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Making a change in my weak prayer Life

PLYMOUTH – Looking at my walk as a Jesus follower, I found that my prayer life was weak in both frequency and depth. It seemed like every sermon, every worship song, every Jesus following friend I spoke with, and every book I read spoke of a deep prayer life that I knew I wasn't experiencing. That appears to be the way God speaks to me. I hear His voice speaking through His Word and through those around me. It was coming through loud and clear that I was lacking in prayer and was missing out on an enormous intimacy in my faith.

I love reading the Bible and soaking in the Words of Truth. Reading the Word of God and seeing Jesus revealed gives my Christian walk a solid direction. I find a strong foundation to stand on, and a reason and order to the world that God created when I read His Word. But prayer is more of a mystery. It feels more subjective and emotional instead of concrete like the Bible. And yet, Jesus prayed....

I decided at the beginning of 2023 that this year I would be intentional about growing in my prayer life. I wasn't sure where to begin but I asked God to help me. I knew He wanted me to spend more time and understand the gift of prayer and that He would direct my growth. I'm far from totally spiritually mature in my prayer life, but I'm excited about what is beginning to happen.

Here are the steps that I'm taking in learning to crave time in prayer with God:

1. I pray to God as soon as I wake, but before I get up. It's a short prayer but acknowledges that God is God and I'm His creation. I give Him the day.

2. I make sure I get up early enough to read my Bible (one chapter a day from a Bible Reading Plan) and save ten minutes for time of prayer. Two minutes of the prayer time I try to just be quiet before God and hear what He wants me to hear. (I'm still just learning this and seeing how God is going to use this time.)

3. I purchased a book, Valley of Vision, A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions by Arthur Bennett. My sister had purchased this book for my mother after my dad passed away, and mom was groping her way through the dark corridors of deep grief. I know that God is the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8) and I thought this book of prayers might help me in my prayer journey. I love the depths of these Puritan prayers and how they see the seriousness of their sin, the goodness of God, and the power of the blood of Christ to cleanse and free us. I read one prayer after my Bible reading and time of prayer. The depth of these prayers staggers and humbles me.

4. My pastor recommended that I read Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools by Tyler Staton. The description says to trade your doubts, disappointments, and misconceptions about prayer for a powerful connection with God! I can tell you that I've never read a book like this one

about how to pray and talk with God. It has been life changing for me. I listened to the audio book while highlighting the book. I'm now going back and just reading the book again. I want to make permanent changes in my prayer life.

5. I'm working to find a rhythm of prayer. I want to pray more than just mornings and before meals, but to take time for intercessory prayer near noon each day. (I'm at work but take time during lunch.) The most loving thing I can do for someone is understand that I can't help them, love them, keep them safe enough all by myself.... but I can lift them up in prayer to our Creator who is All Powerful, All Knowing and who loves them even more than I do. Also, to add prayer in the evening about my interactions during the day, even if it's five minutes alone with God.

There is the beginning of a prayer revival that is moving across our nation especially with young people. I find myself wanting that, too. I desire closeness with God not only in His Word, but together with Him in conversation, breathing Him in, basking in His presence, and feeling the joy of just being with Him, my Father, my God.

Thank You, my Holy Father, for wanting me in your presence. Your goodness overwhelms me. Your gift of salvation and closeness with You is undeserved. Thank you for giving us a way to communicate with You and You with us. Praise You, my God!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie Lynn works at the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. She's a member at Treeline Church in Ann Arbor (new church start that is focusing on university students). It's her joy to mentor several young women. Jamie loves spending time with her husband Tony, her three kids and spouses, and nine grandchildren.

Send Network's 'Terminal' podcast teaches lessons on living

SALISBURY, MD – Send Network's new podcast, "Terminal: The Dying Church Planter," is more than just a story about a guy with cancer, said producer Tony Hudson. It's a story about one man's monsters, metamorphosis, church planting ministry and church members. Most of all, it's the story of God's kindness through it all and His ability to work all things together for good.

"Terminal" follows Richard Pope, a Send Network church planter who found out one month before launching Canvas Church in Salisbury, that he had terminal cancer and three to five years left to live. Despite his diagnosis, Richard and his team launched Canvas Church on April

4th, 2021, and since then, more than 100 people have made decisions to follow Christ and have been baptized there. This past year, the church has doubled in size, trained a dozen ministry leaders and is sending out their own church plant, Garden Church in Cambridge, later this year.

But, upon walking into his crowded church plant in Salisbury, there's more to Pope's story than meets the eye. "I've been through a lot," Pope shared on the podcast. "There's so much, even before you get to the cancer."

Some months after initially recording the soon-to-be released podcast, Pope said he's still a bit nervous about sharing parts of his story: "There's a certain rawness to the way it's told in the podcast, so I'm nervous about that."

In fact, the 26-year-old church planter wasn't keen on the idea of sharing his story in podcast form until he met Tony Hudson, a multimedia writer at the North American Mission Board (NAMB). "Tony didn't come and treat me like I was a product he was writing a story about. Tony treated me like I was a person, and that God was doing something and that was a story worth telling," Pope said.

Perhaps Hudson's ability to connect with Richard had to do with Hudson's own battle with cancer 23 years ago. As Hudson put it, "I think it gave me an opening that maybe just some other person who's not had that experience might not have had. And the fact that God could have some kind of purpose out of my experience, which was pretty unpleasant, that's a pretty great thing."

So last fall, a few weeks after meeting Hudson in person, Pope found himself in a makeshift recording studio set up inside his church — sharing with Hudson, and now, the world, some of the most difficult parts of his life story. Hudson, who narrates the podcast, said the six-hour interview with Pope was the longest in his career. Over the course of five days, he interviewed 29 people who all helped tell the story of Pope and his church. Hudson returned home with a 992-page transcript.

For Pope and his wife, Payton, listening to the eight-episode podcast was both gut-wrenching and encouraging. "After each episode, we asked each other, 'How do you feel about that? Are you good with that?' And yet," said Pope, "the podcast might have been one of the first times we actually just listened to what God has done here, and that was encouraging."

Pope said he hopes sharing his story will encourage struggling pastors and believers that their struggles don't limit God's goodness. In fact, though the journey of planting a church while battling cancer has been incredibly hard, Richard has already seen glimpses of how God has used his cancer as a tool to share the gospel.

The podcast offers listeners a reminder that everyone is terminal, even though most do not know how long they have left. So, everyone, like Pope, should dedicate their life to something — and Someone — that matters.

“Terminal” is available on every major podcast platform, with photos and additional podcast materials on TerminalChurchPlanter.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Skudarnova writes for the North American Mission Board.

A sifting season

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – When farmers harvest wheat they must perform a process of sifting. First, they must thresh the wheat. The old-fashioned form of threshing was to place the wheat on the concrete or stone ground and crush it hard enough so it would separate the grain from the stalks. The farmers would then have to undertake the process of winnowing. In this part of the process, the farmers would throw the mixture into the air and the wind would blow the chaff away where only the heavy, edible grain would remain.

There are times in our lives where we will endure a sifting season. We may feel as if we are being crushed on all sides. These seasons of our lives are hard, painful, and agonizing. Have you ever been there? Maybe you are there now.

For me, I am coming out of a season of sifting. During this season, God led me to the passage in Luke when Jesus was participating in the Last Supper with the disciples. Jesus says to Simon:

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Luke 22:31-32 (NIV)

As soon as I read this passage in Luke, I knew it was speaking directly to me. I was in a sifting season. In these verses God showed me three very important things that I needed in that season.

Three truths to hold onto when you are in a sifting season:

1. Jesus allows the sifting season.

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat....”

We see in this verse that Satan has asked Jesus to sift Simon. When I feel like I am going through spiritual warfare, I can feel the heaviness of the battle and begin to feel defeated and afraid. God made it very clear that whatever warfare or “sifting” we experience in our lives, it first goes through Jesus. Our God is sovereign, which means everything is under His control. Any sifting we go through in our lives is meant to separate our chaff from our wheat so that He can get rid of any impurities that we still have.

2. Jesus prays for us.

“... But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”

Jesus is praying for us. He never loses sight of us, and is always interceding to the Father on our behalf. During my sifting season, God sent three people in the span of six weeks (who didn’t know my situation) to tell me I had been in their dreams and that they felt led to pray for me. During these six weeks, I was at the height of my threshing.

Then a few months later, when I was in what felt like a second round of threshing, a fourth person contacted me. She told me that I had been in her dreams for a few nights in a row and that she didn’t know what was going on, but that she was praying for me. When these four people reached out to me, I felt seen and heard by God. I know God hears my prayers, but He showed me in such a powerful way that He was using His people to intercede on my behalf.

3. Jesus sees the end of the process.

“And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

I love this part of this passage where Jesus states, “when you have turned back.” He knew that Simon would make it through this season and when he did, he would be stronger and ready to lead the other disciples. Simon was going to learn some very important things that would prepare him for his calling. He would not be the same person on the other side of the sifting.

Just as Simon grew and changed during his sifting season, I can say the same for myself. I have been able to thank God for my sifting season, because if it wasn’t for that season I wouldn’t be where I am today. Truth is, we wouldn’t choose a sifting season, but God knows exactly what we need to continue to mold us into the person he created us to be.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:2-4 (NIV)

Next time you go through a sifting season, remember to thank God for loving you so much that he wants to separate the grain from the chaff in your life. It isn’t easy, but it is necessary.

The hard times will make you stronger if you do not give up!

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!

Events introduce men to the God who made the great outdoors

MARSHFIELD, MO (BP) – The first day of autumn may have officially come on Sept. 23, but the season associated with cooler weather had already started for ministries set in the outdoors.

Webster County Baptist Association in Marshfield, Mo., held its 17th annual Outdoor Sportsman Event on Aug. 26. Admission was free with a \$10 fee for shooters over the age of 10, bringing approximately 800 to the people event that included entertainment, food, kids' activities and most important, a Gospel presentation.

"We started this to reach a demographic of men who love the outdoors," said the association's appropriately named director, Mitch Fisher. "They love to hunt and fish but aren't churchgoers. We gear it toward that. These guys are very capable with their crossbows and compound bows."

Such skills aren't uncommon in rural counties like his.

"It's a way of life for us. So, to reach these people we speak their language. The speakers we get are usually local, too," he said.

There are various subgroups for whom these types of events are held.

"We have people who don't know Christ as their Savior. Or maybe they are a Christian but have fallen away and need to get back in church, to reconnect with their family and become better husbands and fathers," Fisher said.

The most recent national statistics from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service state that nearly 104 million U.S. residents at least 16 years old participate in some kind of wildlife-related recreational activity. That includes 11.5 million hunters, 35.8 million anglers and 86 million wildlife watchers.

In addition to being a pastor, Chuck McAlister's career has centered around introducing others to the Creator through the outdoors, whether that comes with wild game dinners or inviting war veterans to his private fishing pond. In those efforts, though, he stressed that it's important to know who you're talking to.

When it comes to wild game dinners, for instance, he advises against praise music that may be good for churchgoers, but for others not so much.

"Play some non-cheatin', non-drinkin' country songs," he said. "I was at one not too long ago and the band broke out in "Free Bird" by Lynyrd Skynyrd. The whole place erupted.

"I told them stories about my daddy and granddaddy, then moved quickly into the greatest lesson they ever taught me. That was how to have a relationship with the God who made the great outdoors."

That connects naturally into a Gospel presentation and invitation. McAlister, senior pastor of Dutch Fork Church in Irmo, S.C., uses those same principles on his 200-acre farm.

His farm serves as the setting for HomePlace Ministries, which offers a variety of ministries including those addressing evangelism, church/pastor consultations, sermon preparation assistance and marriage encounter weekends.

Soldiers, like those from nearby Fort Stewart, in Georgia, often take part in retreats.

"We hosted 9 wounded soldiers from Fort Stewart for a weekend of fishing, fun, fellowship, and worship," said [a Sept. 17 post](#) to the ministry's Facebook page.

"A lot of people don't realize that these aren't grizzled, old veterans," said McAlister. "A lot of them are young. I'm talking 19, 20, 21 years old.

"We get wounded warriors who have never been fishing. They may have grown up in a city and don't have much exposure to the outdoors. So, it's a wonderful opportunity to give them that and teach them to fish."

One soldier – while pulling in yet another fish – learned from McAlister of a direct connection between the activity and the Bible.

"I said, 'Do you know that Jesus said if we follow Him, that He makes us fishers of men?' That amazed him, so I presented the Gospel to him right there on the edge of our pond," McAlister said.

"And he prayed and gave his heart to Jesus."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Barkley is national correspondent for Baptist Press.

The old man

PLYMOUTH – On September the 9th of this year I awoke and breathed in the air of this terrestrial globe for the 25,550th time. Yes, I hit that monumental and somewhat unenviable goal of living for seventy years. It is only unenviable because of the accelerated deterioration of my body and the ensuing challenges and difficulties it brings. Over these decades I replaced or repaired so many parts and appendages that I am not sure where the original me ends and the new and improved begins.

There have been times when my maturing condition has created an atmosphere that was conducive for anxiety and depression. It was during those times that I came to the realization that I must make a choice. Would I allow my physical condition to control my attitude, or would my attitude control my condition as a whole?

In my soul and spirit, I thought, felt, and viewed life as a 25-year-old young man. Every time I looked in a mirror, I had a very difficult time recognizing the reflection therein. "Who was that old guy staring back at me? That's not me! I'm 25!"

The fact is, that no matter what we may try or believe, the aging process will continue and eventually our bodies will diminish and return to dust. Aging is inevitable but growing old is not.

The great theologian, Toby Keith (HA!) wrote a song that Willie Nelson made popular. The sentiment of the song is one from which I believe we could all benefit.

Don't let the old man in
I wanna live some more
Can't leave it up to him
He's knocking on my door.

I knew all of my life
That someday it would end
Get up and go outside
Don't let the old man in.

Many moons I have lived
My body's weathered and worn
Ask yourself how old you'd be
If you didn't know the day you were born.

Try to love on your wife
And stay close to your friends
Toast each sundown with wine
And don't let the old man in.

When he rides up on his horse
And you feel that cold bitter wind
Look out your window and smile
And don't let the old man in.

It truly is a choice. As I said previously, aging is inevitable, but growing old is not. We don't have to let the old man in! This is true in our physical life, but even more so in our spiritual life.

Every day it is a choice as to whether we are going to walk in the Spirit or in the flesh, and my friends, the battle is real! How I act or react in most of my interactions and conversations is the direct result of the choice I make concerning Who will be in control of my life. I believe with all my heart that "Any person in Christ is a new creation. Old things pass away, Behold, all things have become new." Yet, until our body is finally redeemed and in the presence of our Lord, we will battle with the pull of the "flesh", that is, the Old Man.

In the next few weeks there will be much discussion and interaction about monumental decisions that will be made at our upcoming Annual Meeting of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM). These discussions and the exchange of information are absolutely necessary for this family of believers to make wise, and God-directed decisions. But what matters most is the decision we make before our gathering together for deliberation. We all must come to a point where we decide if we are going to let the Old Man in and allow him to control our actions and attitudes, or will we allow the Spirit of God to have His way?

Before you write anything on social media, in an email, or voice in any public forum, please ask yourself if these are the responses of a person controlled by the Spirit of God or by the old man and the flesh. The world is watching and listening. May they see and hear a godly people living a Spirit controlled life where they have chosen to not let the old man in.

But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24

But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

Colossians 3:9-10 [1]

[1] [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Col 3:8–12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

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.

New Generations rally

PLYMOUTH – International travelers descended on the newest of Christians in Michigan!

High school students, university students, and young adults without college degrees learned the International Mission Board (IMB) has wide open pathways of service waiting for them. Opportunities of service for them can be as long as 1-2 weeks, 1 summer, 1 semester, 1-2 years fully funded without a college degree, or 2+2 experience w/ a fully funded mission experience for two years added to two years of education at one of the six seminaries which results in an outstanding degree.

More details can be found at www.imb.org/go. BSCM's Dan Carty and Mile City's Jordan Duncan can be seen, in the image, standing in a small circle of enthusiastic students who represent a portion of the crowd who arrived and engaged in the day's discussions. Carty and Duncan were perfect co-emcees who magically turned the crowd into a family of mission explorers.

The Mile City Church Plymouth team along with Lead Pastor Travis Whittaker, on September 23, hosted the international missions rally in the excellent way in which they faithfully provide help to many. Travis is seen, in the image, with Ryan who won a \$200 scholarship to purchase a passport or to pay for an airline ticket for an International Mission Board assignment.

Ryan's humility and generosity was clear when he remarked, "I was recently hired by one of the major car companies in Michigan. Can I share my scholarship with someone who might not have the means I do now with my new employment?" I thought Ryan's kindness and open spirit would make Ryan perfect for the IMB's [Project 3000](#) where adults who are 21-29 years of age, with or without a college degree, can explore one of more than 3,000 unengaged, unreached people groups across the globe. The IMB's goal is to send 300 missionaries on a two-year fully funded mission assignment.

The day's talks, fun, food, and worship would have not been the inspirational event we experienced without Matt Wagner of [MatthewWagner.org](#) creating a worship team of Michigan's dedicated musicians. Matt's creativity both in music and video transport people through stories and experiences to deeper moments of reflection which is exactly what was needed for those attending.

The two images shown here reveal the important times of contemplation where heads were bowed in private prayer or eyes were raised during songs of worship. Matt, raised overseas as a child of missionaries, knew how to clearly lead all of us toward the Lord through worship.

Repeatedly, the three speakers of the day urged the students and young adults to respond to the lostness of the world's population from the depth of their love and adoration for the Lord.

Julius Tennal II from the Summit Church in Raleigh, North Carolina spoke from the 96th Psalm highlighting how the Lord led him into deeper devotion to the Lord through the influence of inspirational, caring men like J.D. Greear, lead pastor of Summit Church. Seen in the image, Julius explained how he went from the deep south to South Africa then to Summit Church where he trains people for overseas service in remarkable numbers.

Tiffany, an active IMB missionary, joined us through a video connection in which Tiffany displayed brilliantly how a young, single woman serves the Lord overseas with the IMB. The worship center was still and quiet, as seen in the image, while people watched Tiffany talk from the streets of her location in Europe, her apartment, a marketplace, and with a windmill looming in the background.

Tiffany is midway on a two-year, classic journeyman assignment where she works with career missionaries in a country among a people group. Details on Tiffany's assignment can be discovered by clicking here: [Journeyman](#). There was a strong connection with Tiffany because the audience learned that she grew up in western Michigan but only learned about serving the

Lord through the IMB after she moved to the southern United States in pursuit of a college degree.

Patrick Schwarz, the NextGen Leader for the IMB, using two biblical passages as his starting point, ended his talk by showing the many pathways of service offered to members of churches associated with Michigan's network.

As seen in the image, Patrick explained the turns of life that took him from Connecticut to Scotland, then to Virginia as the primary voice to the younger generations. High school students and their leaders leaned into the topic when they learned there are prepared assignments written by missionaries on the field who are waiting for high school students to explore the world and share Christ with others.

Details about high school youth group assignments can be found at [Go Impact](#) with the IMB. The specific details of where, with whom, dates, and costs are online for everyone to see and select.

The two images shown here reinforce why we coordinated this amazing event. The new generations are hungry to give their lives through meaningful expressions to the Lord.

In one image, Jamie is seen with Bre and Layla who won prizes from one of the games we played while getting acquainted. Layla, a third grader and a daughter of a church planter with the North American Mission Board, with a gleaming smile expressed to everyone that she was a "high schooler" on this Saturday because she wanted to learn about missions.

In the other image, we see two of the main speakers standing with Kim and Gwen. Julius and Patrick took time as the morning started to celebrate and pray with Gwen who is a high school student who during a recent youth retreat with Mile City declared that she is called to missions. This amazing Saturday was about people like Gwen matching her expression of devotion to the Lord to a location on a world map.

On the IMB's website for students, they placed a quote of the famous missionary William Carey, who wrote years ago, "To know the will of God, we need an open Bible and an open map." The Sending Out New Generations Rally is updating William Carey's practical instruction. Look, pray, and respond to what you see on the site for high school students and young adults by following this link: [Students](#). Join us as we open up more discussions and gatherings as the spiritual appetite of the new generations increases. The best days are still ahead of us.

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.

Pastors who have made a difference

PLYMOUTH – God called me to preach my senior year of high school. I had not been a follower of Jesus for very long, and didn't really know anything about preaching or ministry. I needed direction and my first pastor knew it.

He met with me and several other men early on Saturday mornings to disciple us and prepare us to pursue our ministry callings.

Pastor David gave us our first opportunities to preach. I remember sitting on the front pew during the worship service getting more and more nervous as my first sermon approached. I started praying something like this: "Lord Jesus, you say in your Word that you're coming back. Please, Jesus come back now. I can't do this. Come back Lord, please! Save me and these people from what is about to happen." Jesus didn't come back, and my pastor didn't stop working with me. His investment in a not so promising kid helped give me a foundation that I continue to build on nearly a half century later.

It was a pastor and wife who invited Shar and me into their lives during college for a premarital seminar for engaged couples. We met weekly in their home with six other couples as they poured their lives into ours. Pastor Harlan and JoAnn shared openly about the blessings and challenges of life together in the covenant of marriage. They gave of themselves to help prepare us for our journey together as a husband and wife following Christ. Their transparency spoke volumes about the joys and challenges of what it really means "that two shall become one."

When our family served as missionaries in Brazil, a Brazilian pastor befriended me. We walked together in the early mornings before the blistering heat of the sun took over. I learned much from this dear brother about life and culture of Brazil. Shortly after preaching one Sunday, I fell to the ground in the most intense physical pain I have ever experienced. It was a difficult moment. We had no family doctor, no experience in the health care system in the city, and insufficient words in Portuguese to describe what was happening. I called Pastor Bené. He stopped everything he was doing and immediately took me to the Emergency Room. He understood my painful, broken Portuguese and helped me communicate with the doctor. I gave birth to a kidney stone - an experience I never want to repeat!

When Shar and I made the decision to start a business and minister bi-vocationally for a season, three Michigan pastors stepped into our lives to help us. It was a critical moment for us, and God used them. Pastor Larry Rednower invited us to help New Haven Baptist Church with a second campus. Pastor Irv (Salty) Saultman, a long-time contractor and bi-vocational pastor, mentored us in carpentry skills and life balance. Jim Marcus, Director of Missions for the Genesee Baptist Association, served as my ministry coach.

Serving in associational and convention life is unique in that there are seasons when it seems like I am in a different church each week. Relocating several times in the last 17 years to be closer to our ministry setting has been challenging at times. It meant finding a new church home. Pastors like Bob Galey, Ed Emmerling, and Wayne Parker have faithfully preached God's Word every time we have been blessed to attend and we are grateful for them.

In recent years, a man we all know has made an incredible impact in my life - Pastor Tim Patterson. Serving with him has taught me much about leadership, grace, and vision. I had serious concerns about the future of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) before God brought Pastor Tim and Sabrina to our state. By the time he arrived, Anne Glissman and Yolanda Chapa were the only convention staff left. Our beloved Pastor Jimmy Jones, stepped into the void as Interim Executive Director and Pastor Gerald Colbert came back and forth from Georgia to serve as Interim Director of Missions. These men and women did an admirable job providing stability in what I considered a Convention in crisis.

Michigan Baptists called Pastor Tim and he has led us through a revitalization of our cooperative mission efforts. God has used him to guide us toward restored health. It hasn't been easy or without pain. His framework through it all has been: "Give God's people the information and trust them with the decision." Pastor Tim and Sabrina have loved pastors and wives across our state, and they have loved Shar and me. Thank you!

Many pastors have influenced my life, but I want to close with a special thank you to Pastor (Dr.) Tony Lynn. Many of you know that Shar and I went to the same middle and high school as Tony and Jamie, but it wasn't until the end of high school that the four of us really started doing life together. It was Tony that invited me to a church Christmas Pageant where I realized for the first time that God loved me, and it was his family that loved me to Christ. We ended up going to the same college and seminary to prepare for a lifetime of ministry. We have watched each other's children, preached in each other's churches, and been brothers for a lifetime. We spent a season ministering on different continents, only to end up serving Michigan Baptists together. From mischief to ministry, Tony and I have been lifelong friends. (Shar and Jamie will tell you that the mischief never stopped). Thank you, Pastor Tony!

My heart is filled with gratitude as I think back to the many pastors who have impacted my life. I appreciate each one and am thankful for their ministry in my life. You probably have a pastor in your life who has blessed your life. Take a moment this month to tell him so.

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.

Leading change

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – According to some sources, nine out of ten churches in North America are losing ground in their communities. Many are declining or dying because they refuse to change. The good news is that new churches are being planted, others are revitalizing, and some are replanting (<https://www.namb.net/church-replanting/>).

The cost of change is scary, but as Dr. Thom Rainer says, “It wouldn’t take faith if we could tackle these challenges in our own strength and power. It is a sin to be good when God has called us to be great. We need change leaders in our churches who are willing to do something great.”

The road leading to change in the church (or community, or convention) can be bumpy and even dangerous at times, but it’s worth it. Jesus is still building his church (Matthew 16:18). With thanks to John Kotter, Professor Chris Thompson, Thom Rainer, and others, I offer this simple overview of a seven-stage roadmap for leading change in your church.

1. Pray like you’ve never prayed before.

You either want to lead change or be a part of leading change, so you need to pray. Leaders often want to see tangible results yesterday. But that’s a mistake. Leading change begins in the power and strength of God. Pray for God’s wisdom, courage, and strength (James 1:5, Joshua 1:9). Pray like you’ve never prayed before.

2. Establish and communicate a sense of urgency.

John Kotter says we need to “inspire people to act – with passion and purpose – to achieve a bold, aspirational opportunity. Build momentum that excites people to pursue a compelling (and clear) vision of the future... together.”

That is what the apostles and elders did in Acts 15 in the Council at Jerusalem. False teachers came from Judea to Antioch, so the apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and boldly addressed them, speaking the truth in love. He inspired them to act in a way that would honor Jesus and promote the true gospel.

Some people in our churches or state conventions don’t see the need to make changes because they don’t see reality for what it is. They don’t see the decline, the worn facilities, or that the church is not reaching unbelievers as it once did. You must lead the congregation to understand what is happening around them and communicate a sense of urgency. “We must do this or that because people need to hear about Jesus!”

3. Build an enthusiastic coalition.

We cannot lead change on our own. Lone Ranger leaders only have one opinion and one agenda: their own. Church and convention leadership teams need to invite others to the table with the right chemistry, influence, expertise, and leadership, including the next generation, to guide it, coordinate it, and communicate its activities. Large-scale change can only occur when large numbers of people rally around a common opportunity. Start with a guiding coalition and enlist a volunteer army!

4. Share your hope.

“Change agents are agents of hope,” says Rainer. Read your Bible daily, pray like mad, and share your hope in Christ and in the church. We need more beacons of hope. Celebrate even the smallest victories and infuse the hope of the gospel into your people. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13 NIV).

5. Deal with stuff.

I hate conflict. I grew up in a dysfunctional home that did not deal with “stuff,” and I’m still running a deficit when it comes to crucial conversations and confronting bullies.

We need to love hard, expect opposition, and build a team of like-minded leaders. “Remove the obstacles that slow things down or create roadblocks to progress. Clear the way for people to innovate, work more nimbly across silos, and generate impact quickly,” says John Kotter. Often, you’ll need to deal with negative stuff.

6. Move to an outward focus.

Almost every church begins with an earnest desire to reach its community with the Good News of Jesus. Over time, the energy, programs, ministry, and money move inward, for the members. The church that just a few years earlier proclaimed the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is now focused on Great Comfort. Move to an outward focus and Jesus-exalting evangelism (John 14:6) or you will die.

7. Implement and consolidate change.

Changes made in your family routines, your workplace, your church, or your convention need to be instituted or implemented. Someone has to make it happen. You must carefully, prayerfully, and repeatedly articulate the connections between new behaviors and organizational success. You must over-communicate until old habits are replaced by new ones. Explain it. Illustrate it. Apply it. Repeat.

Churches and organizations across the country are losing ground because they simply refuse to change.

Maybe we can be the exception.

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.

Gorham to grace: 100 years of God's faithfulness

JACKSON – On September 10, 2023, our church gathered to celebrate its 100 Year Anniversary. The occasion was met with much joy by our members as we had a special worship service to praise God for his faithfulness to our congregation. This was accompanied by a special recognition from Tony Lynn of the BSCM.

The many hands of Grace members who worked together to make this anniversary happen cannot be thanked enough. But ultimately it is our good God and Father who is due all praise and honor for redeeming and preserving this body of believers for a century.

What follows is a condensed version of the history that was provided for attendees of the anniversary event. It is our hope that by sharing an account of the history of our church would be an encouragement to you and your congregations as you continue to bear witness to the goodness of our God and the hope found only in the gospel of Christ.

Gorham Baptist Church began as a mission founded in 1910. Soon it became affiliated with Memorial Baptist Church, on the corner of Griswold and 3rd St., and became known as Memorial Baptist Mission.

The small mission, with a membership of 30 people, originally began meeting over a bowling alley on Michigan Avenue. Shortly thereafter, a small lot on the corner of Gorham and Ganson was purchased for \$300 with the purpose of erecting a church building there. The lot at 140 N. Gorham St. was secured and construction of the building began in 1913. The church building, which still stands today, was completed in 1914 and the dedication was held on June 28th of that year.

Frank Osborn was the first pastor of Gorham Baptist Church, serving from 1915-1917. In 1923 the church on Gorham St. was constituted as Gorham Street Baptist Church. In 1927 Gorham became associated with the Franklin Association of Southern Illinois, becoming the first Southern Baptist Church in Michigan. Prior to this date Gorham had been a member church of

the Northern Baptist Convention, but had withdrawn from it for some time. Although it functioned as an independent church, it was still formally associated with the NBC. Gorham affiliated with the Western Association of Michigan after the latter began in 1957.

In 1957 the Southern Baptist Convention of Michigan was organized, at which point Gorham officially became an affiliating church and was recognized as the first Southern Baptist church in the state. Though there are four other churches in Michigan with earlier constituting dates, Gorham has been a Southern Baptist church longer than any other church in Michigan.

In 1936, Virtus L. Buzbee, originally from Southern Illinois, was called as pastor. He faithfully served in that capacity for 36 years, retiring in 1972, giving him the honor of being the longest serving pastor in our church's history. His ministry is remembered for preaching with a quiet strength, placing an emphasis on the Bible as our source of doctrine and instilling in the church a love for the Word of God.

In the 1940s, Gorham sponsored its own mission, Page Avenue Mission, which would later be renamed Harmony Baptist Church which eventually constituted in 1959. In 1961, Gorham, along with nine other churches in central Michigan, committed to forming the Central Association of Baptists. This was to be a cooperation of Southern Baptist churches in the central Michigan area that would work together in order to promote efforts in and through the churches in the Association in their work of evangelism, education, and benevolence. On October 14, 1961, the first annual meeting of the Central Association of Baptists was held in Jackson at Gorham Street Baptist.

In February of 1972, Pastor Buzbee retired and in November of the same year Milton L. Wood from Georgia was called to lead the church. Pastor Wood would go on to serve the church for twenty-two years. His ministry is remembered for placing an emphasis on individual commitment and focusing on the unity of the church family.

On September 23, 1973, the church voted to purchase ten acres of property on N. Dettman Rd. as the site for a new church building. Groundbreaking took place within the year and the building was finished and dedicated in January 1976.

During the mid-1980s, Grace began a second mission in Napoleon on the corner of M-50 and Wheaton Rd. This mission would eventually be incorporated as Faith Baptist Chapel in 1996 and remains as such to this day. The successful planting of Faith Baptist Chapel makes it the second church plant undergone by the efforts of Gorham Church and its partners.

In 1994, Pastor Wood resigned to move back towards his childhood home and pastor First Baptist Church in Social Circle, Georgia. Pastor Mike Lee was called as pastor in June of that year.

In 2001, the membership voted to change the name of the church from Gorham Baptist to Grace—A Southern Baptist Church. Pastor Mike would pastor from 1994-1998, at which point

he accepted a call as an evangelism consultant from the Baptist Sunday School Board. Pastor Rich Ratts was called to pastor in 1998 until 2004 when he resigned to plant a church in Traverse City.

Pastor Mike returned to pastor Grace in 2004 and would remain until 2010. Under Pastor Mike and Pastor Rich, Grace Church grew numerically and financially. During their time here the vision cast was for missionary zeal, evangelistic fervor, and Christian compassion as guides in the tasks of the church, namely worship, witness, education, ministry, and application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 2011, Grace Church extended a call to Pastor James Walling to pastor Grace. He accepted this calling and remains the primary preaching pastor at Grace to this day. His ministry has sought to emphasize the importance of expository preaching and implement it in practice as well as emphasizing the missional nature of the church and reflecting that in our church philosophy.

We must recognize that our history has and will never be without its hardships. Leadership changes, building projects, and educational initiatives are just some of the things within a church that provide ample room for disagreement and oftentimes strife. It is helpful for us to acknowledge and accept this reality. Yet, throughout the years, during the highs and lows, one thing that seems to mark the congregation of Grace is a dedication to seeing the gospel preserved and passed down to following generations.

The legacy of the church and understanding the local church as family have been central to our members over the course of this past century, allowing for moments of tremendous sacrifice, service, and genuine growth in mind and spirit for our congregation. Being a church in existence for a century allows for our longtime members to see these generations of new believers grow, inherit, and cherish the same truths and commitments they themselves have held dear. This is certainly a rare and special blessing and encouragement from the Lord, for which we pray all true churches in Michigan will one day be able to celebrate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dustin Elliott serves as a deacon and the Coordinator of Family Ministries at Grace Church in Jackson, MI. He is attending Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he is pursuing his MDiv in Christian Ministry. He and his wife have two children and make their home in a small town outside of the city of Jackson.

Milestones and new beginnings

ROSCOMMON – We want to share what God has done in Roscommon. In 1981, a Bible Study and fellowship began at Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center. They moved to St. Helen for a few years, then the faithful followed the Spirit's leading to begin a church plant of Roscommon Baptist Church.

They grew and followed God to a larger building. In 2000, as a growing congregation, the faithful felt the Spirit leading to move again. They prayed, trusted, and followed God. Hearing the Spirit of God say, "GO!" They prayed, trusted, and obeyed. They asked the Lord, "Where?" They prayed.

The second property inquired about was 18 wooded acres with a small cardboard handwritten sign saying, "For Sale by Owner" with a phone number. They prayed, called, and God said, "HERE!" The task would be enormous. They prayed. The labor would be hard. They trusted and God worked. The debt would be significant. They prayed, trusted, and God provided. They knew they could not do it. They trusted God. Those few faithful had no idea how God would provide.

August 2014, a groundbreaking occurred, followed by laying of the foundation.

April 8, 2015, Dr. Michael Ritchie stated, "This is a big deal for our little church, yet we know God is leading us along the way. We want to reach our world for Christ. We start June 1st with framing and work throughout the summer with an expected Grand Opening this fall. We ask you to pray for us and God bless you for praying!"

June 2015, through prayer, obedience, a grant from John C Lasko Foundation and a 15-year \$265,000 loan, God built an almost 10,000 square foot building, giving the property an approximately \$1.2 million value. The building was raised in a week, by God's doing alone. Dankert Construction, Hull Building Company, Beardsley's Plumbing and Heating, Milltown Electric, S&J Excavating, Chilton Baptist Builders from Clinton County, Alabama, and church members with other teams provided physical labor. During the first week, the "For Sale by Owner" sign was replaced with the Chilton Baptist Builders slogan, "GOD IS ABLE".

Having the Occupancy Permit, a Dedication Service occurred September 5, 2015, in the sanctuary. On the frames and trestles are written words of God and prayers for the church. In the foyer, the cross symbolizes how we stand only on the Word and work of God. The faithful pledged to give a designated offering monthly to pay on the mortgage.

January 2023, Dr. Michael Ritchie motioned to use \$10,000 from the checking account to pay down the mortgage and continue monthly payments for the loan to be paid off in September. The motion failed. Discouraged, he took his seat and prayed. A member of the Building

Committee, Terry Miller, motioned to pay the mortgage in full. The faithful passed the motion unanimously.

Ten years from property purchase, 8 years from dedication, and only 7 ½ years of payments, Roscommon Baptist Church is DEBT FREE!

On September 9, we invited church family, building crew, and community to celebrate with archery, hayrides, a Titanic slide, popcorn, snow cones, pig roast, wild game stew, side dishes, and desserts. It was a great day of fellowship. Words from Pastor Erikson Aldridge, Dr. Michael Ritchie, Terry Miller, and a Burning of the Mortgage closed the celebration.

Celebrating freedom from debt in 7 ½ years, with seven representing completion, we do not look back and say, "Look what we have done". Instead, we say, "Come and see what God has done...GOD IS ABLE!!" Celebrating what God began, we know He will be faithful to complete it. Not of works of any man, lest we could boast, but that we stand here basking in the work and splendor of God.

We lift up to Heaven an offering of thanksgiving and praise. As the people of God thousands of years ago, we offer up thanksgiving for all God has done and praise for what we have witnessed. We thank God for what we know He will accomplish for His glory and His kingdom in the future. As eight represents new beginnings, Roscommon Baptist Church is praying for God's direction in this new beginning of being JUSTIFIED. GOD IS ABLE.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenda Aldridge serves alongside her husband, Pastor Erikson Aldridge at Roscommon Baptist Church. She home-educates their two children, Nadya (13) and Vanya (10).

The cathedral of God's creation

PRUDENVILLE – Our church is tucked away in the pines, off the beaten path of M 55, and is commonly known as "The Little Church in The Woods". We talk about the church as a building, structure, or a location, but we all know the church is really people like you and me. People who have believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, buried, and risen from the dead.

Pathway Baptist Church is a loving church that has a heart to reach the lost with the Gospel. The church is active in many evangelistic outreaches and ministries: The Lions Den addiction ministry, the Roscommon County Jail Ministry, Christian Motorcycle Association, Tract Ministry, Children's Ministry, and Video Ministry, (pbcupnorth.com).

But for more than a decade the Outdoor Service and Dinner on The Grounds has been our largest outreach. An outdoor service is nothing new, Christians have been worshiping, singing, praising and praying to the Lord, and preaching his Holy Word in the grand cathedral of God's creation for generations. No man made structure can match it.

It's been our experience that many folks are more likely to attend an outdoor service with an invitation. It is always our highest attended day of the year.

The logistics of an outdoor service and dinner on the grounds puts the church at Pathway to work, and to work together. It is not glorious work, or work that is even recognized by most.

There is weed eating, trimming, raking, mowing, power washing, cleaning, power cords, sound systems, amplifiers, mics (checked once, twice, three times), praying, and trusting God for good weather, food shopping, food preparation, food ordering, and serving each one with gratitude because they have come, at our invitation, to know the Savior through the hearing of the gospel, believing on him, and seeing him in us. What a privilege.

Serving a good dinner after the service gives an opportunity for names to be spoken and remembered, friendships to be made and deepened, and personal ministry to happen as God's goodness and warm sun shines on us all. We have seen many come to faith in Christ, some follow through with baptism, church membership, and discipleship.

The annual Outdoor Service and Dinner on the Grounds brings a smile to our faces here at Pathway. It is nothing new, but it is always a blessing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor Jeff and Judy Tuttle have served at Pathway Baptist Church, Prudenville, MI. beginning in 2009. They have four children and 10 grandchildren.

Growing Southern Baptist churches more likely in Northeast, among newer churches

BRENTWOOD, TN (BP) – If you're looking for a Southern Baptist church, you're most likely to find one in the South. If you want to find a growing Southern Baptist church, however, you might want to try the Northeast.

[Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention's Annual Church Profile \(ACP\)](#) by Lifeway Research revealed the convention is made up of mostly smaller churches dotting the southern United States. Still, more than 1 in 5 churches are outside of the South. And the only region where Southern Baptist churches are growing numerically is in New England. Additionally, churches started since 2000 are the most likely to be currently growing.

“The trends revealed in this analysis confirm that Southern Baptists must prioritize church planting in our effort to reach people for Christ,” said Kevin Ezell, president of the North American Mission Board. “As we do that, not only will we see lives changed with the Gospel, we will also grow our base of churches which will expand our Great Commission efforts throughout the world. I’m grateful for every church that is planting new churches, but we need even more to take up this challenge.”

Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, noted that the largest Protestant denomination is growing in the least Protestant region of the U.S. “While it’s easiest to achieve high percentage growth in areas with fewer Southern Baptists to begin with, the growth is a sharp contrast to numerical declines throughout much of the country,” he said.

General picture of Southern Baptist churches

The Southern Baptist Convention mostly reflects its name, as 78 percent of its churches are in the South. Far fewer are in the Midwest (10 percent), West (9 percent), Northeast (3 percent) or U.S. territories (less than 1 percent).

Not quite half (45 percent) of churches are in suburban areas with a population of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000. The remaining percentage are split between urban areas (28 percent) with at least 50,000 in population and rural places (27 percent) with less than 2,500. Churches in the Northeast and West are more likely than those in the other regions to be in urban areas, while churches in the Midwest and South are mostly in rural and suburban places.

Most Southern Baptist churches (52 percent) were founded since 1950, including 23 percent that were started since 2000. Another 21 percent began between 1900 and 1949, while 27 percent trace their founding to before the 20th century.

The newest group of churches, those founded since 2000, make up an increasingly larger percentage of all Southern Baptist churches, climbing from 19 percent of churches in 2017 to 23 percent in 2022.

“Southern Baptists are the most prolific starter of new churches, but older churches continue to close at a slightly faster pace,” McConnell said.

Almost 3 in 4 churches (73 percent) have an average worship service attendance below 100, including 46 percent who have fewer than 50 for a typical service. One in 5 (19 percent) are between 100 and 249, while 5 percent average between 250 and 499. And 3 percent usually

have at least 500 for their weekend worship service. Churches in the Northeast (53 percent), Midwest (55 percent) and West (53 percent) are more likely than those in the South (43 percent) to have an average worship service of fewer than 50 attendees.

The Southern Baptist Convention is increasingly comprised of the smallest churches. From 2017 to 2022, the percentage of Southern Baptist churches that were below 50 in worship attendance grew from 36 percent to 45 percent of the convention.

For most Southern Baptist churches, most of their worship attendees are also in a Sunday school class or small group Bible study. Still, 35 percent of churches have fewer than 50 percent of those who gather for worship also participating in a small group. Almost 2 in 5 churches say their participation rate runs between 50 percent to 74 percent. Slightly less than 1 in 5 (18 percent) report 75 percent to less than 100 percent are involved in a small group. Around 1 in 10 (9 percent) have 100 percent or more involvement.

The smallest churches, those with fewer than 50 in attendance for a worship service, are the most likely to have 25 percent or less of their congregation involved in small groups (21 percent). They are also among the most likely to have at least 100 percent participating (10 percent).

An increasing number of Southern Baptist churches have few small group participants. From 2017 to 2022, the percentage of churches that had fewer than 25 percent of their worship service attendees involved in a small group jumped from 5 percent to 16 percent, a 219 percent increase.

A [2022 Lifeway Research study](#) found the average U.S. Protestant church had 44 percent of attendees involved in a small group, down from 50 percent in 2008.

“Declines in Sunday School and small group participation is not a short-term problem. It also does not bode well for the future,” McConnell said. “Having a higher percentage of your attendees attending small groups each week is one of [four measures that predict higher worship attendance](#) five years down the road.”

Mostly declines but pockets of growth

The [most recent Annual Church Profile](#) of the Southern Baptist Convention highlighted continued membership decline since 2006, falling to 13,223,122, the lowest number since 1978. The analysis comparing 2017 and 2022 indicates declines in most types of churches with occasional areas of membership and attendance growth.

Membership in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont churches together grew by 1 percent from 2017 to 2022. Every other area saw a numerical decline for Southern Baptist churches.

The regions with the smallest declines were the Mid-Atlantic—New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania—which fell 5 percent, and the East South Central—Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee—which dropped 7 percent. Every other area had a double-digit percentage decrease over the past five years, with the largest decline happening in the Pacific region—Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington—which fell 22 percent.

“The West has the most churches with declining membership. And the Pacific portion of the West has the most dramatic declines among reporting churches,” McConnell said. “California churches had particularly low reporting on the ACP in 2022, making their numbers less reliable.”

Declining, plateaued or growing

Grouping churches according to their percentage change in membership since 2017 gives a picture of which types of churches are most likely to be growing and which must overcome the trends surrounding them. Those who saw an increase in total membership of 10 percent or more are classified as growing, a decrease of 10 percent or more are considered declining and those in between are plateaued. Overall, 18.5 percent of Southern Baptist churches are growing, 42.5 percent are plateaued and 39 percent are declining.

Newer Southern Baptist churches are more than twice as likely to have grown than churches started before the 21st century. More than 2 in 5 of those founded since 2000 are growing churches (42 percent). The younger the grouping a church falls into, the less likely they are to be plateaued, ranging from 52 percent of those founded before 1900 to 22 percent of those founded since 2000. Churches founded in the 20th century are the most likely to be declining—45 percent of those started between 1950 and 1999 and 39 percent of those that began between 1900 and 1949.

Specific analysis was conducted on churches started within the past five years. At least two-thirds of Southern Baptist churches founded in those years are either plateaued or growing. Within the 2017-2021 time frame, the longer a church has existed, the more likely it is to be a growing congregation. For those founded in 2021, 33 percent experienced at least 10 percent growth by 2022, while 2 in 3 churches planted in 2017 (67 percent) are currently growing.

The largest churches are the most likely to have grown. More than a quarter of churches with an average attendance of 500 or more (26 percent) report a membership increase of more than 10 percent in the past five years. Those churches are also among the least likely to have declined (35 percent).

Churches in larger population areas do not automatically equal growth. Southern Baptist churches in urban areas are the most likely to have grown since 2017 (22 percent), but those churches are also the most likely to have declined (46 percent). In fact, the likelihood of a church growing and declining increases moving from a smaller population grouping to a larger one. While rural churches are the least likely to have grown (16 percent), they are also the least

likely to have declined (35 percent).

Similar extremes are also found in the regions of the country. Southern Baptist churches in the Northeast (36 percent) and the West (29 percent) are the most likely to have grown, but they are also the most likely to have declined (46 percent and 47 percent respectively). Churches in the South (45 percent) and Midwest (40 percent) are the most likely to have plateaued.

“It is increasingly difficult for a church to see growth today,” McConnell said. “Southern Baptists have never had more declining churches and fewer growing churches than we see today. As the majority of churches decline, they have fewer resources to invest in ministry. But the God who gave past growth is no less capable today.”

For more information, view the [ACP Church Statistic report](#), the [ACP Church Performance report](#) and visit LifewayResearch.com.

Methodology

This analysis was based on data reported on the Annual Church Profile (ACP) in 2022 and 2017. The ACP is an annual statistical census of Southern Baptist congregations conducted cooperatively by local associations, state conventions, and Lifeway Christian Resources. Around 7 in 10 Southern Baptist churches (69 percent) reported at least one item on the 2022 ACP.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Earls is a writer for Lifeway Christian Resources.

Lifeway campers give more than \$580,000 to IMB, NAMB for Gospel impact

This summer, as thousands of kids, students and chaperones at [Lifeway camps](#) developed a greater understanding of missions and a heart for missionaries, they gave generously, entrusting their gifts for Great Commission purposes.

As a result of this generosity, Ben Mandrell, president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, presented checks totaling \$587,484.97 to International Mission Board (IMB) President Paul Chitwood and North American Mission Board (NAMB) President Kevin Ezell on Monday, Sept. 18, during the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee trustee meeting.

“Every year, one of my favorite moments is presenting the checks to NAMB and IMB from thousands of campers from across the country who have put their money together to support Southern Baptist missions efforts,” Mandrell said. “I love missions, and our team at Lifeway is honored to help support our Southern Baptist missionaries.”

This summer, as Lifeway hosted more than 111,000 kids and students at camps across the nation, representing more than 4,000 churches, it continued its partnership with the IMB and NAMB, providing missions discipleship and promoting missional giving among kids and students attending Lifeway camps.

“One thing people may not realize is the amount of missions education we do at our Lifeway camps every summer,” Mandrell told SBC EC members. “Students who attend camp learn about a church planter who serves through NAMB and a people group we are praying for and trying to reach with the gospel through the work of IMB missionaries.”

In 2023, campers, camp staff and adult chaperones at [FUGE Camps](#), [CentriKid](#), [Student Life Camp](#) and [Student Life Kids Camp](#) across the country gave \$400,310.67 to the IMB and \$187,174.31 to NAMB.

“Tomorrow’s missionaries, pastors and ministry leaders are in our churches today. And we must do everything we can to invest in them and raise them up so they are ready to answer the call,” Ezell said. “Specifically, to this year’s campers and their leaders, I want to say thank you for your generosity.”

International missions

FUGE Camps, CentriKid, Student Life Camp and Student Life Kids Camp all emphasized international missions partners through the IMB. Kids and students gave to the IMB through Lifeway camps, knowing their gifts would help fund efforts to reach unreached people groups, specifically supporting the work of missionaries serving in Panama working with the Emberá people.

The Emberá people of Panama are one of more than 300 unreached people groups in the Americas. They live in remote river communities in the vast jungle between Panama and Colombia. Throughout the week, students learned about the Emberá people and culture and how IMB missionaries Kenny and Cheryl share the Gospel with them. And through daily videos at camp, they met some Emberá who have come to know Jesus, including Cenaida and her son Santiago.

“We have formed a missionary team of local believers who have a heart to reach the Emberá for Christ,” Cheryl explained in a video that played each week at CentriKid and Student Life Kids Camp. “Teams like this are the reason people like Santiago know Jesus.”

Through the missions emphasis in videos, teaching and prayer, Lifeway camps challenged students to consider how the Emberá could know and love God if no one told them, if they didn't have access to the Gospel. By giving to the missions offering, these students are helping reach the lost for Jesus as God uses these gifts to change lives for eternity.

North American missions

Alongside this international focus, FUGE Camps and CentriKid also had a North American missions emphasis for kids and students each week at camp. Throughout the week, campers learned how missionaries Vergil and Kelsey Brown, along with their family, are planting a church in Portland, Ore.

"The Lord made it clear to us that there were other communities in Portland that needed a new, healthy church," Vergil explained in a video for campers.

So, their family moved to Portland.

"We wanted to be a role model of when the Lord asks you to go, you go," Kelsey said. As campers heard the Browns's story of faithfulness through daily missions videos, they were able to associate the faces of a specific family with the offerings they would be giving—offerings that will help more families like the Browns plant more churches in more places to reach more people with the Gospel.

Giving for Gospel impact

"Providing an opportunity to give at camp allows kids to learn they can be a part of the work God is doing all around the world," Henry Dutton, CentriKid manager said. "Giving allows them to engage with God."

At the end of each week of camp, kids and students had the opportunity to give to the missions offering.

"This partnership affords us a strategic opportunity to invest in the next generation of missionaries," said Andy Pettigrew, IMB's NextGen mobilization manager. "We know camp is one of the most important experiences in the life of a teenager. It is incredibly exciting to know that international missions is in front of them day by day to help them catch God's vision for His purposes around the world."

This week, the IMB and NAMB reaped the financial fruit of this summer's weekly offerings.

"I hope students left camp knowing God is at work in their lives and at work all around the world," said Justin McDowell, Student Life Camp event specialist. "Whether it be in their local communities today or in a mission field one day, I hope students' hearts were moved to love others and share the Gospel."

These students were inspired to give because of the stories they heard of faithful missionaries and redeemed souls. Not only do these stories give students a vision for giving to missions but also a vision for going on mission.

“I can’t imagine how many seeds are planted of future church planters, missionaries and church leaders who will one day start a brand-new Gospel work because they saw it demonstrated at camp,” Mandrell said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marissa Postell Sullivan is a writer for Lifeway Christian Resources.

What Southern Baptist state conventions are doing to prevent abuse

Over the past several years, Southern Baptists state conventions and associations have been taking significant steps to prevent abuse within their churches and provide support for survivors. While the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) [has faced criticism](#) for its handling of sexual abuse cases in the past, many state conventions are now prioritizing abuse prevention and survivor care.

Here is a sampling of the efforts made by various state groups to address this issue and protect the vulnerable within our congregations.

Alabama

Alabama Baptists have a [webpage](#) dedicated to helping churches be safer places, which includes resources to help churches create protection policies such as a screening form, permission for background and credit checks and a covenant of ministerial ethics. The convention also offers tools to implement the plan such as a sexual harassment policy, social media policy and computer and internet use policy. Additionally, the Alabama Baptists State Board of Missions offers a [discount for churches](#) to provide training and resources to prevent sexual abuse in churches.

Alabama Baptists have also [established a Sexual Abuse Task Force](#), which challenges church leaders to continue the work of preventing sexual abuse in churches. They have released a [joint statement](#) expressing their sadness and grief over reports of sexual abuse and how they were

handled. Furthermore, [Alabama law requires](#) pastors, church staff and volunteers to report suspicions of child abuse.

Florida

The Florida Baptist Convention has [established an affiliate relationship](#) with the Evangelical Council for Abuse Prevention (ECAP), a partnership that provides access to exclusive resources for child safety programs, training events from experts in the field and discounted admission to ECAP events. The Florida Baptist Convention has [committed \\$30,000 in financial resources](#) to aid churches that desire to develop robust abuse prevention.

The Florida Baptist Convention has also [adopted a special committee report](#) regarding sexual abuse policies and procedures. The committee was authorized by the convention to address abuse allegation reporting, survivor care and prevention within the state convention. Additionally, the Florida Baptist Convention offers child protection training to raise awareness for [abuse prevention and child protection](#). It also provides ministry leaders with resources to assist them in prevention and connect ECAP with area churches.

Georgia

The Georgia Baptist Mission Board offers a program called “[Reduce the Risk](#),” which is designed to help churches train pastors, staff members and volunteer leaders every year with ease. This program is available through Ministry Grid, which is an online platform that provides training resources for churches.

Georgia Baptists also provide free access to a Sexual Abuse Awareness Training. This training is designed to help churches prevent sexual abuse and care for survivors.

Illinois

The Illinois Baptist State Association (IBSA) [encourages churches](#) to study and establish effective policies for security and childcare, including check-in and check-out procedures. It also recommends background checks for all workers, including fingerprint checks of the FBI database and examination of the Sex Offender Registry maintained by the Illinois State Police.

IBSA provides [SafeChurch](#), a program designed to help churches prevent abuse and protect their members. The program includes training on recognizing and responding to abuse, creating a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults and developing policies and procedures to prevent abuse.

IBSA is also part of the [Caring Well Initiative](#), which is a unified call to action for churches to confront the abuse crisis.

Kentucky

The Kentucky Baptist Convention is offering training on sexual abuse prevention, response and care to church staff and lay leaders. The training covers child sexual abuse in Christian environments, understanding offender behaviors and the grooming process, appropriate prevention and responding to allegations, as well as understanding a trauma-informed response and care for survivors.

The Kentucky Baptist Convention has also [established a Sexual Abuse Task Force](#) to help churches prevent and respond to sexual abuse. It has [prepared a handbook](#) to help churches prevent and respond to sexual abuse, with a particular emphasis on caring for survivors. Additionally, Kentucky Baptist leaders are [responding to charges of sexual abuse](#) in a number of Southern Baptist churches across the United States.

Maryland and Delaware

The Baptist Convention of Maryland and Delaware (BCM/D) approved a constitutional change that requires churches to take steps toward preventing sexual abuse and caring for survivors. The BCM/D also provides initial and ongoing training for staff, volunteers and church members that raises awareness and shares effective actions to prevent incidents. [Pathways](#) is a resource they use that provides churches with a clear and concise plan to prevent sexual abuse and care for survivors.

The BCM/D is part of the Caring Well Initiative. The convention is also able to leverage [faith-based and community initiatives](#) which support several programs in mental health services, substance abuse prevention and addiction treatment at the national, state and local levels.

North Carolina

N.C. Baptists have created a [guide to help survivors of sexual abuse](#). The guide provides information on how to determine the classification of the information that is shared with you, how to report the information, how to listen and provide counsel, how to train the leaders within your women's ministry and how to refer to a counselor.

They also [provide resources](#) to help churches by providing training to help churches recognize and prevent abuse, as well as care for those who have been affected by abuse.

Pennsylvania and South Jersey

The Baptist Resource Network of Pennsylvania and South Jersey is focusing on creating awareness of abuse issues and vulnerabilities in churches, as well as providing information and resources for churches to be compliant and safe. Some of the [specific actions](#) the network has taken include:

- Making it a requirement for all affiliated churches to have protocols in place for the security of minors and vulnerable adults, as already required by state law.
- Promoting local resources available to individuals and churches, such as Keep Kids Safe, Pennsylvania, which explains state laws and procedures governing child protection and the reporting of child abuse, and the PA Family Support Alliance, which provides education, support and training programs to make Pennsylvania safe for children.
- Offering ministry and care for those affected by abuse, recognizing the seriousness of these issues.

In addition to these efforts, the Baptist Resource Network has also [partnered with the Southern Baptist Convention \(SBC\)](#) to utilize resources such as the SBC's guide on preventing abuse, which provides information on topics like preparing church leadership for disclosure by a sexual abuse victim, screening and training volunteers and more. This collaboration with the SBC allows the BRN to leverage the expertise and resources of a larger network in their efforts to prevent abuse in churches.

Tennessee

The Tennessee Baptist Mission Board (TBMB) [provides resources](#) to help churches prevent abuse and care for survivors. These resources include training and education on how to recognize and prevent abuse, as well as how to care for those who have been affected by abuse.

In 2019, TBMB developed a task force composed of Baptist physicians, therapists, student and children's ministers and pastors to develop increased resources for Tennessee Baptist Churches. The information gathered by the task force is provided on the TBMB website as a starting place for church leaders. In November 2022, the Tennessee Baptist Convention presented a [sexual abuse report](#), urging the adoption of best practices to prevent abuse. The task force was asked to evaluate the process of how the Tennessee Baptist Convention responds to allegations of sexual abuse and to evaluate the best practices to prevent abuse.

Texas (SBTC)

The [Southern Baptist of Texas Convention \(SBTC\)](#) offers Sexual Abuse Awareness Training, which is a 1.5-hour online course designed to help churches prevent sexual abuse and care for survivors. The SBTC also provides training and resources to help churches prevent sexual abuse and care for survivors

The SBTC assists churches with awareness and education on the topic of sexual abuse prevention, specifically in ministry contexts. It offers resources and training to help churches prevent abuse and care for survivors.

Texas (BGCT)

The [Baptist General Convention of Texas \(BGCT\)](#) equips churches to combat sexual abuse through a proactive strategy of protection, reporting and caring well.

Through a relationship with MinistrySafe, the BGCT provides numerous [no-cost training opportunities](#) to affiliated churches, covering topics including a 5-Part Safety System, Skillful Screening and more. Online resources explain when and how to report abuse and the biblical principles behind reporting.

Texas Baptists Counseling Services provides financial support and referrals to its state-wide network of more than 250 licensed counselors for abuse survivors, their families and others impacted by instances of abuse across the Texas Baptists family.

The BGCT has also produced a new [35-page sexual misconduct handbook](#) outlining steps for abuse prevention and [appointed a new Sexual Abuse Task Force](#) to be comprised of executive board members, pastors, and licensed counselors to provide ongoing guidance in addressing the Convention's abuse response.

Virginia

SBC Virginia [provides resources](#) to help churches prevent abuse and care for survivors. These resources include training and education on how to recognize and prevent abuse, as well as how to care for those who have been affected by abuse. One of the programs offered is Safe Church Training, which is a comprehensive program designed to help churches prevent abuse and protect their members. The training covers topics such as recognizing and responding to abuse, creating a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults, and developing policies and procedures to prevent abuse.

SBC Virginia has also established a Sexual Abuse Task Force to help churches prevent and respond to sexual abuse. The task force provides resources and training to help churches create safe environments for their members.

Editor's note: This story was updated after initial publication to include information from the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Arkansas church nearly doubles after connecting with missionaries

International Mission Board missionary Sheila Crowder entered the worn apartment building. She'd cleared her schedule to meet with a woman she'd been praying for long before this coffee date. As she entered the apartment, the smell of coffee grounds welcomed her in, and she knew she'd be there for a while.

Her friend is from an unreached people group who takes as much joy in a freshly brewed, aromatic cup of joe as they do the conversations that naturally develop around the experience. She'd bathed the encounter in prayer, but she still wasn't prepared for what came next.

Sheila and her husband, Aaron, have been trying to reach this people group for years. The people, who have dispersed and can be found in a nearby city, are traditionally nomads who live in a tumultuous and hard-to-reach area. They're oral learners, as the majority cannot read or write. They practice folk Islam. There are very few known believers among them, as generally their hearts are resistant to the gospel.

That day, after Sheila yet again poured her heart out sharing the gospel with her friend, the woman made a bold decision. She wanted to follow this Jesus Sheila had been sharing about. The missionaries and their team rejoiced as Aaron baptized her. Her salvation was the fruit of many years of labor and prayer.

It wasn't just the missionaries who were praying though. They weren't the only ones celebrating either. An ocean away, a small church in Wilson, Arkansas, had been praying for believers among this people group. Now, they were rejoicing too.

When First Baptist Church in Wilson, Arkansas, connected with this IMB missionary family, reaching the nations became personal for them. As a result, God moved in their congregation and their little community.

Pastor Paul Huenefeld realized that most of the members in his church had never met a real-life missionary. He reached out to the IMB asking if one could visit his church. Through the IMB's efforts, he was connected to Aaron and Sheila Crowder.

Even before church members organized a trip overseas, they began praying for this unreached people group, fervently. When they heard that the Crowders saw this woman come to Christ and be baptized, the church not only rejoiced, but they began to look at their own lives and draw closer to God.

"Their simple decision for Christ in their situation caused our people to rethink their own spiritual lives," Huenefeld said.

Soon, his church doubled in size, from 35-40 on a Sunday morning to nearly 80 each week. Huenefeld's church members were so excited by this work God did an ocean away that their passion was ignited to reach people in their own community.

He saw his church begin to grow as they started to reach the world around them.

At the beginning of this year, Huenefeld, his wife, Angela, and another member of his church, Justin Cissell, put boots on the ground. Traveling to another continent, they met missionaries, national believers and missionaries who are working with the UPG, and learned how God is working in the lives of this people group the Arkansan church adopted.

"Once we began to minister outside of our own area, that's where the growth really came from," he said. "People got more of a passion, and our community was hearing that we were not just sitting in the pews on Sunday morning, but we were out doing stuff."

The church members aren't the only people encouraged by this connection-turned-partnership. For the missionaries, having a church host them, join in on their monthly prayer meetings, be a part of their ministry overseas, and most importantly, pray for them, is invaluable.

Sheila shared, "It was just surprising to find a church that jumped into ministry and was so encouraging, to be honest."

"It's easy to feel disconnected from churches in the States," Sheila added. The missionary couple is grateful for every church that has invested in their ministry, prayed for them, given through IMB giving channels or the Cooperative Program, and connected with them.

Still, FBC Wilson holds a special place in their hearts. "We don't feel disconnected anymore."

Interested in experiencing growth and encouragement for your congregation by connecting with an IMB missionary? Call 800-999-3113 or email info@imb.org.

*Some names have been changed for security purposes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myriah Snyder writes and edits for the IMB.

Georgia family visits all 32 NAMB Send cities, sees a need for new churches everywhere

MONTREAL – Numbers don't do justice in describing the last two years for Kevin and Casey Kilgore and their family, but it's a start. In just a little more than 24 months, the Kilgores have surpassed 70,000 miles traveled in their RV. They've visited and encouraged 265 pastors and missionaries. They've been to 48 out of 50 U.S. states.

And as of September 16, with the family's visit to Montreal, they've encouraged church planters in all 32 of Send Network's Send Cities. Ask what they've learned about North American missions in the process of this epic journey, and Kevin Kilgore doesn't hesitate.

No matter the size of the community or the region of the continent they visit, Kevin sees a need for new, gospel-centered churches to push back lostness throughout North America.

"Church planters are rock stars," Kevin said. "In our minds, they're our heroes. They're doing something that's very, very difficult. Starting new churches is not easy. That's why NAMB [the North American Mission Board] talks about churches planting churches. The denomination doesn't do it. Individuals don't do it. But when churches can get behind planting churches, then that's when we've seen the greatest success."

God began leading the Kilgores toward this missions adventure [not long after a tumultuous 2020](#). On top of all the turmoil everyone faced during that year, the Kilgores lost their beloved pastor, Fred Evers of Northside Baptist Church in Tifton, Georgia. Kevin had served as the church's associate pastor for 14 years. Then, God led the family to sell their home, pull up stakes and take off across North America, visiting NAMB missionaries in the most strategic cities on the continent.

At every stop, in big cities and small, the Kilgores have both served church planters and served alongside them. Whether providing a night out for the church planter and his family, providing practical help for his ministry or simply being an encouragement, the family tries to do what they can together.

The Kilgore girls — ages 17, 15, 13, and 11 — have embraced the adventure and enjoyed serving in diverse spots throughout North America. Before two years ago, they all attended public schools. Today, they are homeschooled and serve with their family in ministry throughout the week.

"What always stands out to me are the opportunities we've had to do ministry together," Casey said. "We've had quite a few opportunities to do that this year, which has been fabulous."

Casey points specifically to a weeklong mission experiences in South Dakota and participation in Send Relief's Serve Tour event in Chicago.

In 2023, they had several opportunities to revisit church planters they'd met along the way, sometimes for the third time. This has allowed the family to build longer-term relationships with some of the missionary families they've served.

For example, the Kilgores have visited church planter Joshua Page and his family three times in the past two years during their trips through Pittsburgh. Page planted The Church at Mon River about 18 months ago. He says he regularly gets messages from Kevin saying he is praying for him. On the Kilgores' second trip through Pittsburgh, the Pages had just lost a child to a miscarriage.

"It was a really difficult time for us," Page said. "They came in with the attitude of just wanting to be a blessing and encouragement. Their girls watched our young boys, and they treated us out to dinner, and just loved on us, wept with us and encouraged us. That was just a really, really sweet time."

Page notes that planting a church in the Northeast isn't easy. Support and encouragement from Southern Baptists, like the Kilgores, has helped them keep going whenever they've felt discouraged.

"Their encouragement in our lives has been really huge," Page said. "They just came through Pittsburgh again, like two weeks ago, and we went out to dinner with them. My wife is pregnant again, and we had an ultrasound, so it's a real triggering time for us due to what's happened in the past. And they were very quick to say, 'Hey, how can we help?' And so, they watched our youngest boy, so that I could go to the ultrasound with my wife. It is just crazy, because here's these random people from Georgia, loving on our family as if they were an aunt and uncle to our kids."

Once the Kilgores leave Montreal, they plan on visiting church planters in New York, Boston, and Washington D.C., before heading back to Georgia for the holiday season.

The Kilgores aren't sure what's next for their family in 2024, but they're committed to following God whatever happens. In two years of trusting God for their next step, he has never failed to give direction and provide.

"As soon as we know what he's leading us to, we'll move in that direction," Kevin said. "If it's continuing exactly what we're doing, he'll make a way to make that happen."

To follow the Kilgores' ministry and find more information about how individuals and churches can support their work, visit throughtheeyesofourtribe.com. To learn about NAMB's church planting efforts, visit SendNetwork.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tobin Perry has written professionally for churches and Christian organizations for more than 20 years. He has served as a writer and editor on the staffs of Saddleback Church and the North American Mission Board. He has also served as a local church pastor in Southern Indiana and a two-year missionary for the International Mission Board. He is a graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism (B.A. '98) and Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div. '07). Today Tobin operates New Creations Editorial Services, which provides content that helps Christian organizations engage and equip their audiences. For more information, visit www.tobinperry.com.

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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