

Ambassadors in a foreign land

ROSEVILLE – Oksana Markova is the Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.S. Ambassadors and diplomats who represent their home nations in official functions, as well as, hob-knobbing at dinners, parties, and social events. Hence the difficulty of her role.

Who wants to hear about war, death, destruction, crimes and casualty statistics at cocktail parties and banquets? At the same time, how can she be sociable and winsome (as ambassadors are expected to be) while her home is at war, and people she loves are dying? For people far removed from the conflict, they can easily forget that it is even going on.

As a follower of Christ, you too are an ambassador. Your ultimate allegiance is the kingdom of Christ. Your nation is the people of God, and your embassy is the local church. Together, we represent our home to the nation we currently live in.

Our mission is to represent our King and kingdom, and to advance the interests of our King and kingdom. We are to seek first the kingdom of God. But we live among people who, for the most part, are far removed from what we represent.

Their lives are consumed with earthly things. We watch them run on the treadmills of pleasure, power, and comfort; always pursuing but never arriving. Most are not interested in hearing about our kingdom. It does not make sense to them. Our King, they are led to believe, would get in their way.

However, there are times when an opportunity presents itself. No one can be on those treadmills for long before one gets injured or the treadmill breaks. In those moments, we often have our greatest opportunities to tell them about another King, kingdom, people, and hope.

Citizens and ambassadors of earthly nations are often embarrassed and frustrated at the antics of their leaders. It is maddening to get behind leaders whose actions and beliefs are illogical or shameful. But think of our mission. We represent a King who died for us! We represent a King who rose again! We represent a King who loves his people more than any shepherd has ever loved his sheep. We represent a King whose kingdom will never end.

Let's represent him kindly, faithfully, and personally. Invite some people to gather with you at the embassy this Sunday so they can get an idea of what your eternal home is really like.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

A father choosing faith

MONROE – As I sit down to write this article on family ministry and what it means to be a father, I have just learned I am going to be a grandfather for the second time. My beautiful granddaughter Georgia Grace just celebrated her 1st birthday and now she will become a sister. My wife, Tammy and I are so full of joy it's indescribable, and now we receive this incredible news. My heart is so overwhelmed with gratitude and praise for the greatness of God.

Meanwhile, I am also experiencing apprehension at the prospects of the world my grandchildren will face. Life for the children of America is changing so rapidly, and children today are met with challenges I cannot even comprehend. However, we have a Father in heaven who is forever unchanging. He is sovereign and in control, no matter how great the chaos becomes.

Now more than ever, my faith is put on the front line. Now more than ever, when the structure of the traditional family is under attack, we need men of God to stand up and be counted. Now more than ever, I feel the responsibility of living wholeheartedly for the Lord and setting the example for my family.

I am reminded of the story of Jacob in Genesis 42 & 43. He was afraid to send his youngest son Benjamin back to Egypt with his brothers. Jacob had already lost one son, Joseph and now his son Simeon was being held ransom, waiting for the return of his brothers. Jacob was afraid, however, because the famine was severe, he was left with no choice. He had to trust God, and there is no better place to be. For in our weakness His strength is perfected. I can't help but think about the extraordinary blessing Jacob would have missed if he had failed to trust God. We know how the story ends; he received all his children back to him.

As a father and a grandfather, I need to trust God. Not because I know everything in the world will be perfect for my family, but because I know God has a perfect plan no matter what may come. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose." That doesn't mean there is not going to be pain and heartache, but it means there will be glory for God through the name of Jesus, and that's enough.

Therefore, I will not let the fear of my heart, or the enemy of my soul overwhelm me. I will put one foot in front of the other and I will walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. I will live my life, enjoy my blessings, and I will love my family.

So, let us approach Father's Day full of confidence and faith, realizing we have an opportunity to share Christ with another generation. Let us follow the advice of the Holy Spirit spoken through the Apostle Paul, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which

surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”
(Philippians 4:6-7)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Wallin, child of God, Pastor of Faith Baptist Church of Monroe, devoted husband of Tammy, proud father of Taylor and Bobby Galbraith, grandfather of Georgia Grace and excited for the future member of our family on the way.

Obedience is the Win

HARTLAND – At Grumlaw, the church that I have the privilege of pastoring, we talk a lot about obedience. In fact, one of our core values is “Obedience is the Win.” It’s how we measure “success”- are people within our faith community consistently taking steps of obedience in accordance with Scripture and the small, still voice of the Holy Spirit?

If I’m being honest, I consider myself to be a pretty “obedient” follower. My wife and I started a church, we’re in the process of adopting our third child, we’ve downsized our home, and we’ve been exceedingly financially generous throughout our marriage. Many people have described us as “the most generous couple they’ve ever met” (apparently the bar has been set pretty low).

Without even realizing it, I had gotten prideful with our personal financial stewardship - God still has plenty of work to do in me, but I have the whole tithe and offering thing pretty well dialed in (or so I thought). I am an obedient and generous follower of Jesus. If God asks me to move, I move.

Since day one of planting Grumlaw Church, we have fully funded a border station between Nepal and India in partnership with an incredible organization called Our Daughters International. The sole purpose of these border stations is to rescue women and girls from the horrors of sex-trafficking.

In the early days, it felt risky - we didn’t “have” the money to pay for this. As many well-meaning Christians posed to us, “how can you pay for a border station when you’re not even self-sufficient?” We didn’t feel generosity was a switch we could magically turn on once we were financially self-sufficient - we knew we were supposed to practice that from day one - again, obedience.

Fast forward a couple years, and we were sponsoring our second border station. Shortly thereafter the Holy Spirit put a nagging question into my head, “you’re getting the Christian’s money to aid this cause, how will you get the rest of the world’s?”

He brought to mind a conversation that had started years ago with a friend where I wondered (out loud), “how sweet would it be to have a coffee shop in every city that we have a church campus? But we don’t keep the money, we give away every nickel to the fight against human-trafficking?” God wed these two thoughts together, and a passing thought became a nagging conviction. “We’re going to start a coffee shop that not only serves the best coffee in Michigan, but we’re going to get the rest of our community’s money to push back against the evil of human-trafficking.”

At first, it felt fun, sexy even. What young church planter doesn’t want to start a coffee shop that they can call their own? We spend half our week in those places anyway, we might as well own one. But the fun and charm of it was short-lived.

Communication with contractors was maddening. Everything was over budget. Bills magically appeared. Raised funds quickly dwindled, and soon Andrea and I were dipping into our own pockets - often and for far greater sums than what we had bargained for (or in my mind - agreed to). “God, I had a very specific way that I wanted this to go, and you’re not exactly hooking it up.”

I thought I had generosity figured out. I thought I knew what obedience was - “do what God asks you to do and God will take care of the rest.” And by “take care of the rest” I thought He meant it will be all fun, all the time. But what about when obedience is, well, really hard? What do you do when obedience hurts? And stretches you in ways that you would have preferred to not be stretched?

The reality is, for most American Christians, we know very little of what generosity looks like in the Kingdom of God (myself included- remember earlier? I was a proud member). Even though we claim to be financially generous, the reality is we have a backup plan for our backup plan. Emergency funds for our savings accounts, fallback plans in case God forgets about us. I have longed preached that “generosity according to the Kingdom of Heaven is putting yourself in a situation that if God doesn’t come through, you’re screwed.” But the reality is, I hadn’t put myself in that situation- not once, not ever. I was living a “compare myself to other American Christians” version of generosity, and I looked dang good. But God had other plans.

So, He asks us to start this coffee shop, to “yes,” rescue women. But what I didn’t bargain for was how much He wanted to teach me - how much more I still had to learn about generosity according to Him. He wanted to show me what it was like to live in the reality of, “God, I need you to come through, or me and my family are in some serious trouble.” There have been nights where I’ve wept in fear - “have I ruined my family’s financial future with this decision?” “Am I sure I heard God right on this one?”

I romanticized, “once we’re open, then the money will come rushing in and the stress will be gone!” Nope. It’s arguably gotten more financially taxing (cover payroll more than once for a business that will never pay you back a nickel, and it gets very real, very fast). God apparently still has more He’d like to teach me. And slowly but surely, “the peace that surpasses all understanding” has become a reality.

We’re three months into this journey, and it’s still hard - it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life (yes, even more trying, and stressful than starting a church). But I’m thankful for what God is teaching me about His “Upside Down Kingdom.”

The measure of each of our lives will be how obedient we were to the Scriptures and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Not just clever words for a well-constructed sermon, but reality. Success for Thread Creek Coffee will not be measured by how much money has been raised for a very worthy cause; success is, “did my sheep listen to my voice?” Yep. Obedience is the win.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shea Prisk is the lead pastor at Grumlaw Church in Hartland, the owner of Thread Creek Coffee.

Missionaries use practical skills to advance Gospel

During the seven years Ben Murray and his wife Jessica waited for the Lord to send them overseas, Ben built up a somewhat unusual skillset for a missionary.

Though Ben and Jessica both shared a calling to go to the nations, Ben never felt led toward vocational ministry. Instead, one of several jobs he held was in their town’s Public Works Department where he fixed problems that came with maintaining their small community. His days were filled with repairing water lines, mowing parks, filling potholes and learning how to resourcefully manage limited funds.

Since the Murrays began serving in Southeast Asia last year, he’s already seen these practical skills put to good use for the spread of the Gospel. He helped build a recording studio at a community center run by believers. The studio has opened opportunities to reach minority people groups with the Gospel.

In the country the Murrays serve in, there are many minority people groups. Their languages are distinct from the country’s national language. Many are only oral languages. Without a written language, it is difficult to teach others the language or to create resources to share the Gospel with them.

One helpful resource is recordings of Bible stories, and the studio at the community center has provided a way to create those. Since the recording studio's construction was completed, approximately 20 Bible stories have been recorded for one people group who previously had no known Gospel resources.

Not long after, two national believers came to the community center with a visitor from one of the country's most remote unreached people groups. They spread out a map to show where this people group lived.

"You see that town all the way at the edge of the map?" Ben remembered them asking. "It's a few hours past that."

The visitor was willing to teach them his language, but they were struggling to communicate and understand each other. Workers at the center taught all three of them a simple language learning method that didn't require a shared common language. Additionally, they were also able to use the studio and make recordings of stories the believers can continue to listen to as they learn.

Ben said it has been very humbling to see how God is at work drawing those in even the most forgotten corners of the country to Himself.

"Those two guys, they don't have much, but they've given it up to learn this new language and go to this remote village, all for the sake of the Good News," Ben said. "It's just really cool to see the Father working in that way."

Jessica, a musician, worked with the two believers to record translations of two worship songs in the people group's language. They also began working on an original worship song.

She remembers it being a messy, unique process as the group sat around trying to figure out the best way to communicate words like "God" and "heaven" for an unwritten language of a people group with no Gospel presence among them. Though it was challenging, and the original song isn't finished yet, Jessica said it was still thrilling to hear verses being put together.

"Tears filled my eyes and hope filled my heart as we heard what was likely the first lyrics of worship to our God in this language," she said.

Though the studio is just beginning to get off the ground, Ben is hopeful for its potential to continue furthering Gospel spread among the country's diverse people groups.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stella McMillian* is a missionary and contributing writer for IMB.

Some names have been changed for security.

Perils of shepherding: sheep bites

PLYMOUTH – My earliest years of ministry were carried out in the arid mountains and valleys of West Texas in and around the small town of Marathon. This region of Texas is defined by the “big bend” in the Rio Grande River as it makes a South to North turn and is from whence the National Park located here receives its moniker. It is truly a beautiful area of our great nation with majestic views and never-ending expanses of almost totally uninhabited desert.

It receives very little moisture in the form of rain but when it does, the transformation is magical. A brown, dry scrubby landscape blossoms into a green canvas that will within days sprout the most brilliant of wildflowers. It is truly something to behold.

It has been said of these seemingly barren grasslands that “no land offers so little and provides so much. The reason being is that the grasses and vegetation of this region are some of the highest protein-yielding of any in the USA. That is why ranchers and stockmen have chosen this area to raise cattle and sheep by the tens of thousands and have done so successfully for many decades.

While living in this area, I had the privilege of working on the Dimple Hills Ranch for Mr. Eldon McGonagill. I was serving in a local church and helping at the ranch as part of my “keep”. The McGonagills graciously allowed me to live in the upstairs portion of their townhouse and were more than generous towards me.

This was my first time around sheep ranching. I had been exposed to cattle since I was very young, but not to sheep. I know this is obvious to most people, but sheep are different from cattle. (DUH!). I just didn’t realize how different they were in nature, demeanor, need etc...

The first thing I learned about sheep came when I was helping move a herd from one section to the other by horseback. You cannot push or drive sheep as you might cattle. They will scatter, run, or just lay down and die, but if you lead them properly, they will follow. As we know, the Bible uses this same analogy with people and pastors as shepherds. We must lead them and not push or drive our flock, or they will scatter, run away or just die.

Mr. McGonagill taught me many things about sheep ranching and life. He was a deacon in our church and a spiritual leader in the community. Every conversation in which we engaged would ultimately find its way to the Bible and our Lord Jesus. One such conversation that I will never forget was about the nature of sheep. He explained how they are very docile and rarely aggressive. He told me that almost exclusively male rams become aggressive when ewes are in season or when their territory or herd is threatened. He said even then, it is rare.

It was during this exchange that he asked me a very peculiar question. “Tim, which hurts worse, a wolf bite or a sheep bite?” I told him, “The wolf bite of course.” He said, “NO! The sheep bite

because you're not expecting a sheep to bite!" He then gave me this knowing look and a half smile and said, "that will be important to remember in ministry."

I was young and naive at the time and could not really understand the depth of that truth. But the longer I have spent in ministry and the more involved I have become in people's lives, the more the reality of that truth manifested itself in my life and experiences.

I know now how horribly painful sheep bites can be. Not only are they painful, but some seem to never heal, and the scars are ever present. Yes, I have been bitten and have many scars as reminders. If it were not for the ever-abiding assurance and presence of our Lord and a never-ending supply of Grace, I am sure I would have succumbed to my wounds.

Pastor and leaders, I want to encourage you to stay close to the healing love of the Cross. You will need it! The hurting bites will come but don't be surprised when they come from those you shepherd, love, and lead. Sometimes they are just your "sheep in wolves clothing". Some of the vestiges of their past are still hanging around them. It is your calling to help them cast off the old and put on the new.

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.

Men leaving home

PLYMOUTH – Leaving home, family, and country to experience ministry around the world will become an annual norm for a handful of Michigan church planters. The North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board put together personnel, resources, and prayers to support these cultural explorations. Church planters, who normally travel their local context, will stretch themselves and their global vision by spending time with people who are unfamiliar with Jesus Christ, in places like South Central Asia, Africa, and Europe. The actual outcomes are unpredictable, but here is what we are hoping to see!

These short-term vision trips will create:

1. Robust Volunteers

These men will discover the robust global system in place to send people with the Gospel to the masses around the world with pathways of service for almost everyone: medical personnel, pastors, teachers, athletes, and more.

2. Bold Invitations

The pastors/planters will be inspired to preach Sunday messages that will call church members to vocational international mission service or many, volunteer, short-term excursions.

3. Lavish Giving

These pastors/planters will rush back to call their church members to greater generosity after seeing first-hand how the finances given through the Cooperative Program and the special offerings for international and North American missions are used in precise and powerful ways.

Michigan's three church planters for 2023 are: Seth Springs of Waterford, Michael Goforth of Port Austin, and Ray Ruffin of Redford. Their gratitude for the experiences and their personal discoveries are refreshing.

Seth Springs of Waterford said: "The benefits of these global engagement trips are endless. For myself, anytime I get out of my little box, God seems to stir up something new in my heart, to do something fresh in my life, to remind me that His plan for the world is bigger than just my little corner of it. I'm so thankful to the Send Network for making this adventure possible, as I come back rejuvenated, motivated to participate in God's global mission."

Michael Goforth of Port Austin stated: "I had a life-changing week in Germany that I will never forget. The lostness in Frankfurt was overwhelming, but I left with the encouraging truth that we had boots on the ground. Our faithful missionaries are there, engaged in the work. And through our incredible partnership with NAMB and IMB, God is using our little church to make an impact for His glory among the nations."

Ray Ruffin of Redford expressed: "I am excited I was provided the opportunity to participate in the mission trip to Bulgaria. I am especially excited to represent my church by leading the way in opening international missions in the local church context. My desire is to participate in the Great Commission and share where the Lord provides opportunity. This will open up more conversations with the local congregation about the sharing the Gospel near and far."

During the coming years, each mission trip will take place in different locations, hosted by a variety of international missionaries, yet we expect that each planter will leave their home, their families, and their churches for a brief time in order to:

1. Have Eternal Cross Cultural Conversations

Each planter will have conversations with others who have little to no concept of Jesus Christ or access to a personal Bible in the language they have spoken since childhood.

2. Encourage Global Mission Partners

The planter will meet with local mission partners who are often emboldened to share their faith more after North Americans spend time and take risks to share life with them for a week's time.

3. Imagine Bolder Mission Initiatives

Create ideas as to how the members of their church or a coalition of American churches could return to the field to assist the missionaries with whom they spent time.

4. Take Bigger Risks in the USA

Imagine ways to engage people living in the USA who have moved from countries with little or no impact by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 3:20 (NLT) reminds all of us that the Lord can release a lot more of his bold plans on the world when we are ready to ask and imagine things as large as the Lord does. That text says,

“Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Our Heavenly Father

PLYMOUTH – Of all the words Jesus could have chosen to refer to God, the one he used most frequently was “Father.” We are so accustomed to calling God “Father” that we fail to realize just how revolutionary this was.

According to the Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, God is only referred to as “Father” 15 times in the entire Old Testament. Jesus uses the word “Father” 65 times in the synoptic Gospels and over 100 times in the Gospel of John. It’s not just a way to address God, it’s Jesus’ preferred way for us to think about God.

It is interesting that in prayer Jesus calls God “Father,” but he teaches us to say, “our Father.” Why the difference? By divine nature, Jesus is the eternal son of the Father. God is our Father by adoption when we receive Christ as our Savior and Lord. Jesus understands his uniqueness as God’s only begotten Son, but the result is the same - God is his Father and ours. “But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name” (John 1:12).

In Matthew 6, Jesus refers to God as Father 12 times - just three times less than the entire Old Testament. This chapter is full of deep spiritual truth, but two truths about the Fatherhood of God emerge to encourage us this Father’s Day.

Our Heavenly Father celebrates us as His children.

As you read through these verses, it is readily apparent that our heavenly Father takes notice of our inner character, and it pleases Him. As His sons and daughters, we are a delight to Him. He sees it in the way we give (vs 1-4), the way we pray (vs 5-13), and the way we fast (vs 17-18).

Some use these same virtues to get noticed by others: Like the person who gives his offering in such a way that it can’t be missed (v 2), or the person who looks for the most public place to parade his piety in prayer (v. 5), or the one who makes it painfully obvious that he is fasting by the distortions of his face and unkemptness of his hair (v 16). Ultimately, the motive is to be seen by others and the reward is the personal gratification received by hearing their applause.

The child of God, on the other hand, gives, prays, and fasts out of the overflow his relationship to Christ. He does so in such a way that it does not draw attention. These acts are done quietly in gratitude for all that Jesus has done for us. They are a part of who we are in Christ. These spiritual disciplines are done for the well-being of others and personal growth. They are about the needs of others being met, the trusting prayer of faith taking root deep in our souls, and spiritual discipline gained by fasting.

Three times Jesus says, “**And your Father who sees in secret will reward you**” (vs 4, 6, 18). It’s a beautiful picture of the Heavenly Father taking notice of His sons and daughters as they live out their faith. He sees the very reflection of Jesus in our lives, and it pleases Him. He smiles as He sees the redemptive work of His Son being lived out in the lives of His children. There is applause, not here on earth, but above as our Heavenly Father celebrates the character of His children.

God knows everything about you. He sees you - and is pleased.

Our Heavenly Father meets our every need.

It's striking how vast God's provisions are for His children. Jesus wants us to understand that our Heavenly Father is an incredible provider, and that we can turn to Him for our every need. Jesus tells us not to worry 6 times in this chapter because God will take care of us (vs 25, 27, 28, 31, 34).

He wants us to know that God's provisions are available to us for the asking. We don't have to worry about life, about food and drink, or what we will wear (verse 25). Worry won't lengthen our days (v 27) or add clothes to our wardrobe (v 28).

We don't even have to worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will worry about itself (v 34).

Jesus drives home the point that God meets our needs by turning our attention to the birds soaring in the sky above and the wildflowers growing in the field beyond. God cares for each. Through the rhetorical question Jesus asks, our incredible value to God is declared and His provision for our every need satisfied. "But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you" (vs 33).

Of course, God's greatest provision for us comes in Christ who gave his life on Calvary for our sins and rose again for our salvation. Because of him, we call God, "our Heavenly Father."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Durbin is the State Evangelism Director for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before joining the state convention staff, Mike served as Church Planting Catalyst and Director of Missions in Metro Detroit since 2007. He also has served as a pastor and bi-vocational pastor in Michigan, as well as International Missionary to Brazil.

Heresies among us

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – Apparently, American evangelicals' grasp on theology is slipping. More than 50% of us affirmed heretical views of God in the 2022 State of Theology survey, released by Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research.

Overall, adults in the U.S. are moving away from orthodox understandings of God and his Word year after year. More than half of the country (53%) now believes Scripture "is not literally true," up from 41 percent when the biannual survey began in 2014. Canada attracts even higher percentages.

Researchers call the rejection of the divine authorship of the Bible the “clearest and most consistent trend” over the eight years of data. Researchers wrote, “This view makes it easy for individuals to accept biblical teaching that they resonate with while simultaneously rejecting any biblical teaching that is out of step with their own personal views or broader cultural values.”

Paul warned Timothy about this very moment. “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4 ESV). Evidently, the time has arrived.

Here are five of the most common mistaken beliefs held by evangelicals: (Source: Stefani McDade, “Top 5 Heresies Among American Evangelicals,” CT magazine online, 9-19-22)

1. Jesus isn’t the only way to God.

Fifty-six percent of evangelical respondents affirmed that “God accepts the worship of all religions.” This answer indicates a bent toward universalism—believing there are ways to bypass Jesus in our approach to and acceptance by God.

2. Jesus was created by God.

Seventy-three percent agreed with the statement that “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” This is a form of Arianism, a popular heresy that arose in the early fourth century.

3. Jesus is not God.

Forty-three percent affirmed that “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.”

4. The Holy Spirit is not a personal being.

Sixty percent of the evangelical survey respondents believe that “The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.”

5. Humans aren’t sinful by nature.

Fifty-seven percent also agreed to the statement that “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.” So, we do not have sinful natures? This denies the doctrine of original sin.

In case you are wondering, the Bible’s perspective is much different, and our churches in Michigan need to pay attention.

1. Jesus is the only way to God.

The Bible insists that Jesus is the only way of salvation, and in following this teaching we follow the lead our Lord and his apostles (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the only Savior of sinners (John 14:6). He alone is qualified to save, and he is the only redeemer God has sent.

2. Jesus was not created by God.

John 1:1 says, clearly, "In the beginning was the Word." Before there was any matter, before anything had been made, Jesus was. "In the beginning was the Word." So, there at the beginning, when those things were brought into being, he was there already. That's the point of "in the beginning." Jesus was there as the Son of God in the beginning.

3. Jesus is God.

The only Redeemer is the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, in whom God became man and bore the penalty for sin himself (1 Cor. 15:3; Gal. 1:4; 1 Jn. 2:2). "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:2).

4. The Holy Spirit is a personal being.

There are three persons in the one true and living God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are the same in substance, equal in power and glory. For more help on the doctrine of the Trinity you can read "The Trinity" on The Gospel Coalition website (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-trinity>)

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:4).

5. Humans are sinful by nature.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Sin was first present in the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, which has corrupted all people except for Christ, and which leads to death, both bodily and spiritually (Rom. 3:23).

Sin is the failure to keep God's law and to uphold his righteousness, thus failing to glorify the Lord fully. While there are many different manifestations that sin can take, they are all rooted in the initial disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden. All those who have been born afterwards, other than Jesus Christ, have been born into sin and cannot escape the guilt and punishment that sin incurs apart from the freedom found in Christ.

We accept the divine authorship of the Bible! Let's walk in its truth and preach and teach the Scriptures as if our very life depends on it, because it does. We cannot push back the darkness of our day if we are not settled in our evangelical convictions.

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.

Bambi Lake: A new home in a familiar place

ROSCOMMON – “Bambi Lake” conjures up great memories for me. Summer camp with a bunch of guys in Pinegrove, the late night hikes to the fire tower, and chalk drawing by Bro Leon Fuller. One year my family stayed in the campground for two weeks. The first week, I helped my dad install the hot water baseboard heat in the cafetorium; and the second week, my brother and I went on a weeklong canoe trip on the Ausable River.

More important to me was the spiritual impact the camp had on my life. It was at a campfire service that I dedicated my life to serve the Lord in any way He chose.

When you arrived at Bambi, you could sense the presence of the Lord. I remember singing “There’s a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in this place, and I know that it’s the presence of the Lord.” Camp is so important because you are away from the hub-bub of your life, and able to clearly focus on God and His Word.

Life took me away from Bambi for more than 40 years: college, marriage, children, teaching in Christian schools, and serving the Lord in my church. My youngest child was born with general disabilities, which meant many doctor visits, hospital stays, and special equipment. My wife and daughter began to attend Joni and Friends Disability Retreats where they met a group of people who understood the challenges we faced. I began to get involved with the group as a dad, then teaching Bible and music to the young adults with disabilities.

COVID brought many changes, with the cancellation of camp in 2019 and the closure of the Kettunen Center in Tustin, Michigan. We needed a new camp/Conference Center to use for our disability family retreats. The camps that were handicap accessible were booked out for years, and the camps that were available were not willing to make the adjustments we would need for our camp. It was at that moment that my brain finally worked and I remembered Bambi Lake.

I warned our team that it had been 40 years since I had seen the camp. What changes had they made? Would it be handicap accessible? How do we get wheelchairs through the Michigan sand? We scheduled a three day mini-retreat with the Bambi staff to evaluate the camp. As I

expected Sara's wheelchair became stuck in the sand shortly after getting her out of our vehicle. The camp had one sidewalk between the two main buildings.

As we talked with the staff and with our leadership team, we felt "the sweet, sweet spirit in this place." Mick, Nancy, and the entire team at Bambi Lake began to work to make the camp handicap accessible. Sidewalks and ramps have been constructed, and entries to the building have been modified to accommodate wheelchairs.

Our families, volunteers, and the leadership team enjoy Bambi Lake: catching fish on the new handicap accessible fishing dock, riding on the wagon through the trails, and being fed physically and spiritually. At Bambi Lake, we have found our new home. By God's grace, we will hold our third Through the Roof Disability Family Retreat at Bambi Lake, July 24-30, 2023.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Sutphin and his wife, Dawn, have been married for 42 years with five children and five grandchildren. David serves with Through the Roof Disability Ministries as the volunteer coordinator and Bible Teacher for the "youthful adults," including his daughter, Sara, at the Disability Family Retreat. You can learn more about Through the Roof Disability Ministry at ttrdisability.org.

SEND Detroit update

DETROIT – God is on the move in the Motor City. If you are looking to involve a mission team this summer with gospel efforts and church planting please reply and let me know. I would love to help you connect and serve with a church planting missionary in our city! Wayne Parker Send Detroit Missionary

Gospel Advance in the Motor City

In the first few months of 2023 we have witnessed the church planters of Send Detroit diligently laboring for the gospel. Following the 10 new launches that we had in 2022, these new churches are seeking creative (especially given the cold winter months) and relevant ways to reach people in their communities (Game nights, Bingo night, Valentines parties) and connect for deepening faith (life groups and Bible study). We are also seeing churches that have developed leadership residencies being successful to equip men who will lead out in the planting of new churches. As our network grows in Detroit and Michigan, relationships and partnerships are growing deeper between church plants, so that there is a deeper spirit of cooperation and unity.

ESL Ministry Reaching Different Language Groups

Hikari City Church (Maki Umakoshi) and Mile City Espanol (Oscar Luna) are partnering to reach the Japanese and Spanish speaking communities from Plymouth/Livonia through an English as Second Language ministry hosted at Mile City Church (Travis Whittaker). They just started this outreach in March with about 20 participants and are preparing well for growth in this ministry.

Churches Planted and Putting Down Roots

Treasuring Christ Church (Michael Guyer) was able to move into a new location in Ypsilanti (pictured above) and Commonwealth of Faith (Torion Bridges) was able to purchase the building and property that they are meeting in Redford.

New Life Celebrations!

We are seeing new believers follow the Lord in baptism. Churches that held baptism services in the early months of 2023 included Transformation Church, Waterford (Pastor Seth Springs), Reformation Church, Detroit (Pastor Malcolm Griswold), Lanters Church, Wayne (Pastor Ryan Cabildo) and Crossover Church (Pastor Ken Nether).

Network Gatherings

During January we hosted a guys night at Little Caesars Arena with about 12 guys who came out to enjoy fellowship and a night out to watch the Detroit Red Wings from the gondola seats! It was a fun time together! Each month this year we have also gathered intentionally at local churches to huddle with church planters for prayer and encouragement. In January, we met at The Church at Clawson (Bob Morrissey), In February we met at the Commonwealth of Faith, Redford (Torion Bridges) and in March we met at Transformation Church, Waterford (Seth Springs). Each time we gathered with 10-12 men. These gatherings provide us with opportunity for a deeper fellowship in our Send Detroit Network.

A loving father loves

LANSING – In Luke 15 we encounter a scene where the Pharisees and scribes complain of Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners (15:1–2). Jesus having already encountered this criticism (5:27–32 Matt 9:11; Mark 2:16), uses three parables to serve both as a defense of His ministry to sinners, and as an appeal to the Pharisees and scribes to join the celebration of all

who gain entrance into the kingdom of God. While the three parables are connected by a similar theme (the joy of the lost being found), the third one, 'The Prodigal Son' usually grabs the bulk of our attention. But why?

Jesus starts this parable off with the statement, "A man had two sons," immediately after his introduction and without any real explanation of why, he says, the younger son came to his father requesting his inheritance. A father's inheritance was something he passed on to his children upon his death. Thus, the younger son's request for his inheritance could be seen as equivalent to saying to his father, "I wish you were dead!" Since it would seem harsh for a son to wish for his father's death (especially in the case of a father who is loving and very caring to his children), it is probably more than likely that the son intended to communicate his desire to no longer be under His father's authority.

More astonishing than the son's request is the father's response as without hesitation he honors his son's request. The father figures out what his inheritance would have been if he were dead and then the father gives his sons' (both) their inheritance (v. 12).

Upon receiving his inheritance, soon after the younger son packed up all his belongings and decided that it was best for him to venture out on his own into a distant country. But why would a good or loving father let his son go, knowing that his son would no longer be in his presence or underneath his protection? Simple, because a loving father loves you enough to let you leave.

When things don't go well for the youngest son, as they often don't when we venture away from the presence and protection of a loving father, he returns. Yet, when his son returns the father does not reject his son. In fact, the reaction of the father when his son returns, "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him v. 20). At the first sight of his son, without his son having to say a word, the father knows, the world and its pleasures will tear young people apart, and his son has not been exempt.

To relieve him of the world and its cruelty, the father's compassion is communicated to his son as he not only welcomes him home with compassion, but follows it with a celebration. Why? Because a loving father not only loves you enough to let you leave, but he also loves you enough to let you return.

As we shift our focus from the younger to the elder son, we see him at work, somewhere on the property of his father. As the elder boy is coming in from the field, he hears celebration. Puzzled, he sought information from one of the servants. The servant informs him of his younger brother's return, and the celebration in his honor.

The older brother becomes angry (v. 28) and even refuses to join the party. Not sure why this is a problem, even the father seems perplexed once he learns that his older son is not coming in. So, the father goes out, and pleads with his son to come in and join the celebration. Suddenly,

in a moment of overwhelming emotion the older son expresses his objections to his father's actions, for he feels overlooked, even under appreciated by his father.

Now to the older son's credit, he did not remove himself from his father's presence or protection even though he had been given his father's provision (v. 12). However, he illuminates his own self-righteousness and then further tries to validate his anger by telling his father what he had never done for him, "you never even gave me a young goat..."

But his father with sadness written all over his face, compassion gripping his heart, opens his hands stretching his arms towards his son and says, "all that I have belongs to you." Thus, the father further demonstrates the same love to his eldest son as he has to his younger. However, the father needs his oldest son to know that he loves them both equally, regardless of their recent decisions for his presence, his protection and/or provisions for them.

Furthermore, the father will not dismantle the party already in progress even if it means losing his oldest son. Why? Because the father has already made his choice, for a loving father chooses both of his sons and what belongs to him belongs to them. But why? Because ultimately a loving father loves you enough to let you reject him or return, but he also loves you enough to let you choose.

This Father's Day will you choose to accept the love and compassion of a loving Heavenly Father choosing to accept His presence, protection, and provision over your life? Dads, this Father's Day, will you and I choose to look like the good and loving Father that our God is as we seek to love our children, all of them, unconditionally whether they remain in our presence, protection, and provision? And Fathers, will we be wise and loving enough as good dads, to let our children choose? God Bless you men and Happy Father's Day!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor Coye L. Bouyer is the founding pastor of Kingdom Life Church in Lansing, MI where he has served since March of 2010. Pastor Bouyer firmly believes that he was not only called to Preach the Gospel as part of the process of reconciliation of man to God, but also using any platform as a bridge of reconciliation of man to man, and even more so amongst the brethren. Pastor Bouyer and his lovely wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1) have been married four over 20 years and have four children; Sierra, Seth, Cayla and Coye II.

Fatherhood is a difficult subject for me...

PLYMOUTH – As I reflect on the fatherhood experiences in my life, I see how each moment has shaped my view of our Heavenly Father.

My own Father was diagnosed with brain cancer when I was 10 and given two months to live. I watched him deteriorate over the next two years until, finally, he went to be with Jesus. Although I only knew my dad for 12 years, each day I saw him live his life to glorify God. He did this not only in the way he interacted with people but also in the way he disciplined my brothers and me. He held us to a high standard and did his best to set us up for success as Jesus followers.

The last two years of his life, I watched him waste away, unable to eat solid food. Yet, every day he fed himself on the Scriptures. His actions showed me just how precious the Word of God really is. He taught me how to love Jesus and trust him no matter the circumstances.

Our Heavenly Father also delights in Jesus, his Son, and he delights in us as well. Yet, he is not afraid to discipline us. He does this with the end in mind, to grow us and shape us to look more and more like his Son. I desire to be a father who guides and instructs his children, steering them to Jesus and to the truth found in His Word.

I had my first father-in-law in my life for about ten years as well. He is a brilliant man, the smartest I have ever met. He has even read the dictionary for fun... twice. He showed wisdom and knowledge in everything he did. It wasn't uncommon for us to have conversations that left my head spinning for days. Sadly, our relationship ended when his daughter and I were divorced.

The Heavenly Father's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways. It's okay when we lack the understanding. Most times we just need to know who He is and trust that He is working everything for our good. I want to show my son that it's okay to not always understand everything. We serve a big God who is trustworthy and can be taken at His Word.

God was gracious to me and gave me a new father-in-law to fill my fatherless gap. My wife's dad is the most selfless person I have ever met. He is kind and caring, willing to do anything for anyone at any time. He has taught me so much in the brief time I've had with him. Each day he shows me how to have a servant's heart as I care for my family and each person I meet.

Our God is no different! He is a merciful and gracious father, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He is a servant to the weak, reaching to out a hand to all those who need it. I desire to be a father who is humble and patient, willing to serve my kids selflessly with unconditional love.

My own experience as a father was the briefest of all. I was only given two seven-week

periods until we had the miscarriages. I deeply miss those two babies and grieve the time I never got with them. After the first, I was terrified that it would happen again. So, when we got pregnant the second time, I didn't dare hope. I didn't dare celebrate and I regret that. That precious child deserved to be celebrated no matter how long he was with us.

In the last year God has given me an incredible gift. And this gift calls me "Dada". Just over a year ago, a 21-month-old foster child came into our home. About three months into his stay with us, he uttered that life changing word, "Dada". I never knew how sweet a word could sound until I heard it from those little lips.

Only our Heavenly Dada knows how long I will hear those words from him. The Father knows just how long each of us have. And he is watching us and he is cheering us on! He is delighting in every move we make toward Jesus, no matter how small (Zechariah 4:10). These three babies have taught me to find joy in every moment, no matter how small. Each one is precious and deserves to be celebrated. They remind me to enjoy every hug, every kiss, every giggle, every "nigh nigh", and every "Dada".

Fatherhood is a difficult subject for me, and it may be for you as well. Even so there is good news. No matter what happened with your biological father or your father-in-law or even your own kids, you have a Father right here reaching down to pick you up and hold you tight.

Just as we desire relationship with our children, he desires relationship with you. He wanted you in his family so much that he sent his own beloved Son to live, die, and rise so that you could become a child of His. He chose you and he wants to guide you, to shape you, to celebrate you, and to protect you. He has invited you into his family and now is the time for introductions. You don't want to miss knowing this Dada.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Carty recently won the 2022 Best Darn Ministry Assistant Award for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (voted on by himself). He loves Superman, pizza, and our adoption into the family of God. But his greatest earthly love is his amazing wife, Claire! She brightens his whole life. He is currently pursuing his MDIV in Missiology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Stay tuned to see what God does in their life.

‘Why SBC’ Twitter hashtag focuses on Great Commission unity

NASHVILLE (BP) – As the 2023 SBC Annual Meeting (June 12-13 in New Orleans) approaches, many Southern Baptist pastors and leaders are sharing the reasons they are glad to be part of the Convention using the hashtag [#WhySBC](#).

Matt Capps, senior pastor at Fairview Baptist Church in Apex, N.C., made the first video, where he pointed to thousands of churches plants, fully funded missionaries and seminary students as reasons to be encouraged about the Convention.

“All of these are ways that we work together to reach every person for Jesus Christ in every town, every city, every state and every nation,” Capps [said](#). “That is why I’m a Southern Baptist.”

Capps told Baptist Press about his decision to spark the hashtag.

“I was talking with some pastors in North Carolina and all of us lamented that the tone and rhetoric of the conversation online trends towards division and hatefulness as we get closer to the annual meeting,” Capps said in a statement to Baptist Press.

SBC President Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, Texas, made his own video under the hashtag.

“At the opening session this year for annual meeting in New Orleans, is going to consist of a commissioning service for the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board,” Barber said [in the twitter video](#) released May 22.

“We’re going to have the opportunity to celebrate the appointment of 92 new missionaries who are going to be commissioned at that service, and we’re going to be celebrating 10,000 church plants that the North American mission board has been able to achieve.

“When you are Southern Baptist, you come to the point that you sort of take that kind of thing for granted, but that is amazing and wonderful and world-changing.”

Capps told BP it can be easy to focus on the controversy in SBC life rather than the work God is doing.

“If you only knew Southern Baptists from what you read on social media, you might think the Convention is more focused on personal campaigns and philosophical conflicts rather than the Great Commission,” he said.

“However, the vast majority of Southern Baptists are encouraged by the work of the Convention and are hopeful for the future. The majority of Southern Baptists remain steadfast in stewarding this sacred effort to fulfill the mission given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s time to stop arguing on social media and start working together.

“The [#WhySBC](#) videos came out of this desire. It wasn’t an elitist campaign, I am a local church pastor. My aim was simple, do what I can to change the tone of the conversation.”

Clint Pressley, senior pastor of Hickory Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., also reflected on his personal experience of the way Southern Baptists impacted him in his early ministry.

“I loved people, I loved Jesus and I loved the Bible ... I didn’t know how to get those three together,” Pressley [said](#) in a video. “I didn’t know how to get those three together. Southern Baptists taught me how to do that.”

In response to the videos posted by pastors, others in the Convention were retweeting and posting their own content supporting the sentiments of the videos.

Tristan Martin, pastor of Alameda Baptist Church, Norman, Okla., simply [posted a selfie](#) holding copies of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000 and the IMB resource “Lottie Moon: a life of radical obedience.”

Barber concluded that no matter the negatives or conflict that may exist in the SBC, the collective missional heart of churches is what keeps the convention alive.

“God has chosen, in spite of whatever faults we have and no matter what our weaknesses are, He has chosen to use this family of churches to share the Gospel all around the world,” Barber said.

“That’s the heart of FBC Farmersville. That’s why we’re thrilled to be a part of the Southern Baptist Convention, partnering with you to share the God news of Jesus Christ all around the world.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Cockes is a Baptist Press staff writer.

Sexual abuse ministry check website almost ready for launch, ARITF says

NASHVILLE (BP) – The SBC Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force says it is preparing to launch a ministry database website as ordered by messengers to the 2022 SBC Annual Meeting in Anaheim. The website will not be connected to Faith-Based Solutions or Guidepost Solutions in any way, according to a [May 25 release](#) on the group’s website.

“After listening and giving careful consideration, the Task Force determined, in consultation with the Credentials Committee, to move away from Faith Based Solutions (the Christian-led division of Guidepost) as the provider and manager of the website,” the update said.

The group also announced that during the site’s initial launch, it will utilize only the first three criteria in the definition of [“credibly accused.”](#)

ARITF Chairman Marshall Blalock told Baptist Press task force members are planning to have the website online when they give their report at the SBC Annual Meeting in New Orleans on June 13. The names that have been vetted from categories one, two and three will be on the site at that time.

“Name, alias, birth date, offense, location of offense, date of offense and a photo will be on the site in a searchable database. It will be available for public search without a password or user account,” Blalock said.

Related to the fourth category, the update said, “The ARITF is not abandoning category four. We are, however, committed to implementing each category once it is fully developed. We will continue to work closely with churches, leaders, survivors and experts to thoroughly address concerns and ensure that the development of this category is as effective as possible in protecting all parties.”

The fourth point of the credibly accused definition deals with the “Determination by an independent third party according to a preponderance of evidence,” according to the update.

The group said the following statistics are among their rationale for the continued work to find a way to include the fourth criteria:

- 2 out of 3 sexual assaults go unreported. (RAINN)
- Out of every 1000 sexual assaults, only 25 offenders will ever be convicted. (RAINN)
- A male abuser who molests boys has an average of 150 victims. (Emory University)

- A male abuser who molests girls has an average of 52 victims. (Emory University)
- Only 16% of child victims ever tell about their abuse. (NCAC)

At the [2022 SBC Annual Meeting](#), messengers passed the following definition for those considered to be credibly accused of sexual abuse:

“A credibly accused pastor, denominational worker, or ministry employee or volunteer includes one who has confessed in a non-privileged setting, who has been convicted in a court of law, or who has had a civil judgment rendered against them. Additionally, an independent third party who has been hired by any church or other Baptist body, may determine, by preponderance of the evidence following an inquiry, that a pastor, denominational worker, or ministry employee or volunteer is credibly accused. A ‘preponderance of the evidence’ is the legal standard required for a civil judgment.”

In the May 25 update, the group clarified the definition of sexual abuse that will be used on the ministry check site, saying, “the term ‘sexual abuse’ is defined as any sexual act that could result in a criminal conviction or civil liability in the jurisdiction where it occurred.”

Blalock told BP he had been encouraged by the cooperative spirit he had encountered from many Southern Baptists to rid churches of sexual abuse.

“The passion of our people to prevent sexual abuse has been one of the encouraging blessings of serving on this task force,” he said.

While he admits the task is great, he believes partnership is key.

“It’s the heart of our people to cooperate,” he said. “It will take each church sharing information to help every other congregation identify abusers and protect their people.”

The update said moving away from Guidepost is a primary reason it has taken a year for the ministry check website to be prepared. “... [T]his meant dividing the work related to Ministry Check between multiple providers,” it said. “This added complexity to our assignment, but our goal was cooperation. In order to encourage unity and the widest possible cooperation among our churches in combating abuse, we sought to remove every stumbling block.”

It also sought to address “false narratives” being spread about the group’s work.

“There is a narrative being promoted that these steps were taken in response to threats about churches or conventions withholding Cooperative Program funds. The ARITF agreed to pursue these changes for one reason: to have the widest possible participation by our churches to stop sexual abuse,” the update said.

The group said understanding the timing of their decisions is important, “It is also worth noting that the ARITF met to make these changes before any public announcements were made by any state convention.”

Blalock said the ministry check website will have information about prevention including a toolbox for local churches when it debuts in June.

Last year, messengers in Anaheim approved the creation of the Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, including the ground rules for the group’s work and how members are selected:

- The task force operates on a year-to-year basis and must be granted an additional year by messengers at subsequent annual meetings as needed.
- Vacancies on the task force are appointed by the SBC president at the time of the vacancy.

This is the full text of what messengers passed related to the creation and ongoing work of the ARITF:

“That the messengers to the 2022 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention approve the creation of an Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force (ARITF), authorized to operate for one year, to be renewable by each subsequent annual convention as needed. The ARITF is to be appointed by the president elected by the 2022 Convention, who will also appoint its leadership. Any vacancies will be appointed by the SBC president at the time of the vacancy. The ARITF and its work are to be funded by the Executive Committee for the first year from the sexual abuse reforms allocation. The Executive Committee will fund the ARITF’s expenditures and recommendations, pursuant to the recommendations adopted by the Messengers, the approval of which may not be withheld. The ARITF will work collaboratively with entity heads to recommend funding mechanisms for reforms for following years. The ARITF will report to each annual session of the Convention that it is in existence.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandon Porter serves as Associate Vice President for Convention News at the SBC Executive Committee.

Appeals over removing churches from SBC spark larger debate

SPRINGFIELD, IL – The announcement that three churches will appeal the decision to deem them not in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention is a key point in a larger discussion likely to happen when Southern Baptists convene in New Orleans this summer.

On June 13, messengers to the SBC Annual Meeting will vote on whether to uphold the decision to withdraw fellowship from [Fern Creek Baptist Church](#) in Louisville, Kentucky; [Freedom Church in Vero Beach](#), Florida; and [Saddleback Church in Lake Forest](#), California. The SBC's Executive Committee (on recommendations from the Credentials Committee) deemed the churches not in friendly cooperation in February.

Two of the churches — Fern Creek and Saddleback — were [disfellowshipped](#) due to concerns over women serving as pastors. The action regarding Freedom Church stems from reports it did not properly handle an allegation of sexual abuse.

Historic vote

“SBC bylaws plainly outline the process for churches determined to be not in cooperation with the Convention to appeal their cases before messengers cast their votes,” David Sons, chairman of the Executive Committee, said in a statement May 16.

“Since this is the first time in SBC history for this particular item of business to come before the Convention,” he noted, “it’s important for everyone coming to New Orleans to be prepared and informed about the process.”

The SBC Credentials Committee announced in a statement May 16 that the Committee on Order of Business will consider the appeals during the miscellaneous business portion of the afternoon session on that Tuesday.

A representative from the appealing church and a representative of the Credentials Committee or EC will be allowed to speak to the question of whether to sustain the decision to deem the churches not in friendly cooperation.

Founded by pastor Rick Warren 43 years ago, Saddleback was one of the SBC's largest churches before its removal in February. In 2021, the church ordained three female staff members, resulting in a review by the Credentials Committee. At the 2022 annual meeting in Anaheim, the committee initially proposed waiting to make a decision on Saddleback's relationship with the SBC until they could gain more clarity on the use of the title “pastor.” After debate on the convention floor, including an [appearance](#) by Warren, the committee withdrew its recommendation.

Warren, who has given [five reasons](#) for Saddleback's appeal, retired in 2022 and Andy Wood succeeded him as lead pastor.

Wood's wife, Stacie, is a teaching pastor at Saddleback. Earlier this month, the church announced Katie Edwards, one of the women ordained in 2021, will serve as campus pastor at its Lake Forest location.

At Fern Creek, Linda Barnes Popham has served as pastor since 1993.

A closer look at structure, governing documents

Bart Barber, president of the SBC, devoted a recent Twitter [video](#) to the larger issue of how the SBC's structure and governing documents impact the process of determining which churches are in friendly cooperation with the convention.

Article III of the SBC [constitution](#) says that to be considered cooperating, a church needs to have a faith and practice that is closely identified with the Baptist Faith and Message, Barber noted.

"The thing is, nobody knows what 'closely identified with' means in terms of actually applying it to the case of individuals churches," he said.

Furthermore, Barber said, recently revamped responsibilities for the Credentials Committee require it to "fill in the blanks" on what kind of relationship a church needs to have with the Baptist Faith and Message in order to be in cooperation with the SBC.

[Article VI](#) of the Baptist Faith and Message states, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

Barber said he is in favor of motions likely to be proposed in New Orleans to review the constitution and bylaws and suggest changes with regard to what cooperation means in the SBC, and also to review the Baptist Faith and Message to see if updates or clarifications are needed.

He is also in favor of allowing messengers to vote on a proposed amendment to the constitution that would disqualify from friendly cooperation a church that affirms, appoints, or employs a woman as a pastor of any kind. Barber recently [announced](#) the program for the annual meeting includes more time for convention business, including discussion of proposed motions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meredith Flynn is the managing editor for [Illinois Baptist](#).

Life experiences help trucker in Nebraska replant effort

LOUP CITY, NE (BP) – They are two skills anyone can learn but many don't – listening and trusting. Ryan Durham's life has given him experience in both, and he uses them as pastor of Calvary Church, a replanted congregation barely seven months old.

Before becoming a pastor, Durham was a trucker. Most of that was over-the-road, where he would cover all 48 contiguous states and be gone from his family for up to seven weeks. His introduction to that life started when he was 16 years old, and in a manner he says "wasn't perfectly legal."

"I grew up in Texas but would spend summers with my uncle in Colorado," he said. "He hauled cattle and liked to take a short nap before he got home so he wouldn't be tired when he got there. He taught me how to drive the rig."

One day his uncle crawled in the back to nap while Durham waited in the passenger seat. A minute later his uncle's head popped out from behind the curtain that separated the cab from the bed and asked what Durham was doing.

"I said I was waiting on him and he said this would be a good time to head to the house. Then he said, 'It's that way.'"

Durham hopped into the driver's seat, but was aware he actually wasn't alone.

"I knew he was back there sitting behind the curtain. About five miles from the house, he popped his head back out and said, 'OK, stop the truck. If your aunt sees you driving, she's going to kill me.'"

Durham listened and learned. His uncle gave him the opportunity to put those lessons into action, albeit with 50,000 pounds of cattle in tow.

Those principles have factored in to his role at Calvary. Durham and his wife, Brandi, began attending Calvary Church in Englewood, Colo., in 2015. Calvary had been founded in 1952, but by 2009 was near extinction. A desire to return to its roots with a focus on church planting led to establishing other churches in the state and beyond.

Still a trucker, Durham felt a call to ministry. He began attending online classes through Gateway Seminary just as Calvary began a cohort training experience for those exploring a call to plant and replant churches.

"They took a chance on me," said Durham, "a blue-collar truck driver working 90 hours a week."

In 2019, living in the Denver area had become expensive and the Durhams were considering a move. An elder at their church suggested Kearney, Neb., where they could get some more experience with a Calvary church plant there.

COVID extended those plans, leading to a longer stay in Kearney. So did their daughter, who still had another year of high school to go, when she was awarded a full scholarship to the University of Nebraska-Kearney.

“We were like, well, we thought we’d be here for two years and now we’re here for a minimum of four,” Durham said. “We didn’t know what the Lord was doing, honestly.”

One day at a yard sale he started talking to a young lady who mentioned a struggling church in Loup City, 45 minutes away, that needed a pastor. Durham connected her with Calvary leaders back in Colorado. Those conversations led to Durham’s meeting with the Loup City church in May 2022.

The initial plan was to preach once a month during the summer “and then kind of see where things went,” Durham said.

His and Brandi’s first visit to a midweek Bible study brought an instant connection.

“The first question I asked was why they loved that church and everyone who was there,” Durham said. “Instead of talking about the things the church had done in the past, what they loved about the building and things like that, they talked about the community and how much they loved it.

“They had kind of lost their way on really preaching the Gospel to the community and they knew that needed to happen. They were sheep without a shepherd.”

Before the meeting was over, the couple had promised to serve the entire month of June. They haven’t left.

The Durhams are a blended family and know about patience, working with others and how that can develop, or fracture, trust.

In a town like Loup City – population just over 1,000 – people know what’s going on with others. Grace Bible was relaunched last October as Calvary Church, Loup City, and attendance has grown from the dozen or so last summer to about twice that. Durham is talking to a young man who is considering baptism. Other measures of growth come from local police telling Durham who they don’t see as much because of Calvary’s impact on the community.

He’s still a trucker, but hauls fuel to a truck stop only 45 minutes away. Some days he’ll switch off from the fuel tanker and hook up a grain trailer to take grain to an ethanol plant. His new boss supports him as a pastor, giving Durham Sundays, Mondays and Wednesdays off.

Currently, Durham is looking for a job in Loup City to be closer to the church. Meanwhile, he'll keep counseling over the phone while driving and listening to recorded commentaries. He's working through one about the Book of Ruth that he recorded himself reading so he could listen to it again while driving.

There are other aspects of being a pastor he says he's learned from Mark Hallock, lead pastor at Calvary, Englewood, and Mark Clifton, director of Church Replanting and Rural Strategy for the North American Mission Board.

"There's a term, tactical patience," he said. "There may be a hundred reasons a church is dying, and we can't fix them all in a week. I learned that a lot with my family as we grew together.

"That's helped me a lot, moving into the replant world."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

First Person: How the ERLC helps churches

NASHVILLE (BP) – As the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention, I am excited to share with you the various ways we are committed to coming alongside Southern Baptist churches like yours.

Our goal is to help you think biblically about the cultural issues of our time by providing resources that are rooted in the Gospel. Our commitment to assisting Southern Baptist churches is rooted in the unwavering truth of God's Word and His gracious Gospel. We strive to be a trusted voice for you and your congregation as you navigate the challenging issues of our day.

I encourage you to [explore our website](#) and take advantage of these valuable resources. Thank you for allowing us to serve your church and represent your interests on Capitol Hill, before the courts, and in culture. Here are some items that I think you will find particularly helpful:

Light Magazine

Our [in-house magazine](#) provides in-depth articles, interviews, and thought-provoking content on a range of topics relevant to Southern Baptist churches. I encourage you to explore our past

issues where you can access content on [pursuing a culture of life](#), [human dignity around the world](#), and being [salt and light in the public square](#).

Policy

We have identified four key policy areas where our Commission is uniquely positioned to provide a distinctly Baptist voice in the public square on behalf of our convention. Our team continually produces insightful content and analysis in these areas, enabling you to stay informed and engaged. Visit our website to explore the extensive resources available in these policy areas: [Religious Liberty](#), [Life](#), [Human Dignity](#), and [Marriage](#) and [Family](#).

Christian Ethics Primer Series

We understand that navigating complex moral and ethical issues can be challenging. That's why we have developed our [Christian Ethics Primer Series](#), which provides concise yet comprehensive guides on a variety of topics. These primers serve as valuable resources for you and your congregation.

Digital Downloads

Over the years, we have compiled a library of digital downloads that cover a wide range of subjects, from guidance regarding religious liberty to cultural engagement strategies. These resources are readily accessible on [erlc.com](#), allowing you to equip yourself and your church community with relevant information and practical tools.

The Importance of Bylaws

The ERLC worked with Alliance Defending Freedom to create a resource guide for churches to update their bylaws in light of challenges related to sexual orientation and gender identity lawsuits.

Included are the five areas where churches can provide clear frameworks outlining their faith and religious convictions to protect themselves so that they can continue in ministry that is faithful to God's Word and brings about Gospel transformation. Download your copy [here](#).

A Theological Framework of Sex and Gender

We live in an age experiencing the disastrous effects of the sexual revolution. Confusion over basic concepts such as man, woman, and marriage are but the latest divergence between a culture committed to radical individual autonomy and a church committed to Scripture's teaching.

Local congregations daily face questions of gender dysphoria, same-sex unions, and on basic concepts of what it means to be a man or woman. The ERLC seeks to equip pastors and ministry

leaders to answer those questions in light of Scripture's clear teachings with resources like these and future projects. Download your copy [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brent Leatherwood is president of the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

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.

The Baptist Beacon is the official newsjournal of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM.org), in association with the Southern Baptist Convention. The mission of the Baptist Beacon is to communicate with Michigan Baptists in our shared mission of punching holes in the darkness through starting, strengthening, and sending churches.

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