivering from the chill of broken Christmas promises or the absence of a cherished family member who once filled a seat at the Christmas table.

And to make matters worse, we can be so into our own joyful Christmas celebration we might overlook those around us who are not filled with a festive spirit. Or if we do notice them, we may be tempted to simply dismiss their lack of cheer as mere Scrooge-like behavior. However, there is often more to the story than they are simply a Scrouge who hates Christmas. The pain and grief experienced by many this time of year are often rooted in legitimate struggles. The stresses of real life do not magically disappear with a chipper “Merry Christmas!”

If we take our role as Christ’s ambassadors seriously, we should make sure we aren’t so caught up in our own celebration of the holidays that we miss ministering Jesus’ love to those who are seriously hurting around us. Here are a few simple suggestions that can help.

First, open your eyes. Those who are hurting or lonely are there, often right in front of us, but we can be too busy doing Christmas that we do not even see them. Do not assume that those with a “Bah! Humbug!” demeanor prefer to be that way.

Second, open your heart. Yes, our Christmas list is usually cram packed with more than enough chores and responsibilities for us to do. But busyness is no excuse for us to neglect our responsibility to love our neighbor as ourselves. Make room in your heart to love someone who may have no one else to share the joy of the season.

Third, open your circle. Hurting people will not come to us and ask if they can crash our Christmas party. Often, they will need more than one invitation. Don’t be afraid to be persistent. No one wants to feel like they are an imposition, so do your best to convey a “the more the merrier” attitude.

Get out of the comfort of your own Christmas bubble and go share the joy of the season with someone who may be feeling truly miserable today. Let’s not settle for mere Christmas wishes when so much more is needed. God came near when Immanuel entered our desperate situation. We can do no less for the hurting people around us today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Art Werry has been pastor of New Life in Fraser for over thirty years. Recently, he was confirmed as the director of missions for the Motor Cities Association. He also handles the technology needs of the BSCM. Art and his wife Tricia are raising their teenage daughter, Hannah, in Clinton Township.

John Newton's Amazing Grace maintains eclectic appeal at 250 years

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – Folk singer Arlo Guthrie sang it at Woodstock. Pop star Rod Stewart recorded it in 1971. Crowd-surfing is rampant as American Celtic punk rock band Dropkick Murphys perform it on YouTube.

"Amazing Grace," in its 250th year, has such eclectic appeal and attracts so many genres that ethnomusicologist Paul Benham often discusses with his students whether it's a gospel song.

"People will sit and argue about it," said Benham, an adjunct professor of music and ethnomusicology at Liberty University.

Benham and Joshua Waggener, a Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor of church music and worship, both say the song's pentatonic or five-note scale common to traditional spirituals is part of its appeal. The lyrics resonate with many, with certain verses omitted at will.

John Newton: infidel

Amazing Grace was first sung in 1773 on New Year's Day at Lord Dartmouth's Great Hall in Olney, England. John Newton wrote it to accompany his New Year's sermon from 1 Chronicles 17, encouraging worshipers to remember the Lord's "past mercies and future hopes," the [Museum of the Bible](#) records in an online exhibit.

Such blessings were precious to Newton, a former atheist, exceptionally foul-mouthed sailor and slave trader known for self-proclaimed debauchery. Saved by God's grace, he ministered 43 years.

Newton claimed conversion in his early 20s when he cried out to God during a violent storm aboard The Greyhound slave ship in 1748, but continued to work in the slave trade for another six years, those latter years as a slave ship captain.

“(Newton) didn’t leave the slave trade immediately following his conversion and never organized the release of any Africans that he had been responsible for enslaving,” the Museum of the Bible quotes journalist and biographer Steve Turner. “Crucially, his captaincy of slave ships didn’t begin until after he had become a Christian.”

Newton’s delayed rejection of the trade has not deterred social justice advocates and Christians alike from embracing the hymn. Those on the right and wrong sides of history have claimed the song as an expression of resilience, determination and protection, including abolitionists and enslavers, the blue and the gray during the Civil War, segregationists and civil rights advocates alike.

Turner notes the irony that the first slaves to sing Amazing Grace would not have known it was the work of someone who actively participated in the cruelty they suffered.

‘Conviction and suffering’

Mahalia Jackson, whose 1947 recording of Amazing Grace is among the most notable, puts the hymn in a category with “The Day is Past and Gone,” a gospel song based on words written in 1792 by Englishman John Leland.

“Those songs come out of conviction and suffering,” Jackson is quoted in the Museum of the Bible exhibit. “The worst voices can get through singing them, ‘cause they’re telling their experiences.”

Benham speaks similarly.

“Everybody’s had toil and trouble, or dangers and toils and snares,” Benham said. “I think that resonates. ... It’s almost universal.”

The lack of the name of Jesus in the lyrics also makes the song easier to sing by nonbelievers, said Waggener, who is also SWBTS coordinator of research doctoral programs in church music and worship.

“It is distinctly biblical in its words, distinctly Christian in its origins, but because it doesn’t mention Christ by name,” Waggener said, “it doesn’t use the name ‘Jesus,’ ... others can, you might say, appropriate.

“For them, the words ‘grace,’ or even, ‘I was lost,’ or, ‘the Lord has promised good to me,’” Waggener said, “it can mean all kinds of things.”

Both Waggener and Benham note Judy Collins' 1970 recording of Amazing Grace, an a cappella rendition the Library of Congress preserved in the National Recording Registry as "culturally, historically or artistically significant." Collins' recording peaked at 15 on Billboard's Top 100. It was even more popular in the United Kingdom, spurring the Royal Scots Dragoon Guard, Scotland's senior regiment, to adapt it for bagpipes.

Collins discussed her faith in a 2007 PBS interview, expressing a blend of Christianity, Buddhism and the Self-Realization Fellowship movement founded by Indian guru Paramahansa Yogananda.

Operatic soprano Jessye Norman sang it at Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday tribute, a rock concert that drew perhaps 70,000 to Wembley Stadium in 1988. Organizers requested the hymn specifically.

"I wasn't at all sure that was a great idea. And it was certainly something a lot of the rock fans did not understand," she said of the audience in a 1990 PBS interview with Bill Moyers. "But after a while, they finally quieted down to listen, and some of them sang with me. They were forced to remember why they were there, that it was not only a rock concert, it was a remembrance of somebody that was in prison for the wrong reason."

Becoming Amazing Grace

The song took decades to reach its current form. It is unknown which music accompanied its first rendition. It was first published in Olney Hymns in 1779 under the title, "Faith's Review and Expectation," among a collection of 348 hymns written by Newton and poet William Cowper. As was custom, none of the hymns included musical scores.

American Baptist song leader William Walker was the first to pair it with the tune of "New Britain," the Museum of the Bible states in its exhibit. It is the most popular soundtrack for the hymn today.

As the song gained popularity across the southern U.S., song leaders would add verses that suited them, expressing contemporary struggles of the day, Waggener said.

"A lot of it has to do with us as Americans. We take something and we improve on it," he said. Amazing Grace "took on a life of its own." The song was particularly fluid in the Black early American Gospel tradition when churches didn't often use hymnals.

"They could do it how they wanted it," he said. "A song leader would get up and just say a line, and everybody would sing it. The song leaders had a lot of freedom. They could sing it slow. They could sing it fast. They could add notes. They could subtract notes.

"And once that gets to Mahalia Jackson, she's sung a lot of hymns, but no one's sung them quite like that before."

Among the Library of Congress' Chasanoff/Elozua Amazing Grace Collection are performances from more than 3000 musicians or ensembles, all available for public [listening](#) at the library's Recorded Sound Reference Center.

Newton had written six verses. The final verse included today was added along the way. It was first printed in 1851 in the abolitionist periodical, "The National Era," in a 40-week serial telling of Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," the Museum of the Bible said.

Waggener sees the last verse as a crucial completion, telling of our heavenly home.

Yet noting the lack of Jesus' name in the song, Waggener exhorts his students to always include a song that clearly mentions Christ by name when including Amazing Grace in worship.

"So that in that context, it's clear where our salvation comes from," Waggener said. "That it is only through the redemption that Christ supplies, and by His grace alone."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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What does caring for others truly mean?

SOUTH LYON – Looking back on life, I can't really remember how Tim and I became friends. I do remember a very unkind voice message that he left for me on the church message machine one time, and I got in my truck to drive around town until I found him and asked that he not do that again.

To my surprise, the next day I was sitting in my office with him helping him to write a resume for a job that he was wanting.

I would see him walking all over town, usually standing in front of a building smoking and talking to some folks. Every now and then, he would stop by to visit and then take off.

During Covid, we started doing our morning worship services outside and he became a regular. He would show up early to help us set up chairs and take them down when we were done.

As we moved back into the building, he became pretty faithful in his attendance on Sunday mornings.

Like a lot of people, he was stressed because of job loss and needed help with filing for unemployment. Once again, I found myself filling out his unemployment forms and submitting them. Every few days he would stop by the church to see if I had heard anything about his unemployment check.

I would always tell him that he would know that his check had arrived when the money was directly deposited into his account. That never seemed to be what he wanted to hear.

He would never admit it but I always suspected that Tim was homeless. He never would give me an address when I pressed him on it so I would always put the church address down when I needed to fill in a spot just to keep things going. He also wore a heavy coat and heavy work boots, even on the hottest days of summer.

He eventually landed a job for a brief period and was excited about getting an apartment. I could tell by the answers that he was giving me about the conversation with those who worked at the apartment complex that they were just pulling his leg, and that he would not be living there anytime soon.

When the job came to an end, Tim once again came to the church for assistance. He never asked for money or a handout, he just wanted help with filling out forms that he didn't understand on the government computer system.

While we were doing some remodeling in the church that year, Tim would stop to watch or even help if he could. He was pretty comfortable stopping by and staying for different lengths of time.

I noticed, as things began to get cold, Tim was stopping by more often and lingering longer. He would always ask if I had heard anything about his unemployment money. Government agencies can move slowly and there is usually no caring voice at the other end of the phone.

I remember the last time I saw Tim was at an Operation Christmas Child packing party that we were having on a Sunday night at the church.

Tim came with his usually heavy coat and work boots. His hair was sticking up all over, but he was happy and upbeat. The year before he just stood and watched as everyone would pack boxes with toys, soap, washcloths, hats, etc. but this year, he was participating.

I've got pictures on my phone of Tim working with others to fill boxes. You could tell from his smile that he was having a good time and later stayed to enjoy hot chocolate and cookies with all of us as we finished up the job to get ready to go home.

For some reason, the cold air of the night bothered me as I made my way to my van to head home that night. After a long day, I was ready to climb into my nice warm bed and pull the covers up to go to sleep.

As I worked on that following Tuesday, I fully expected at some point in the day to have Tim knocking at my office door to check on his unemployment money. To my surprise, he didn't show.

By Thursday, I began to wonder, especially since he seemed desperate for the money and he was always good about being there to check in on the day he was supposed to.

So, I decided to jump in my van and drive around town to see if I could find him. I stopped by the local stores and asked about him. I stopped by some of those who seemed to be good friends. Nobody seemed to know what he was doing or where he was at.

I thought maybe he had gone to stay with family somewhere for the holidays.

Later that day, he was found, laying on the floor of a metal shed in the trailer park next to the church, with a plastic tarp pulled up to keep him warm. No one knew how long he had been there or how long he had been using the shed as a place to sleep.

Since he had no family that we knew of to claim his body, the state buried him in a grave with a number on the marker.

There are "feel good" moments in our lives when we pat ourselves on the back because we have done a "good deed" for someone or, we have reached out in some small way and it hasn't really cost us anything but maybe a little time.

As the Christmas Season approaches, we might give some change in a red kettle, or pack a box with cheap toys and odds and ends. If we really go the extra mile, we might even give the wait staff an extra tip for their service.

As a Child of God, how far do we really go to help others? How caring are we?

Some people are calling out right in front of you and so many times, we just do enough to make ourselves feel good. These are things we don't really think about until something forces us to see it upfront and personal like I did, with Tim. "For God so loved the world that He gave...." I'm not sure we will truly understand what it means to care until we truly know what it means to give like God gave. He sent His one and only Son because of His love for you and for me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Churches sharing the Gospel, planting seeds as holidays approach

BOSTON, MA (BP) – In the nearly four centuries since its founding as America's first park, Boston Common has witnessed some of the most important news events of American history – from public hangings during Colonial days to celebrating American independence in 1776 to Union soldier recruitment in the 1860s.

Earlier this month, Boston Common witnessed the sharing of history's greatest news – the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jaime Owens, lead pastor of the historic Tremont Temple Baptist Church just a few blocks from Boston Common, led 15 congregants to the park to give away copies of the Gospel of John and sandwiches and to share the Good News.

While at the park, the group initiated conversations through a sign saying, "Ask a pastor anything." A number of interesting questions came Owens' way, including one from a Muslim who wondered how Christians could believe in a God who died on the cross. Another non-religious man asked what the world would be like if everyone lived like the Good Samaritan.

In each case, Owens shared the Gospel. He also teamed other experienced personal evangelists with less experienced ones to strike up conversations, hand out food and talk about Jesus. It was the first week of what Owens hopes will be at least a monthly time of personal evangelism for church members.

"In my preaching, I've always emphasized sharing the Gospel personally with those God has placed in our lives – neighbors, coworkers, unsaved family," Owens said. "But we had never considered going downtown together to openly share the Gospel. This is a new direction for us. It's one way we can carry out the mission, and it's encouraging because we can do it together."

Tremont Temple began as an American Baptist congregation in 1839. Abraham Lincoln once spoke at the church, and Charles Dickens first read *A Christmas Carol* on American soil there. Today, it's jointly affiliated with both American and Southern Baptists.

Carl Bradford, an associate professor of evangelism and missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, says the timing couldn't be better for churches like Tremont Temple to get more involved in personal evangelism.

Bradford believes the old adage that people are more open to the Gospel during the holiday season than other times of the year. He notes research has shown more people are searching for churches online during Christmas and Easter than at any other time of the year. The same studies, he says, show Christmas and Easter are the highest attendance Sundays of the year in many churches.

“Though not everyone in the world understands the Gospel message, many do embrace the spirit of giving behind Christmas,” Bradford said. “The season’s emphasis on generosity and goodwill can make people more open to hearing the Gospel.”

Bradford also notes many people struggle through the holidays because of all the cultural pressures attached to the holidays. Often, those people are open to hearing about what Jesus has done for them.

At Lincoln Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Ill., the holiday season comes during the middle of a fresh evangelistic push. While the church is in a transition period between lead pastors, interim pastor Eric Reed has been encouraging the church to focus on evangelism.

“There was a real sense of, ‘We’re going to be OK. We’re good.’” said David Higgs, the worship pastor at Lincoln Avenue. “But [Pastor Reed] brought this to our attention. We knew we were good, but we couldn’t just settle there. We don’t want to settle. The way he put it is, ‘When the sheep catch their breath and get comfortable, they tend to nibble, and they nibble on each other.’”

So, the church decided to go all in on an initiative they call “Engage J-Ville,” which is all about personal connections and community connections. Leveraging an evangelistic prayer app through their state Baptist convention, church members began praying for and sharing the Gospel with friends and neighbors who didn’t have a relationship with Jesus.

The church also had several events scheduled throughout the fall and into the holiday season, including a Fall on the Farm outreach and a Christmas concert.

To create a visual reminder of their commitment to sharing the Good News, the church has a display of ping-pong balls. Each represents a person who heard the Gospel through someone in the church.

“We’ve not, to my knowledge, heard of any immediate people coming to Christ yet,” Higgs said. “But there are a whole lot of seeds being sown. We’re hearing that, so we’re just going to watch those be planted and trust the Lord will work.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Bubble lights

PLYMOUTH – Over the past few weeks, I have been retrieving “Christmas Tubs” from the basement in order that Sabrina may begin her annual and all-consuming ritual of decorating the house for the season. As I bring the Christmas bling up, I am taking the Fall accouterments down. Good thing I got a new hip this year.

I have a newfound knowledge and realization that the Patterson’s possess way too many of the trappings of Christmas. Box after box and container after container came up the stairs with every trip I took. Little ones, big ones, heavy ones and only one light one. All of them were cram-packed full of tinsel, lights, trinkets, bows and more ornaments than most trees could bear.

The accumulations of 49 years of housekeeping are evident because of the inordinate amounts of decorative cheer that are now strategically placed in every corner and nook of our abode.

But when I look past all the trappings and see the joy of the season that all this glitter, gold and lights help illuminate, I find it is well worth the effort.

When it comes to Christmas, I love every minute of it. The sights, smells, crowds, cooking, candy, parties, trees, lights and oh, especially the lights.

Ever since my childhood days in West Texas I have had a long-lasting infatuation with Christmas lights. As you can imagine, the landscape of the barren Texas desert lacked the twinkle of colored lights. For that matter, most of the year it was only one color. BROWN! So, when Christmas came about, color came to my world as well.

Almost every weekend during the Christmas season the Patterson family of my childhood would pile in our 1956 Chevrolet Belair and cruise the streets of our tiny, Texas hamlet. OOOh’s and AHHH’s could be heard floating out the open windows of our sedan as we slowly rolled by house after house in our Gulf Project community. Christmas in color.

Though I loved and thrilled at the exterior decorative lights of those cute little homes, the lights that brought wonder and fascination to my little mind were the miraculous bubble lights that adorned our tree.

Slender, candle-like lights that when illuminated could capture anyone’s attention. They consisted of a long glass tube about 2 inches long that was sealed and filled with a special liquid. A small light was housed within a round base that held the glass tube that resembled a candle and when the light within was electrified and emitted heat, the liquid would boil, creating tiny bubbles. But what really fascinated me was the fact that if you held one of these lights in your hand that it would begin to boil without the heat from the bulb. Magic! How could this be? Lights that bubbled? Shear wonder!

These little luminary wonders were the creation of the National Outfit Manufacturing Association (NOMA) back in 1946. Their ability to create these recurring bubbles and boil this liquid is really not a miracle, but merely the laws of nature at work. The liquid that is sealed within the glass tubes is methylene chloride, which has a very low boiling point, and when exposed to the heat emitted from the enclosed light, it boils.

And all this time I thought there was something magical and mystical about those lights. Just a little heat and what was inside revealed its nature.

I have noticed that bubble lights have made a big comeback. Oh, not the ones that adorn our trees but the ones that scurry through the hallowed halls of our malls, shopping centers, big-box stores and other retail establishments. Everywhere I look this season I see these large human bubble lights bounding about society. They are mostly bright red in color with some that turn an intense blue, depending on their emotional state. Others are green in an envious sort of way while others have turned white or a pale yellow because of the sick feeling they have in their stomachs because of their overspending.

I heard that some of these human bubble lights have begun to boil and bubble so much that they have gotten into fistfights with one another. YouTube is filled with these Yule Tide tantrums. Now that's the Christmas spirit!

The reason these human bubble lights reach the boiling point so quickly and easily is the very same reason the bubble lights on our trees do so. It is what is inside. If we are filled with envy, greed, hate, frustration, anger and just a downright "grinchiness", then when we are exposed to the slightest amount of friction, we will boil.

The heat of life has a way of revealing the true contents of our hearts. None of us are immune from the friction we encounter when we rub family, friends and fellow societal inhabitants the wrong way. Bubble lights have a place in our lives and when in their proper place they bring beauty and wonder. They should adorn our trees, hearths and homes but not our hearts. This Christmas may we all be filled with the true Spirit of the season. The Spirit of Peace on Earth and Good Will to all Men.

"A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

I wanted to share one of my BAD DAD HOLIDAY JOKES. You can begin groaning now.

This guy goes into his dentist's office, because something is wrong with his mouth. After a brief examination, the dentist exclaims, "Holy Smoke! That plate I installed in your mouth about six months ago has nearly completely corroded! What on earth have you been eating?" "Well... the only thing I can think of is this... my wife made me some asparagus about four months ago with

this stuff on it... Hollandaise sauce she called it... and doctor, I'm talking DELICIOUS! I've never tasted anything like it, and ever since then I've been putting it on everything... meat, fish, toast, vegetables... you name it!"

"That's probably it," replied the dentist. "Hollandaise sauce is made with lemon juice, which is acidic and highly corrosive. It seems as though I'll have to install a new plate made out of chrome this time."

"Why chrome?" the man asked.

"Well, everyone knows that there's no plate like chrome for the Hollandaise!"

Sorry about that! But I do pray that this Holiday Season your home is filled with love, wonder and the Grace of God's most precious gift.

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.

Night Before Christmas: A debate

PLYMOUTH – In 1822, Professor Clement Clark Moore, a family man and biblical scholar wrote the poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas," for his children. The poem that became an American favorite started as a simple expression of love of a father to his children during the holidays. History says that Moore ideas and images came to him after a wintery shopping trip riding in a sleigh and spotting a Dutch immigrant who gave him the idea for St. Nicholas.

Reports say that a friend, visiting from elsewhere in the state of New York, who listened as Moore read to his children on evening, was so moved by the poem that the friend took a copy of Moore's poem, without his permission, to a local newspaper who published the story the next year and each year during the holidays.

Moore, a poet and biblical scholar, was embarrassed by the acclaim given to his poem for so long that he did not claim authorship until 1837 after his family urged him to announce his ownership. Moore wanted to be known for his writings about Scripture, not a legend about St.

Nicholas. Later, due to his family's encouragement Moore finally placed the poem in his book of poetry in 1844, twenty-two years later.

Since those early days until now, scholars still debate whether Moore is the author or another man by the name of Major Henry Livingston who died in 1828. Livingston never claimed to have written the poem but his family, after his death without any physical evidence, claimed their beloved major was the writer of "Twas the Night Before Christmas."

The Certainty

As we approach the time of year when we commemorate the wonderful miracle of the Lord becoming flesh (John 1:14) in Jesus Christ, do you find this celebration strengthens your faith? I feel bolder and more certain with each year's celebration of Christ's birth! The story we celebrate was planned before the beginning of time, long before the aroma of the Garden of Eden filled the nostrils of Adam and Eve.

Look at the image of the author, Clement Clark Moore, of *Twas the Night Before Christmas*. He looks stoic and solemn in the black and white picture with his long coat and streaming beard, yet he was a loving earthly father who carved out time during the hectic holiday season to pen a poem to entertain his children and ultimately the world's children for 201 years. Throughout the years, as I lived overseas with my wife and our children as missionaries on three continents, I would on occasion recite the poem to our children stretching their imaginations about winter while we lived on the edge of the African Sahara Desert.

However, the one story I will never explain away as a legend of entertainment is the Good News of Jesus Christ! I now have nine grandchildren who know with every ounce of certainty that their papa clings to his hope in Jesus Christ.

Paul said it best to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15 (NLT), *"Let me now remind you, dear brothers and sisters, of the Good News I preached to you before. You welcomed it then, and you still stand firm in it. It is this Good News that saves you . . . I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him."*

That is the kind of story we need to read on Christmas Eve. My hope and prayer for all of us this Christmas season is that our lives and testimonies in Jesus Christ will be seen and heard by those around us so that their faith will grow stronger and more certain this holiday season. Merry Christmas!

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.

Just preach Jesus

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – A few years ago, I read an article on The Gospel Coalition website. It was about preaching at Christmas, and I was in crisis mode in mid-October without a plan for the annual Christmas series.

Christmas comes around every year. The same songs. The same texts. The same old, old, old story. Most of the time I love the familiar rhythm and routine, but that particular year, I just panicked.

“How many more Christmas sermons and holiday talks can I possibly come up with?” I was in the habit of preaching four weeks of Christmas messages. We love Christmas at our church, but if I do a Christmas series every year for 40 years, that is going to be 160 sermons just on Christmas. It’s tempting to play with innovation, invention, novelty.

“But don’t do it, pastor. Don’t get cute at Christmas,” advised Kevin DeYoung (Pastor, Don’t Get Cute this Christmas). “Your people need regular meat and potatoes, not the newest eggnog recipe. Stay away from props and video clips. Put to death the Star Wars tie-in you’ve been really excited about. Don’t worry about preaching the same truths and the same themes. They don’t remember last year’s sermon anyway. Go ahead and tell them the old, old story one more time.”

That set me free. Maybe it will do the same for you.

“That means the Christmas Eve service should not be about the evils of shopping or the dangers of busyness. We can leave behind clever cliches like Wise Men Still Seek Him or Have Yourself a Mary Christmas. There’s no need to focus for 40 minutes on what exactly was the Star of Bethlehem, and if you are going to talk about the Magi, don’t make it an academic lecture on Persian astrology...” Good advice. Thank you, Kevin.

Let's just keep the main thing the main thing. Let's tell the familiar Christmas story the way it was told to us from the Bible.

There may or may not be unbelievers in your Christmas services. But I'm sure there will be saints struggling with sin, and weary and wounded seniors, and exhausted mothers, and fathers who work too much for the good of their family. They need to hear about Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace who came from heaven to be our Savior. He was born in a manger to die on a Cross, and he is the only way to the Father.

DeYoung is right. "Our people don't need us to find something new. They don't need empty spiritual bromides... Our people need the gospel." They need to hear the extraordinary, miraculous story of Christmas and experience the majesty and glory of God in the Word proclaimed afresh as their pastor exalts the name and power of Jesus to save. Just preach Jesus. Don't be cute or clever or charming or cool or complicated or cheeky. Just preach Jesus.

"Hunker down in Matthew 1 or Luke 2 or Isaiah 9 or Micah 5 or John 1 or in any text that will lead you to lift high the name of Jesus. Don't be cute or clever. Just preach Jesus," writes Kevin DeYoung.

I agree. And your congregation, however big or small it might be, will be glad you did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Worth celebrating

ROSEVILLE – Sometime in the summer I start planning the layout of my train (now trains) and village display that I set up under and around our Christmas tree. This has admittedly gotten a little out of hand, but I try to tell my wife Cathi, that it is not really my fault. I want to have a train or trolley for each of our grandkids, and we are up to seven.

This means I go to estate and garage sales in search of trains, track, transformers, and any village pieces that I think will work. Then, when the layout goes from paper into form, I send pictures to my grandkids so they can begin to anticipate what it will be. This year I started following some people on YouTube who, even from my view, go bonkers.

The setup takes hours and for a guy like me since I hold a graduate degree in Murphy's Law. But, if it all comes together and if all the trains, trolleys, lights in the buildings, skaters on the pond, merry-go-round, teacup ride, cable cars, and the hot air balloons work, the result is magical. I can control the tree, village lights, trolleys, rides and trains from my phone. It is pretty neat. But the payoff is when my grandkids see it and the fuses in their little brains explode. I love to do things that cause my grandkids to want to be with me because they know I love them.

I know that December 25 is not the day that Christ was born. I know that the origin of the date is sketchy at best. So, is it worth celebrating Christmas? Are we guilty of making more of this than we should? I don't think so. In fact, I don't think we could ever make more of this than we should. Let me explain.

Sometime (before there was time) God designed the universe and before the foundation of the earth was laid, he planned for his Son to come to this earth to live the life that we could not live and die the death that we could not die. God knew that this plan would be almost impossible for us to believe, so he prepared us and spent thousands of years of human history putting into place every piece and along the way, he kept giving us pictures of what the Messiah would be like. God sent prophets who over hundreds of years told us of the One who would come.

Those who had ears to hear (like Simeon and Anna) were waiting and longing for this day. God sent Gabriel, to Zechariah, then Mary, and then Joseph in order to prepare them for this once in a universe event. God was indeed coming to earth to be part of his own creation so that he could do for us what we could never and would never do for ourselves.

And then, it all came together, just like God planned. God is directing it all and all the players and pieces start moving. Elizabeth conceives, then Mary conceives, then John is born, then the decree is given and Joseph and Mary start heading south to Jerusalem, the birth of Christ takes place, angels blow up the sky, and a star appears. Shepherds run to Bethlehem from the fields while wise men start moving from the east.

Do you see it now? Do you see how millions and millions of pieces all work together in perfect harmony to carry out God's plan to send us a Savior? Do you see the heart of our good God doing all of this in order to blow our minds with his grace? Do you see how much God has done so that you will know he loves you and wants you to want to be with him? So, yes, this event is worth celebrating. What a God! What a Savior! Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Johnson has been serving as the Senior Pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church since 1989. He has a Master of Divinity degree from the Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary (1997).

Christmas birth announcements

LANSING – Perhaps one of the most unique gifts I have ever received was from one of my dad's elder sisters.

She handed me an envelope about two and a half inches by three inches, addressed to my aunt and my uncle from my parents, who were stationed overseas in the military in the early 1970's. I carefully opened the envelope, and saw what looked like a hand drawn card with bright pastel-colored flowers and butterfly on the front with the words, *"We had a Happening..."* in the center. I opened the card revealing a picture of a baby holding a flower with the words, *"and this is who happened!"*.

What I was given was my birth announcement! The card contained my name, my weight, my parent's names, the date, and time that I was born.

In the lives of families in the 1970's military and otherwise, when you had news to spread, you sent out announcements through the mail (air mail in this case) and then you waited, and waited, and waited for it to arrive then waited some more to receive a response!

This was a typical birth announcement for the time.

In Luke chapter 2 we see the birth announcement of the world's Savior! It wasn't sent by airmail but was fittingly sent by an angel, a messenger from God followed by a multitude of heavenly hosts singing, glory in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!

While they were in the peace of the night, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and announced,

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."
Suddenly with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts appeared praising God and saying: *"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"* – Luke 2:11-14

We can all relate to the joy a person feels when they hear the news of someone welcoming a child into the world.

Can you imagine the joy that the shepherds must have felt when they heard the announcement of the birth of Jesus! He was the expected Savior of the world! He was the One that the prophet Isaiah prophesied about hundreds of years beforehand.

Isaiah wrote, *"Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."* – Isaiah 7:14

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." – Isaiah 9:6

The shepherds responded with immediate obedience to, *"see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us. They found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger, just like the angel had said. The shepherds then announced to others the message given to them about this Child". Lk. 2:15-18*

God sent into the world a Savior! One who would meet man's greatest need, forgiveness of sin, and peace through this Savior, Jesus Christ! The angels announced the birth and the shepherds shared this news with everyone!

Will you allow Him to meet your greatest need? Will you ask Jesus to forgive you of your sins and to make you a new creation, in Him?

Will you share with others what Jesus has done in your life?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua Diaz has served as Youth Leader, Worship Leader, Deacon, Sunday School teacher, Baseball Chaplain (of the Local Single A Team) and recently an Interim Pastor. Joshua and Annabel have served jointly leading VBS outreach. Joshua is a husband, father, and grandfather who has served in ministry at Good Shepherd Baptist Church, (El Buen Pastor) in Lansing, MI since 1991. Joshua and his lovely wife Annabel have recently celebrated 29 years of marriage.

What do you treasure this season?

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – We are in the midst of the crazy and busy Christmas season. It seems as if time speeds up from November 1st to January 1st! So often we rush store to store in search of the perfect Christmas gift, we feel pressure to attend all the holiday events we are invited to, and we try to fit in all the holiday baking that is expected of us by our family. If we are not careful, we can get caught up in all the activity and commercialism of the season and miss what the season is all about!

A verse I have been thinking on over the last few weeks comes from Luke right in the middle of the Christmas story. The shepherds had been in the field keeping watch over their flock, when suddenly, they were greeted by an angel who told them that a Savior had been born. They were instructed to go to Bethlehem and find the baby who would be wrapped in cloths and lying in a

manger. Once the shepherds saw Him, they began to spread the word about all the things they had heard and seen.

However, Mary's response is found in Luke 2:19 (NIV) –

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

I wonder how we react when we encounter the Savior? Do we rush off to share the signs and wonders He has revealed to us or are we quiet and still before the Lord and take time to treasure the encounter that we experienced and ponder the moment?

God has been speaking to me lately about sitting with Him and soaking in the moments of revelations that He brings. These are special moments given to us through our personal and intimate relationship with Jesus. If a friend were to share something personal and meaningful with me, I wouldn't rush off to tell others. I would listen to her and just sit and be still in her presence.

I think that is what God wants us to do as well. Before we rush off to share a revelation we have received, we need to linger a little longer in God's presence and treasure the gift we have just been given. When we take time to ponder the things of God, they become a part of us. Proverbs 4:20 – 21 (NIV) says,

Pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart.

One thing that helps me to ponder the things of God, is by journaling. I like to journal when God speaks things to me through His Word or through His Spirit. Oftentimes we think we will remember the moment because it is so impactful, but I have found that if I don't write it down, it fades quickly from my memory. By keeping a record of what God has spoken, I can treasure that moment and keep it to refer to when I am going through a hard time. This serves as a reminder of what God has done in my life in the past.

What are you treasuring this Christmas season? Are you so wrapped up in the busyness of expectations and holiday traditions that you aren't even able to receive what Jesus wants to give you? Are you only giving Him a few minutes each day, rushing off to the next thing on your "to do" list?

Jesus has to be the priority of our lives. This may look like saying "no" to an invitation or laying down a holiday tradition. Once you carve out the time to be with Him, simply sit at His feet and adore Him. Remember why He came and let the Holy Spirit show you the deeper things of God. I pray you will take time this Christmas season to be still in God's presence and to receive all He wants to give you. As He pours out his blessings on you, treasure the experience and ponder them in your heart.

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.

Jesus is the reason for the season

DETROIT – As the Christmas season swiftly approaches I must confess since a child I've always anticipated this season. To be frank I haven't encountered many scrooge-like personas. Most people truly await the Christmas season. It's during this time of the year where people of likemind anticipate cheerful Christmas music, and admire the glows from flickering colorful lights and decorations. I'm not much of a hot chocolate guy, but it's just something mysterious about this time of the year where hot chocolate or a chilled cup of eggnog is consumed.

My family and so many other families embrace this time of the year to gather and share memories, play games and exchange gifts. But as I ever grow in the Lord I also realize this period of the year can be very emotionally weighty. What I mean is that for some this season could also be a solemn reminder that life now may not look and feel like it once did. Some people have had to embrace transitions, loss of loved ones, sickness and despair. And so while Christmas brings joy it can also bring memories. That's why humanity needs another reason! Reason?

Body

Furthermore as a firm believer in Jesus I am on a constant journey of spiritual maturity in him. What I have discovered over the years is that there is a far greater joy in Christ that lies beneath the Christmas season. Don't get me wrong I've always known Jesus was the reason for the Christmas season.

Growing up in our church as a child we were assigned Christmas speeches and we acted in skits. On another note, like many, our Americanized eyes if only for a short period have been clouded by gifts, music, and the accouterments of a Santa-centered Holiday. As I grow older I am more appreciative and thankful for God's Church because it's during this season that most churches turn their attention to recognize Advent.

And so I love this time because it provides me the time and space to be both reflective and introspective. It is in my state of reflection that I grow more appreciative and humble because of what God has done for humanity through his sacrificial giving of Jesus Christ. What really makes this season special and rich for Christians is that the Christmas season hangs on the hinges of “true love fulfilled”. What Am I getting at? During ancient biblical times many people like you and I heard the prophetic words preached of a coming Messiah. One prophet by the name of Isaiah, stood and preached

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder.

*And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

The reality is that many people heard those life-giving words spoken by Isaiah and they didn't get a chance to see the promise fulfilled, and yet they died with a hope that God in all of his providence is sending a savior into the world that would be the ultimate answer for the issues and problems.

I get chills just thinking about the unwavering faith of those who believed in Jesus before his arrival. Now, as we live on the other side of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection I can truly sense and feel God's love towards the world. The love that brings new life, and births a faith that can conquer the worst of days. A love fulfilled, and so the prophetic promise spoken by Isaiah were not mere words but the truth of God that would lead to God's plan of salvation for all humanity. It is during this Advent season (last week of November-Dec 24th) that we as the church embrace the real reason for this season.

Conclusion

The virgin birth of Jesus makes the difference during the Holidays. No lights in the world shine brighter than the light God has given us through Jesus. I love Christmas songs. Who doesn't? But, there is no melodic tune that can bring the kind of joy to our hearts like a song written about The Messiah.

Through all human experiences whether joyous or sobering the truth remains that God poured out his loving by graciously giving the world his only son Jesus Christ and it is through him that we have a greater reason to live full and purposeful lives.

Jesus is the Reason for this Season and every season.

Prayer

I invite you to this prayer:

God, thank you for being a promise keeper, thank you for knowing that we needed a gift that money could not obtain. Thank you for fulfilling your promise in that you sent your Son Jesus Christ into the world and into our hearts so that true Joy would erupt in our hearts. Amen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Clark is the Lead Pastor of S.E.E.D. Church of Detroit, Mi. S.E.E.D. Church exists to help people grow upward in their relationships with Jesus Christ and others.

Our hope is more than Christmas

WESTLAND – I have always loved Christmas! It's always been a magical time full of twinkly lights, family traditions, familiar decorations, festive gatherings and the celebration of a humble couple and their brand new baby.

Well this year for us is a bit different. We too are just a humble couple expecting our brand new baby boy. I'm 8 months pregnant and it makes this Christmas season seem real on a whole different level. We too are waiting for our first baby boy to be born.

This Christmas season for us is full of waiting. Not just waiting for this baby, but waiting for dreams to be fulfilled, questions to be answered and for decisions to be made in regards to our precious foster child we've had for a couple of years. As we get closer to the addition of one son, we anxiously await God's plan for the other. We struggle to trust a Holy God amidst a flawed human system. We are both filled with awe and excitement as well as fear, sadness, and uncertainty. We are both thankful for the fulfilled promise of one child and mourning what might never be.

We are waiting. We are mourning. We are praising God for what He has done, yet asking him earnestly for Him to intervene.

I imagine Mary might have felt the same. Mary was specially chosen to carry the Savior of the world. She had every reason to be thankful and blessed. But the circumstances surrounding the conception of her baby made her an outcast. Mary was betrothed to a good man named Joseph, and had to tell him she was pregnant.

During this time, Joseph had the right to stone her to death for this. Yet he married her, taking on the shame and responsibility of raising a child that was not his own. While Mary sings, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior", she also might have been

mourning how everyone else perceived this holy miracle. The gossip surrounding his conception followed her and her family.

She was grateful. She was scared or alone. She praised God for this miracle but might have doubted why he had to bring it like this.

Christmas also reminds us of this dissonance. The joy mixed with the grief. The suffering and the glory. The joy of the long awaited, promised, perfect Savior to bring us back into relationship with God. The end of animal sacrifices, and not being able to approach the throne. The joy of the heavenly coming down to us. The beauty of a fragile baby invading the world with humility, and service to love us, a wicked and deceptive people. A God who said, "Come to me". The ultimate healer coming down to rescue us.

Yet we don't need to look far to see that the devil still prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. The evil we see all around us reminds us, the world is not yet fully redeemed. For Christ will come a second time, restoring once and for all. Yet we are waiting.

Romans 8:22-23 puts this perfectly: "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

We groan for the world to be set right. We ache for the healing, restoration, and peace that comes from knowing that Christ is, has come and will come. Because of Christmas, because of what Christ came to do we can have hope that when He invades our world the next time he will do it in victory. He has already won!

So Lord, find us faithful. Find us to be a people who trust You in the joy as well as the grief. Remind us that while we are waiting You are still good, you are close and you see us. Thank you, that in Colossians 2, Jesus, you, "...disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; [and] triumphed over them."

Christ has already defeated Satan. It is already done! So this Christmas season we rejoice in the victory of Christ amidst the brokenness of the world. We remember when we look at the manger scene that while Christ came in humility, he also came in power. That our promise of victory is only through the victory of Christ over death and the rulers and authorities. We enjoy the twinkly lights, the family traditions, the magic of it all because we know our hope is in much more. Merry Christmas!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire lives in Westland, MI with Dan, the love of her life, her beloved foster son, her snuggly pup, Daisy and baby to be! She is imperfectly following her Savior and delights in being involved in the lives of others. She is excited to celebrate this Christmas, but even more the arrival of her sweet miracle baby!

With us

ADRIAN – Looking towards the holidays, excitement, and anticipation build. It's not the gifts or all the trappings that bring these emotions to the forefront, although they help! Instead, it is the realization that we will be WITH family and friends, and memories of being WITH family and friends.

It's the time that we get to spend WITH brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, moms and dads, friends from high school and college we haven't seen in a while, and the list goes on and on. It's a special time with special people.....the key word is WITH.

For me, November and December also bring back fond memories of hunting with my younger brother and dad. We hunted many different animals, and I loved the thrill of the hunt. As I look back now, it's the memories of being WITH my brother and my dad who passed away a few years ago that make those moments special. The power of WITH is indispensable as we look back as well as move forward.

As Advent dawns on us again, WITH is an important aspect for us to remember and on which to meditate. In Isaiah 7:14, God gives Isaiah a word of prophecy about the Messiah that Matthew will quote (Matthew 1:23) when he reports on the birth announcement of Jesus to Joseph. Names are vital in the Bible and this name that would be given to Jesus communicates one of the greatest promises as well as greatest aspects of the incarnation. God, through the prophet Isaiah, gives the name Immanuel to the Messiah. God WITH us.

Of all the gifts we are given in and through Christ, it's hard to find one that compares with the fact that the Father sent the Son to be WITH us. We often look back on the gospel with amazement and wonder. What would it have been like to physically walk with Jesus? To be instructed and discipled by Jesus? To hear His wonderful teachings? To look into His eyes and see love like we had never seen before? There is a sense in which we envy the disciples and long for that kind of relationship with Jesus.

But in doing so we forget the very words of Jesus in the gospel of John. He said that He was leaving, but He would not leave His followers as orphans. He said He would send the helper to be WITH them in His physical absence (John 14:15-31). Later, Jesus would say that it was to their advantage for Him to leave, and the Spirit to come to be WITH them.

While we celebrate this time of year, may we think deeply of the gift of presence over presents. May we meditate and worship God for the gift of His presence in our life. May we praise Him for the gift of Jesus as a baby coming to be WITH us, but may we also praise Him for the Holy Spirit that is always WITH us today and every day. This is such amazing news that we should also share this gift with others. You don't have to be alone anymore. The God of the universe wants to be WITH you! May we praise and worship the God who is WITH us and wants to spend eternity WITH us. What an amazing gift!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nate is the pastor at Catalyst Church in Adrian, MI. He has his MDIV from Liberty Baptist Seminary. Nate has been married to his high school sweetheart Alison for 23 years. They have 4 kids Payton (19) Parker (16) Paisley (9) and Paxton (7).

The life-saving legacy of the Psalm 139 Project

A powerful, though often overlooked method for helping protect preborn life is to provide a woman in an unplanned pregnancy a “window” into the world of the child she is carrying. Internal statistics from the pro-life ministry Care Net [have shown](#) that when women who are still in the process of making a pregnancy decision are offered the option to view their baby’s ultrasound image in a supportive pregnancy center environment, they are much more likely to continue their pregnancy. That’s why in 2001, the ERLC launched the [Psalm 139 Project](#), named after the verses in Scripture that state:

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139: 13-16).

The purpose of the project is to raise money to provide ultrasound equipment to pregnancy resource centers and provide medical staff with the necessary training for operating the equipment. The initiative also plays a pivotal role in changing perceptions by helping people see that preborn children and mothers with unplanned pregnancies are not abstractions, but individuals made in the image of God and loved by Jesus. The project has received overwhelming response from pregnancy care centers expressing a need for new ultrasound equipment, indicating its positive impact and the demand for such resources.

The Psalm 139 Project began receiving funds in 2001 and placed the first ultrasound machine in 2004 (the cost of a machine and training is roughly \$40,000). Initially, the project funded two to three ultrasound machines per year. But in December 2020, the ERLC announced an ambitious goal to place 50 ultrasound machines in pregnancy resource centers nationwide by January 2023, which would have been the 50th anniversary of the disastrous Roe v. Wade decision. Since the beginning of this initiative, over 85 machines have been placed in PRCs and other organizations around the United States. Twelve of those placements occurred thus far in 2023.

Across this nation, men and women working and volunteering in pregnancy care centers are the real heroes of the pro-life movement. These centers come alongside families facing unplanned pregnancies to educate and empower more women to choose life for their babies. And these centers wouldn't be able to do this important work without the support of churches within their communities.

Cooperation among Southern Baptists

The Psalm 139 Project also wouldn't be able to provide life-saving equipment without the generosity of Southern Baptists and partnerships with state conventions. To recognize these efforts, the ERLC gave a Psalm 139 Partner for Life Award to partners who have shown an exceptional commitment to valuing life by supporting those on the front lines of this essential ministry work. In 2023, the ERLC gave the award to:

- the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions,
- the Louisiana Missionary Baptist State Convention,
- the North Carolina Baptist Convention,
- the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board,
- Southern Baptists of Texas Convention,
- and the Southern Baptist Convention of Virginia.

These conventions and their churches recognize that Southern Baptists have a greater opportunity to serve families in a post-Roe culture. The ERLC is committed to standing with these partners in protecting life at all stages and will seek to be a leading voice in this next chapter of the pro-life movement.

In 2024, the Psalm 139 Project will continue to identify and place machines, with an emphasis in placements in abortion-permissible states and provide critical support for those pregnancy centers as abortion tourism continues to bring an increased number of women seeking abortions to these states.

Culture may change; legislation may change, but the Gospel remains the same. At the ERLC, we will continue to proclaim the glory of the Gospel, the value of life, and God's plan for the family.

One hundred percent of financial contributions designated to the Psalm 139 Project go toward purchasing ultrasound machines and providing training for workers. No ERLC Cooperative Program resources are used for these machines. Tax-deductible gifts may be made [online](#) or via check to ERLC, 901 Commerce Street, Nashville, Tenn., 37203. Learn more at psalm139project.org.

‘International member care’ helps churches stay connected to missionaries

HELEN, GA (BP) – Missionaries are rightly celebrated and honored prior to leaving for the field. However, the challenges of settling into their ministry assignment and cultivating ongoing effectiveness can be overlooked by churches.

Natalie Ford considered that reality last year during a conference that had a breakout session on the local church’s involvement in caring for missionaries.

“My mind was spinning at the concept of it and what could be done,” she said. “I left thinking there was so much we need to do to undergird our missionaries to ensure longevity.”

It led to Ford, a member of First Baptist in Helen, Ga., being named the church’s International Member Care Coordinator in June. In that role, she maintains consistent contact with six missionaries who have been sent out through First Baptist and the International Mission Board. She also works to keep missionaries and their work in front of church members, bringing them alongside as partners in delivering the Gospel.

While member care is offered through the IMB, Ford saw the opportunity for more support through a local church. Her background as a licensed counselor also brings an acute awareness to mental health’s importance for those on the mission field far from home.

“Several of our missionaries have their own counselor, not me, because of our existing relationship,” Ford said. While she helps missionaries process their times on the field and offers support, professional ethics prohibit Ford from counseling in a traditional role.

However, she noted, “I would say my counseling background impacts how I relate to people in general.”

Lead Pastor Jim Holmes said the work and Ford’s background will be central in the church’s expanding work to support missionaries.

“Natalie is one of our most strategic hires for us in recent memory,” he said. “She is top-shelf and this has excited the church.”

Helping ‘the best and brightest’

The conference Ford attended was hosted by [Barnabas International](#). Further training for her role has been received through the [Global Member Care Network](#). Areas in that training include member care on the field as well as how to debrief missionaries and help them adjust upon their return.

Ford also connects with missionaries through Zoom and WhatsApp. She develops a biblical theme each month that is shared with missionaries, church members and small groups like Sunday School classes, helping prompt discussions on serving abroad.

Jim Gant, executive pastor at First Baptist who also oversees counseling, spoke on Ford's role and how it came to be.

"Natalie alerted our staff to the attrition rate among missionaries and brought recommendations for what we could do to help," he said. "These missionaries are the best and brightest of us, and if they're struggling, it's obvious we need to do more to help them."

Ford's role calls for communicating with missionaries at least twice per month and encouraging them in areas such as personal spiritual development as well as strategies that lead to personal and relational wellness. Other responsibilities include coordinating efforts among church members to encourage missionaries and facilitating on-site visits with missionaries at least once per year as church finances allow.

"Each of our adult Sunday School classes supports a missionary and invests in them," said Gant, who, when he moved out of his home had it repurposed for missionaries who are temporarily stateside instead of letting it sit empty.

"This is all very new to us, but First Baptist is such a generous church that gives toward missions and does everything to help missionaries succeed," Gant said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

Proven leader shares wisdom in reaching Native Americans

OKLAHOMA CITY, OK (BP) – SBC Statesman Emerson Falls has developed a missiological strategy for reaching Native Americans with God's life-equipping gospel of Jesus.

He has done so with wisdom acquired from a lifetime as a Native American, from more than 50 years walking with Jesus, and from nearly that long ministering among his Native people.

In his final weeks before officially retiring as the full-time Native American Ministry Partner with Oklahoma Baptists, Falls talked with Baptist Press about the four essential elements of the strategy he has developed.

- Express the gospel in ways Natives can understand
- Equip Native disciples for spiritual growth
- Empower Native churches to be self-sufficient
- Emphasize the benefit of all God's people working together for His glory

Southern Baptist work with Native Americans is weaker than it was in 2011, when two major events related to Native Americans took place within six weeks, Falls said in mid-November.

The visions and goals of The Gathering and The Summit withered in a malaise of reasons that date to the first encounters of missionaries and Natives. The removal of Natives from their homeland, and the removal of their children from their homes, where efforts were made to strip them of their culture, language and worldview, Falls said.

Contextualize the gospel

"As a result, the message of Christianity did not ring true in the eyes of those being displaced," Falls said. "A minority of Native people did receive the gospel and we are grateful for the early-day missionaries. However, these missionaries did not understand the principles of good missiology. As a result, Native people felt they had to choose to either be Native American or be Christian.

"That background is important," Falls said. "One of the challenges for us is to contextualize the gospel so they don't have to choose being a Native or a Christian. They can be both at the same time."

One example of contextualization is an evangelistic tract with a picture of fry bread on the cover. Fry bread is eaten in most Native cultures, though it can be prepared differently and taste differently in Arizona than in Alaska. The tract makes the point that just as we need bread for physical life, we also need bread for spiritual life. Jesus is the bread of life.

In 2015, Falls began serving with the Circle of Life Native American Fellowship in Oklahoma City. The word "circle" is an important element in most Native cultures, he said. For people seated in the circle, everyone is equally important and can see each other face-to-face, rather than the back-to-face and raised-podium look of western church seating.

Many Native people are involved in powwows, which usually take place on weekends. Circle of Life started with Tuesday evening services so Powwow people could attend church.

Powwows got a bad name from early-day missionaries who thought dancing, drums and singing were pagan rites, but powwows celebrate Native culture, and are “one of the few ways Natives today can maintain what little culture we have left,” Falls said, especially for the 87 percent of the nation’s 8.75 million Native Americans in the United States who do not live on reservations.

Circle of Life members attend powwows to celebrate their heritage and start friendships that in God’s timing lead to gospel conversations. They also cook dinners, entertain youngsters with balloon animals and face painting, and pass out Bibles and “Fry bread” tracts to parents and others who show interest.

“For us, powwows are a mission field,” Falls said. “We go there, build relationships, participate with them, the same things you would do to go in and reach your community.

“I think it would be a shame for us to not try to reach the indigenous people from our own country, particularly the way they’ve been treated,” Falls continued. “I believe the true measure of Christianity is how we treat ‘the least of these.’ Native people have experienced their share of suffering. It is time they experience the joy of the Lord.”

Spiritual growth

Discipling new believers requires a discipler being one-on-one with the disciple, involving discipline, accountability and trust that comes from honesty, integrity and genuineness.

“Much of what we [Christians] do is done inside the four walls of a building,” Falls said. “Real discipleship is done in the community. Jesus went to ‘all the towns and villages.’ He saw that the people were like ‘sheep without a shepherd.’ He told us to ‘pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.’ I pray for workers to labor among Native Americans.”

Churches that establish long-term connections with Native people result in relationships that nurture disciple-making, he said.

Leadership

Life often is very difficult for Native Americans. Whether in a city and estranged from their reservation community, or entrapped by reservation life, Native Americans often struggle.

Nearly every tribe offers college scholarships for graduating high school students, but “It’s a real sacrifice to go into ministry, so what we have is a ‘brain drain’ from the church, and we just don’t have a large pool of people to begin with,” the Native leader said.

“If we’re going to see any progress among Native Americans and reaching our people for Christ, it’s going to take good leadership.

“Just as Natives are learning to succeed in business and gain independence from government assistance, Native churches must learn to succeed in ministry without a steady stream of assistance from outside churches,” he said.

Work together

“We need to get to know each other with a ministry of presence, not doing stuff for people but going and helping people with what they’re doing, not doing church for them but being a friend and when we see a need, minister to that need,” Falls said. “As we minister among them, the opportunities to share the gospel will open to us when they know us.”

Best practices for a non-Native church is to establish a multi-year relationship with a Native church that includes repeated in-person and telephone/email contacts throughout the year, Falls said.

“Learn what they need so you can give them a hand up rather than a handout.

“Maybe the community needs plumbing work done on a shower house. Maybe a bad storm destroyed the powwow’s pavilion. Maybe the school needs painting. Work with – not for – the community. The volunteers you train might turn their newly acquired skills into an income stream.”

Leadership leads to longevity in ministry, Falls said.

“We’re asking people to invest resources in developing local leaders and helping them until they’re able to develop their own ministries. By demonstrating Christ-like love, we – and they – can earn the right to share the gospel.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Christians in Sudan may face Sharia law as oppression overtakes Sahel

KHARTOUM, SUDAN (BP) – A return to Sharia Law might be in store for Sudan as civil war nears its 10th month there, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said in its latest Fact Sheet on the Sahel Region of Africa.

The Sudanese Armed Forces under the country's transitional leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has recruited thousands who worked as intelligence operatives of former pro-Islamic President Omar al-Bashir, USCIRF said, raising concerns among Christians that al-Burhan has hopes of establishing Sharia Law.

Christian persecution eased when al-Bashir was overthrown in 2019, but a transitional government aimed at establishing democracy has been in jeopardy since civil war began in April between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group under the leadership of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo.

"After the fall of the Bashir government, the transitional government granted Muslim and Christian groups some important freedoms, earning praise and support from the U.S. government," USCIRF said. "However, the outbreak of new conflict in April 2023 within the state security apparatus has severely diminished any possibility of safe, open religious practice in Sudan."

Sudan's deterioration is part of a recent political trend across the Sahel, including Mali, and Niger, where armed forces attacked an already weak national government and established a military coup. The new under-resourced state is supported by external forces, including the Russian-backed Wagner Group, to confront "extremist elements." While cracking down on violent extremists, the new government uses accusations of extremism as a pretext for suppressing religious minorities, the fact sheet says.

"The state then begins to perpetrate religious freedom violations in the campaign against violent extremist groups," USCIRF said. "At the same time, competing ethnic and religious groups which historically distrusted one another may take sides for or against the new government, change alliances, or form armed auxiliary units to survive. This posturing may result in further effects on individuals' freedom of religion or belief."

Eric Patterson, president of the Religious Freedom Institute, said the trend shows the connection between international religious freedom and U.S. international governmental relations.

"For those who say that issues of religious freedom and human rights are somehow tertiary, or fourth- or fifth- or sixth-tier things," Patterson said, "what we see in this region (is) how closely intertwined (are) issues of religious identity, issues of religious political systems, and how closely these are tied to national security imperatives, both for the people on the ground and for our United States allies."

Patterson was a panelist in a conversation USCIRF hosted Nov. 9 on religious freedom in the Sahel.

Across the Sahel, “the presence of insurgent groups, ethnic and religious conflict, and the continual intervention of military actors in politics have a direct impact on religious communities,” USCIRF said.

During al-Bashir’s regime which spanned 20 years, USCIRF considered Sudan a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom violations, denoting “systemic, ongoing and egregious” violations. USCIRF downgraded Sudan to its Special Watch List of countries to be monitored in 2019, and removed the country altogether from its list of religious freedom violators in 2020. But the overthrow of the transitional government in April represents “grave threats to religious freedom” there, USCIRF Vice Chairman Frederick A. Davie said in a Nov. 9th conversation.

Sudan suffered decades of civil wars that began in the mid-20th Century before the country split in 2011, establishing Sudan as a majority Muslim north and a majority (60.5 percent) Christian South Sudan. Christians comprise about 5.4 percent of Sudan’s 48 million people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

ERLC urges rescindment of proposed LGBTQ+ foster care regulation

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission has released a [letter](#) urging the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to rescind a recently proposed regulation regarding foster care providers and foster children who identify as LGBTQ+.

The [regulation](#), proposed on Sept. 28, specifies steps foster care agencies must implement or maintain so that children in foster care who identify as LGBTQ+ are ensured a “safe and appropriate” placement if requested.

ERLC President Brent Leatherwood said the proposed regulation is a severe violation of religious freedom.

“This proposed rulemaking discriminates against religious and faith-based foster care providers by forcing such organizations to choose between their deeply held convictions and their desire to live out their faith by caring for some of the most vulnerable children in our society,” Leatherwood said in a letter released Monday, Nov. 27.

“Religious and faith-based organizations’ belief in a biblical sexual ethic is not at odds with the ability of foster families to provide “safe and proper care” to foster children from any background. ... We strongly believe that HHS should rescind its proposed rule. The proposed rule will lead to religious discrimination of otherwise qualified foster families and will result in a catastrophic lack of foster care placements for the vulnerable children who need them most.”

The regulation, proposed by the Administration for Children and Families (a division of the HHS), is officially titled [“Safe and Appropriate Foster Care Placement Requirements for Titles IV-E and IV-B.”](#)

The Social Security Act requires state and tribal agencies’ children’s welfare agencies to implement certain plans in order to ensure a proper foster care environment for children.

Under the proposed new regulation, those requirements would expand to include “providing for the needs” of self-identifying LGBTG+ children.

The regulation states, “To be considered as a safe and appropriate placement for a LGBTQI+ child means the provider with whom the agency places the child will establish an environment free of hostility, mistreatment, or abuse based on the child’s LGBTQI+ status, the provider is trained to be prepared with the appropriate knowledge and skills to provide for the needs of the child related to the child’s self-identified sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and the provider will facilitate the child’s access to age-appropriate resources, services, and activities that support their health and well-being.”

Leatherwood said the regulation forces Christian parents and foster care agencies into an LGBTQ+ affirming worldview which would violate their religious beliefs.

“Although HHS claims it is not violating the free exercise of religion, the Department is functionally enforcing such discrimination by relying on the false assumption that only ‘affirmation’ of a child’s LGBTQ beliefs is ‘safe and proper,’” Leatherwood said.

“Contrary to such assertions by HHS, a foster family should not have to agree with every political, spiritual, and other belief of a child to be deemed ‘safe and proper.’ A foster parent’s biblical belief regarding sexuality and gender identity does not detract from their ability to warmly welcome a vulnerable child into their home. ... What should remain preeminent in considering foster care placements is whether the foster parent has a physically safe and secure home with access to the resources the child needs while a permanency plan is developed.

“Foster care is designed to be a temporary placement to solve underlying issues preventing parents from adequately caring for their child. As such, the rights of biological parents are worthy of protection – including the right to oppose damaging gender ideology.”

Leatherwood also appealed to Southern Baptists’ strong belief in the importance of foster care ministry.

“Southern Baptists have long prioritized a robust theology of support for foster care, repeatedly stating in resolutions a desire to continue to participate in our nation’s foster care system,” he said.

“In 2022, Southern Baptists [resolved](#) ‘to continue and increase their efforts to serve and support ... foster-care and adoptive families, doing invaluable and often under-recognized work in the care of women and children at every stage of life.’

“Our deeply held religious conviction to serve and protect vulnerable children has led thousands of Southern Baptists to launch foster care organizations, foster children, and create ministries in their congregations to support the physical and financial needs of foster families. Additionally, congregations across the country have hosted training for foster families to ensure they are trauma informed and have all the knowledge and resources they need to be “safe and appropriate” placements for children in crisis. Every life is precious and worthy of dignity and protection, and that includes protection from sexual ethics that themselves cause harm to children. As Southern Baptists, it is these very beliefs that lead us to serve the most vulnerable and that make these families a “safe and proper” placement for these children in need.

Hannah Daniel, policy manager for the ERLC, explained the ERLC opposes the regulation not only because it violates religious liberty, but because it does not serve the best interest of foster children.

“This new rule from HHS would limit the ability of Christian parents to participate in the foster care system without compromising their deeply held beliefs regarding gender and sexuality,” Daniel said.

“Children who identify as LGBTQ make up a disproportionate percentage of those in our foster care system, and these children desperately need love, care and safety. This rule would exclude millions of parents who are ready to provide that and push these children toward homes that will encourage harmful gender transition procedures during an already traumatic time in the child’s life. The ERLC filed comments pushing back on this rule and urging the Department to consider these harmful implications — not only for people of faith but also for the wellbeing of the child.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Cockes is a writer in Nashville.

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