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Worn but not out

PLYMOUTH, MI – I recently read a bit of prose by Wendell Berry that speaks to the experience of all of God's human creations and our inescapable process of growing older. That is, if our Heavenly Father graciously allows us to walk into those mature days. I just celebrated my 66th birthday and as Sly and the Family Stone sang, "I just want to celebrate another day of living." I don't feel old. Well, I do have sensations that are new to me, like pain in joints and places, to which I had never previously given any thought. But in my mind, I am still 20 something years young and could assault hell with a water pistol, even though my eyesight may limit the accuracy of my aim.

Wendell expressed my feelings well when he wrote:

*I know I am getting old and I say so,
but I don't think of myself as an old man.
I think of myself as a young man
with unforeseen debilities. Time is neither
young nor old, but simply new, always
counting, the only apocalypse. And the clouds
—no mere measure or geometry, no cubism,
can account for clouds or, satisfactorily, for bodies.
There is no science for this, or art either.
Even the old body is new—who has known it
before?—and no sooner new than gone, to be
replaced by a body yet older and again new.
The clouds are rarely absent from our sky
over this humid valley, and there is a sycamore
that I watch as, growing on the riverbank,
it forecloses the horizon, like the years
of an old man. And you, who are as old
almost as I am, I love as I loved you
young, except that, old, I am astonished
at such a possibility, and am duly grateful.*

"VII." by Wendell Berry from *Leavings*. © Counterpoint, 2010. Reprinted with permission.

"When I wore a much younger man's clothes," I just knew that Jesus' return would take place in a matter of days. I still believe in His imminent return, and know for a fact that His epiphany is closer than it was back in the days of my youth. I was driven to see as many people come to Christ because I knew we just didn't have enough time remaining. That same urgency remains in my heart today, but with some added reasoning. I don't have much time left because, well, I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME LEFT.

Yes, His return is imminent, but so could be the termination of my earthly tenure. The law of averages is not on my side. I am passionate about making every day count. **I may be a bit worn, but I am not out!** I may move more slowly, but it is with determination and a more deliberate purpose. I have learned where all the potholes are and the land mines because I have stepped in most of them. In my heart beats the desire to see “just one more” come to Him. The dreams and visions that the Father gives me are just as big and grandiose, and even more so than those of my youth. It is my prayer that I have enough knowledge from my experiences and attained a modicum of God’s wisdom so that I may be able to see those dreams and visions become a reality, in a way that is pleasing to Him, beneficial to His people and advances the Kingdom.

I have a vision for 500 healthy, growing and multiplying Southern Baptist churches here in Michigan by 2025. I have a vision that every believer, in every BSCM church would know “who’s their one” and actively share the Gospel with them. I have a vision that every church that is affiliated with the Baptist State Convention would recognize, understand and embrace the greatest mission funding plan in the world, The Cooperative Program. I have a vision that every gathering of our BSCM family’s, whether great or small would fully realize that we can do more together than we can alone.

I may be aging, as are many of our churches and congregants, but that does not mean we are done. We may not be as quick or as agile as we once were, but that is no excuse not to stay in the fight. Paul kept proclaiming until the very end, “I have fought the good fight.” He kept swinging, fighting and punching like the prophetic pugilist he was until the very last blow. Age is not a limitation, it is just a number. Now is not the time to quit, but to continue the fight with greater purpose. Now is the time to “Punch Holes In The Darkness.”

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.

Sick Stomach, Bloody Hand: Obscurity to Community

PLYMOUTH, MI – My stomach tightened as I peeked around the doorframe of the middle school gymnasium from the hallway. The bleachers were filling-up with guys wildly talking and

punching one another in the shoulders. There was an excitement as guys yelled to one another about what position they were going to play on the seventh grade football team. I paused. I felt the cool steel and rough brick of the door frame and wall as I imagined myself disappearing into nothingness. I did not know the names of the positions on the field. The pit of my stomach stirred. I felt like an idiot, a zero, again. It was an all too familiar seventh grade kind of feeling for me.

It was the end of an autumn school day. Behind me, other students were rushing to the line of yellow buses outside preparing to deliver students to their homes. I had to make a decision. That morning I told my mother, "Mom, I'm going to join an intramural football team at school this year. Will you come pick me up? We're having a meeting. The teachers who coach will be choosing teams." My mother replied with a look of shock in her eyes then added her typical, reliable support, "Sure honey, I can do that. It's good that you're joining a team. What time and where? I can keep the car after I drop Dad off at work at the shop."

Replaying that conversation in my mind, I calculated that if I got on the bus that I would arrive home before my mother left the house to pick me up at school; so, I turned down the hallway toward the school's exit, fell into stream of departing students, and silently settled into my familiar bus seat in solitude. The deep sadness calmed my sick stomach. When I appeared in the doorway, at home, my mother was shocked and saddened; but, she intentionally raised her voice to a happy tone to lift my spirits, "I'm glad you're home, honey. You don't have to join a team. We're your team. Come on in here and relax." Nothing further was spoken about that day back in 1970 something until now.

Today, I hear some of the most effective churches say something like, "Get out of rows and get into circles." Another says, "You grow best when you share life in community with others." I agree with them, but I wonder does anyone find it as hard to join a small group or a team like I did as a seventh grader? If so, do church leaders work as hard at including people in small groups as they do at increasing the crowd for worship? How does a person snuggled in his or her blanket of solitude get untangled and enter a small group? What needs to happen?

During eighth grade, I entered that same gymnasium. The sounds and the scene were similar to the prior year. I was determined to conquer whatever frightened me back into obscurity the previous year. No one helped me. It was a scary experience. My stomach was sick. I had moments of panic; but, I remained there during the entire initial meeting and selection. None of the coaches knew me. I was the proverbial last pick on Coach Thompson's team. When the football gear was given out, I was handed the baggiest pants and the oldest pads. Those thoughtless gestures said, "You're not important. You won't last." Nevertheless, my personal resolve kept me going to practice and waiting to play.

Weeks later, Coach Thompson's team had the worst record. I heard the other teachers-turned-afternoon-coaches tease Thompson mercilessly during school hours; so, Coach Thompson let our team know what he thought of us. He did not hold back. The team understood he was not

only angry; he was disgusted with us. He ran us through drills reassigning players into different positions. He tore us down as a team and as individuals.

One afternoon, Thompson screamed, "I'm looking for a defensive nose tackle who is not afraid of contact! Someone who will go after the ball!" Thompson lined up our five best offensive linemen and directed the center to snap the ball to him. The rest of the team lined up single file facing the offensive linemen with Thompson behind receiving the snap. One after another, each of my teammates was stopped from getting to Thompson. He told us what he thought about our pathetic efforts.

When it came time for me to line up face-to-face with the center, I was brewing with anger. I went into a down position getting as low as I could. I pulled back my right arm estimating the path of my palms going under the center's shoulder pads so I could lift him out of my way then lunge at my coach's legs. I wanted to silence the Coach's outbursts. I think the offensive line underestimated me, or they may have been exhausted repeatedly going through the drill. When the ball was snapped, I snapped. The moves came just as I had imagined. The only surprise was that I felt a warm burning sensation in the palm of my right hand as my hand was deeply sliced open by a rivet on the center's shoulder pad.

To this day, I remember that astonishing moment when I smeared my bloody hand across the chest of my practice jersey and the coach grabbed me by my facemask, then guided me around in circles like a dog on a leash and yelled into my face, "I found my nose tackle. I found my nose tackle!" My teammates patted me on the back repeating over and over that afternoon, "Good job, Lynn." The dark storm with our coach was over. It was a significant turning point in my life.

I am not the guy who defines himself by a sport, though I enjoyed playing football. I was never the outstanding star. I simply took part in a football community where for a few years I learned more about myself and the value of a team.

So, what are some take-aways from this memory?

1. Churches need to intentionally make joining groups easier on shy, frightened people like me when I was in seventh grade.
2. Groups can be a place of tension and stress, however people can discover greater strength when overcoming challenges even within a group.
3. Spectators at a football game do not invest in a game as deeply as the players and coaches who practice, workout, live as a team and strive for excellence.

There is something wonderful about getting out of the rows and getting into circles. Community is better experienced in small groups, genuine friendships and even in the stress of life as long as you have company in the midst of those tough times. Join-up. Go deeper. Share life.

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.

Senda la vida

PLYMOUTH, MI – Her story was gripping. The country where she was born and raised had entered into a crisis that continues to this day. She was near the end of studies in college and facing forced service in the military - a situation that for her was untenable. This woman in her early 20's told how she waited for the right moment and fled - fled everything for Argentina with only \$300 in her pockets. I was moved by the inner strength she possessed to make such a courageous decision. Her words only faltered when she shared how difficult it was to leave her family, especially her mother behind.

She started her new life. Starting over in a new country is filled with challenges, but she was thriving in her adopted homeland. She was doing so well that she managed to save enough money to get her mother to move in with her. Her new life was taking shape, but things started to change after a chance encounter on a bus. She met a man who offered her a job. It sounded interesting so she shared her resume and contact information with him.

A pleasant first encounter quickly turned sour. The phone calls started immediately, and grew in frequency and intensity. He started to stalk her and followed her on the bus to work. She realized that she had made an incredible mistake. As she shared, my mind feared that the story was heading toward human trafficking. She knew her situation was precarious, and made the decision to flee again. She got on the metro and waited until the last possible moment. She stepped out and the door closed before he could follow.

We met her in Mexico, just across the Texas border. She has a valid passport and is following the process to present her case to legally immigrate to the United States. Her story was riveting to hear. Two things stood out to me as she shared. First, this intelligent, courageous, and hard working woman will be an incredible addition to any country that accepts her. Second, I am extremely grateful to the brothers and sisters in Christ in the River Ministry who are meeting needs in the name of Christ.

Bob Wood, Sue Hodnett, David Roberts and I were able to see the River Ministry firsthand during a vision tour in the border town of McAllen, Texas. Because the River Ministry missionaries were gathering for their annual meeting, we were able to meet them and hear about their work. We were inspired by their passion, dedication, and creativity to serve people and share Christ. Doctors, dentists, pastors, church planters, and others shared how lives were being touched by Christ.

About our time in Texas, Sue Hodnett shares: “The needs are so great and opportunities to minister are limitless. It was enlightening to see that it is possible to make a difference in the lives of these families seeking refuge. From the news stories reported, it seemed as if coming to help would be met with great difficulties and challenges. I don’t see that as the case. There are many pipelines to serving, and it is a very organized ministry.”

Bob Wood writes, “The ministry at Senda la Vida stands out to me. The director left a profitable job in Plano, Texas, and returned to Mexico to minister to the needs of migrants. Senda la Vida has a compound where they provide a clean and safe place to live and sleep, regular meals, and a daily worship service where they can hear the Gospel. They minister to people in transition who have nowhere to live, but on the streets. There are many who are awaiting immigration hearings in the U.S., or who have been deported from the U.S. While we were there, we met people from Venezuela, Cuba, and Central America.

David Roberts challenges Michigan Baptists to: “Pray about whether God would want you to be on a team going down there to do things such as medical clinics, feeding ministry, first aid training, evangelism, construction, VBS, sports camps, church leadership training, etc. Consider whether you would go together as a group from your church, association, or go with a group made up of Baptists from all over Michigan.

There is a huge need there providing almost limitless opportunities for service. Texas Baptists desire for us to serve alongside them, to learn from each other so that, by working together, God will open doors and amplify and multiply the work He is already doing there.”

I am grateful that this team and I had the opportunity to see this incredible ministry and the needs. There are multiple ways Michigan Baptists can serve Christ through the River Ministry. Two areas stood out to me; the Colonias and the shelters. Colonias are communities, often on the edge of cities, where hundreds and sometimes thousands of people live. As we drove by row after row of houses, the need for churches to proclaim the Gospel was obvious. Numerous opportunities exist for Michigan Baptists to partner with church planters as they start new churches, and with pastors to strengthen existing churches. The shelters or Respite Centers meet the needs of people in transition. We discovered many ways for mission teams to make a difference: Family festivals, job training, soccer tournaments, crafts, and worship services. The opportunities are endless.

If your church is looking for a great place to serve people and share Christ, contact any member of our team. This is an excellent mission opportunity and is part of our partnership with Texas Baptists.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Want to add a caption to this image? Click the Settings icon.

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.

Bambi: home and away

ROSCOMMON, MI – There are many places in Michigan where one can view the creativity of our almighty God. One of these places is Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center. Especially during the fall, I am constantly struck with the beauty of the lake, the trees, and the night sky. It allows you to begin to grasp the awesomeness of our Creator, and marvel at His glory. However, the glory of God does not end at the tree line, and I would like to remind you how Bambi Lake ministers to our local community, all of Michigan and beyond.

A large part of the ministry at Bambi is providing an opportunity for groups and individuals to come and experience God in a way that is meaningful and unique. It is exciting and encouraging throughout the year to experience God's spirit moving through the lives of adults and teenagers alike. We have enjoyed the opportunity to host and produce two weeks of summer camps for Michigan teens called Wild Week. During these weeks, youth groups from all over the state come together to worship God and to hear His word. We always witness many who make decisions to follow Christ, and dedicate their lives to serve the Lord.

In 2020 we will be offering three Wild Week Camps - "3 Wild Weeks/3 Unique Experiences". The First Wild Week will offer students the opportunity to participate in our exciting Wild Week Camp like we have offered the previous two summers. The Second Wild Adventure Week will offer students the opportunity to experience camp in the Mountains of Tennessee. The Third Wild Impact Week will offer students the opportunity to serve in mission/ministry projects in the local Michigan community which will culminate in a community-wide evangelistic rally. We are excited for the lives that will find Jesus and be forever changed this next year.

Along with weeklong camps, Bambi Lake also hosts and produces weekend retreats throughout the year. You will find retreats for women, men, pastors, pastors/wives, leader training, married couples, and youth. Themes can vary from being a simple getaway to a time of training and growing in your walk with Christ. Weekend retreats are a great opportunity for believers to come and be refreshed and rejuvenated in their walk with Christ. Our hope is that Bambi will not only be a place to experience God, but a place for believers to be equipped for the ministry and also create long lasting friendships that extend past their time at Bambi Lake.

This last year God allowed us to begin having a greater impact in our local community. We have been able to partner with local public schools for band and cross-country camps. We have become involved in our local Chamber of Commerce and have participated in Community Expos and even hosted our own “Bambi Lake Life Day” - a day for surrounding communities to come and experience Bambi Lake. God blessed us with an amazing attendance of local people who had never been to Bambi. Additionally, over the Labor Day Holiday every room we had including the Campground was filled - there was no room left in the Inn! It was exciting to see the hard work and renovations in the campground, lakefront, etc., being enjoyed by returning guests and many first-timers. Our prayer is that we will continue to see an increase of local community involvement here at Bambi, and that God’s presence would be tangibly known by all who enter our property.

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.

Be real, show love, make disciples

INKSTER, MI – We are One Mission Church located in Westland Michigan, We are a small, but loving Church that focuses on discipleship. With our Church being small, we know that the commitment of our members is what matters. Our mission is to transform the community one person at a time through the power of the Gospel. We live out our mission in our everyday lives. We also teach that prayer is our number one priority when we speak of getting the Word of God to those who are lost.

One Mission Church has had a busy, but productive 1st year in ministry. Within the year we have had more than 60 people join our Church family, and many others that have given their lives to Jesus Christ. In the beginning of our journey to answer the call to ministry, we had

church in our home with about 10-15 people worshipping with us on Sunday mornings. This intimate setting was an amazing way to get to know some of our members on a personal level, and to build relationships. One Mission Church has volunteered at community events held by the City of Inkster on a few occasions. At these events we are able to connect with the community, and invite people that we meet to our church.

One of our first community events that we held before we launched our Sunday services was our Community Fall Festival. We now host this community event annually in October. Our event consists of food, bounce houses, Christian music, activities for all ages, and an opportunity to receive the Gospel. Our focus is always to share about Jesus Christ, and what he has done for all of us. We focus on our neighboring communities that are close to our Church. One community that is on our hearts is a low income neighborhood called Lemoyne Gardens. It's a housing community where about 950 residents live. The Lord has called us to this area to Love on the Community of Lemoyne Gardens, and share the good news with them whenever possible.

To get One Mission Church better equipped to go out in the community to share the Gospel we were lead to the training course of 3 circles. 3 circles helped our congregation to better understand how to turn everyday conversations into Gospel-centered conversations. During the training, a member of One Mission Church who came from a rough background of doing drugs, living on the streets, and not living for Christ, has come to have a strong relationship with the Lord. Now, she is sharing her testimony to all of the people with whom she comes in contact. Not only is she sharing her faith, but she has a better understanding of life and who she lives to serve in this world.

One Mission Church may be a small church, but we are continuously growing in numbers and in love for Jesus Christ. We have a strong impact on our community because of the Love that Jesus Christ has for us. The Lord brought us to this building to serve others while sharing his good and faithful love across the nations. We are excited to see what 2020 brings. As we charge our members every week at the end of Sunday Service, be real, show love and make disciples, we also charge you to do the same.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antonio and Jessica Wimberly are from Inkster, MI. Their church is located in Westland MI Antonio is a church Planter/ Pastor for One Mission Church. Antonio and Jessica have been married going on 7 years. They have 2 children Savanah 13 and Antonio 5. Antonio has also been trained to help coach other Church Planters; he's waiting for that opportunity to serve. Antonio Also Works with the Youth for the African American Fellowship of Michigan.

Once dead, now alive

CLIO, MI – “Replanting a church becomes a platform to display God’s glory. By the power of the gospel, that which was once dead in now alive” – Mark Clifton

I received a text last May from a pastor on the FBC Clio Legacy Team. They asked me to pray about coming back to Michigan to replant the church I grew up in. I laughed. I’m not sure if it was a nervous laugh, an “are you kidding me” laugh, or a God’s got a sense of humor laugh, but it was one of those.

Rachel, our kids and I at that time had been serving at a non-denominational church in Rossville, Indiana for almost 5 years. We had seen God do amazing things there. Lives changed by the truth of the Gospel, and people growing as disciples of Jesus so why would we consider a move? A few years before this text, Rachel and I had a conversation about ministry, and we agreed that we would not look to leave our church family, but if someone reached out to us we would pray about it. So... we prayed and sought God’s will and as we prayed, and waited for God to show us His will. He led us to move back to Michigan as re-planters. So we surrendered with no NAMB support in place at the time, and no other churches committed to support us yet. We had a home to sell and a home to buy. It was one of those moments of waiting and trusting our Lord to work, and He did. God supplied our support from NAMB, other churches and individuals, and sold our home and provided a new one.

After our move we spent the first several months vision casting and building relationships with those who had been a part of FBC. Then on January 6th this year we launched as a re-plant. What was once dead or dying, now has life. What was once without focus, now has vision, and we give God the Glory for His work. We have seen great growth in the church in both numeric numbers, and spiritual growth. God has also opened many new ministry opportunities for us in the Clio schools and in the community. This re-Plant was desperately needed. With hundreds of SBC churches closing yearly there is a greater and greater need for re-planting. There are 32,000 people within 5 miles of the building our church meets in. Think about if the church had come to an end. Thank God for His work though NAMB and SEND Network Michigan, and the new focus on re-planting churches.

There are many challenges to replant a church, and much support and prayer is needed. For a dying church to be replanted, there has to be a humbling of the church to see the need, and willingness to surrender leadership and tradition to start anew. There is a need for other churches to help support the pastors and partner in ministry with them. There is a need to create a new reputation, and a need for refocus on discipleship, gospel proclamation, and call to “be the church” not just go meet with the church in worship. God has worked or is working in great ways to accomplish each of these in City Church. We continue to need your support and prayer, and we want to say thank you to those that have already come alongside us. It is a testament to the power of the gospel to see what was once dead, now alive and growing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Marcus serves as Lead Pastor of City Church in Clio, Michigan. City Church is the Re-Plant of FBC Clio and launched on January 6, 2019. Prior to launching City Church, Rick served in pastor and youth pastor positions in Indiana, Michigan, and Kentucky. Rick and his wife Rachel both grew up in Michigan SBC churches and both surrendered their lives to Jesus at Bambi Lake as teens.

Parenting and Grand-parenting

CLAWSON, MI – 1 Timothy 1:2 says, “To Timothy, my true son in faith.” They are growing, maturing, and sharing their faith. They are inviting friends and family to church, and some have taken that next step and led friends and family to put their faith in Jesus Christ alone. My wife, Cindy and I resonate with the Apostle Paul.

At 23 years of age Cindy and I had our first child, and while in many ways we were ready, we definitely needed the help and wisdom of our parents. I’m so glad my mother-in-law was there for the birth of our child. She was parenting us, grand-parenting our child, and sometimes parenting her grandchild. As we serve at The Church in Clawson, we feel we are filling that same role as my mother-in-law did with us.

Two years ago we participated in a large car show that is hosted every year by the Clawson Lions Club. The city closes a half mile of Main Street, including a stretch where our property is located, and they park around 400 cars up and down the street.

At the event I was able to meet Janet and Patty, a mother and daughter. At that time Janet was battling throat cancer, and I was able to pray with her in the church parking lot. Janet and Patty said that they would come be our guests one Sunday very soon. That one Sunday very soon turned into a Wednesday night some 8 months later. Patty came for a little while before visiting on a Sunday. A few Sundays later, she brought her mother with her. Then she invited another friend, Jenny, who we also met at that first car show. Janet then invited several of her friends who now attend our church regularly. Patty was then able to invite her Father, Janet’s husband to church. A couple of months ago we baptized, Patty, Janet, Patty’s son Josh, and another friend of the family, Chris. Patty and her friend, Jenny led our car show outreach this year. We

have another new family attending through that outreach, and the father was saved in his second week attending.

Anthony DeMonaco, who I met through door to door canvassing is now one of the core members of our team. He led his daughter to the Lord who now sings every week on our music team. He oversees the financial department of our church, and started Champion Sports Ministries which provides weekend services and discipleship for players and coaches of the United Shore Professional Baseball League which plays in Utica, Michigan. He also serves on The Church Strengthening Team for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM).

At times we feel like we are just learning how to parent, yet we are helping our “kids” parent their own “children.” There’s nothing like being a parent, and even still further there is nothing like being a grandparent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob grew up in a Christian Home. From an early age he knew that God had called him to be in the ministry. He enjoys bringing truth from God’s Word and making it practical and relevant to our every day lives. He met his wife Cindy while attending college. They have 3 children, Bobby (15), Tyler (12), and Jaydon (10).

Students urged to bring Bibles to school Oct. 3

COLORADO SPRINGS, CO (BP) – After 17-year-old Perry participated in Bring Your Bible to School Day in the seventh grade, he started a Bible study for classmates and grew closer to God during his mother's cancer diagnosis in his junior year.

"I think that if you take one step, one action at a time, and just take your Bible to school," Perry said in advance of the 2019 observance Oct. 3, "then whether right there or way later on in your life, you realize that that was exactly what [you] needed in that moment."

The impact of Scripture in Perry's life anchors a promotional video for the 2019 event and its motto "Bring It. Share It. Live It." Event founder Focus on the Family (FOTF) encourages students of all ages not only to bring their Bibles to school Oct. 3, but to live their faith with targeted events scheduled throughout the year.

"For the first time this year, Focus on the Family will challenge Bring Your Bible to School Day participants to put into practice the 'Live It' portion of the event's 'Bring It. Share It. Live It' motto," FOTF said in a press release. "Students and their families will be equipped with monthly challenges -- specific, tangible actions they can take to live out their faith at school and in the community throughout the year."

More than 650,000 students participated in 2018, FOTF said of the event that drew 8,000 participants in 2014 in its first year. "Live It" events will be announced in 2019 and 2020, FOTF said.

Endorsing Bring Your Bible to School is veteran stock-car driver J.J. Yeley, whose car for the Sept. 20 and Sept. 28 Xfinity Series races in Richmond, Va., and Charlotte, N.C., respectively, is emblazoned with the Bring Your Bible to School logo and colors.

"Navigating a racetrack at high speed may take courage," Yeley said in an FOTF press release, "but in today's world, it can take far more courage to be a student and publicly share and live out your faith in school."

New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees, also endorsing this year's event, defended his faith after an attack accusing him of hatred against the LGBT community in New Orleans.

"There's been a lot of negativity spread about me in the LGBTQ community recently, based upon an article ... that led people to believe that somehow I was aligned with an organization that was anti-LGBTQ," Brees said in a Sept. 5 YouTube video linked in FOTF's press release. "I'd like to set the record straight. I live by two very simple Christian fundamentals, and that is, 'Love the Lord with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.' ... That means love all, accept all and respect all."

FOTF President Jim Daly applauded Brees' support of the event.

"Like Scripture teaches and Drew Brees referenced," Daly said, "as Christians, we believe we're called to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind -- and love your neighbor as yourself."

Candi Cushman, FOTF's director of education issues, founded Bring Your Bible to School to educate students about religious freedom.

"We were hearing from students and their families about how kids were told they couldn't read their Bible during free time at school, or that they should hide their Bible away in a locker because it might offend someone," Cushman has told BP. "We were also seeing that same sentiment echoed in the national headlines."

"We wanted to create a fun, empowering way to remind students of their basic religious-freedom rights and let them know that they don't have to hide their faith, or be ashamed of it,

when they walk in the school doors," Cushman has said. Bring Your Bible to School "resonates because it is something that's an easy, proactive and positive way for students to express their faith and start conversations."

Event information and promotional materials for students, parents, teachers and churches are available at bringyourbible.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' general assignment writer/editor. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists' concerns nationally and globally.

First-Person: The collegiate mission field

ONTARIO, CA. (BP) – When you think of the mission field, what comes to mind? Perhaps a foreign country or exotic locale, plane tickets and passports?

In the Great Commission, Jesus says the mission field is "all the world."

Let me encourage you to remember that college and university campuses are an important part of the mission field -- a mission field ripe for harvest. They exist in your town or city. You may even drive by one on your way to work.

Many of us spent years on the collegiate mission field. As college students, some of us were born again in college, reached by a Christian roommate, college ministry or local church. Others of us wandered from Christ while in college or experienced a crisis of faith. For good or ill, college is a life-changing experience.

Consider the size of this mission field, encompassing roughly 20 million college and university students enrolled in the United States. By one count, there are 235 countries in the world -- only 59 of which have a population of more than 20 million people. That means there are more college students in America than citizens of 75 percent of the world's countries.

About 1 million of these students are international students, many of them from countries with little Gospel witness. Humanly speaking, their best chance of hearing the Gospel and coming to faith is during their time at college in America.

Here at Gateway Seminary in California, I recently went to lunch with a new student from Japan. He had never heard of Jesus before coming to America. While attending a college in Southern California, he was invited to an event at a college ministry where he heard the Gospel and came to faith. Today, he is training to go back to Japan as a pastor.

We must not forget the mission field in our backyard. On or near these campuses, there are Southern Baptists ministers leading groups of students to reach other students with the Gospel, disciple new converts, connect them with local churches and lay a foundation for a lifetime of faith.

More than ever, the collegiate mission field is a large, diverse and often hostile environment for many Christians. On some campuses, open mockery and bullying of Christians and Christianity is tolerated and, in some contexts, encouraged or sanctioned. Yet on these campuses are men and women coming to faith, growing in faith and clinging to faith against the torrent of social pressure and spiritual opposition often masked as academic criticism.

Having noted the size, diversity and challenges of the collegiate mission field, allow me to suggest the following actions steps:

First, pray for college ministers. Find out the names of the college ministers on a campus near you and pray for them and the students in their ministry.

Second, investigate how your church can support college ministers. In some states, college ministers are self-funded missionaries. See how you as an individual or your church can support these missionaries or sponsor their outreach events. It may be as simple as opening your home to some college students for a cookout. Yours could be the only "American home" an international student is invited to during their time in the United States. What a privileged opportunity.

Third, if your church is near a college or university campus, consider how you might take a direct role in campus outreach. Find out if there is a Baptist collegiate ministry (sometimes called Baptist student ministry or Christian Challenge) and support it. But if none exists, then see if your church can stand in the gap. Years ago, a church I attended in the Los Angeles area started a collegiate ministry. It was a small group, but we saw several students come to faith in Christ and many more grow in their walk with Christ.

Lastly, do not forget about Baptist colleges and universities and other Christian schools. Every year, young men and women come to faith at schools like California Baptist University. These campuses draw unbelieving students, introduce them to the Gospel and graduate new Christians into the workforce.

Let me share a personal story. My wife grew up in a non-Christian home in Southern California. She received a scholarship to a private Christian school and for that reason decided to attend.

While a student, she was faithfully and lovingly evangelized by her Christian roommate, and she eventually accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She became the only person in her immediate family to graduate from college and the only Christian.

Colleges and universities are mission fields. Lives are being changed. The stakes are eternal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Groza is a vice president and associate professor of philosophy of religion at Gateway Seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention in Ontario, Calif. He is a contributing author to such books as "Marriage in the New Ministry Culture" and "Idealism and Christian Philosophy."

Cooperative Program: A missionary's gratitude

EDITOR'S NOTE: October is Cooperative Program Emphasis month in the Southern Baptist Convention. Learn more about CP at <http://www.sbc.net/cp>.

RICHMOND, VA (BP) – As I near the first anniversary of being elected president of the International Mission Board, I am incredibly encouraged about so many aspects of the Great Commission work of Southern Baptists.

At the top of the list are our missionaries. Over these months, my wife Michelle and I have met with more than half of our 3,700 Southern Baptist missionaries and their 2,880 children.

I recently received a message from one of them that communicates the sentiments I've found in all of them. The missionary wrote:

"Dr. Chitwood, I am leaving language class and am so humbled as I type this. There are so many people who allow me the opportunity to study at the seminary, serve, and now share the gospel here in this country. I am so appreciative of the SBC faithful who sacrifice so I can follow Jesus here. 'Thank You' for being a mouthpiece for the gospel so faithfully and stressing the importance of CP & LMCO [Lottie Moon Christmas Offering] giving so [unbelievers] can hear the Good News. I love you and I am forever grateful to be a Southern Baptist. To God Be the Glory!"

Not only does this missionary's message communicate the deep appreciation of all of our IMB personnel, it also communicates how the Cooperative Program provides for a holistic Great Commission effort.

For example, this brother mentions language class. Language learning is essential for the effectiveness of most cross-cultural mission efforts. So are things like a place to live, a means of transportation, a ministry budget and immunizations -- all provided by the generosity of Southern Baptists who give their tithes and offerings to the Lord in a local church that is committed to cooperative missions.

The missionary also mentions the privilege of studying "at the seminary." By God-given wisdom, Southern Baptists not only have established six seminaries delivering the highest quality of theological education and ministry training, but they also have supplemented each seminary budget with Cooperative Program scholarship dollars.

This generous investment by Southern Baptists keeps the cost of tuition low enough even for students hailing from lower socio-economic backgrounds to have access to a seminary degree without accumulating a mountain of debt that would, at the end of the day, prevent them from going to the mission field. Though not a cross-cultural overseas missionary, I've personally benefited from three degrees paid for, in part, by "the SBC faithful who sacrifice so I can follow Jesus" where He calls me to serve and lead.

What I also know about this particular missionary is that he went out from a healthy church where he served under a pastor whose ministry was blessed and strengthened by state convention staff members. The ministries of the state convention, funded by the Cooperative Program, helped equip and encourage the pastor, his staff and the church family as they sought to be effective witnesses in their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

No wonder he's grateful to be a Southern Baptist. And so am I. To God be the glory ... among the nations!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Chitwood is president of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board.

Cooperative Program: Sealed for missions

BIRMINGHAM, AL (BP) – As Southern Baptists, we have one thing that unites us. At our core is the passion to take the Gospel of Christ to those who have never heard. We work together

toward that common goal. As a child and young adult, my heart was sealed for missions. I am a product of the Cooperative Program.

The CP is Southern Baptists' unified plan of giving through which cooperating Southern Baptist churches give a percentage of their undesignated receipts in support of their respective state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention missions and ministries.

Nearly 40 years ago, my tiny Southern Baptist church participated in a World Missions Conference (later called On Mission Celebrations). That was my first opportunity to be up close and personal with missionaries. More than 70 percent of your national CP dollars are at work in the United States and around the world supporting missionaries.

A new pastor's wife introduced our church to Acteens and, through missions education as a youth, my life was changed forever. National WMU does not receive CP allocations; however, many state WMU offices are funded through state CP dollars.

I felt God's call on my life as a youth while serving on the missions camp staff of a state Baptist camp supported by the CP. Statewide youth events helped me mature as a Christ follower. During this time, I met many who served through our state convention office. They took an interest in me. Those heroes of the faith called me by name. It made a difference.

In college, I participated in a CP-funded Baptist Student Union ministry. It was one of the greatest discipling influences of my life. During this time, I also served on an associational WMU council. I developed as an associational WMU leader by attending statewide training events sponsored by the CP.

Every semester of seminary, a receipt showed a portion of my tuition was subsidized by a gift to the CP. As a newly appointed North American Mission Board missionary, I was challenged to always express appreciation for gifts to the CP. I needed no convincing. For nearly 20 years, I served on state convention staffs in Arkansas and Illinois. I saw firsthand how gifts to the CP meant people had the opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel of Christ.

Southern Baptists, I am grateful for the difference you made in my life through gifts to the CP. Thank you for your partnership in my home state, the United States and the world to proclaim the hope found only in Christ.

As we read Jesus' words in Acts 1: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Father, stir our hearts. May we have a passion for taking the Gospel to the lost. Free us from distractions. Give us the energy and resolve to work together to declare Your glory to the nations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Wisdom-Martin is executive director/treasurer of national WMU.

Standing on Our Knees

It was still dark outside as I rose to go to prayer. A chill in the room told me that it was going to be a frigid mile-walk to the square. I wanted to crawl back under the covers, but resisted. “I’ve been doing this for only three days while my Ukrainian friends have done it every day for five years,” I rebuked myself.

Leaving the hotel, I picked my way around frozen piles of ice and deep muddy puddles, bent my head away from the wind, wrapped my scarf a little tighter, and walked in the early morning light to Freedom Square in Kharkov. It was only 26 degrees with fresh snow falling and a bitter wind beating at my face, but I arrived to find big smiles, hearty handshakes, and warm cheek-kisses from a jovial group who seemed not to notice the cold at all. The contagious joy warmed me from inside out and made me glad I’d come.

But every day? For five years? I don’t know if I could do it. What compels these people to get up early and kneel in the snow? Why is it so important to meet together when they could whisper a prayer from the warmth of their beds?

Call to Prayer

In March of 2014 tanks and guns and men with masks appeared on the streets of Kharkov, Ukraine, throwing everything into upheaval and threatening the twenty-three-year religious freedom that had nurtured this post-Communist generation. Nearby cities of Lugansk and Donetsk were also under attack by separatists, but those battling in Kharkov didn’t know what they were up against.

Pastors and evangelical leaders put out a call for prayer—seven o’clock every morning, in the city square, for anyone who wanted to fight the real battle taking place for their city—the spiritual battle. Within a week, a hundred and fifty to two hundred believers showed up to fight on their knees because they remembered the spiritual darkness that shadowed their land under Communism. This wasn’t a political battle, it was and is a spiritual battle of epic proportion as their freedom to worship, meet together as churches, pray publicly, and share their faith with others was all being threatened.

“This is the generation of the children whose fathers were killed for their faith, whose fathers spent most of their time in prison for their faith. We knew the real face of Communism, and it was trying to come back. We were standing on our knees, and we said, ‘Lord, we don’t know what to do. Our eyes are on you, Lord.’ The only hope was on the Lord,” said Pastor V, a Baptist pastor and one of the leading organizers of the prayer meeting.

During the seventy-two-year Communist rule, evangelical churches and activities were outlawed. Ukrainians who preached, taught from Scripture, or shared the gospel were forced underground and severely persecuted. Two generations of children grew up being taught in school that there was no God. After WWII, conditions were especially dangerous. Baptists and other Protestant believers in the USSR were compulsively sent to mental hospitals, were forced to endure trials and imprisonment, and were even deprived of their parental right in some cases.

After years of praying and paying dearly for their faith, God brought religious freedom to the country. Since that time Ukraine has become the Bible Belt of Eastern Europe. It is the hub of evangelical life throughout the former Soviet Union, leading the way in new churches and sending missionaries.

In contrast, the still-occupied territory in Eastern Ukraine is presently seeing the same attitude toward evangelicals that they remember all too well from their childhood. In the wake of the 2014 takeover by separatists, evangelical churches have been closed and threatened with fines in the main cities in the occupied territory.

Now, when these brothers and sisters gather, they pray for those in the war zone and for long-lasting peace, knowing that it will only come if God’s spirit moves to bring people to repentance and faith in Jesus.

This is why Ukrainians pray every day, on their knees, regardless of the weather.

“At this point, I’d be afraid not to pray,” said pastor V. “We know what’s at stake.”

Prayer Lessons

Joe Ragan and Linda Gray, who serve in Kharkov as IMB missionaries, lived through the scariest times of the invasion. Joe had to flee his home in the war zone in 2014, leaving all his earthly possessions behind. Linda was in Kharkov, then and now, and remembers almost fleeing the city in fear during those days. God used this prayer group—their fellowship and faithfulness—to keep Linda grounded.

“In some ways I was in awe of my Ukrainian brothers and sisters and their passion for prayer, only watching from afar. But after a short time, I found myself kneeling alongside my friends. I

always rose up from the time of prayer with a sense of knowing I was still exactly where I was meant to be,” she said.

Hebrews 11 is a roll call of those who came before us, an encouragement to learn from those who exemplified faith. Though the Ukrainians on the square are not figures of the past, they are present day examples of faith in a world not so different from our own. As Joe and Linda can testify, they have a lot to teach us. As conflict rises and anti-Christian rhetoric begins to influence the culture where we live, might we be wise to follow the example of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters? What might we learn from these faithful pray-ers?

1. Start with repentance.

When the events of March 2014 took place, the Ukrainian church felt it was a wakeup call and was strongly convicted that they had not been already praying for their country and their leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-3). In the twenty-three-year period after Communism, enthusiasm had waned, and the church had quickly become complacent.

“When we started praying at the square, I had to repent, because I hadn’t been praying for our president or our government. Because we didn’t like them, we didn’t pray, even though we are Christians and the Bible tells us to pray,” said Nadia, my translator and a pastor’s wife in Kharkov. Now they pray every day for those in power over them, whether they like them or not.

2. Pray in times of peace.

Even though the immediate threat of violence has passed in Kharkov, the dedicated group (about twenty people now) continues to meet and pray faithfully. Through the events that took place five years ago, their eyes were opened to the threat of danger and the privilege of peace. They prayed frantically for safety from immediate danger. Now when they gather, they pray not only for God’s blessings, but for revival in their churches and on their streets so that God’s name can be known to all Ukrainians.

3. Pray even in the midst of social or political pressure to stop.

When the prayer group began in 2014, they were threatened by soldiers and violence as well as policemen who said they had to disperse or face jail. “In the first days when we began to pray in the square, we were afraid because we knew that we might be beaten,” said Nina, an Orthodox believer who has been a faithful pray-er since the beginning.

The fears weren’t imagined. In Donetsk, where the battle also raged, a prayer tent was set up, and the leader was beaten and hospitalized. He later died.

“We have to stand on our knees and overcome our fears,” said Ivan, an eighty-year-old man who arises at 5:30 every morning to travel to the square and pray. “You must understand that when you kneel in prayer, big things happen. God gave us power to overcome fear.”

4. Join with other denominations to seek God together.

Two of the founding members of this prayer group were an Orthodox priest and Pastor V, a Baptist. The fear of war brought believers of all denominations together in a new and unique way. Pastor V said that these “prayer friends” made their Christian world wider and helped them see what God is doing. No one ever asks a new pray-er what church they belong to. All are welcomed. “The church gathered, and Christians came out together,” said Nina. “On the square, the church became one.”

5. Know that the sweet fellowship of prayer is worth the effort.

Despite long travel routes and bad weather, the ones who come together each day now depend on the encouragement and fellowship of communal prayer. The big smiles and hugs and laughter among the group make it obvious that the joy is greater than the inconvenience. Pastor V says the practice has become a welcomed routine and a great start to the day and makes them stronger in their spirit.

“Whatever the weather is, after prayer and fellowship with brothers and sisters, moreover, with God almighty, I just fly back home on the wings of faith,” Ivan said.

As I rise from my kneeling position, my toes are a little numb and, well, honestly, I’m freezing. But it doesn’t really matter because my heart is warm and full of gratitude for the witness of these people.

I live in Prague, Czech Republic, the atheist capital of Europe. There is a group that meets every morning in the center and prays. I’ve never been because I’m not a ‘morning person,’ a reason that seemed legitimate until now. Today, I decide, I will join the group of pray-ers in Prague one day soon, and as we pray for our city, I will also be praying for Kharkov and thanking God for the fellowship of standing on our knees together. Will you pray for your city?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Leigh is a writer with IMB, living in Central Europe. She has joined others in her city for prayer after being inspired with the faithfulness and fortitude of Ukrainian Christians.

As a disciple-maker, I'm not the whole story

I first met Khalid* through an online follow-up request, a way some people seek answers for their troubled souls.

We have seen our opportunities to share the gospel in our area gradually change over the past couple of years, with a new openness that has not been present for many generations. We are now increasingly having open conversations in coffee shops, malls, or while sitting on park benches, about the hope that lives within us and how that allows us to live and serve with joy.

We have seen that there are two distinct thresholds in a Muslim's decision to follow Jesus—the point of accepting that Jesus is Lord, and the “all in” point of baptism. Both are critical statements in their lives, with baptism being the “no turning back” line in the sand.

Discipleship looks very different here. It is extremely rare for a person of a Muslim background to just up and “accept the Lord as his Savior.” The much more common route is through watching YouTube videos or television programs, establishing a relationship with a believer, either a foreigner or another national, and then probing that believer with questions about Christianity. We are often meeting with people like this for months or even for years as they weigh the cost of leaving everything behind and taking up the cross to follow Jesus.

Let me use Khalid as an example. Before we first met, I had heard about him and his walk of faith up to that time. I was told that he was a new believer who was looking for someone to help him grow in his faith. He had been on a three-year faith journey that spanned three countries and encounters with several believers. The first time we met, I asked him to tell me his story. He was a delightful young man who was sincere about knowing more about Jesus and what it looked like to live as a Christ follower. Together with other believers, we dug into the Word each week and answered his multitude of questions—some of which I had never been asked before.

What caught me off guard was his proclamation that he didn't actually become a true believer until after several months of our discipling him.

As the weeks turned into months and the questions and discussions got deeper, we could see Khalid's faith growing. It was not long before he was pleading with me to baptize him. On that momentous day, as Khalid gave his testimony to the small group of believers gathered in the room, he outlined his walk of faith in coming to Jesus. What caught me off guard was his proclamation that he didn't actually become a true believer until after several months of our discipling him.

The faith walk from Islam to Christianity is most often a long one. We may be given the privilege of fifteen minutes of sharing our faith or fifteen months of discipleship time. We are not his or

her whole story. We may get to see them baptized, but most often we will not. We desire to use every moment and opportunity that the Master gives us to share the hope that is within us, with gentleness and respect. The rejoicing will be in heaven.

It is now up to Khalid and others who have taken the plunge and gone all in with their faith to do any future baptisms. Someone else planted the seed, and I got to water it. God can now make it grow into a vibrant and healthy fruit-bearing tree.

* Name changed

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mick Mocha has lived in several countries in North Africa and the Middle East for the past 25 years. He enjoys scuba diving, tennis, and sitting in coffee shops with the locals talking about life.

Cody Cowboy Church's videos lift its witness

CODY, WY (BP) – Cody Cowboy Church brings the "Wild Wild West" into the 21st century with its video recording ministry at each summer night's rodeo in the famed Wyoming town.

It's a ministry that started as a result of the discerning eye of church planting pastor Pat Alphin's wife, Renee.

"We started out [recording] behind the bucking chutes," said Alphin, a former bull rider. "One of the contestants asked me to video his ride one night, so he could watch himself to see how he could improve.

"Renee told me later that night, 'If we had a camera, what a ministry that would be.'"

Athletic skill improves when riders watch video of their performance and see what they did wrong, Alphin said, which is as true for rodeo contestants as for football players.

"When we first got up here [in 2016] we could see the multifaceted ministry we could do here, in the community, with ranchers, at the rodeos and with tourists," Alphin told Baptist Press. "We get opportunities to share the Gospel with people from all over the world."

Cody, an hour from the east entrance to Yellowstone National Park, claims its moniker -- Rodeo Capital of the World -- because it has one of the world's longest-running rodeos and is the only place in the nation that hosts a rodeo every night of the summer, from June 1 through Aug. 31. In addition to its nightly video ministry, the church plant hosts rodeo riders in its all-male, 10-bed bunkhouse, and ministers in various ways to the community, tourists and ranch hands.

The Alphins were given a video camera by East Mountain Baptist Church in Gilmer, Texas, and bought a 32-inch television they set up where the contestants congregate under the bleachers.

"We started videoing the rough stock riders, the bull riders, bronc and bareback riders," Alphin said. "Started coaching them. Then someone [from the bleachers above] spilled a beer on the TV."

Now Cody Cowboy Church has a 65-inch television screen and computers in a big blue tent behind the bucking chutes. Two video cameras positioned around the rodeo grounds log each contestant, who can view replays, slow motion and multiple views for on-the-spot analysis as well as next-day coaching.

At 9 a.m. each day, contestants gather in the church's bunkhouse to watch the previous night's rides. Alphin was providing some coaching, but "the PRCA [Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association] caught wind of this, this year, and they've been coming up through the season and helping us coach," the pastor said.

Alphin's ministry roots date to high school when he rode bulls in Mesquite, Texas, and then competed on the professional -- PRCA -- circuit from 1974-1980.

"I was raised Southern Baptist but just had the religion part of it," Alphin said. "When I got into a relationship with Jesus, all my bull riding friends fled."

The Alphins, who had planted two cowboy churches in Texas, arrived in Cody in May 2016 and began building relationships with townspeople, officials and participants in the nightly rodeo. Four people were present for the first worship service in January 2017, including the Alphins, but soon there were 20, and by summer 2017 there were as many as 50.

"When winter hit we stayed at 40 to 50 and one Sunday this summer we had three baptisms and 103 people in service," Alphin said. "We average 60 to 70, though."

Financial stats tell of similar growth. In 2017, Cody Cowboy Church received \$23,534 in undesignated offerings, and gave \$807 -- 3.4 percent -- to missions through the Cooperative Program, the way Southern Baptists work together in state conventions and throughout the world. In 2018, the church received \$41,530 and gave \$2,696 -- 6.5 percent -- through CP.

"We believe in the Cooperative Program," Alphin said. "It is an opportunity to be a part of the greater global plan even though we are a mission church with limited resources."

Church members park cars during the weeklong Cody Stampede Rodeo June 30 through July 4, assisted this year by mission teams from First Baptist Church in Atlanta and Mobberly Baptist Church in Longview, Texas.

Cody Cowboy Church and the two mission teams also fed breakfast to participants at each of three parades -- July 2, 3 and 4 -- and served three meals a day to all the contestants and workers at the rodeo between June 30 and July 4.

Cody Cowboy Church also ministers to area ranches, recently baptizing five people from the Moon Crest Ranch near Cody. Last spring the church hosted an appreciation dinner for teachers at Cody's junior and senior high schools.

"We came to Cody with no preconceived ideas on what this ministry would look like and let God define the ministry and mission field," Alphin said.

"He does an amazing job at that when we let Him have the control. We have been so surprised and in our wildest thoughts could not have come up with or implemented this plan we have seen unfold."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

'Dirty Jobs' star helps ministry transform community

NEW ORLEANS, LA (BP) – Brenda Lomax-Brown received a surprise visit from television personality Mike Rowe, who showed up with a film crew to give her a \$20,000 check and a new playground for the local ministry she directs in the Hollygrove-Dixon neighborhood of New Orleans.

During the Aug. 5 Facebook-based episode of "Returning the favor: A forgotten neighborhood fights back," Rowe, former host of the popular TV show "Dirty Jobs," accompanied Lomax-Brown for a tour of her neighborhood, while a team -- without her knowledge -- built a \$30,000 playground in fewer than four hours near the Life Transformation Center. The center is a

ministry of Celebration Church, a Southern Baptist church with campuses in the New Orleans area, Baton Rouge and the Northshore.

Rowe then brought Lomax-Brown back for a surprise unveiling.

"All day, driving around with you, was an absolute blast," Rowe said in the episode. "And the more I got to know you, the more I thought, 'this really is a woman who will go to city hall and get out the hammer and start making all kinds of trouble.' But we really don't want you to have to do that. We really want to do something for the community, and we really want to thank you for everything you've done so far."

Nearly speechless, the retired Air Force officer gave credit to Christ for the unexpected blessing.

"Oh, Jesus, thank you," she said moments after seeing the new playground. "Lord, have mercy."

She finally managed to say, "Keep believing in your dreams because they can become a reality."

Since Celebration Church opened the Life Transformation Community Center in 2017, the ministry center has helped improve a community marked by poverty and violence.

Volunteers from Celebration Church and other local charities have provided tutoring and mentoring for children and teenagers, and job and life skills training for adults. The congregation also has spruced up yards, performed home renovations, cleaned up abandoned lots and helped dismantle abandoned homes.

"The residents will tell you Celebration Church has made quite a difference," pastor Dennis Watson told the Baptist Message. "We came in to serve and help. People see children, teens and adults being helped on a regular basis by Celebration members -- at the Life Transformation Center and throughout the community. The community has become a safer place and a community that people are now willing to move into. We've been able to help children and teens become better students; and, then we have had adults who have said, 'I have hope for my family because of Celebration Church's efforts in this community.'"

Watson said the Life Transformation Community Center has helped give his church members a renewed passion for service.

"They have an outlet in helping the inner city community they never would have had before," Watson said. "We are seeing people's lives touched and transformed in the community. And we are seeing the lives of our people changed as they go down to Hollygrove/Dixon to serve."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Blackwell writes for the Baptist Message (baptistmessage.com), newsjournal of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

I Don't Want to Be Thirsty Anymore

I have been feeling such thirst, and I don't want to be thirsty anymore," Eugenio told me after our Bible study at breakfast.

Eugenio and I were introduced by a local language school to help us learn each other's language. We hit it off well and discovered that we had much in common. We were close to the same age and shared similar experiences in business. We were just two men talking about life experiences, trials, and life in general. We drank a lot of coffee, shared some meals, played some basketball, and hung out regularly. We were becoming friends.

We quickly began to share deeper struggles, concerns, and beliefs. He shared some personal history and experiences about Mexican culture, religion, and many other things. I shared my testimony of how my brokenness brought me to God and how God's sufficient grace through a personal relationship with Jesus transformed my entire life, my marriage, my desires, and the trajectory of my future—leading me from the business world and into international missions.

There was a wrestling match going on in Eugenio's heart. He already knew there was more to life than money, success, and whatever comes next. Having seen transformation in the life of his sister, who had heard the gospel and put her faith in Jesus last year, Eugenio was very interested in hearing more. He was searching for truth. Eugenio was discovering the difference between religion and a personal relationship with Jesus.

We began to search the Scriptures together and meet for breakfast on Wednesday mornings with the pastor and other local Christians from an IMB church plant. We studied the book of John together, and through discipleship and Eugenio's own personal study, Jesus revealed himself to Eugenio as the way, the truth, and the life.

After breakfast with Pedro—a new believer—and me, Eugenio said, "I have been feeling such thirst, and I don't want to be thirsty anymore." Then Eugenio prayed to receive Christ, right there in the coffee shop.

A few weeks later, after another breakfast chat, our new brother in Christ said, "I always felt like God was way up there, so distant from me, but now I know that he lives in me."

Thank you, Southern Baptists, for your continued prayers and support. God is working here in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shelton Johnson is studying Spanish so he can serve IMB workers in South America by helping to meet their families' logistical needs.

Religious liberty gaining momentum in court?

PHOENIX, AZ (BP) – The Arizona Supreme Court last week rebuked states and municipalities that overzealously enforce anti-discrimination laws.

The state's highest court said the city of Phoenix cannot apply a nondiscrimination ordinance to the designers of custom wedding invitations. In a 5-3 decision, the court found Joanna Duka and Breanna Koski, owners of Brush and Nib Studio, have the right to decline to create custom invitations for same-sex weddings. Justice Andrew Gould, writing for the majority, put forward a sweeping defense of free speech and religious liberty. See related Baptist Press story.

"The rights of free speech and free exercise, so precious to this nation since its founding, are not limited to soft murmurings behind the doors of a person's home or church, or private conversations with like-minded friends and family," Gould wrote. "These guarantees protect the right of every American to express their beliefs in public."

Duka and Koski, who are Christians, have clients sign a contract with language noting that the calligraphers will not do work "that communicates ideas or messages ... that contradict Biblical truth, demean others, endorse racism, incite violence, or promote any marriage besides marriage between one man and one woman, such as same-sex marriage."

In 2016, they filed a preemptive lawsuit against the Phoenix ordinance, which levies jail time and fines to places of public accommodation for violating a nondiscrimination mandate that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes.

Gould dismissed attempts to portray the case as primarily about discrimination. Dissenting justices compared Duka and Koski's concern to historic examples of prejudice, from the Jim Crow laws of the South to Phoenix shopkeepers posting "No Mexicans allowed" signs. Gould

called such arguments "a one-sided analysis that effectively deprives plaintiffs of their fundamental right to express their beliefs."

He added, "No law, including a public accommodations law, is immune from the protections of free speech and free exercise."

The decision offers persuasive reasoning to other courts, said Alliance Defending Freedom's Jonathan Scruggs, who represented Duka and Koski.

"The freedom the court upheld for Joanna and Breanna today is good for everyone," he said following the announcement of the ruling. "Americans disagree about many issues, but we should agree on the freedom to disagree."

Scruggs said courts hearing similar disputes have already cited the decision -- including the case of Hands On Originals, a print shop that declined to design and print T-shirts for a gay pride festival. That case is pending before the Kentucky Supreme Court. Attorneys have also cited the decision in the appeal of florist Barronelle Stutzman's case to the U.S Supreme Court and a third lawsuit involving Colorado baker Jack Phillips.

"Duka and Koski's beliefs about same-sex marriage may seem old-fashioned, or even offensive to some," Gould wrote in his ruling. "But the guarantees of free speech and freedom of religion are not only for those who are deemed sufficiently enlightened, advanced, or progressive. They are for everyone."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve West writes for WORLD Digital, a division of WORLD Magazine (www.wng.org) based in Asheville, NC. Used by permission.

First-Person: Why denominations & networks matter

AMARILLO, TX (BP) – Many younger pastors often feel two interesting and competing impulses.

First, there is a growing sense that denominations aren't that important. Second, there is a strong desire for relationships with others in ministry and a willingness to participate in affinity-based networks.

Traditional denominational membership and involvement has declined over the past few years, and yet at the same time new networks have emerged and grown quickly.

I think this reveals both young leaders' eagerness to connect with other pastors and churches and also their desire for those networks to be meaningful and effective. In other words, young leaders are willing to participate in denominations and networks so long as they see the value in them.

As a Southern Baptist, I have seen the good, the bad and the ugly in our particular network of churches. We are in many ways like a large (sometimes dysfunctional) family. And yet I continue to cooperate denominationally. I see value in partnership with other churches.

Here are five reasons why denominations, conventions, associations, cooperatives, collectives, networks and other affiliations matter:

1. Theological identity

Denominations are inherently confessional. There is something powerful when a group of churches say together in unity, "This we believe." It says to those inside and outside the denomination what it is that brings these particular churches together.

My children and I love to eat sugar-filled cereal in the mornings. My wife prefers healthy cereal that tastes like cardboard. I'm thankful for cereal boxes that clearly label what kind of cereal is in the box. Because of the label on the box, I know what product I am getting.

Denominations are a way identifying the beliefs of a certain group of churches -- a way of identifying what's in the box, so to speak. Labels, however much our postmodern culture hates using them when it comes to theological boundaries, are a clear way of being identified as believing X, Y or Z.

This is helpful for those who are trying to decide which church to join. Theological commitments distinguish groups of churches from one another. Clear confessional statements are also helpful for churches and pastors because they make it easier to identify with other churches and pastors of like faith and practice. They help the church at large avoid divisive disagreements about theology because those who are in the denomination or network already know what each other believes about the fundamentals of the Christian faith and the particulars of denominational identity.

2. Missiological partnership

There's an African proverb that says, "if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." Put another way: We can do more together than we can apart. This is a basic principle of denominationalism. Denominations afford churches the chance to work together in common endeavors such as theological education, missions, church planting and disaster relief.

As a Southern Baptist, it is a privilege to partner with over 47,000 other churches across the country. We pool our resources in a giving system known as the Cooperative Program. This allows us to plant new churches around the world, fully fund thousands of North American and international missionaries through our mission entities, and train thousands of future pastors and ministers through our seminaries. The Southern Baptist ecosystem also facilitates cooperative partnerships between churches at a local and a statewide level.

3. Ministerial training

Denominations often create various avenues for ministerial, theological and practical training, including institutions like colleges, universities and seminaries, as well other pathways. Whether through conferences, coaching or formal education, pastors and others often find that some of the best theological and ministerial training in the world is available through their denomination.

In the Southern Baptist Convention, training is available through denominational colleges and seminaries, national entities and state conventions. Personally, I benefited from attending a college affiliated with my state convention and then a Southern Baptist seminary.

As important and as helpful as that training was, I have found training provided through my state convention and other national entities to be just as helpful. In fact, I found that training provided through the convention often had a practicality to it that was sometimes lacking in more formal institutional settings.

Conversely, training provided through our formal institutions provided expertise and depth that I greatly appreciated. Taken together, my denomination has been a tremendous source of training both for me as a pastor and for the laypeople in the congregations I have served.

4. Pastoral accountability

Denominations have the ability to provide a broad-based network of support and accountability for churches and pastors. This sometimes takes place through formal means, such as when a denomination disassociates from a church for a theological or functional reason. Sadly, this hasn't been done frequently enough. However, the framework exists within voluntary networks to be able to enforce membership standards.

More commonly, denominational accountability takes place informally. If a pastor is erring theologically or personally, the pastors around him can admonish, rebuke, challenge, encourage, pray for and approach him both with a level of concern and agreed-upon intentionality that would not be there without a mutual commitment to be bonded together in a relationship.

5. Ecclesiastical fellowship

Ministry is tough. It is often lonely. Denominations allow pastors and churches to have an avenue of fellowship that often doesn't exist otherwise. Pastors can draw strength and encouragement from one another. Churches can enjoy the broader unity we share in Christ as we fellowship together. Whether it's a group of local pastors meeting for lunch every month or larger groups of churches or pastors meeting together for annual gatherings and meetings, God often uses these opportunities for fellowship to renew, refresh and reinvigorate us.

Together, churches that come together demonstrate to a watching world the power of the Gospel to reconcile and unify people and churches.

Denominations can be a source of frustration at times, but they also can be a tremendous blessing. They allow us to embody the spirit of Ecclesiastes 4:9-12:

"Two are better than one because they have a good reward for the efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken."

We are truly better together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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