

First-Person: Jeff Iorg, a difference maker

Jeff Iorg has been unanimously elected as the new president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee. In one way, this is not a surprising event. In another way, given our recent past experiences, this is almost miraculous.

Jeff Iorg, center, was elected SBC Executive Committee president/CEO on March 21, 2024, in Dallas.

I see Jeff Iorg as a true difference maker as our new leader in this most important position. He has a resume that speaks volumes about his leadership gifts. As a longtime president of a seminary and a well-known author and preacher/public speaker, Jeff is well known in SBC life.

When he was nominated, I indicated that he and I have been friends and colleagues for almost 26 years. During that time, I have witnessed how the Lord has used him in strategic positions of influence. In my mind, the Executive Committee made the right choice, especially at this juncture in our history.

What do I expect of him? Several words come to mind. Faithful is one of them. He is the epitome of faithfulness to God and to his calling. *Excellence* is another word. In all things, Jeff strives for excellence. Difference maker is my favorite description.

Jeff will seek to provide clarity as to our mission. In this time of confusion, we are in much need for someone – or someones – to offer the kind of clarity to see us through some divisive issues and difficult situations. Jeff is that kind of leader.

Any church or group can experience what the military calls “mission creep.” In the fog of war, this often happens to the military. How do you operate or function when you cannot see clearly?

Perhaps we are in a fog as Southern Baptists. We need someone who can help provide clarity so we can reaffirm our mission as a people of faith.

Jeff Iorg will seek to promote stability at the SBC Executive Committee. I think in looking back at the history of the EC we would be hard pressed to ascertain a time when stability is more needed than now.

The Executive Committee has struggled in recent years in ways in which many of us would never have imagined. Good people have different views as to why this has happened, but the most essential matter before us is how can this important leadership position regain stability. A leader who provides clarity as to our mission and seeks to promote stability will be one who can lead best in the present and in the future.

Granted, this clarity and stability will not happen overnight. No one leader can do this alone. Dr. Iorg will need assistance, but he is the kind of person who will find that help as needed.

Jeff Iorg will seek to personify unity among our people. Clarity leads to stability, and then there is an opportunity for unity. Of course, unity does not mean uniformity. After all we are Baptists. However, I believe that 95-98 percent of us agree on the major issues. I believe Jeff Iorg is the kind of leader who will remind us of that reality.

Like you, I will be praying for Dr. Jeff Iorg as he assumes his new duties. I commit to being a good partner with him in Great Commission ministries. I will do my best to help him to be effective as our leader.

The Biblical phrase *“For such a time as this...”* is often quoted, but I am not sure that I have known a time when this is more applicable than right now. We are with you, Jeff Iorg. We want to be a part of the team of difference makers for today and tomorrow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Lance writes for Baptist Press.

A different day

HARVEY – One would have to be living under a rock somewhere to not realize we are living in a different day. We are living in a day where we can see a lot of the verses in God’s Word that speak on the latter days playing out all around us.

Even the unsaved seem to recognize that there is something different about the days that we are living in. We can see a lot of similarity in 2 Timothy 3 where it says that perilous times will come:

For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lover of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.

This is quite a list, and we know that these things have always been part of our sin nature, but we see an increase of these things in our society to where it is out of control. You see an occurrence of these things happening in a split second on your phone, and there doesn’t seem to be any escape to a normal world.

A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with an unsaved friend of mine that had made the statement "I would love just a little sense of normalcy in the world."

People cannot put their finger on what is going on. The world is changing so fast, and we that know Him, know that his return is so close.

So, looking at this, we in Christ, should understand we no longer live in a country or a world that has a biblical worldview. Without a biblical view you have confusion, disorder, and chaos. It is like trying to put together this beautiful jigsaw puzzle, but someone has put in other pieces that don't fit. The picture just doesn't make sense. This is why so many people are losing hope. We see a huge increase in drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and increased suicide in our culture and it's not slowing down.

We that have come to faith in Christ, been born again, drank from the well, and tasted the Living Water, been set free, that have been forgiven, that have been redeemed have the answer...the truth which is in Jesus Christ.

We have been given the mystery to the Kingdom. If ever there was a time in the history of the church, the body of Christ, that the harvest is plentiful, I think it's now. I can tell you this truly excites me. We have a world that is hungry for the truth.

However it's also a time for me to fully understand 1 Peter 3:15, *But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear*; I was so convicted when I heard someone say, when is the last time someone asked about the hope inside me.

As a pastor I have come to understand this as one of my main missions, to train the laborers. There are some great resources, and they are at our fingertips. But the one place where we must begin is in the heart. When God started to change my heart for the lost, it started to be my focus. Someone told me recently that the Pastor can imprint his heart on the congregation. This is where I as a pastor want to lead, by my Savior every step of the way.

These are exciting times, and we can see it if we keep our focus on Him and not the world. One of the things we find in his Word is when God moved in miraculous ways, the people moved first. We are living in a different day, but they are exciting days. These are the days to be so close to the Savior and to be led by the Holy Spirit. In words of encouragement, don't miss out on being a part of His Kingdom work. This is where you will find JOY.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Sego is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force. For the last 22 years he has worked in many parts of the ministry working along some great pastors as an adult Sunday school teacher, working as part of evangelistic team and worship leader. 2 years ago, he answered the call to pastor Harvey Baptist Church where he serves today. He also has been with the Michigan Department

of Correction for the past 26 years as a correction officer, and the last nine as a trades instructor with the Education Department.

Determining the readiness of a church to be revitalized: Key questions to ask

Here is the reality:

Many declining churches recognize they are struggling and in need of help. They know things are not looking up and that something needs to be done. They know things can't stay exactly the same.

The question is, how does a potential pastor and leader distinguish between a church that is truly ready to do what it takes to turn things around, and a church that isn't ready? In other words, how do you determine whether a church is actually ready to be revitalized?

One of the keys in this assessment of readiness pertains to giving up control and trusting the Lord to lead them in a new direction. This will involve asking very specific questions that will help you get to this congregation's heart. These questions will help determine whether the time is right to help revitalize this church.

There are three primary types of questions that need to be asked to those inside the church when assessing its readiness for revitalization. The first is what I'm calling questions that lead to joyful celebration. These are the easiest questions to ask. These five questions help the remaining folks celebrate the good of their church – of what God has done and is doing in their congregation. We start with this type of question in order to encourage them and begin to build trust with them.

Questions that lead to joyful celebration (Easy)

1. In your opinion, what are the three best things about the church?
2. What do you think the average person in the church would say is the best thing about the church?
3. What is your dream for how the church might 10 years from now?
4. Who is the favorite pastor in the history of the church and why?
5. What is your fondest memory of the church?

At this point, we begin to push in a little bit more. With these questions, we are moving from easy to moderate in terms of comfort level for those answering. These 13 questions will be a bit more difficult and uncomfortable to answer. They're not quite as hard as we'll get to in a moment, but these questions lovingly force individuals to reflect honestly on where they are as a church.

Questions that lead to honest reflection (Moderate)

1. How are decisions made in the church (both formally and informally)?
2. If a big decision needs to be made, to whom do the members look for the blessing or approval?
3. What was the biggest mistake made by any of your previous pastors?
4. What is something I might say from the pulpit that would cause a number of members to cringe? In other words, what are some of the "hot button" issues for this congregation?
5. How does church membership work in this church? What are the expectations laid upon church members?
6. Do church members generally (and happily) follow the lead of their pastors and leaders?
7. What items in the current services are non-negotiable? What other items are acceptable and have been featured in the past?
8. Would the congregation have any objection to the pastor working on sermons from outside the church? A coffee shop? My home study?
9. What is the policy and general understanding regarding the pastor's days off and holidays?
10. Do you think it would be relatively easy for a young family to settle into the church/town? What challenges might my wife and the children face?
11. Does this church network with other churches? Who? How?
12. What are the spoken and unspoken expectations for the pastor in this church?
13. What are the spoken and unspoken expectations for the pastor's wife and children in this church?

This third and final group of questions are the most difficult and uncomfortable questions to both ask and answer, but they are the most important. Each of these questions will probably have follow up questions needed to press in further. As you will see, these 15 questions shed light on the culture of the congregation, as well as some of the sacred cows that may exist.

Questions that help produce necessary evaluation (Difficult)

1. In your opinion, what are the three biggest challenges in the church right now?
2. What would the average person say is the biggest problem in the church right now?
3. How would you sum up the spiritual health of the congregation in regard to prayer, a heart for evangelism, love for one another, etc.?

4. What portion of the church is most happy with direction the church has been going and why? What portion of the church is least happy with the direction the church has been going and why?
5. In your opinion, what was the best quality of the former pastor? What was the most difficult or challenging quality?
6. Why did your previous pastor leave? How long did he serve the church?
7. How long have pastors typically stayed in this congregation? Over the past 30 years, how long is the pastor's average tenure?
8. What do you think he would say was the biggest difficulty in pastoring this church?
9. What are some of the "sacred cows" I need to be aware of?
10. How well does this congregation do with change? Can you share some of the changes that have been made (big or small) in this congregation in the past few years? How has that been received?
11. If I was your pastor, what advice would you give me in order to most effectively lead some kind of change for everyone? What would be the appropriate process to do so, in your opinion?
12. What has been the biggest conflict in the church in the past five, 10, 20 years? What was the biggest conflict in the history of the church? Has there ever been a church split? What were the issues involved?
13. What was the topic of your last contentious business meeting? What was the disagreement about? How was the issue settled?
14. How well does this church handle conflict? Can you share an example of a conflict in the past two years and how it was handled?
15. What is potentially the most divisive issue in the church (practical, doctrinal, personal)?

Ask good questions ... listen humbly and carefully

I've heard it said that the No. 1 job of a leader is always to *name reality*. What we must do when we're assessing a church's readiness for revitalization is to identify where the church *really* is, now. What are the real strengths? What are the real challenges? What are the potential pitfalls? What does this church need to become healthy again? These are the types of questions that must be wrestled with in order to clearly see the reality of the situation.

This post originally appeared at [Mark's blog](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Written by Mark Hallock

Every season matters

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – Don't you love the first few warm days of spring after the long, cold, and dreary winter? I moved to Michigan from Florida almost 15 years ago. I lived in Florida my whole life and didn't realize how good I had it.

There is a reason it is called the "Sunshine State." After the first winter in Michigan, I realized how important it is to enjoy the sunny days in the wintertime, even if it is just recognizing them and soaking the sun in from the car windows. There is something lifegiving about the sunshine!

Over the last few years, God has been showing me how the winter season is important in our lives as well. When it comes to plants, perennials take advantage of the winter as a much-needed time of rest.

In late fall as winter approaches, perennial plants begin to prepare for freezing temperatures, dry weather, and water or nutrient shortage. Instead of continuing to try to grow in these conditions, the plants know to stop growing and save their energy until warmer weather returns. This also allows the plants' roots to continue to develop and thrive.

In Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NIV), Solomon writes,

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heaven.

I love this quote by Christy Nockles in her book, *The Life You Long For*:

"We love the marking of seasons and how we can trust that God is working in ways we cannot see. We know that every season is named with purpose. A season of sowing brings forth a season of harvest, just as the harsh cold of winter brings forth a season of dying... a necessary bridge to new life."

Sometimes we only validate the growth we can see in the moment, and we forget that the growth that we see is actually because of the work God has done in the winter seasons of our lives.

The winter season allows us time to rest and recharge. God didn't create us to always be producing and working. He established rhythms for us to follow, just as he set in creation. We have rhythms set for us daily by the sun and moon, and we know that we can't function without rest.

As the day comes to an end and the sun goes down, we begin to feel tired and ready for rest. This rest allows our bodies to recharge and be ready for the next day, just as the perennials follow their seasonal rhythms. There will be times in our lives that God is calling us to rest. We may not understand it in the moment, but God is wanting to do something in us during this

season. He may be healing us from a busy season, or He may be preparing us for something that is to come.

The winter season prunes away what we no longer need. If we want new growth to occur in the spring, the old must die. As winter approaches, we pull out all the dead plants to make room for the new growth to come up in the spring. In the winter seasons of our lives, we must trust that God is pruning away what we no longer need in order to do something new.

Isaiah 43:19 (NIV) says,

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?"

Next time you feel as if you are going through a winter season, remember that God has you in that season for a purpose and that He is working in your life. When we tuck away and allow ourselves to rest, God is able to show us things in our lives that need to be removed, changed, or surrendered.

Winter is a necessary season for new growth.

It recharges us.

It refocuses us.

It realigns us.

God is working in the dark and dreary season of winter, even when we don't see it. The fruit of the winter season will come. Stay faithful and abide in Christ and believe God will bring forth new growth in your life.

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!

Eclipsing our fears

PLYMOUTH – A total solar eclipse will take place at the Moon's ascending node on Monday, April 8, 2024, visible across North America, and dubbed the Great North American Eclipse by many in the media. Many of us here in Michigan will be able to see a partial eclipse, but for the closest place to see a full eclipse we would have to travel south into Ohio near Bloomville or Norwalk.

Solar and Lunar eclipses have been recorded in historical records, writings, and hieroglyphs for thousands of years. Accompanying many of those ancient records were hundreds of different myths and legends about the source, substance, and omens concerning these heavenly events.

Eclipses generated panic, fear and feelings of doom and impending destruction. A sense that the world would soon end and a great evil would follow the solar phenomenon. To cope with this unknown and inexplicable occurrence, many cultures would create myths and stories to explain and to rationalize these terrorizing episodes.

- In ancient Colombia the people could be found shouting and crying to the heavens that they would work harder and mend their evil ways.
- It is said that the Chippewa tried to shoot flaming arrows into the darkened sun to ignite its flame that had been extinguished.
- The Norse people imagined that the gods had placed Loki in chains and to secure revenge, he created two giant heavenly wolves in which one would swallow the sun and the other the moon.
- Those who at one time lived in Transylvania, had a similar perspective as did the ancient Columbians in that they believed an eclipse was the result of the angry Sun turning away from mankind because of its bad behavior.
- One that surprised me a bit is from the Benin people of West Africa. They believed that the sun and moon were male and female respectively and were very busy moving about the heavens, but when they came together, they turned out the lights for privacy.

Even today, a popular misconception is that solar eclipses can be a danger to pregnant women and their unborn children. In many cultures, young children and pregnant women are asked to stay indoors during a solar eclipse. Scientists and astronomers around the world have debunked any such claims. There is no scientific evidence that solar eclipses can affect human behavior, health, or the environment. Scientists, however, do emphasize that anyone watching a solar eclipse must protect their eyes. And I would highly advise you to use only certified eclipse viewing lenses if you want to take a glimpse of the celestial event.

SUNGLASSES WILL NOT DO! You could seriously damage your eyes otherwise.

So many times in life, the things which we do not understand can, as did eclipses in ancient times, generate panic, fear, feelings of doom and impending destruction. It may be a phone call

from your physician informing you of some invasive disease or renegade malignancy that has taken over your body. You don't understand its origin and to be honest, the medical experts are as perplexed as you.

An automobile accident takes place or an incident at work and your future becomes dark, foreboding and filled with fear.

World affairs and political chaos seem so out of control that fear of the future for yourself, and your loved ones has gripped your heart and soul like a giant boa constrictor, causing all faith and hope to be squeezed out like some mangled tube of toothpaste.

It's during these times of the unknown and misunderstood that we have the tendency to create myths that mollify our confusion and give reason to our ignorance. That's what we do in our frail, fragile and fallen condition. In place of trusting Him who is the Creator of all that is, and holds us in the palm of His hands, we generate excuses, explanations, and stories that have nothing to do with reality.

Proverbs 3:5 is clear when it says: Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

Looking back at the myths surrounding an eclipse has been quite enlightening and at times humorous. Yet, looking back deeply into my life and the myths I have created concerning the unknown and inexplicable, instead of trusting God, is not that funny.

There has never been a time when the God of all the universe has not provided for me and met me at the greatest point of my need. He holds the future and yes, He holds me! The old Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier said it well.

***I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death,
His mercy underlies.***

May we never forget the verse of a "new" song we sing.

***All my life You have been faithful.
All my life you have been so, so good.***

So no matter how dark it becomes or how frighteningly unknown the future may be, just know that He who is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End is still on the throne and in control.

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.

Michigan's diverse family

PLYMOUTH – I am halfway through exploring all of the language groups within our Michigan Baptist Church family, and I am loving every minute of it! I am reminded that we serve a great God with an enormous love for every nation, tribe, people, and language.

The Bible proves the Lord's love is for everyone.

- A diverse crowd of color and languages was stunned upon hearing the sacrifice Christ made on their behalf so they could receive eternal salvation in Christ. Acts 2:11 reports them saying, "We all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!"
- Peter, who always needed extra attention when learning a lesson from the Lord, made his announcement of a tremendous discovery about the inclusion of the Lord's love when in Acts 10:34-35 he said to a crowded room of people before their public profession of faith, "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right."
- One of the earliest mentions of God's promise of eternal love to the world was made to Abram, in Genesis 15:3 when he said, "All the families on the earth will be blessed through you."
- The Book of Revelation projects a startling image that grips my imagination when it says in Revelation 7:9-10, "After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation, and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a roar, Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!"

How Many Lives?

Look at this image and you will discover that during 2022, 7% of the population in Michigan was foreign born. That means that approximately 700,000 people in the state very likely speak a language other than English in their daily lives; that they may have different religious practices;

that they may have a long list of questions on how to live in the United States as a newcomer; and that they rarely if ever have been in the home of someone born in Michigan. Through the practice of hospitality and with an attitude of love, we have an opportunity to bridge relationships upon which we can share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others from around the world. What could you do for a foreign-born neighbor living near you? Dinner? Patio party? Invitation to an outing in the community? Coffee break to let them ask questions? Look at this as an opportunity to live a Book of Acts experience.

Where Are They From?

Study this pie-chart chart closely and it might surprise you to see from where the newest residents of Michigan are coming. Another side of the exploration is that everyone is not settling in Michigan's largest cities. There are small-towns with significant language groups. For instance, would it surprise you that back in 2020, the city of Coldwater reported that of the 10,000 people living in the city that over 2,000 were from the country of Yemen? That means that one in five residents in Coldwater are from Yemen. The pie-chart reveals that the three largest regions of the world contributing new residents to Michigan are the Americas with 23.5%, the Middle East with 19.2%, and South-Central Asia with 17.8%. The pie-chart reveals the rest of the story.

Arabic

This image shows you two families who are leading two different Arabic language congregations in the Troy region. They moved to Michigan through different pathways from their homelands of Iraq and Egypt. As the original families in the church have been growing and multiplying generations, the younger generations within the churches are more familiar with English than Arabic. These leaders are focused on creating new leaders and new congregations in cities throughout Michigan. Some of the churches will be created with Arabic speakers and others with English speakers. Would you pray for the multiplication of dedicated personnel and sites to create new churches?

Burmese

The picture shows three families who came to North America from the country of Myanmar. These wonderful families are leading congregations near the cities of Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, and Grand Rapids. The unrest in their homeland forced some in this picture to make their way to North America by residing in refugee camps before making the United States their home. Many in this language group actually speak a particular dialect from their region and find themselves using a commercial language from Myanmar as a way to share life with one another. Their stories of suffering are real and make me weep, but their courage is revealed in an often-repeated phrase when I am in their company. They say, "The Lord is faithful. The Lord is faithful." Would you pray for the newest ones among us to find people of peace in Michigan to help them feel they are welcomed, loved, and included?

Filipino

In this picture taken at our home, Jamie is standing in the middle of one of the longest partnerships with Michigan Baptists. This image reveals two or three generations of brothers and sisters in church leadership with origins from the Philippines. Many of the congregations revealed in this picture are growing in the Greater Detroit area. It was inspiring to hear the leaders pray and speak about planting new churches north of Detroit in small towns where newer generations are settling and growing their young families. Additionally, this language group may be the most active at taking mission trips back to the Philippines to create new churches, develop leaders, and inspire church multiplication. Would you ask the Lord to call out dedicated new leaders to plant new churches in Michigan and in the Philippines?

Japanese

Older and newer come together in the image taken in the family room of our home. One couple represents a marriage born out of foreign exchange student program decades ago that created a Japanese ministry in Ann Arbor, and the other couple is the story of the Lord's calling of a Korean woman and a Japanese man who married because the Lord called both of them at two different times, in two different places to be missionaries together to the Japanese in Michigan. They now lead a new church plant in Plymouth. Would you pray for these two couples who often have a limited amount of time with people from Japan who come to Michigan for three to four years before returning to their homeland. Careers and wealth consume the attention and energy of most who come to America from Japan. Yet, these four champions are finding ways to create friendships, express the Good News of Christ, and to develop leaders for the future. Would you ask the Lord to give these four connections that will create believers who will come alongside these four leaders to share the work of the ministry?

Romanian

The pastor, wife, and family of the Romanian church in Warren invited us to their loving home to enjoy an authentic Romanian meal, a time of prayer, and to hear the stories of salvation each one of us experienced in Jesus Christ. Listening to the heroic efforts of this couple whose families lived through the Communist Revolution of the 1980s to overcome the Communist rule was enlightening. Jamie and I recalled the exact days of that change of government during the 1980s because we were enjoying the holidays with Jamie's family in Michigan when news reports took over the TV programs. We never knew then that we would be hosted by a family, in Michigan, who lived those dreadful experiences over thirty years ago. It is obvious the Lord has a plan for drawing us together. Would you pray for the pastor and his congregation who would like to find a larger meeting place more to the north of Detroit where their congregation can grow and multiply?

Spanish

This image from the living room in our home is filled with older and newer elements of the Spanish ministry. One couple in the picture became our friends when we returned to Michigan from seminary during the 1980s and other couples in the image are as new to us as the last twenty-four months. That shows you how the Lord continues to work his ways in our lives while never giving up. Within this crew there are those leading ministries in multiethnic communities and others concentrating on creating churches focused on Spanish and second to third generation ministries that will likely need to be formed in English. The challenges are many, but this team has an energetic creativity that is unstoppable when fueled by the Holy Spirit. Would you pray asking the Lord to create an ongoing conversation within this newly gathered group that will come up with solutions for challenges that can be overcome as the Lord directs?

Not Finished Yet

I still have more language groups to explore and with each language group, I hope to see each group take lead on implementing plans that will magnify how the Lord is at work, locally and globally which is one of our core values where we seek first the kingdom of the God.

If during the reading of this article, you sensed a Lord-like nudge to help one of the language groups with whom we are working, act quickly and write or call me: Tony Lynn, tlynn@namb.net, (734) 770-0608. I will happily put you in contact with the language, pastor, or planter that the Lord placed on your heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the Send Network Director for Michigan and the Language/Ethnic Church Planting Catalyst. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as a lead pastor in Michigan churches and as an international missionary, along with his wife Jamie, in the Niger Republic, France, and Canada.

The pandemic changed my church

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – Most of our churches changed significantly due to the Covid pandemic. It seemed like everything shifted overnight for us. One Sunday morning we had 300 people in the worship service. The next Sunday we closed. *Thank you, Mr. Covid!*

The virus changed us. The pandemic altered our vocabulary. We started using words we did not use before. Phrases like “social distance” and “frontline workers” took on new meaning. Covid reformed our words, our language, and our expressions.

Furthermore, researchers discovered that levels of anxiety, depression and suicide skyrocketed during the pandemic. There was a sharp increase in alcohol consumption, too. Our cultural psyche was modified by Covid.

The corporate unity in and among many of our churches also took a big hit. The pandemic spawned injurious ideas and attitudes. Instead of respecting one another and loving one another like Jesus loves us, we took sides. Anyone who disagreed with us became our enemy and automatically “cancelled.”

So, yes, much has changed because of the Covid restrictions and lockdowns. We made a lot of mistakes and so did our governments and churches. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He *never* changes, and we find our greatest hope in Him.

The character of God has not changed

In Malachi 3:6, God says, “For I the Lord do not change...”

Everyday we count on the unchanging, hope-inducing character of God. He is consistent and utterly reliable. God’s love will always be unswerving and unailing (1 John 4:7-8).

We can lock ourselves in a dark room to get away from the sun, but we cannot keep the sun from shining. The sun still shines. So it is with God's love. We can reject it. We can walk away from it. We can try to avoid it. But God keeps loving us. No matter what choices you make, God still loves you.

One of the hymns we sing goes like this:

*When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace; In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Never give up. Jesus is our Rock in times of unprecedented change and turmoil.

The condition of man has not changed

The pandemic changed many things, but the condition of man is still as drastic as it was before Covid. The Bible says in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The pandemic only exposed more of our sinfulness. It prompted people to act out of their sinful nature.

We live in a world that is full of brokenness. Broken lives, broken relationships, broken systems, broken governments, broken marriages. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden it set the whole world on a collision course, and we experience brokenness every day now. We need a Savior. We need someone to rescue us. We still need Jesus. The only thing that can help us is the grace and mercy of God through Christ (John 1:17).

The provision of the cross has not changed

Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the grave to set us free from the power and dominion of sin. He paid the penalty for our sin and bridged the gap between God and people.

Jesus made it possible for us to be saved, forgiven, and free! For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God (1 Peter 3:18).

Years ago, in the Cathedral of Santiago the archbishop was hearing confessions of sin from three hardened teenagers in the church. All three boys were trying to make a joke out of confession, so they met with the archbishop and confessed to a long list of sins that they had not committed. It was all a joke.

But the archbishop knew what they were doing, so he played along with the first two who ran out of the church laughing. Then he listened carefully to the third boy, and before the boy could run away like his friends had done, the priest said to him, "Okay, you have confessed these sins. Now I want you to do something to show your repentance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church, and I want you to look at the painting of Jesus hanging on the cross, and I want you to look at his face, and I want you to say, 'You did all that for me and I don't care.' And I want you to do that three times."

The boy looked up at the picture of Jesus and said, "You did all that for me and I don't care." Then he stood and stared at Jesus hanging on the cross. He stared at that painting for a long time, and finally, he broke down in tears.

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). No pandemic can change that.

The mission of the church has not changed

The mission of the church is to go into the world in the power of the Spirit and make disciples by proclaiming this gospel, calling people to respond in ongoing repentance and faith, and demonstrating the truth and power of the gospel by living under the lordship of Christ for the glory of God and the good of the world.

The pandemic has not, and cannot, modify the mission God has given us (Matthew 28:19-20). The task – the mission – of the church has not changed in 2000 years! So, let's get on with it.

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.

How to know for sure that you will go to heaven when you die

LANSING – It was December of 1971. I had just returned from my tour in Vietnam as an infantry soldier. I had a lot of things on my mind. While on leave I visited my mother's place of employment.

There I met a young lady named Jackie Casebolt. In a short time we were married. I was not a Christian and she was. We set up house in Radcliff KY near Ft. Knox. In the evening Jackie would read her Bible before retiring for the night. Not being a Christian, it seemed like I had nothing to do while she read her Bible. I decided I would start reading the Bible as well.

I happened upon Revelation 21:8 "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." I didn't understand everything in that verse, but I did understand that the Bible was telling me that had I died in Vietnam, and there were many times when I could have, that I would spend an eternity in hell.

God spoke to me clearly in that verse. I desperately needed to know where I would spend eternity if I died that day. I had no idea where to start. I had not been raised in a Christian home. Fortunately, my wife could clearly see that I was troubled. She showed me what I needed to do from God's Word and that night I gave my life to the Lord.

It is a sad thing for me to recall to this day. For the first twenty-one years of my life no one had ever sat down and showed me exactly from God's Word what I needed to do to go to heaven. We need to keep the main thing the main thing and it seems to me that we focus on everything ahead of Biblical evangelism. We need to get back to that today more than ever.

How do we know for sure? Today I know for a fact that if I die today that I will go to heaven. I know this for three reasons...

I have done everything God has told me in his Word that I need to do to become a born-again Christian.

1. I realized that I am a sinner
2. I confessed my sins and repented of them
3. I received the free gift of eternal life that God has promised me
4. I received Him as Lord and believe with all my heart that God had raised Him from the dead. His Word promised me that I am saved. (The Romans Road)

God's Spirit bears witness to my spirit that I am a son of God.

Romans 8:15-16 says, "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God," NKJV. His Spirit lives within my heart and empowers me to live for him.

I am living a changed life.

I am not the same person that knelt beside his bed more than fifty years ago. The Bible makes it clear that those that are genuinely saved will be changed daily to live a life that honors and glorifies Him. James 2:14 "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?"

We as believers need to be clearly sharing the plan of salvation from God's Word in order to make any real difference in this chaotic world. We don't need clever plans, programs, or anything else. We need to get as close to the Lord as we can and make it a point to share the Gospel clearly to everyone we can. That's how the Gospel turned the world upside down in the first century. It has the power to do it again. Let's get at it!

May God pour His blessings on all the churches and ministries in the SBC.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Kemper is a 75-year-old army brat (his dad was a career soldier). He was raised and has lived in four different countries and numerous states. He became a born-again Christian in 1971 shortly after returning from a tour in Vietnam. He has been an ordained minister since 1975. He has enjoyed dual careers, pastoring and being a systems analyst (computer programmer). He has pastored churches in Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and now Michigan. He has been pastoring the Discover Life Church in Lansing, MI for over five years now.

A salvation story

PLYMOUTH – Each person’s story of that journey is distinct but shares the common foundation of our loving God sending His Son to die for our sins, being raised, and is now in heaven with His Father interceding for us. He wants a relationship with us. I’m humbled by that truth. My story of coming to know and accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior is the bedrock of my life.

I am a Michigander and my family lived in Swartz Creek. I grew up in a home where we prayed before meals, attended church every Sunday (morning and evening) as well as Wednesday evening. My dad worked for General Motors, and my mom stayed home with my 6 siblings and me. My connection with the church was more important to me than the friends and classes at school.

From a young age, I loved to hear preaching from the Bible, singing hymns, and being part of the discussions in Bible studies. At nine years old, I asked my dad what people whispered in the ear of the pastor when they went to the altar at the end of service. He explained the Gospel to me and seemed so happy that I asked. The next week, I went after service to talk with the evangelist, Sam Cathy, who had me repeat a prayer of salvation. Shortly afterwards, I was baptized.

I tried to live a clean sin-free life, but I found it more of a struggle than it should have been since I was professing to be a Christian. I noticed how others seemed to have a vibrant personal faith whereas I felt like I was part of a church culture instead of having a real relationship with Holy God. I watched how my dad was moved by people’s testimonies, and how he would stay up to take us to church on Sunday mornings after having worked all night. His prayers seemed to come from his heart. His faith felt real. Mine didn’t.

As a young teen, I remember that service so clearly. An evangelist came to our church. He explained the rebellion and ugliness of sin, and how it separated us from God. Our only chance to be freed from the penalty of that sin-guilt was by believing in His Son, Jesus Christ. My head and heart exploded! For the first time, I saw my real need for a savior. All my clean living wasn’t going to earn my way to be in God’s presence. My heart was broken.

I prayed and asked God to forgive and save me. I told Him how I believed that His Son died for my sin, was buried, and rose again after 3 days. Jesus Christ was the perfect sacrifice for my sin. He saved me! I was so filled with peace and joy. I no longer felt like I was playing the part of ‘Christian’. I had an inner transformation that changed my point of view on everything. Since I had been ‘baptized’ at 9 years old, I thought I didn’t need to tell anyone that I had just become a new believer at age 13.

After having spiritual doubts at 18 years old, I spoke with my pastor, sharing with him that I was truly saved at age 13, but wasn’t growing in Christ as I should. He walked me through Scriptures and told me that being baptized was an act of obedience as a believer. I came to realize that I

had never been baptized as a follower of Christ. Being baptized was an amazing experience to show the world that I was dead to my sinful way of life, and risen with Christ to a new life and commitment to follow Jesus!

After my baptism, I began to grow with leaps and bounds in my Christian walk! My perspective had changed. I was looking at life, my life, its purpose, and my part in God's plan through a whole new lens.

I was married the next year (age 19) and continued my intentional journey to grow in maturity and sanctification in Christ. Serving and loving God and His Son Jesus Christ is the best privilege of my life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie works as Executive Assistant for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Her greatest joy is serving Jesus Christ. Her husband, Tony, their three children, and nine grandchildren are gifts from God that fill Jamie's life to overflowing. Mentoring young women in the Lord is a ministry of delight. Jamie and her family served 13 years with the IMB international mission work in Niger Republic, West Africa, and Paris, France.

A life of sin

DEWITT – When I was growing up, I attended the same church as Nicky Cruz and had the opportunity to hear him share his testimony. For those who don't know, Nicky was a gang member who was the focus of David Wilkerson's book, *The Cross and The Switchblade*.

Nicky was the head of a street gang on trial for murder when God used Wilkerson's ministry to reach him and other gang members with the gospel. They came to the crusade as a way to have a gang fight without the police being involved and tried to steal the offering from the event, but instead God stole them out of the devil's grasp.

Once he had shared his testimony, he allowed us to ask questions. One person introduced his question by saying, "I wish I had a testimony like you, but I was raised in a Christian home." Nicky jumped on him before he could even get the question out. Nicky emphasized that this young man had a much better testimony than Nicky ever did because God had saved him from a life of sin instead of out of a life of sin.

While I agree with Nicky's heart in his answer, in my opinion Nicky was wrong. Nicky's testimony wasn't greater or less than this young man because both of them are infinitely

beautiful examples of God's grace. While I identify with the young man who questioned Nicky, I think that in my testimony you will see that even in my life, God saved me from a life of sin.

I was blessed to be raised in a Christian household. My parents faithfully attended church each week. My grandparents and great-grandparents were missionaries in Latin America. I was blessed to be in an environment where I heard Christian things all the time. When I was about 5, I was in children's church at Christian Center church in Colorado Springs when we sang the song, *The Lord's Army*:

♫ I may never march in the infantry ♫ Ride in the cavalry ♫ Shoot the artillery ♫ I may never shoot for the enemy ♫ But I'm in the Lord's army!

After singing that song they asked us if we wanted to be fighting for God or against God and I raised my hand saying I wanted to fight for God. As far as I can remember, that is the point when I first asked Jesus into my heart. My parents might remember something different, but that is what sticks in my heart and mind.

From that point my life, externally, looked pretty good. I was active in Sunday school and the youth group, eventually being seen as a leader. I even joined the Bible Quiz team and memorized large portions of scripture. I was a good kid. I believed I was saved, but my view of salvation was "fire insurance". If I died, I wouldn't go to hell, but other than that I lived my life for myself.

I wasn't a good kid because I was letting God work through me, but because that was my nature. I would regularly raise my hands during the singing at church, not because I felt called to glorify God, but because someone had once told me how impressed they were when I did that. When I was a good Christian youth, it made me look good and, I thought, made God look good.

When I was a junior in high school we went to a youth retreat. I honestly don't remember much of what happened that weekend, but one thing I do remember is on the first night hearing the speaker say, "It is pretentious to claim Jesus as savior unless you also make Him your Lord." That struck me to the heart. It was all I could think about for the next couple days.

That weekend in the back stairway of a resort hotel in Vail, Colorado, God got ahold of my life. I don't honestly know if I was saved by the ignorant prayer as a 5 year old or if the moment of salvation was in that stairway, but after that moment, I knew God had a special plan for my life.

From that time my life changed. Externally people would not have seen a difference, but my motivation changed. I now wanted to act in a way that pleased God, and wanted Him to get the glory.

My life was not all roses from that point on, I still struggled to let God be in control. I wanted to be an engineer and struggled against God's call when I felt he was calling me to be a

minister. That fight with God led me to a time of clinical depression as I tried to get God to see things my way, while simultaneously trying to follow His guidance (James 1:5-8).

That fight also led me into traps of immorality in my thoughts that still attempt to reenter my life. Over time, I realized that the fight was not about what God wanted, but about truly recognizing that God's plans for me were better than my own.

Once I surrendered to His guidance, God ended up having me complete an engineering degree in computer science, and has used that to help provide since most of my time in ministry has been bi-vocational. More importantly, once I surrendered to His full control, I had peace and was able to trust Him because He proved Himself faithful.

It took me far too many years to recognize the fullness of the gospel. You may ask yourself, what is the gospel? The gospel is good news, but to understand the good news, you must put it in context of the bad news. As you read this, picture yourself each time you read "I".

I have sinned. Whether the sin is murder or pride in living a "good" life, all of those sins are equally abhorrent to God and should be abhorrent to me. If my sin is not abhorrent to me, then I don't recognize the depth of my own sin. Romans 3:10-18,23

I deserve God's wrath. When I sin, it is against God, anyone else I harmed was a secondary victim. My sin rejects His plan for my life. My sin asserts that I believe I can do things more effectively than God. My sin mutilates the image of God in my life and the way that others view God. My sin damages others made in God's image. In short, I deserve death and hell.

The only way to pay for sin is by a sacrifice of blood, but the sacrifice of animals, or even my own blood, is insufficient to erase my sin against God. Leviticus 17:11, Romans 6:23a, Hebrews 9:19-22

I cannot stop sinning, I cannot clear away the consequences of sin in my life, I cannot make up for sin. Even when I resist sin in my own strength, I become prideful in my ability to withstand sin, thus again living in sin. Romans 7:19-25

God loved me in spite of my sin. Jesus loved me enough to die for me. Even more startling to me, now that I am a father, is God loved me enough to allow His Son, Jesus, to die for me. God loves me enough that He wants me to live forever with Him. John 3:16, Romans 5:8

While I can do nothing to earn or merit salvation, God paid the penalty for my sin and was a blood sacrifice on my behalf. Since He is infinite and perfect God, His blood perfectly and permanently covered the penalty of death my sin deserved. Hebrews 9:24-28

I am not saved by doing right things, but by accepting His gift of salvation. Romans 6:23b

I accept that gift by believing He died to pay the price for me and rose from the dead to prove His victory over sin. As a result, I can trust Him to direct my life (be my Lord) and will share that with other people. Romans 10:9-10

I can now let God work through me trusting that He has paid the price and confident that one time I will spend eternity with Him. Whether you are new to church or have been a pastor for decades, I pray that you too can join in that confidence, if not, ask a Christian to help you understand and to pray with you today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Finkenbinder has been the pastor at FBC DeWitt since 2020 and lived in Michigan since 2005, marrying his wife, Amy in 2008; they have 3 kids. Kevin was raised in Colorado Springs, CO.

New Valley Church pastor

The Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) wants to welcome the new pastor and his family to The Valley Church in Saginaw, Michigan. On March 10, 2024 Jason Craver accepted the call as Pastor to The Valley Church in Saginaw. He & his wife, Rachel and their 3 daughters, Julianna, Aria and Kaylee live in Breckenridge, Michigan. We are very excited that God has provided the man who shares our hearts in serving our community. We are looking forward to working alongside Jason and his family. God has truly blessed The Valley Church (TVC).

Reconnect and refresh in this lovely land

ROSCOMMON – Thinking of the Bambi Lake Friends and Alumni Gathering, May 17-19, made me remember this old hymn, Precious Memories. This is the third verse:

*“In the stillness of the midnight,
Echoes from the past I hear,
Old-time singing, gladness bringing,
From that lovely land somewhere.*

*Precious memories, how they linger,
How they ever flood my soul,
In the stillness of the midnight,
Precious, sacred scenes unfold.”*

So many sermons. So many long talks with friends. So many worship and camp songs. So many lingering strolls along the beach. So many amazing chalk talks. So much good food. So many slippery rides down the hill, tubing. So many blazing bonfires.

Bambi Lake is such a special place, one where all these things, and more, have happened over and over again. I am so grateful that this place, this “Lovely Land,” is set apart for a sacred reason—to experience and be reminded of the goodness of God.

Many of us have stories about how we were impacted at Bambi, and I hope that you will plan to come to this Gathering weekend so that your story can be heard and God will be glorified in it.

Take Rachel, for example. Her first experience at Bambi Lake was as a toddler with her parents, then as a camper at Mom and Me, Girls In Action Camp, Metamorphosis Teen Camp, and Youth Winter Retreats. At each of these events, Rachel experienced God, layer by layer, and forged lasting relationships. Her favorite places were sitting in front of the cozy fire playing endless games of Uno, swinging on the beach swing at night while talking with a friend, and finding solitude to pray at the prayer chapel.

All was well. Until it wasn't.

Life—as she knew it—abruptly ended for Rachel in the middle of her high school years. Her family was broken apart and her brother was away at college, leaving her alone in a very dark, tumultuous sea of more questions than answers. She had to figure out who God really was. Was He faithful? Was He good? Was He only-wise?

Rachel was raised in church and had a good Biblical foundation, but there comes a time in our lives when we all need to take real ownership of our faith. Rachel was no different. But navigating these dark times became easier as she knew that Bambi would provide the space she needed to heal. At Bambi, she was able to quiet herself enough to seek God's face, gaining her own set of sea legs in the faith that would go on to serve her well into adulthood. “Bambi has always been a safe and comfortable space where God has met me in my pain and my joy, providing clarity in my journey as I have followed His leading.”

Rachel is now a Pastor's wife and mom to 3 busy kids. She sees Bambi as a safe haven that she will share with her own kids this summer. Her hope and prayer is that they, too, will find Bambi to be a place where they can encounter the goodness of God.

For 65 years, God has used Bambi Lake to touch thousands of lives, just like Rachel's. We extend a warm invitation for you to join us on this weekend that is set apart to honor our past,

celebrate the present and work toward a bright and blessed future. It will be a time of fun, fellowship, music, testimony, food, and an abundance of love and laughter.

“Praise the LORD...young men and women, old men, and children. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.” Psalm 148

To register and get all the details, go to Bambilake.churchcenter.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Scientist uses resurrection to lead hundreds to Christ

HOUSTON (BP) – In an unassuming office on the campus of Rice University, you can often find professor James Tour on a Zoom call. Is he chatting with other scientists around the world about his groundbreaking research in nanotechnology? Maybe. But more often than not, he's talking with a stranger about the resurrection of Christ.

Whenever he has the opportunity – on his website, at a lecture or at the end of one of his [many YouTube videos](#) – Tour invites anyone who doesn't believe in the resurrection to talk with him about it. Seekers connect with him from all over. The only stipulation to receive an hour of one-on-one time with one of the world's leading scientists? You must be curious about the resurrection.

“You need a quiet location, a Wi-Fi connection and a camera turned on,” he tells them. “When they agree to that, I meet with them.”

Tour, who calls himself a Messianic Jew, teaches chemistry, computer science and nanoengineering at Rice. He has received his share of [accolades](#), such as being named “Scientist of the Year” by R&D Magazine in 2013 and being inducted into the Royal Society of Chemistry in 2020, just to name two.

He holds more than 200 patents. But he's a lot quicker to mention another number – the 107 people who received Christ last year after spending an hour with him.

Tour has a "[burning desire](#) to see people saved," he told Baptist Press. "As Rachel cried out, give me children or I die. Lord, give me children, or I die," he said, quoting Genesis chapter 30.

Not all of Tour's resurrection conversations are on Zoom. Many of them are at his home on Sundays.

For 25 years, he has taught a Sunday School class at West University Baptist Church near the Rice campus. He and his wife invite the class – which can number upwards of 80 people – to their home for lunch after church. Many seekers accept the invitation, where they hear Tour share the Gospel by way of the resurrection.

Tour often begins by using the illustration of a bridge – man on one side, God on the other, a chasm of sin in between.

"But I always funnel it right into the resurrection of Jesus Christ," he said. "The last verse that I share is Romans 10:9. 'If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that He's risen from the dead, you shall be saved.' This is exactly where the Scriptures lead us to. It is not Jim Tour's prescription. It is exactly where the Scriptures lead us to."

The resurrection forms the foundation for the other crucial doctrines of the Christian faith, he believes.

"We do not have to convince them of the Trinity," he said. "We do not have to convince them of the virgin birth. We do not have to convince them of the Noah's Ark story. None of that. That's never on the table for me.

"It is those two things – the lordship of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And I go right after the resurrection, because once the resurrection is established, the lordship is clear."

He lays out all the evidence for Jesus' literal death and bodily resurrection. The fact that Roman soldiers were skilled in the practice of crucifixion, so there was no way Jesus was still alive when he was placed in the tomb. The fact that Thomas was able to feel and see the wounds in Jesus' hands and side. The fact that Jesus appeared to more than 500 people after the resurrection and that He even ate with them. The fact that secular historians of the time affirm that Christ's followers were willing to die rather than deny the resurrection.

"I would die for what I believe," Tour said. "But these men and these women were not dying for what they *believed* to be true. They were dying for what they *knew* to be true. Because they saw it with their own eyes. They saw Jesus risen from the dead. And nobody dies for what they know to be a lie."

Tour goes through this narrative with different people each week. Most of them are highly educated, he said. The conversation takes 30-40 minutes.

“I see people go from not believing in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ to believing in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ based upon this 30-minute conversation...,” he said.

“I think why they come to believe, to embrace the resurrection is truth, is because the truth of the resurrection was already written on their hearts,” he said. “It’s already there. I’m just bringing them to a point to confess to what’s already there.”

Tour then leads the person in a prayer patterned after Romans 10:9.

“Once they have prayed that prayer,” he said, “it’s like a seed that’s sitting here in your heart. That seed opens. Now, when you pray that prayer, now something is gonna start growing.”

Tour reassures each new convert that their faith doesn’t have to be very big.

“I don’t have a hundred percent assurance of anything in this life,” he tells them. “I don’t believe anything a hundred percent. For all I know, we are living in a matrix.”

He then tells the story from Mark 9 about the man who asks Jesus to heal his son. Heal my son “if you can,” the man asks.

“And Jesus says to him, ‘If you can? All things are possible to him who believes.’

“And the man says something very profound,” Tour said. The man says, “‘Lord, I believe, help my unbelief’ ... meaning that I do believe, but you know, I’m not a hundred percent. ...

‘Jesus didn’t say, ‘Well, you go away; when you’re a hundred percent, come back, I’ll heal your son.’ Jesus immediately healed his son.

“I don’t know what percentage belief you have in the resurrection. Maybe it’s only 20 percent. That’s good enough. The Lord’s gonna help your unbelief.”

Tour then assigns homework to each person who prays to receive Christ – 15 minutes of Bible study and meditation each morning. He has them start in John 1. He tells them to be prepared for a change in their life and behavior.

Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians that the resurrection is the most important thing, Tour said. That’s why he believes it should be ground zero for any conversation about the Gospel.

“This is God’s prescription for salvation,” he said. “Why wouldn’t you use it?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Erlanson is managing editor of Baptist Press.

Sexuality: God's design best learned in church, not TikTok

GATLINBURG, TN (BP) – “If you have a boyfriend that wants to have sex (but are) scared to say no and just break up, what do you do?”

The teen's question, submitted anonymously via an app, was read to 100-plus of her peers and their parents.

“You need to be focused on God's plan for your sexuality,” her pastor, Nick Moore, replied. The boyfriend “doesn't sound like the kind of person who is pursuing that same design.”

“Eventually he will break you down,” Moore's wife Kyndra added, commending the teen for “trying to do what is right.” Agree with God in prayer “that sex is for marriage,” she counseled, “(and that) ‘I believe you have a man for me who will love me and cherish me and take care of me.’”

The Moores led a Wednesday evening session on “God's design for sexuality” – and Satan's “war on sex” in his hatred of God – at First Baptist Church in Gatlinburg, Tenn., where Nick is the lead pastor.

Sexuality is a topic that has become “more and more neglected,” Nick said. Talking about it can be awkward, and in a church it can carry “a condemning tone.”

But what's needed, Nick said, is a God-focused “Kingdom mindset.”

A ‘spiritual’ reality

“If there's any place you should be learning and growing in your knowledge of what this topic is about, it should be in the church,” he said. “What we're dealing with is not just a biological reality. We're dealing with something that is deeply spiritual. ... It's part of who you were created to be ... something that goes to the core of our being.”

God's design for the “one-flesh union of marriage” began with Adam and Eve, Nick noted in the mid-February session, and is evident throughout Scripture in such passages as 1 Corinthians 6 stating that “the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ... Don't you know that your bodies are a part of Christ's body ... that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? ... So glorify God with your body.”

“There is no such thing as casual sex,” Nick stated, noting that the one-flesh union of a husband and wife reflects Christ's union with the church, which the apostle Paul described by writing, “This mystery is profound” in Ephesians 5 in the New Testament.

One teen posed a question on the app: “If we’re sexual beings and were made to be that way in God’s image, does that mean God and Jesus are also sexual?”

‘Oneness’ of the Trinity

“God created sex,” Kyndra volunteered, “so that humans can work toward experiencing the oneness ... in our marriages that is modeled in the Trinity between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, that nothing they do is apart from each other.

“Everything Jesus does is for the glory of the Father. Everything the Father does is for the honor of the Son. Everything the Spirit does is to point you to both,” Kyndra said. “Sex is part of getting to that oneness. I don’t know if that means God is sexual, but he created sex as a reflection of that oneness.”

And the bond of marriage, Nick said, is the framework for God’s childbearing instruction to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply,” as well as providing for the physical and moral protection of each family member and for pleasure between a husband and wife, which is celebrated in the Old Testament’s Song of Solomon.

‘Not hearing the truth’

Sex is “a good gift” that “God has given to his children,” Kyndra said, “but you guys are being lied to and you’re being stolen from because you’re hearing all the lies about it and you’re not hearing the truth.

“I would venture to say that most of what you think about sex is a lie,” she continued, “because where are you getting it from? You’re getting it from your friends who know nothing about sex. You’re getting it from TikTok ... from Snapchat ... from Instagram ... from pornography.

“Guess who’s behind all of that? Not the God of wisdom,” Kyndra said. God’s design for marriage “brings life and it brings joy. It doesn’t bring STDs and abortion and broken marriages.”

From “the earliest pages of Genesis” continuing throughout the Bible, Nick noted, “Satan and his demons (have been) making war against God’s design” because the one-flesh union is “such a beautiful picture” of God’s redemptive purposes.

Satan’s hatred is manifested by stirring people into “pornea,” which Nick explained as the New Testament Greek word for both fornication prior to marriage and adultery after marriage, and into rape, incest, homosexuality, prostitution and polygamy.

Repudiating God’s design

Pornea before or outside of marriage, or even sexual sin that stops short of intercourse, is “a repudiation of (God’s) design,” Nick stated.

“If you are a man or woman created in the image of God, you are destined for either marriage, which is the general rule, or celibacy, which is an exception to the rule,” he said. “Either of those things pornea breaks. You’re breaking the vow of your future marriage or you’re breaking the life of celibacy that God has called you to.”

If, for example, “you had a friend who you thought was a Christian, was baptized, maybe a member of the church, and all of a sudden that friend started saying something like, ‘Jesus Christ doesn’t really save you. Jesus Christ isn’t really God. Jesus Christ really can’t forgive you of your sins,’ you would be worried about that person on a spiritual level,” Nick said, “because that person is saying something that is not true about God and about the gospel.”

By engaging in pornea outside of God’s design for marriage, “we are doing the same thing,” Nick said. “We’re saying something that’s not true about God and not true about the gospel – only louder because we’re using our bodies to do it. We are blaspheming God’s truth through our actions.”

‘Saturated by porn’

Asked via the app about pornography, Nick described it as “the same kind of sin as fornication and adultery.”

Today’s culture, he said, is “saturated by porn,” distorting “our view of women, our view of men, what relationships should look like, how we should behave.” Many teens’ first encounters with sex, he lamented, come through pornography “objectifying people” not just in sexual intercourse but violence such as choking and other abnormal forms of sexuality.

“Is masturbation a sin?” another teen asked via the app.

“Does it make you feel ashamed?” Kyndra asked. “You know in your heart that something is wrong with that ... because that act and that feeling were made for somebody else. You’re stealing from your future spouse what was made to enjoy in the context of marriage.”

Self-gratification is contrary to the concern God expressed in creating the world that, “It is not good for man to be alone,” Nick responded. Lust is a universal temptation but it needn’t turn toward sexual immorality when a teen is diligently asking, “What do I need to be doing to minimize my temptation to lust?”

‘Not too late’

The Gospel, Nick stated, is “the answer to our sex issue” – “the good news that Jesus, the Son of God, came to this earth and lived a perfect life, never sinning, being tempted in every way

that we are. ... He died a sacrificial death on the cross for all mankind that all of our sins can be paid for ... not only paid for in terms of guilt, but we would be set free from (sin's) slavery and delivered to newness of life."

"Some of you," Kyndra said, "have already started down the path" of sexual immorality and shame, yet "it's not too late. ... That's the beauty of following Jesus, that you don't have to stay where you're at." God has "good plans for you, and they're within his design and in (his) season."

Willpower alone will not deter sexual sin, Nick said, underscoring the importance of engaging one's faith by "putting protective measures in place."

"If you are a 16- to 19-year-old young man in a car alone or in a basement alone or in any context where you are unsupervised with a young lady, there is no sermon series ... no Bible study ... no memory verse ... that is going to keep nature from taking its course. The battle was lost when you put yourself in that situation."

Nurture a "countercultural" mindset, Nick advised, by giving thought and prayer to such questions as, "What am I watching? What kind of situations am I putting myself in? What are the ways that I'm thinking about the opposite gender that are not in line with God's Word, that are leading me in a path of lust? And how do I guard against those things?"

In seeking "a new heart and a new mind" for God's design for sexuality, Nick said, "You can be united with Christ. ... You (can) be given his righteousness before God, and he will begin to cleanse you from the inside out."

Nick and Kyndra were International Mission Board missionaries in Zimbabwe from 2015 to 2021 with their seven children (three boys and four girls, now ages from 9 to 18.).

'Increasingly burdened'

The couple recounted via email their motivation for addressing sexuality.

Since returning from Africa, Nick said he has been "increasingly burdened by the state of marriage and family in the U.S. Marriage rates are slowing down and delaying. Birth rates within marriage are plummeting," The statistics are little different among professed Christians, he noted.

"The church must present a counterculture particularly in these areas if we hope to be salt and light along with our gospel preaching," Nick said.

"We have four, almost five teenagers and I am working in the public high school," Kyndra said, "so the challenges our teenagers face in 2024 have fallen right in my lap." Social media is having a "profound impact on the way they view the world, themselves, others, work ethic, emotions,

money, and specifically sex. Our kids are being indoctrinated by the lies that surround them and they do not have the discernment yet to know truth from error.

“It seems the light is cowering to the darkness, staying quiet on issues where Scripture speaks boldly,” Kyndra said. “Sex is in their faces every day, and they are learning about it everywhere except the places where they need to be learning about it – the home and the church.

“The only way to set these things straight is to confront them head on, talking honestly, openly and unashamedly” to counter “the lies of Satan that seek to destroy them,” Kyndra said. “If we do not speak out clearly they may never have a chance to repent and turn to our King who has wisdom and life to offer.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Art Toalston is a writer based in Nashville and a former editor of Baptist Press.

Global missionary partners advance gospel in Colombia

Laura Martinez’s letter to her supporters in Mexico is reminiscent of New Testament letters. Recently, she wrote about adapting quickly to the culture, climate, geography and gastronomy of Colombia. She enumerated the differences in seasons and interpretations of certain Spanish words, and she was pleasantly surprised the quality of water in Colombia is higher than where she’s from in Mexico.

More importantly, she expressed her great joy for participating in the Great Commission task.

Martinez is a global missionary partner who serves on an International Mission Board team in Colombia. She was sent out from Dr. G.H. Lacy Baptist Theological Seminary in Oaxaca, Mexico, a seminary founded by IMB missionaries.

GMPs are financially supported by their sending church or organization and serve with IMB teams.

Amanda Davis, director of globalization at the IMB, said through the GMP program, IMB can partner with institutions like the seminary to offer students a place to serve in semester-long internships in cross-cultural missions.

“This is a win-win opportunity for both [the seminary] and IMB. The students get to serve on an established team with veteran IMB missionaries,” Davis said. Students receive experience and training on these teams.

“Our missionaries receive more laborers for the harvest field, more gospel witnesses, and get the opportunity to pour into the lives of young seminary students, who will become the next generation of international missionaries,” Davis continued.

Short-term, high-impact

After orientation with IMB GMP trainers, Roy and Dirce Cooper, Martinez now serves with IMB missionaries Brian and Ronda Massey.

She works among the Zenú, an Indigenous people group in Colombia. She ministers on a reservation and to children and youth in a local church. Her role includes working with IMB missionaries to design oral materials for discipleship and training local believers in two Zenú churches and a church plant.

“My desire is for the families of these groups to be reached and discipled for the glory of God,” Martinez wrote to her supporters.

The team recently celebrated the baptism of new believers.

“I hope I can convey the joy that is in my heart for what the Lord is doing among this people,” Martinez penned.

“God has really used her in the short time that she has been here to make an impact for His kingdom,” Brian said. “Laura has such a sensitive heart to the Lord and has been used to minister on several occasions to Zenú kids who have had different types of trauma in their past.”

Martinez recently planned, organized and led a Vacation Bible School and trained Zenú Christians. Several children made professions of faith and brought their parents to church. “[The seminary] has done a great job of preparing her for transcultural work,” Brian said. “Her expertise is exactly what we needed on our team.”

Martinez wrote, “I am so happy and grateful to the Lord for giving me this opportunity to serve Him in Colombia, also for the grace that He gives me, for His care, for His provision [and] for His inexhaustible love.”

Roy said Spanish-speaking missionaries, especially the seminary students, are highly effective.

“They already know that part of their role is to understand the new context and to adapt to reach the people where they are. Their preparation as well as their coming from Latin America are tremendous helps,” Roy said.

In a letter to Roy and Dirce, Dr. David Tamez, seminary president, expressed his gratitude for the IMB’s support and dedication to the seminary’s students. He said the Coopers’ assistance has been “crucial in the ministerial preparation process of these servants who are poised to extend the gospel through global missions.”

He said, “One of the most encouraging aspects we consistently hear from our global missionary partners is the transformative impact of cross-cultural engagement. Many share stories of building meaningful relationships, witnessing positive changes in the communities they serve and experiencing personal growth through the challenges and joys of mission work.”

“The program not only equips students for international missions but also empowers them to serve in a variety of capacities, both globally and locally,” Tamez continued.

Dirce hopes serving as GMPs will confirm students’ calling, whether that takes them to an international or local mission field.

“As they work on our IMB teams, we pray that God will speak to them about His specific call for each of them because that is what they want to know: ‘What does God have after this, after I graduate from the seminary?’” Dirce said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tessa Sanchez writes for the IMB.

Know Your Context

Culture eats strategy for breakfast. – Peter Drucker.

You may be able to rightly divide the word of God. You may lead people, teams and organizations. You may care well for those in your congregation. However, without understanding your surrounding context, it will be difficult for you to connect with your people.

Bob Bumgarner, guest on the “Replant Bootcamp” podcast earlier this year, [said](#), “Listening to the field will lead you to the future.” This statement emphasizes the importance of cultural

exegesis – paying close attention to the culture surrounding you and being able to use that to minister wherever God has placed you.

If you are involved in a replant or revitalization of any kind, cultural exegesis will be critical to consider, and there are several tools to help you in that effort.

Here are four ways to be more intentional about your surrounding context, ranked from least to most important.

1. Study your demographic

In episodes [86](#) and [89](#) of the Replant Bootcamp podcast, Josh Dryer helped us understand demographics' vital role in your ministry. When I began working with churches at our association, we used a resource called [Mission Insite](#) to provide a detailed report of demographics in our area. Using those reports, I created customized demographics for all our churches and began speaking on Sunday evening services, doing a presentation called "Who's My Neighbor?"

While "demographics" sounds boring to some people, this presentation helped our churches understand what were the most significant ministry needs in their area. Part of cultural exegesis involves thinking missiologically. If you use demographics to pull income information, average age, ethnicity and family structures, ask yourself, "Does my church look like my community?" Demographics paint a picture with broad strokes to help us recognize how God wants to use our churches most effectively.

2. Be in your community

Another way to "listen to the field" is by being active in your community. As a replant or revitalization pastor, you will do yourself a favor by being as active in the community as possible. Some of the most helpful conversations I have been in have been at the coffee shop, a football game or a city council meeting.

Please forgive me for quoting a Johnny Cash song instead of a theological book. Still, in the song "No Earthly Good," Johnny says: "The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread, but how can you share it where you've got your head? There are hands that reach out for a hand if you would, so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good." In the podcast, Bob said, "You can't exegete your community from your desk." Don't forget that as a shepherd, you need to smell like the sheep. Be where your people are, and use your insight from the surrounding community to help you minister to their needs.

3. Listen to your people

The best way to learn about your community and surrounding culture is to listen to your people. What do they fear? What do they value? What is essential for your church in this community?

After doing a “Who’s My Neighbor?” presentation, one of our churches recognized the need to focus outwardly on their low-income neighborhoods. So they consulted an agency to do food drop-offs and started doing a bi-monthly food giveaway. On the second Saturday of those months, I drive through their town and see cars lined up for miles. With each bag of food, they give away tracts and invitations for people to visit their church. It all started with a pastor asking his congregation, “What do you think are major needs in our community?”

Don’t forget that those congregation members have likely been in your town longer than you and will be there long after you are gone. As they listen to you preach the Word, listen to their needs and let them lead their engagement in the community.

4. Be led by the Holy Spirit

Mentioned in this episode was Henry Blackaby’s classic work, *Experiencing God*. In the book, Blackaby suggests that we should look around, see where God is at work, then join him in that work. Blackaby would say we need to be led by the Spirit if we are seeking to engage our communities.

The Holy Spirit’s work involves prompting, convicting and leading. If we are walking by the Spirit, expect to think of prompted ways you can understand and minister to your context. Karl Barth once said we should “have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in another.” Use Scripture to exegete your culture. One example given was in Acts 6, where a need arose among the apostles. The widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The word of God continued to spread when the apostles addressed the need, listened to the people and met the community’s needs ([Acts 6:1-7](#)).

My encouragement to church leaders is to not be tone-deaf to the culture but instead be good students of it. While the gospel’s message never changes, ministry opportunities sometimes change around us. If we study the people and listen to them while we are in the community, the Holy Spirit will lead us to minister effectively for the glory of God.

This post originally appeared on the [Replant Bootcamp blog](#).

Difference-maker: football recruit using NIL money to support adoptions

EUHARLEE, GA (BP) – It was a hot day in September 2021, and Vanessa McWhorter jostled with a sweaty toddler in the football stands watching her son push other boys around on the field.

Unlike her son, though, the child she held didn't share her DNA. Vanessa and her husband, Josh, had already adopted a little girl into their family. The one in her lap would follow about six months later.

In earlier years, the McWhorters were about as set as a family could be. Josh was, and still is, a respected businessman in the community who volunteered a lot of time to coaching youth sports. Vanessa was involved in numerous volunteer opportunities. They had two kids, a daughter and son, who were molds of their parents. Things were lined up for a picture-perfect life.

But through their volunteerism, Josh and Vanessa saw kids in harder circumstances. That, plus watching other families foster and adopt children, prompted them to do the same. There was a different path to take.

It would converge with the still-growing young man on the football field burying one defensive lineman after another. Just as adoption impacted him, those experiences would one day prompt him to bless other families.

Making the most of an opportunity

His birth certificate says "Joshua Alan McWhorter, Jr." Vanessa, who grew up in South Carolina rooting for the Gamecocks, attempted to use his birth name. It would be futile, as Josh and his family of Bama fans established a different name early and often.

It became a self-fulfilling prophecy. When you grow to 6'4" and 297 pounds by the time you're 16, "Joshua Alan" just doesn't fit the script the way "Bear" does.

With two years of ball left for Cass High in White, Ga., Bear continues to collect scholarship offers (27 and counting) even after the 4-star recruit made a verbal commitment to Arkansas last fall. When the state of Georgia [approved](#) Name, Image and Likeness deals for high school athletes last fall, it opened up opportunities for players like Bear to reap a windfall that has now come to be associated with highly-recruited teenagers.

For Bear, though, there was a different path to take.

Father and son spent many weekends on recruiting trips. The prospect of NIL money became part of those discussions. One day Bear floated the idea of using it to help offset adoption costs for families. That led to steps currently underway to establish the Brother Bear Foundation.

“I’ve wanted to have a way to help others any way I can,” said Bear.

“Adoption completely changed my life. When I started getting those opportunities, I knew it was time to do something.”

“We were talking about different ways to use NIL to help others,” said Josh, who played a little college ball himself as an offensive lineman at Furman. “But he kept coming back to adoption. He and his sisters have a special relationship.”

Big changes, big blessings

Olivia, 11 years old, joined the family when she was almost five. Four-year-old Lydia was four months. In addition to serving as foster parents as needed, the McWhorters have also provided respite care for foster families.

The family attends Cartersville (Ga.) First Baptist, where Josh has served as a deacon and Bible study leader. Vanessa teaches 5th grade Sunday School and chairs the benevolence committee.

“Obviously, it doubled the size of our family and spread us a little more thin,” said Vanessa. “But I wouldn’t change anything. Bear has a heart for adoption. Lily (who will begin attending Arkansas in the fall) wants to be an elementary teacher and has told me she wants to be an adoptive mom.”

Because of the stories they’ve heard in their own home, Bear and Lily intuitively know and gravitate toward the kids at school who are living in extended stay hotels or dealing with similar difficulties. That awareness follows to the cost of others wanting to help.

“Hopefully, the foundation will lead families who are in position to welcome kids into their home for adoption,” said Bear.

Some people take a different path. They may also create them for others.

“When it came to the opportunities through NIL, we wanted him to think of what was important to him,” said Vanessa. “We didn’t want him to look back in ten years and wonder what happened with it. “We want him to be a difference-maker.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

First-Person: Intercessory plea for SBC

Southern Baptists, let us not give up on prayer.

Despite the monumental issues we face, we must not forget that, in God's heart, prayer is far more monumental.

Even with the temptation to feel downtrodden or hopeless about the SBC in the past few years, let us not forsake the foundational, enlivening element of prayer inherent in our faith.

Let us go to Indianapolis in prayer for our Annual Meeting.

And let us move into the months and years ahead making intercessory prayer a vibrant, organic yearning in every realm of Baptist life.

The apostle Paul's prayer in Philippians 1:9-11 can be a clear starting point in rejuvenating our prayer:

"And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, so that you may approve the things that are superior and may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God."

None of us can know how God may respond to the courage and resolve for engaging in intercessory labor – whether with mercy, with power, or by allowing tumult and godlessness to take their course.

But if we proceed without intercession, we can be certain that our troubled circumstances in the SBC and in the world around us will become all the more dire.

There is so much to be thankful for in our Baptist heritage. We hold to the Scriptures as God's inspired revelation. Multitudes of people throughout the world have been saved from spiritual darkness and lostness and are joyous citizens of an eternal heavenly home. We have helped people experience Jesus' love through devastating losses or personal crises. We have made strides against racism and prejudice – and strides for inclusiveness – such as the 1995 resolution repenting of our convention's complicity in the stain and inhumanity of slavery.

And just recently, thanksgiving is in order for the election of the next president of the SBC Executive Committee, Jeff Iorg, outgoing president of Gateway Seminary. Regarded as a person of integrity and vision, we must continually undergird him in our prayers as a highly influential leader among our churches and a highly visible representative of Southern Baptists in the media.

Further, for a fresh awareness of the person and power of Jesus Christ in our churches and throughout the SBC, consider:

- First and foremost, prayer for Great Commission missions continues to be vital, reaching to the furthest regions of the world as well as our neighbors next door. Let us pray for our international missionaries and those across North America – and us, as members of our churches – that we may unashamedly help people with empty souls gain freedom in Jesus from the weight and guilt of their separation from God. Let us help them enjoy the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, as described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23.
- We need God’s guidance in how our churches determine the roles and nomenclature for men and women in the body of Christ – whether we can find a unifying accord or possibly find ourselves entering an era of schism, yet doing so with grace toward one another.
- We must not be prayerless about the heart-wrenching scars of victims of sexual abuse and their families as well as horrified members of unsuspecting churches. We must not lose sight of praying that our churches will put vigilant measures in place to protect vulnerable children and youth. We must relay appealing teaching about God’s intent for the power and purity of sexuality. And we must pray that justice for perpetrators will be carried out.
- Let us pray for our historic, fruitful cooperation among the entities of the SBC, particularly our mission boards; our 41 state/regional Baptist conventions; and our hundreds of local associations of churches. Let us pray that we as Southern Baptists may provide the intercession, wisdom and resources necessary for the optimum operation of our Baptist work.
- Let us pray that our convention leaders, our pastors and church staff – and our laypeople – will be people of integrity, shunning the temptations of immorality, callous leadership and illicit gain which, at times, have tarnished the witness of faithful Southern Baptists to a watching world.
- And as we engage in this year’s political process, may we seek the “wisdom from above,” which is described in James 3:17 as “first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense.”

Prayerfulness versus prayerlessness – it’s a sobering choice, one with night-and-day consequences for our souls and our witness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Art Toalston is a writer based in Nashville and a former editor of Baptist Press.

Chicago church's weekday service reaches influx of immigrants

CHICAGO (BP) – It started as a weekday worship service to their community, then it exploded as migrants arrived in Chicago.

“We’re riding the wave,” Uptown Baptist Church Pastor Nick Kim said of the swell of new residents who turned out for a Wednesday morning service. Kim referred to the surfing language used by famed pastor and church planter Henry Blackaby to describe a move of the Holy Spirit in his Canadian community. Uptown had a similar surge when the city suddenly became home to migrants from the southern U.S. border, and many showed up in his lakefront community.

Two years earlier, a Spanish-language congregation that had been gathering in the neighborhood lost its meeting space. Their pastor approached Uptown about using its facility, a stately Gothic building on the corner of West Wilson and North Sheridan in a historic neighborhood. With a neon sign outside and colorful banners with the name of Jesus in many languages inside, Uptown has unique structure – the building has a dividing wall between the sanctuary and the fellowship hall that opens to double capacity.

That became important when one weekday worship service became two – one in English and one in Spanish. At the peak more than 500 people packed the space for many weeks.

“It was more than our building could handle,” said Kim, formerly a leader in the local Baptist association who was called to pastor the church three years ago. “The number was overwhelming. At the same time, the Lord reminded us about the need for discipleship.”

Kim knew that their opportunity to reach migrants might not last “because they are transitory.”

“We knew we could share the Gospel and plant the seed and prepare them to grow as disciples later on as they moved on,” Kim said. “While they were here living in shelters for about six months, they were hearing the Gospel.”

That was the church’s intent from the beginning. As associate pastor Mark Jones described it, Kim and the elders were clear that the ministry must be a work of Uptown, not merely offering meeting rooms to a church planter.

“Our church members now have ownership of this new work of God,” Jones said. “Initially, our members didn’t understand this service was an extension of UBC, but now they do. We have between 12-15 of our members attending and serving at the service each Wednesday.”

At its peak above 500 in January, the church was giving fast food gift certificates to every attendee. Even on snow days when kids were out of school, the church building was packed for the services of teaching and worship and testimonies. Uptown's ministry has shifted now, offering a noontime meal five days a week for about 100 people, and a bilingual seminary student, Ariel Heredia from Logan Square, teaches messages heavy on discipleship.

"We may disagree how migrants got here, but they're here and they need the Gospel," said Kim. "And that's who we are – a church that accepts everyone."

As the Uptown neighborhood sees a simultaneous wave of gentrification, Kim is looking to reach young professionals who are moving in as well. "We know how to reach the hungry who understand their need, but we have to reach the people who don't know they have need because they have stuff," Kim said. "They need the Gospel too."

This article originally appeared in the [Illinois Baptist](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Reed is editor of IBSA media.

To view the corresponding images and links that accompany these stories or to read past stories and issues of the Baptist Beacon, visit BaptistBeacon.net.

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Editor: Tim Patterson - tim@bscm.org

Managing Editor: Jamie Lynn – jamie@bscm.org

Webmaster: OneMissionTV, LLC