



Newsjournal of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan

Telling the story  
of Michigan Baptists

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# **BSCM Making Moves**

By Jamie Lynn

Moving day for the staff of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) is rapidly approaching. The sale to the Tyrone Township began simply enough as a check on a zoning discrepancy.

Late last year, the BSCM Annual Convention messengers voted to approve the Executive Board to move forward with the possible sale of the Fenton building. The staff started the process of selling the building by contacting a commercial realtor at the end of January. That's when the realtor discovered that the property was zoned residential vs. commercial. As the realtor approached the Tyrone Township government about the zoning discrepancies, the township showed immediate interest in purchasing the building. The process moved quicker than expected. The building was listed at \$1.1 million, and the Tyrone Twp. countered with \$1 million. Executive Board members were given a copy of the purchase agreement to review and bring questions, and on March 7, 2019, the Executive Board approved, and BSCM Executive-Director, Tim Patterson, signed the purchase agreement.

Tim Patterson, with his Executive Leadership Team, Dr. Tony Lynn and Pastor Mike Durbin, looked at several different options for possible future office space. March 4<sup>th</sup>, Patterson and a transitional team that included: Pastors Jim Nelson, Stan Parker, Herb Harbaugh, and Jimmy Jones toured a potential office space at the Burroughs Building, 41100 Plymouth Road, Plymouth, MI 48170. The Relocation Team voted unanimously to make a recommendation to the Board of Trustees to lease the Burroughs Building as the BSCM offices, pending the sale of the Fenton building. The Executive Committee voted unanimously to recommend leasing the office space.

The Burroughs Building office is approximately 1900 sq. ft. Because the office space is being newly renovated, it will be built to BSCM specifications. The cost for the lease will start at \$25,000 and move up to \$30,000/year, and will be secured for 5 years. The cost of the lease will be less than the annual expenses at the Fenton building. The building has ample parking, common meeting areas, fiber optic high speed internet access, conference rooms that can be reserved at no extra charge, a large meeting area that can accommodate the entire annual state convention (500+), a cyber café, a cafeteria, and a gymnasium. It is located near I-96 and the I-275 interchange. The office building also allows for expansion if needed. It is close to the Detroit airport and the population center of the state. The only current drawback is the extended travel time for staff to the new office site.

The monies from the sale, which are expected to be \$925,000, will be placed in a foundation, with WatersEdge, of the Baptist Foundation of Oklahoma. A 4% - 7 % annual return is expected (approximately \$50,000 return/year). The corpus of funds will not be lost. It will continue to benefit the BSCM with dividend/interest. With WatersEdge's

guidance, the residual of the corpus will allow the state convention to use the funds while still growing the corpus.

Bob Kiger, Michigan Disaster Relief Director, was involved in the discussions on the new office and said, "Once we move the State Office to Plymouth, Disaster Relief supplies and equipment will be more accessible. It will also be conveniently located for volunteers to meet." The Burroughs building has extra storage space available if it's needed for BSCM items or DR equipment.

The office hours will be maintained at 4-days a week, Monday through Thursday. The phone numbers also will remain the same. The address will be updated and sent to all the BSCM churches. BSCM churches and members are invited to check out the new office setting on and after June 1<sup>st</sup>. There is easy access and guests are always welcome.

## **Rebuilding Lives, Showing Jesus' Love**

By Staff

Fremont - Michigan Disaster Relief Volunteers are reaching out to overwhelmed homeowners in Newaygo County. More than 100 roads were covered by flooding in the Western Michigan region, and more than 100 homes were impacted. Jim Brown was one homeowner assisted by a Southern Baptist Disaster Relief team. He did not have flood insurance. He told a WZZM-TV reporter from Grand Rapids that "God had sent him angels". He added, "The team did in two hours what would have taken me a week." Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) Disaster Relief Director, Bob Kiger led a team of 14 volunteers. He says, "I get choked up with I think about my opportunity to serve." You can see the full news report about the team below.

[www.baptistbeacon.net/post/rebuilding-lives-showing-jesus-love](http://www.baptistbeacon.net/post/rebuilding-lives-showing-jesus-love)

# Game Over

By Bob Johnson

*"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead...."* - 1 Corinthians 15.20

Roseville - Janell (not her real name) was our waitress for lunch. There were 15 of us (mostly pastors), and most of us had individual checks. Janell had done a great job, but one guy wanted to pay for another guy's lunch and well...let's just say it sort of messed things up. Janell started to apologize, then she broke down. You see, she suffers from high anxiety, and it doesn't take much to trigger it. This triggered it.

Anxiety is not rational. It makes mountains out of molehills. It tells you something is far worse than what it really is which is why anxiety is so crippling. Like an internal alarm clock that won't stop beeping, anxiety says, "you are going to fail, you are going to be rejected, you are going to mess up, you are going to let others down." And of course, when you listen to that, you tend to believe it which only reinforces it. You may know Janell. She may listen to you preach on Sunday, or sit next to you in church. In fact, you may be her. Does the resurrection of Jesus speak to her (you) in any meaningful way? YES! A thousand times YES!!

1 Corinthians 15 begins with Paul reminding us of the gospel. The gospel means "good news." Good news is something that is announced. We do not make the news, we declare the news. We declare what has already happened. The resurrection of Christ is an event that has taken place which infinitely, decisively, and unalterably proved that Christ has indeed lived a perfect life. Christ has indeed died a perfect substitutionary death. Christ has indeed paid for our sins. Christ has indeed absorbed the just and righteous wrath of the Father that should have been poured out on us. The payment has been accepted. The check has cleared the bank. Christ has risen from the dead. Therefore, if you repent of your sin and trust in Christ alone, you are united with Christ – forever! You are now and forever in Christ! Nothing can separate you from the love of God – ever. That means that no matter how hard the battle is, how difficult the game may be, how challenging the situation is, at the end, you win. You win because Christ has already won.

It is like this: Your basketball team is down by 2 with 5 seconds to go in the game. You are playing for the NCAA tournament championship. Your coach calls a time out, and draws up a play for you to get the ball and shoot a 3-pointer. If you hit it, you win. If you miss, well...you don't want to think about it, but in that moment, you do. In fact, it's almost all you can do. What happens if you miss? You look around. The crowd of 40,000+ is on their feet. Your parents are in the stands along with dozens of basketball legends. The cameras are in your face, the music is pumping, the sound is deafening, and it's all going to be in your hands. The stakes do not seem like they could be higher. You feel your mouth go dry and your palms sweaty. But wait!

What if you knew that you already won? What if you knew that your victory was already accomplished? What if you knew that from where ever you shot the ball it was going to go in? How would that affect you? Would you panic? Would you still be anxious? If you really knew that you would win, you would be excited to get the ball, and get this over with.

If you are in Christ, the battle is over, the game is already won. Your mission is to live, fight, and play with that in view. Anxiety will not have the final word. Little things that feel like big things will not have the final word. Your sin, failures, and discouragements will not have the final word. Your accusers will not have the final word. Your internal voice of condemnation will not have the final word. Look at Jesus! Look at his empty tomb. Even death will not have the final word. He won. Game over!!

# Urban Camp at Bambi Lake

By Stan Parker

Roscommon - The weather was cold, icy, and snowy, yet the weather was not be a distraction for those urban youths from Detroit, Lansing, Westland, Southfield and Ferndale who travelled to Bambi Lake for a camp to remember for a lifetime. For many of the students, it was their first camp experience. The weekend was filled with fellowship, great food, and lots of fun in the game room. The camp weekend was also a time of connection. Hundreds of miles from home, many of the youth discovered other students from their home schools who they were meeting for the first-time.

This Urban Camp was a joint effort between the Michigan African American Fellowship team and the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM). The fellowship team is extremely grateful for the support and assistance received from BSCM in helping make the Urban Youth Camp a blessed success. There were approximately 30 youth and several youth leaders who participated in the camp. The teens were from Faith Fellowship Baptist Church, One Mission Church, Oak Park Baptist Church, The House of Restoration, and Temple of Faith Baptist Church.

The keynote speaker, Mark Williams of Kentucky, spoke on the theme "My Identity in Christ". Williams had the youth engaged the whole time. The breakout sessions were also informative, and were facilitated by Pastor Roland Caldwell Jr, Pastor Antonio Wimberly, and Deacon Ron Swain. Each plenary session was started with praise and worship led by Kierston Thurmond from One Mission Church of Westland. Several of the youth offered prayer during the sessions. The most important highlight of the weekend was when three youth surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ.

14-year-old Jacob who attended the camp said, "I thought this camp was going to be boring and not fun at all. Well, I was totally wrong. I enjoyed myself, learned a lot, met some new friends, ate well, and had fun." 11-year-old Donta added, "Minister Mark was funny. He kept my attention and I learned good stuff about Jesus."

Each attendee was asked to complete an evaluation of their camp experience. 98% of the youth rated their experience as very good, and 95% strongly suggested scheduling the Urban Camp again next year. Only 5% thought we should do it in the summer when the weather is hot, and they could go swimming. Overall, the camp was well received.

# Earthquakes and Gaping Holes

By Tim Patterson

It was in the early morning hours of my little West Texas home, just as the sun was peeking over the horizon that the earth-shaking rumble began. I thought someone had driven their vehicle into the side of our home. The fact was that we had experienced a small earthquake, which was not that uncommon in those regions of the west. A few shakes, a plate or two knocked from their display in the den, and small amount of anxiety. That was all that we noticed during that seemingly uneventful time. It was just a tremor. They happen all the time. Nothing to worry about.

Later that day, reports came in from different media outlets that a huge crater had formed in one of the surrounding oil fields. It was the size of several football fields, and as it formed it had taken several storage tanks into its depths and some sizable pieces of oilfield equipment along with them. A rumble, a shake, and all that was left was an enormous gaping hole.

Every day in families throughout Michigan and the world, great quakings occur. With little fanfare, a rumble and a shake is felt in heaven and in the hearts of so many when one of our loved ones die. When they take their last breath and pass from this life into the next, they leave behind gaping holes. Not ones in the crust of the earth, but in the hearts and lives of all of those who remain behind. The loss of their presence and leadership as a husband and wife, father and mother, grandfather and grandmother, brother and sister, uncle and aunt and friend will leave many with an aching sense that something is desperately missing in their lives.

For some, we knew their passing could be eminent, and at times, as Christians we have even prayed for that difficult yet sweet relief to come quickly. The fact remains that though our prayers of the ultimate healing are answered, we sense a great loss. Our hearts are broken, and a cavernous wound of grief exposes our inward most selves to the stinging winds of memory. Nothing can really fill the void our loved ones leave behind and for us who have the Hope of Heaven in our hearts, only time and the tenderness of God's presence will heal the bleeding of our souls.

C.S. Lewis said, *"God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience and shouts to us in our pain."* If that is true, and I believe it is, then it is during times of grief and hurt that we should hear His voice more clearly. It is during these times that our attention should be His. When someone dies the inevitable question always surfaces. Why? Why him or her? Why now? Viewing life from heaven's perspective is not a privilege we have while the story of our life is still being written.



My wife has the terrible habit of going to the last pages of a book, and reading them first to find out how the story will end. She just cannot tolerate the anticipation and suspense. For all of us, our life's story, or the book of our life is a process. It is a process that must be completed in its entirety. Each page must follow the other with no interruptions. We cannot skip to the end of the book, read how it all turns out, and get a premature understanding of everything that transpires in our lives. Nor can we know in advance the purpose of it all, but one day we will. One day we shall no longer look through a poor mirror, but we shall see Him face to face and we will understand fully.

*"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." - I Corinthians 13:12*

Until that day arrives, we must be satisfied that He who knows the past, present and future, has given us victory over the gaping grave and provided eternal life for all those who will trust in Him.

Though our lives may quake and rumble when death visits our world, Easter has filled the hopelessness of the grave and chasms of fear. The earth shook on that great Resurrection Day and death was defeated.

*"Death is swallowed up in Victory.  
O Death, where is your sting?  
O Hades, where is your victory?  
The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.  
But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."  
- I Corinthians 54b-57*

# Michigan's Move to Mobility

by Tony Lynn

On Thursday evening, March 7, 2019 the Baptist State Convention of Michigan's Executive Board unanimously voted to accept the purchase agreement for the sale of the convention's Fenton office building and subsequently voted, in total agreement, to lease 1900 square feet of office space in the historical Burroughs Building in Plymouth, Michigan. Through the sale of the building and acreage the state convention will net nearly one million dollars to be placed into the state convention's foundation. The large investment into the foundation will provide annual dividends that can be disbursed for meaningful ministry priorities or reinvested in order to increase the strength of the Michigan Southern Baptist Foundation.

During last year's annual state convention on Friday, November 9, 2018 at Grace Church in Jackson the messengers of the state convention by vote entrusted the Executive Board to oversee the consideration and sale of the convention's property. Conversations between leaders of the state convention, to consider the sale of the property, started early in 2018.

When Pastor Tim Patterson became executive director of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan, during May 2015, one of his goals was to maximize the resources and the personnel of the small state convention in order to bring increased health to the established churches while planting multiplying churches. His financial and strategic leadership, in concert with the elected officers of the state convention and members of the executive board, has brought significant results in less than four years.

Patterson and the state staff travel regularly to churches and regions throughout the state. Pastors, church planters, church members, and associational leaders have packed personal and vocational schedules making it challenging for them to find the time to travel to and attend large conferences of the past. State staff serve more as consultants now responding to personal requests to assist one church or a local group of churches at the same time. Mobility has become one of the major priorities within the ministry. Seeing images of state staff on social media attending the launch of a church plant in Grand Rapids, followed by a conference in Detroit, then preaching at a significant historical day in an established church in the upper peninsula in one week's time has become common place. State staff build strong, supportive and trusting relationships with others throughout the state through those face-to-face ministry excursions.

Online meetings and live streaming have provided valuable links to those geographically scattered and isolated throughout the region, including a few church planters in Canada who partner with the state convention due to proximity and identification. The Burroughs Building in Plymouth will provide robust tools to enhance the state convention's connection with pastors, churches and associations. Meeting rooms with enhanced online connections will be conveniently provided at the new state convention site. Technology will never replace face-to-face meetings, but technology can create frequent and

convenient follow-up meetings to enrich those deep, personal, interactive relationships formed by sharing life and ministry.

The Baptist State Convention of Michigan's ministry center will relocate to the third floor of the historical Burroughs Building in Plymouth. The Plymouth facility was once a production center, during the 1900s, for adding machines, typewriters and the early-edition computers used in the banking industry. Today, developers are remodeling the site as a high-service, interactive community for a diverse set of clients. Some of the neighbors joining the state convention inside the Burroughs Building are: an athletic club, a cafeteria, an electric car company, and one of the newest church plants in Michigan, Mile City Church. The state staff are looking forward to forging new friendships with a variety of people in the Plymouth and Burroughs Building community.

# Who's Your One?

By Mike Durbin

I love Easter Sunday! It's my favorite service of the year. The worship, the Scripture, and the message all celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, and the hope we have in Him. Easter is God's declaration that sin, Satan and death do not have the final word over our lives. Our hope is in the risen Christ who declared, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live" (John 11:25 CSB). Easter changes everything!

As a pastor, it brought a smile to my face to look over the congregation on Easter Sunday, and see families and friends sitting together. It was common for people in our church to joyfully introduce me to people who were their special guests for the service. Often, I knew from previous conversations that some of these guests still needed to accept Christ as Savior and Lord. I considered it an honor and a sacred trust to faithfully share the Good News of the Gospel.

Many of us will be inviting loved ones to our church's Easter services. Our hope is that they will hear and respond to the Gospel. We want them to know Christ as their personal Savior and Lord if they do not already. There's a new resource that I am using this Easter season to pray for someone I know who needs the hope of the Gospel. It's called, "Who's Your One?"

Here is Day 1 of "Who's Your One? Prayer Guide."

Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." JOHN 14:6, CSB

"God, I know there is only one way to salvation. Jesus is clear; He is the only hope for a lost and dying world, and that includes \_\_\_\_\_. His/Her salvation depends on acknowledging Jesus is who He says He is, and He alone is the source of salvation. Use the people and circumstances in \_\_\_\_\_'s life today to point him/her to the reality of Jesus. Give me courage and boldness to call \_\_\_\_\_ to faith in Jesus when the opportunity arises, and help me make it clear there is no other way to be saved."

"Who's Your One?" is an initiative of Southern Baptist President, J.D. Greear. It's totally free, and is available in print or you can download it at [whosyourone.com](http://whosyourone.com). You can use it on your own or as an emphasis with your small group or church family. There are Prayer Guides, Book Markers, Posters, Social Media and other helps. There's a place where you can share the first name of the "One" you're praying for on the [whosyourone.com](http://whosyourone.com) website. Another great feature for those of us who use the You Version Bible app is that you can use the Prayer Guide along with your daily Bible reading plan.

Who's Your One? is not just for Easter, but I'm using it this Easter season to pray for someone I care about and for myself as I look for opportunities to share Jesus.

Easter is a great time to invite family and friends to church. It's one of the times during the year that people are more open to actually respond "yes" to an invitation.

# Christ Won Our Freedom

By Mick Schatz

Roscommon - My best day as a kid was the last day of school. No more teachers, no more tests, no more sack lunches, no more getting up early, no more homework, just complete freedom. Freedom to have fun, go to the beach, stay up late, play in the woods, and freedom to stay with grandma for weeks at a time and eat as much ice cream as possible out of her magically stocked freezer. Sweet Freedom!

Unfortunately, as we all know, this freedom was only temporary because school always came back to enslave my time and imagination. Thankfully, there is a freedom that is eternal and magnificent. As we celebrate Easter, we must remember this freedom we have in Christ because He gave His life for us on the cross where He paid the ultimate price for our freedom. Yet, there is a price we must also pay - the price of humble surrender. Compared to the price Christ paid, humble surrender would seem quite easy. Nevertheless, it is the most difficult act of the human will. Our pride and our ego are far too important to just surrender control. We know what's best because we have all the answers.

This unwillingness to surrender reminds me of an encounter between Captain Naaman and the prophet Elisha in the book of 2 Kings 5. Naaman was a great warrior, but he had leprosy. He was sent to the prophet Elisha for healing who told him to wash in the Jordan River seven times, and he would be healed (made clean and set free from the disease). The price of freedom was too high, too undignified, too humiliating so he stormed away full of pride and doomed to die.

Proverbs 16:18 tells us that "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling". This was almost the end of Naaman's story, and for many of us this scenario has become all too familiar. We desire to obey God's word, and grow stronger and deeper in our faith until we reach the place where obedience and relationship demand too high a price. We choose disobedience over obedience, defeat over victory, ego over humility, self-reliance over surrender and captivity instead of freedom. Why? Because being free in Christ requires total reliance on him and not on ourselves.

For Naaman to be free he had to humble himself, his ego, and assumptions, and literally allow himself to be "washed away." Freedom comes through the blood of Christ washing away our self - all of our pride, vanity, ego and self-righteousness. When we choose to live in freedom, in victory, we discover healing for our souls, the desire to forgive and be forgiven, and the ability to see and want the best in others. The truth is, once you have experienced living free in Christ, anything less is unacceptable, and we desire others to also live in Christ's freedom. Freedom is contagious, and victory is inspiring. Jesus won the victory for our freedom. Let's live in it. Let's share it!

## **Church planting: Key for sending church is vision**

by Brandon Elrod

AMES, Iowa(BP) -- In the lifetime of their congregation in Ames, Iowa, Cornerstone Church has launched more than 15 new churches across the Midwest. Planting these new churches became a core aspect of Cornerstone's DNA as they shifted into the mold of a sending church.

"We are not doing church planting simply because it's a great strategy," said lead pastor, Mark Vance. "We practice church planting because it's a model of the Gospel."

Vance described the picture of Jesus leaving His heavenly home and of God sending His Son to accomplish His mission.

"We have to realize that we are the sent people of God," Vance emphasized.

As they aim to reach college communities and university campuses, Cornerstone sends leaders and church members with each of those new church plants.

"All of the people who were a part of the church planting process spent significant time here," Vance said. "Of those who went out were raised up, trained up and then sent out to participate in church planting."

One of those church planting missionaries that Cornerstone sent out is Rob Warren, who leads Doxa Church in Madison, Wis., which launched in the Fall of 2018.

Warren, who served as a 2019 Week of Prayer missionary for the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American missions, said the efforts of a sending church make starting a new church in a difficult mission field more feasible. See related Baptist Press story.

"You're setting yourself up for success," Warren said of the relationship with his sending church. "If the goal is to come and plant a vibrant church, we are better together. You can go farther and faster with a sending church."

Cornerstone's church planting emphasis grew out of the seed of a vision about the fields being "white unto harvest" based on Luke 10:02. While the church had seen growth in their local congregation, they looked outside themselves to notice the need to send workers, missionaries, to reach communities with the Gospel.

"Generally speaking, the problem is not a lack of resources. It is a lack of vision," Vance said. "We were so focused on what was right in front of us that we didn't have a bigger picture of what God had for us. We had to lift our eyes up and see the harvest."

Cornerstone's leaders saw planting in collegiate communities as their main target because that was the lane God was blessing in their ministry in Ames near Iowa State University.

Many churches that have the desire to start new churches in a city or community that desperately needs a gospel witness may struggle to know where to get started. A sending church, Vance noted, must first establish a healthy, gospel-centered culture.

"Many planters go out with the expectation to plant a healthy church," Vance said, "but if they are leaving an unhealthy church culture, they will unconsciously replicate what they know."

For Warren, this meant his and his family's moving to Ames for a season and joining the team at Cornerstone. The church got to know Warren, and he gathered insight into how Cornerstone operated.

"They were constantly allowing me to look under the hood, learning their system and how they did ministry," Warren said.

While the majority of church planting missionaries that Cornerstone sends out are raised up from within the church, Cornerstone built a relationship with the Warrens, welcomed them into their church home and made sure he was "a part of the family" at their church.

"It was about developing a relationship and launching Warren with everything that we have," said Vance, which entailed not only finances, but prayer and cooperating with a shared vision.

While Doxa Church establishes itself in Madison, Cornerstone leaders serve as elders and participate in biweekly video conferences.

"They are there for guidance and decision-making," Warren said. "They are able to provide the wisdom of guys who have been leading for years.

Then to become a sending church, the congregation and its leadership must shift its mindset from addition to multiplication. This means doing more than simply bringing more people into one congregation.

"At Cornerstone, our vision is not simply to invest more and more resources to become a bigger church," said Vance, "but to invest our resources into" other cities and college campuses.

"We became so convinced that this is what God wanted us to do that we released our lead pastor &#91;Troy Nesbitt&#93; so that he could focus on sending," Vance said.

Nesbitt now directs The Salt Network, a collection of churches set on planting new churches across the Midwest and beyond. As their vision developed into a



movement, the North American Mission Board (NAMB) came alongside Cornerstone to encourage and boost their mission efforts.

No matter what the next step may be, NAMB exists to help churches take their next step in launching new churches in communities where a gospel witness is sorely needed.

For more church planting information and resources, visit [namb.net/church-planting](http://namb.net/church-planting).

## **Greear: Ordinary people called to spread the Gospel**

by Andrew J.W. Smith

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP) -- The Gospel needs to spread throughout the world by ordinary people, just like it did in the book of Acts, J.D. Greear said during Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's chapel yesterday (March 26).

Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, used the example of Stephen in Acts 6-7 to bring this point home, describing the blueprint for the spread of Christianity as more like Stephen's dramatic sermon before the Sanhedrin than the Sermon on the Mount.

"Jesus' plan for reaching the world is not gathering large groups of people to bask in the anointing of one prophetic teacher," said Greear, pastor of The Summit Church in the Raleigh-Durham, N.C., area, who once worked for the International Mission Board.

"His Plan A is raising up ordinary people in the power of the Spirit and sending them out," Greear said.

Stephen was not an apostle or elder in the early church. In fact, before he was appointed as a deacon in Acts 6, he was an "ordinary guy," Greear said. Even his deaconship was a supporting role as one of several men selected to help deliver food to widows so the apostles could focus on prayer and teaching the Word. He was the "Meals on Wheels" of the early church, Greear said.

But Stephen's story marked a turning point in the book of Acts and all redemptive history, Greear noted.

Stephen did his job so well that it got the attention of the angry Jewish religious establishment, who began to discredit him, Greear recounted. In Acts 7, Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin for questioning, where he delivered the longest and most comprehensive sermon in Acts, tracing Israel's history in great detail and showing from the Scriptures how the entire Hebrew Bible is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Even more angry than before, the Jewish leaders took him outside and stoned him to death.

This moment inspired a brand-new age in the expansion of the Gospel message, Greear said. Whereas before Acts 7 the Gospel had not yet left Jerusalem, after Acts 7 it expands to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth just as Jesus commanded in Acts 1:8.

Stephen -- an ordinary man -- would be the springboard for global transformation, Greear said, noting that God wants to use ordinary people today like He used Stephen in Acts.

"Not a single apostle is involved in the story. Not one," Greear said. "It is Stephen's witness that provokes the riot, and of those who leave preaching the Word, Luke the author of Acts seems to go out of his way to show you that not a single apostle was included.

"For those reasons, I believe Stephen's story is given to us as an example of how the Gospel is supposed to spread globally. In Acts, Stephen is a picture of what ordinary Christians in the church are supposed to look like, and what will happen in the world when they do."

The thing that makes ordinary Christians such extraordinary servants for the Kingdom, Greear said, is not self-confidence or positive thinking but the presence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

One of the most surprising verses in the New Testament, Greear said, is John 16:7, in which Jesus tells His disciples that it is to their "advantage" that He would leave earth and send the Holy Spirit instead. It is hard to imagine that the presence of the Spirit is better for Christian ministry than the presence of Christ, Greear said, but that reality highlights the central role of the Spirit in the Christian life.

Anyone can do anything, even the "least of the Kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 11:11) if they experience the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, Greear said.

"What makes Stephen remarkable is his confidence -- a confidence he apparently gained from an awareness of the fullness of the Spirit within him," Greear said. "The most common characteristic repeated about Stephen was that he was 'filled with the Spirit.' What gives ordinary people such extraordinary confidence and effectiveness is the knowledge of the power of the Spirit within them."

Greear acknowledged that Stephen's story does not end happily from a worldly perspective. After telling the Sanhedrin that he could see Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father in heaven, the Jewish leaders stoned him to death. In his dying moments, Stephen alluded to Jesus' final words and made it clear that he saw himself as a sacrifice for others. Even if ministry doesn't call us to give our lives, it often does require similar sacrifices, which is a difficult lesson to learn in comfortable American culture, Greear said.

"We like to talk a lot about how coming to Jesus brings peace and fulfillment into our lives, and that's all true," Greear said. "But at some point, if people are serious about following Jesus, obedience to Him goes the opposite way of fulfillment, happiness and peace. At some point, coming to Jesus is going to take you 180 degrees opposite of the direction you want to go. And in that moment, there is only one thing that is going to propel you forward: a vision of Jesus being absolutely and totally worth it."

Greear's chapel sermon can be viewed at <http://equip.sbts.edu>.

# Another Easter

By Matt Thompson

Grandville - I'll never forget that Saturday night. It was a night filled with great anticipation. The next day was our first vision-casting meeting at the church I was planting. As expected, there were a few last errands to run, so off I went to the store. I did my shopping, got in my car to go home, and then it happened. Smack! Head on. Airbags deployed. Knocked out. Car totaled. Later that night, when I finally came to in the ambulance, an officer said, "*Man, you were out of it!*"

As I approach another busy Easter season, I wonder if I will find myself in that same spot. Not in another car accident, but being "out of it," experiencing a head on crash with Easter busyness, only to "wake up" later having missed the celebration. Here is my fear this Easter (or for *any* day), that all I have to *do* would suffocate my joy in what Jesus has *done*.

So what is the remedy for the pastor, parent or person who is gasping for joy amidst the stranglehold of busyness? The answer is not found in remembering all I have to do, but in remembering all that Jesus has done. Joy is found as I rehearse the Gospel. May we breathe, over and over, deep breaths of joyful wonder of that first, glorious Easter morning.

Place yourself there, side by side with Mary and Mary Magdalene (Matthew 28).

It was over. Jesus died. It was a long, emotional weekend. No tears left to cry.

Walk with them brokenhearted towards the tomb on that brisk Sunday morning.

Weep with them in extreme sadness as you hopelessly approach Jesus' grave.

Stop in disbelief as you see an open tomb and hear the angels announcement, "*He is not here, He has risen.*"

Allow this breaking news to make your heart beat a little faster as your sorrow gives way to a ray of hope!

Imagine peering in to the tomb, your eyes slowly adjusting to the deep darkness.

Feel the change of temperature as you now enter the damp, dark, cold grave.

Gasp with them in shock at the realization that Jesus' body is gone.

Lean in with them to place your hand on Jesus' folded burial cloth.

Notice that the once dried up tears are beginning to flood your eyes again.

No longer tears of sadness, but ones of hopeful anticipation!

And then it happens. Smack! Head on. Out of nowhere. Instantly you remember His words. No, not the angels' words, Jesus' words — "*After three days I will rise.*" It clicks! Yes, He *IS* alive! But where? The angel announces, "Galilee!"

Right now both Mary's have a choice to make. We all have a choice to make. Do I stay in the tomb or run to Jesus? One option grovels amidst the things of death, and the other runs to embrace the Giver of Life. This is the choice I must make every moment of every day. Do I live in light of the reality of the resurrection or not? Do I run in glad and joyful surrender to my Savior, or do I continue wiping my tears with the useless burial clothes in the grave?

The reality that our Savior is alive, has conquered sin, and left the tomb makes it possible for us to leave the tomb. Like Mary and Mary Magdalene, may we joyfully run to embrace Jesus (Matthew 28:8)! Because Jesus left the grave behind, we must leave the grave behind. This is our new life of joy that is only available through Jesus' resurrection. What a joyous Easter morning!

After my accident, I went home from the hospital with a sore knee, a number of cuts and bruises, and a pretty bad headache. I'll never forget the response of my eight-year-old son that next morning. He said, "Daddy, looks like God is giving you another day to talk about Jesus!" Instantly, tears filled my eyes and joy filled my heart. My son was right. God has graciously given me another busy day, and another Easter, to joyfully talk about the joy that is only found in Jesus! Will you do the same?

## **FIRST-PERSON: Crucify self?**

by Sarah Dixon Young

FORT TOTTEN, N.D. (BP) -- When we moved from Florida to North Dakota, I was surprised at the number of official documents we needed to change.

Driver's licenses, vehicle registrations and insurance, health insurance, mailing address for all our bills, information for the IRS and other matters entailed hours of paperwork that had to be submitted.

In addition, we changed our wardrobes. Clothing appropriate to Florida's climate was only a drop in the bucket to North Dakota winters. I only owned one pair of socks, and I didn't even understand what a heavy coat was. We changed the kinds of shoes we wore. We changed how we cared for our dog, a shorthaired, warm weather-loving animal. We even changed the kind of oil we used in our cars and had to put block heaters on the engines.

We died to being Floridians and became genuine NoDakers. Even our accents changed.

When, however, the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans that the old self must be crucified, he wasn't just talking about an external part of an individual. Crucifixion entailed the whole being. Everything about the old self had to be put to death and left behind in order to walk in newness of life.

Crucify self? This concept seems extreme. Why total death to the self? What about self-expression? Self-actualization? Self-esteem? Our society does a lot of self-valuing.

Paul answers that too in Romans 6:6-7: "... so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin."

I was talking with a group of ladies recently who struggle with drug addiction. They were discussing the motivation behind their drug usage.

"We use drugs because we have the freedom to do what we want," one said.

"Yeah," another contended, "that judge can't tell us what to do. I love that feeling of being able to make my own choices. I can just be myself."

In one moment, they spoke of drug usage as a freedom they choose, yet in the next breath, they sobbed about the horrible slavery their addictions had caused in their lives, acknowledging the full extent of the corrupted tyrant of self.

Perhaps you don't have a drug addiction, but you may be a slave to fear, anxiety, pride, bitterness, depression or anger. When we choose to follow Christ, we must die to all these forms of slavery.

"For one who has died has been set free from sin," Paul continued in Romans 6:8.  
"Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him."

Once we have died to sin, we not only change our eternal residence. We also become a whole new creation. Instead of dressing, acting and being identified as a citizen of hell, we now think, love, speak and act like a citizen of heaven. We live with Christ, and our identity is in Him.

Watching the struggle of drug addicts to crucify the old self makes it poignantly clear how difficult a step this is for all of us who have been slaves to sin. It is much more difficult than the identification and wardrobe changes we made when we moved.

But there's good news to those who turn to Christ, Paul noted in Colossians 2:13-14:  
"And you, who were dead in your trespasses ... God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

As Jesus said in Matthew 19:26, "With man, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible."

## **FIRST-PERSON: Looking for heaven on earth**

by Lynn Pryor

NASHVILLE (BP) -- I am all for improving society and culture, but what should that look like?

My Democratic friends tell me one thing. My Republican friends tell me another.

Some of my evangelical friends tell me one thing. Others with more ecumenical, liberal views tell me another.

Perhaps the best thing we can do is draft our own standards for society, gather likeminded believers, buy a huge chunk of land and start our own community. We'll follow the rules we've set up (based on biblical principles, of course) and everything will be perfect.

Just one problem: History has shown over and over that trying to create a utopia just won't work.

Early in American history, scores of people flooded to this continent in hopes of a better life. Even after we became a full-fledged independent country, scores more continued flooding in for the better life. This "grand experiment" with a democratic republic was good -- but for many it wasn't good enough. So the great expanse of untapped land (never mind the Native Americans already here) seemed to be the ideal solution: Start their own town and lead it according to their own rules and interpretation of Scripture.

Starting your own utopian community was especially popular in the 1800s. Eighty were started in the 1840s alone. Probably the two most well-known are the Shakers, who practiced celibacy, and Oneida Community, where everyone was married to everyone else (they called it "complex marriage"). Two communities with opposite views, both espousing their way as integral to a utopian community.

One of the utopian communities, the short-lived Fruitlands, was based on transcendental principles: People are inherently good, society has corrupted us, and we are at our best when we are fully independent and self-sufficient. So how do you achieve this transcendental goal in a community? Don't eat any meat, don't consume any "stimulants," don't use any form of animal labor, don't use any artificial light, don't take hot baths and don't drink anything but water! (A side note for fans of "Little Women": Louisa May Alcott lived for a while in this community because her father was one of the founders.)

These communities are a fascinating part of our American history, especially considering how unique they were from one another. But note this: They are a part of our history, not a part of current culture.



The reason is simple: They were created and led by imperfect, fallen, sinful people. And the people that flocked to these communities were imperfect, fallen, sinful people. We'll never reach a utopia -- a perfect place to live -- as long as imperfect people are allowed to start them or live in them. The only perfect utopia would be lived under God's law. His laws are perfect, but we've done a lousy job living up to His laws.

As we read in Romans 3:10-12: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."  
(NIV)

There is a "utopia" in the future of those who follow Christ, but we will only live in it when we are living in His presence in His eternal Kingdom. Until then, let me suggest the following:

Instead of running off to start a utopian community, get involved with the culture you're in. Partner with your church family in engaging and interacting with the people in your community. You don't have to embrace everything in culture, but by your presence -- by living for Christ in the power of His Spirit -- you can infuse that culture with the Gospel.

Be Jesus to those around you.

## **BeachReach: free rides, pancakes, Gospel encounters**

by Aaron Wilson

PANAMA CITY BEACH, Fla. (BP) -- For many college students, spring break is synonymous with catching some rays at the beach by day and partying all night. But over the course of three weeks in March, nearly 800 beach-bound collegians used their spring break to serve and evangelize.

Students from across the country along with student ministry leaders gathered in Panama City Beach, Fla., March 3-22, to participate in BeachReach, providing spring breakers free van rides, pancakes, Gospel conversations and prayer.

Through the annual collegiate ministry coordinated by LifeWay Christian Resources, BeachReach participants demonstrate a willingness to meet people where they are with a witness for Christ.

BeachReach also added a disaster relief component this year, partnering with local churches to help underserved schools repair playgrounds and other facilities damaged by Hurricane Michael.

"The Christian college students who came to be a part of BeachReach were so bold in loving spring breakers and pointing them to Jesus," said Bill Noe, LifeWay's collegiate ministry specialist. "They weren't saying, 'behave better,' but 'let me point you to Jesus who's better than any other kind of life you might be living.' We had thousands of Gospel conversations."

As a result of these acts of service and the conversations they sparked, 42 spring breakers expressed faith in Christ this year. To help students visualize how the Holy Spirit was working over the course of the three-week period, each new believer's name was written on a beach ball and attached to a display known as the Salvation Wall.

Need a lift?

At BeachReach, many Gospel conversations originate in church vans and buses used as free shuttles to transport students around the popular spring break destination. LifeWay employees serve as dispatch coordinators to handle the logistics of the service, which this year provided 13,247 free rides.

"At 9 p.m. we turn on the phones, and the spring breakers start calling in," Noe said. "We take them where they need to go and try to engage in conversation along the way."

Students often give vans creative names like Van Gogh or Sir Vancealot and write the phone number for rides on the side. Spring breakers also learn about the service through street teams who hand out cards and engage people as they're walking around.

Each 12-passenger van is arranged with at least four BeachReachers -- a driver, a navigator who handles logistics, someone in the back to monitor the safety of the vehicle and one person in the "hot seat" to take the lead in steering conversations toward Christ.

It's often passengers, however, who initiate the conversations.

"People are curious why we're willing to serve them for free so they'll ask, 'Why in the world are you doing this?'" Noe said. "It gives our teams a perfect opening to tell them about Jesus."

Meanwhile, street teams pursue similar conversations on foot around town. They pass out cards, help people call in for rides by letting the dispatcher know how many people are in a party and where they're traveling and starting conversations while waiting for vehicles to arrive.

"The street ministry is always interesting because you never know what you're going to find," Noe said. "We have BeachReachers who go into 24-hour diners to buy folks a meal and strike up conversations over waffles. Others might help students who've gotten separated from their group. We help them get somewhere safe."

#### Prayers and pancakes

While teams in vans and on the street are serving people and sharing the gospel, another group of students covers them in prayer.

"We have prayer shifts that run until 2 a.m. each night," Noe said.

Back at the BeachReach home base, students gather in the prayer room to watch a large screen with a live feed of information texted in from BeachReachers in the field.

"Those in the prayer room are always the first people to hear what's happening and celebrate," Noe said. "I'm always surprised at how many students say the prayer room was their favorite part of the week."

While the prayer room and phone lines close at 2 a.m., BeachReachers serving in vans might not finish their runs until an hour later. For that reason -- and to accommodate the sleep-in habits of spring breakers -- a pancake breakfast is served in a bowling alley each day from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., with BeachReach volunteers preparing more than 12,000 pancakes.

"The pancake breakfast serves as a great opportunity for people to continue building relationships," Noe said. "A lot of times, a good conversation starts on a van ride, but the passenger then has to get off. People will often make appointments to meet over pancakes the next day to continue the discussion."

#### Catalyst for evangelism

BeachReach is much more than pancakes and van rides, Noe said. It also serves as a classroom for teaching students to share their faith.

"We have a lot of folks where it's their first time being thrown into a kind of environment where they're seeking to share the Gospel multiple times a night," he said. "For many students, it's the first time they've ever shared their faith."

For this reason, Noe and other college leaders see the event's greatest impact happening in the lives of students who learn how to share their faith over the course of BeachReach.

"One of the best things about BeachReach is that the impact lasts well beyond the month of March," Noe said. "BeachReachers are now going back to campuses all across the U.S. to more passionately and effectively engage the lost students on their own campuses."

## Midwest recovery begins as additional flooding looms

by Brandon Elrod

OMAHA, Neb. (BP) -- Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDR) leaders have established several sites in the Midwest to respond to historic flooding that has created at least \$3 billion in damages in recent weeks.

"As soon as I got in the airplane and flew back home," said Sam Porter, national director of disaster relief with the North American Mission Board (NAMB), "it was stunning to see the farmland that still has floodwater on it. The river is back within its banks, but the land is so flat that there is still water trapped within thousands of acres."

Porter traveled in and around Nebraska for several days as state SBDR leaders organized and formed their strategy. So far, SBDR has five sites that are operational with the expectation that more will be needed in the near future.

"There were record levels of snowfall in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and much of that has yet to thaw," explained Porter. "The lakes in Minnesota are also still frozen. So, we're expecting further flooding of the region."

"We are far from being close to finished with this flood."

Whether from the runoff from melting snow or expected rainfall, Porter anticipates that Southern Baptists will need to broaden the scope of the response. Volunteers need to "stay tuned," he said, and churches need to continue praying for the region.

SBDR has assessed homes in Nebraska and Kansas and have identified more than 2,000 flood-affected homes, and SBDR leadership expects a long deployment to provide relief for as many of those homeowners as possible.

Volunteers in Iowa have begun the "mud-out" process of removing muck, damaged furniture and storm debris that has filled homes, cleaning roughly 20 homes in Sioux City.

"We're trying to put boots on the ground physically to help mud out homes," Porter said, "but we're also trying to help out by teaching others how to clean out homes and fight the mold that will result from the flooding."

Send Relief, NAMB's compassion ministry arm, has begun sending supplies -- crisis buckets, shockwave mold remediation, push packs and Bibles -- to resource volunteers and survivors as they participate in recovery efforts.

In northern Missouri, Southern Baptist chaplains have been providing emotional and spiritual support for families as they waited for floodwater to recede before they could go back to their homes.

"I get to see the Cooperative Program in action with our SBDR teams doing what it takes to help serve one another in the midst of disasters like these," Porter added in reference to Southern Baptist cooperative ministry.

The North American Mission Board is responsible for coordinating national responses by Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, which is one of the three largest providers of disaster relief volunteers in the United States.

NAMB coordinates partnerships among 42 Baptist conventions that operate in all 50 states to gather volunteers and respond to disasters, including providing hot meals, chainsaw and mud-out relief work following natural disasters.

## **Ripkens' Easter sorrow gave rise to global impact**

by Ann Lovell/Western Recorder

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP) -- "Stay in the story." That's the advice retiring missionaries Nik and Ruth Ripken offer the next generation.

"Don't quit before you see all that God has for you," Ruth said. "Don't get sidetracked."

The Ripkens, known for their extensive research into Christian persecution, have relocated to Louisville, Ky., having signaled their retirement for March 2020 after 35 years of service with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board.

Originally from Kentucky, the Ripkens were appointed by the then-Foreign Mission Board in August 1983. Through the course of their career, they lived in seven countries: Malawi, South Africa, Kenya, Somalia, Germany, Ethiopia and Jordan. With a recent trip to Cuba, the list of countries they've visited reached 86.

"We've also sat with believers in persecution for days and days at a time in 72 of those countries," Nik said.

Those in-depth conversations shaped the Ripkens' lives and legacies. Their research, which spanned 15 years, resulted in hundreds of interviews and culminated in two books, "The Insanity of God" and "The Insanity of Obedience," and the feature film, "The Insanity of God." More than 90,000 people in 800 theaters viewed "The Insanity of God" when it was released in August and September 2016.

Easter Sunday 1997

For the past several years, the Ripkens have focused on sharing in small groups, churches and conferences the insights they gained as they talked with persecuted believers across the globe.

Their quest for understanding began after the death of their son Timothy in Nairobi, Kenya, on Easter Sunday 1997. Timothy died at age 16 from cardiac arrest brought on by an asthma attack.

Describing the day of Timothy's death in "The Insanity of God," Nik wrote, "I was overwhelmed by my own loss. Ruth used the word 'resurrection' that night; I was fixed on the crucifixion. The pain was unbearable."

Ruth felt Timothy's death was the most challenging experience of her missionary career, and the challenge of moving past the grief was equally great.

"Beyond [Timothy's death] was figuring out how I continue to serve and live and be who I need to be post that," Ruth said.

"How do I carry on? Believers in persecution taught us how to do that."

The key, she said, is to "stay in the story."

#### Yearly letters

Nik and Ruth's story began in rural Kentucky. As a 9-year-old girl, Ruth attended Camp Cedarmore in Bagdad, Ky. There she met Bertha Smith, a Southern Baptist missionary who served in China and Taiwan from 1917 until her mandatory retirement at age 70 in 1958.

"I felt so overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit that that's what I wanted to do," Ruth said. She talked with a few people about what to do next, and they told her to write the Foreign Mission Board.

"I did, and they sent back information," Ruth recounted. The mission board encouraged her to write every year and tell them where she was in the process.

When the Ripkens went for their appointment interview with the FMB in 1983, the consultant showed the Ripkens their files. Ruth's file contained every letter she had written the FMB since she was 9 years old.

"She had a small book," Nik said, "and I had a page."

Throughout their career, the support of believers helped the Ripkens stay in their story. Ruth recalled the number of people across Kentucky and elsewhere who wrote them when they were serving overseas.

"As we went to Malawi and East Africa and South Africa, ladies all over Kentucky handwrote letters to us, encouraging us in our journey," Ruth said. "Over the years, we could see their handwriting disintegrate (as they began to age).... So many women invested a lot of time in supporting those who were going to the nations."

Then, after Timothy's death in 1997, Nik and Ruth lived on the campus of Georgetown College in Georgetown, Ky., from 1997 to 2000, hosting 60 to 90 students in their home for six hours every week. Of those, 60 have served as short- or long-term missionaries, Nik said.

"Those students loved on us during that time," Ruth said. "Many of them are now overseas. We feel a huge responsibility to be a foundation and support to them as people have been to us."

#### 'Stay in the story'

Understanding the long view of God's plan helps believers stay in the story. In many cases, this may mean enduring difficult situations much longer than we think possible or necessary, Nik said.

One powerful scene in *The Insanity of God* is the story of Dmitri, the pastor of a small house church in the former Soviet Union. One night, communist officials burst



into his home during worship. They arrested Dmitri and sent him to prison for 17 years, more than 600 miles from his family.

Dmitri was the only believer among 1,500 hardened criminals. The isolation from the body of Christ combined with the physical torture tested his faith and strength. But he found a way to endure.

"For 17 years in prison, every morning at daybreak, Dmitri would stand at attention by his bed," Nik wrote. "As was his custom, he would face the east, raise his arms in praise to God, and then he would sing ... to Jesus.... The other prisoners banged metal cups against the iron bars in angry protest. They threw food and sometimes human waste to try to shut him up."

Then, one day, after finding a piece of paper on which Dmitri had written every Scripture reference, Bible verse, story and song he could recall, his jailers beat him severely and threatened him with execution. As they dragged him from his cell down the center corridor toward the courtyard, Dmitri heard a strange sound.

The 1,500 criminals who had long ridiculed him stood at attention by their beds. They faced the east, raised their arms and began to sing the song they had heard Dmitri sing to Jesus every morning.

"Who are you?" a guard demanded.

"I am a son of the living God, and Jesus is His name!" Dmitri replied.

The guards returned Dmitri to his cell. Sometime later, he was released and told Nik his story.

About six months ago, Nik heard that Dmitri had died. Nik contacted his son, who assured him Dmitri was still alive.

"He is hurting every day from the abuse he endured, but he wakes up every day singing with joy. He is living a life of joy because his story is all over the world," Dmitri's son said.

"Dmitri's story has outlived the persecutors' stories," Nik said. "His story has outlived the Soviet Union."

As Nik started to end the call, the son said, "But Nik, wait. I want to tell you something. I'm now the chaplain at the prison that held my father for 17 years."

"There is not a single minute, hour or day in those 17 years when Dmitri would have imagined that his son would be the chaplain in that prison," Nik said. "But look what God can do when you stay in the story."

## **'Together,' 'strategy,' 'genius' among CP descriptors**

By Karen L. Willoughby

EDITOR'S NOTE: April 7 is Cooperative Program Sunday in the Southern Baptist Convention. For information about the Cooperative Program, go to [sbc.net/cp](http://sbc.net/cp).

MILES CITY, Mont. (BP) -- A Montana pastor likens the effect of the Cooperative Program to a fence line.

"It's like multiplying our labor, like building a fence two miles long together, rather than a quarter-mile if you had to do it alone," Jeff Cahill told Baptist Press. He's a rancher and pastor of Valley Community Church in the far-reaching prairies around Miles City, Mont. "We see the Cooperative Program as a way we can reach beyond our abilities."

The Cooperative Program is the way Southern Baptist churches band together to advance God's Kingdom work in state and regional conventions, across North America and throughout the world.

"Let's be found consistent in our actions and guilty of doing good," said Nick Garland, pastor of First Baptist Church in Broken Arrow, Okla. "God has blessed the Cooperative Program and the people who give to missions through it."

Each church determines the amount or percentage of their undesignated offerings to be allocated for cooperative work outside their local reach. That amount is forwarded to the state or regional convention, which determines by vote at its annual meeting the percentage to be sent to Southern Baptists' national and international causes.

"The genius of the Cooperative Program is that percentage-wise a small church is just as invested in missions as the church that gives millions," Garland said. "Both honor the Lord with their gift. The key to the success of the Cooperative Program is that it is not impulse giving, emotional giving, but that it is giving consistently."

The Southern Baptist Convention allocates percentage amounts of what it receives to the International Mission Board (50.41 percent); North American Mission Board (22.70 percent); the six Southern Baptist seminaries (22.16 percent); Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (1.65 percent); and the SBC operating budget, 2.99 percent. These percentages were approved by messengers to the SBC annual meeting in Dallas last June.

"We're better together," said Billy Russell, pastor of First Baptist Church in Bolivar, Mo. "We want to connect and serve people and reach people much further than just Bolivar. The Cooperative Program does that better than any other organization I know."

Pastors across the SBC say their churches believe in and support the Cooperative Program with at least 10 percent of undesignated offerings. These same churches also cooperate hands-on in local, regional, national and international missions.

Some examples:

-- "We believe in missions, and the Cooperative Program is part of our missions strategy," said Steve Carne, pastor of Hamilton (Va.) Baptist Church. "We feel God would have us send missionaries throughout the world, as the International Mission Board does, to send church planters to underserved populations as the North American Mission Board does, and to train future pastors as our seminaries do. We give to the Cooperative Program because we yearn to be part of this Kingdom-building work."

Hamilton Baptist gives 35 percent of undesignated income to missions, including 12 percent through the Cooperative Program. The church also has a longstanding partnership among Native Americans in the Dakotas and recently began partnering in Ghana, West Africa.

-- Union Baptist Church in Harrison, Ark., where Bill Melton has been pastor for two years, for many years has given 25 percent of undesignated offerings to missions through the Cooperative Program.

Union Baptist, averaging 90 people in Sunday morning worship, gives another 6 percent to the North Arkansas Baptist Association, 2 percent to church-generated missions causes, and its people pay their own way on mission trips.

"As the new pastor coming in who has never seen this kind of percentage giving I had to ask, 'Does that kind of giving hurt this other ministry or that special project,'" Melton told Baptist Press. "It doesn't hurt anything! It helps everything.

"I would love churches to have the courage to say, 'We're going to increase our giving dramatically and put our finances out of our hands and see what God can do,'" Melton said. "Too often we do what only we can do, what we feel comfortable doing. We limit God and what He can do when we do that."

Union Baptist is known statewide for its willingness (with the association's activities trailer) to help churches put on block parties. Members go on short-term mission trips at least twice a year to Fort Worth, Texas, where they "feed the homeless, love on people and share Jesus," Melton said, through the Beautiful Feet street ministry.

The church gives to missions first through the Cooperative Program because of CP's inherent strength, Melton said. "For a missionary to be able to be on the field and to not have to worry about where his support is coming from -- 'Is it going to show up this month and am I going to be able to stay?' -- the Cooperative Program is an aid for our missionaries."

-- Cutting downed timber into sections and splitting logs for firewood shows how the Cooperative Program works, said Eugene Overstreet, pastor of Sierra Baptist Church in Pioneer, Calif.

"The men work together, each doing something that leads to a shared goal: bringing God's love to those who need to hear of it, and in this case, to feel it," Overstreet said of the warmth for those who need firewood as well as the warmth of God's love.

"That's what the Cooperative Program does. It supports the whole program of what Southern Baptists are doing throughout the world, and we do it together."

Sierra Baptist starts by giving 14.5 percent of undesignated offerings to missions through the Cooperative Program, plus 5 percent to the Mother Lode Baptist Association. It's heavily invested in community ministries as well.

"We try to share Jesus with the people around us," Overstreet said. "We need to be involved in our community, to be a witness for the Lord and hopefully reach people for Christ.

"One of the reasons we continue to do well, I believe, is because when we give, God blesses and He brings more people here because we're willing to give and to share," the pastor noted. "That's very important, I think."

-- Back to eastern Montana, where there is more space than people.

"Neighboring," no matter the distance, is a necessity of life, said Cahill of Valley Baptist in Miles City. "Working together makes everything easier. That's the beauty of the Cooperative Program. When we all do our part, everything comes together like it's supposed to."

## Undaunted by ALS, he writes novels for millennials

by Joe Westbury

CUMMING, Ga. (BP) -- Jim Burton sits up in his wheelchair, eyes bright with a big smile on his face as he begins to read.

With his wife Kim holding a copy of his latest novel and a microphone, he breathes life into Jake and Shannon Blue, the lead characters in "Ransomed." It's a book for and about millennials set in Madison, Ky. -- a stand-in for his hometown of Madisonville -- but spans the world through adventure and intrigue.

This isn't Burton's first foray into writing. He has been a professional storyteller for 43 years, first as a photojournalist for newspapers such as the Dallas Morning News. Later he served as an author and editor of publications targeted to laity at the former Baptist Brotherhood Commission and then the North American Mission Board.

Even now, ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, isn't keeping him from writing.

After Burton was caught in a series of downsizings at the mission board, he launched into contract writing and selling insurance to support his family. He also served as bivocational pastor of the English-speaking ministry at Sugarloaf Korean Baptist Church.

Barely two years after losing his job, his life took a drastic turn with a diagnosis of ALS. In short order he wrote "Life in the Blue Zone," a first-person account of his battle with ALS and Kim's battle with breast cancer -- "blue" being the color of handicapped parking spaces.

Burton continued to struggle with employment options virtually nonexistent for someone in his late 50s. He eventually became well known to readers of the Georgia Baptist state newspaper, The Christian Index, as a freelance writer. He traveled the state in his wheelchair and specially equipped van, interviewing and photographing subjects and telling their story of how gifts through Southern Baptists' Cooperative Program were making a difference in the Kingdom.

It was during this transition from a salaried career to living with ALS that the soft-spoken Kentuckian took up the challenge of writing novels, refusing to step aside from his calling as a storyteller and directing his talent to reaching out to millennials who, he sensed, were searching for spiritual direction and a sense of purpose.

In creating Jake and Shannon Blue as main characters for what became a four-part series, Burton wanted "younger readers to see a successful millennial couple who were also committed to their faith."

When he could no longer type, he learned how to dictate entire books, phrase by phrase, chapter by chapter, using voice recognition software with Kim's help.

He wrote two published books in the Jake and Shannon Blue series -- "The Salt Covenant" and the recently released "Ransomed" -- and has completed two others in the series, "Redeemed" and "Adoption."

A fifth book he recently completed, also a novel, will deal with workplace violence.

The books tackle contemporary issues such as terrorism, kidnapping and sex trafficking, yet with an evangelistic undercurrent. Themes of humankind's fallen nature, forgiveness and redemption echo through each book.

"My goal was for each to be a good two- or three-day read. And I wanted each to have a real message that could reflect everyday issues readers are facing," Burton says.

"Having been a photojournalist for four newspapers I have met some fascinating characters and drew from those encounters. Character development is what makes a good book, and there are no better examples than people who already surround you," he says with a smile.

Burton credits Bill Bangham as one of his mentors who brought him to where he is today.

"Meeting Bill was one of the pivotal moments in my career when I joined the Baptist Brotherhood Commission. He was a very talented writer ... and remains so today ... and mentored me in writing as I mentored him in photography. We both benefited from the relationship."

Bangham eventually established himself as a writer and photographer at the former Home Mission Board (now NAMB) and the International Mission Board, and he and Burton have maintained their friendship through the years.

Burton and his wife recently hosted a book signing at the skilled nursing center where he now lives. Entertaining questions about how he writes brought him to one of his greatest regrets of the illness.

"One of the things I miss the most is not being able to hold my Bible and turn the pages, reading from my favorite passages. But Kim has been a blessing and a patient helpmate to me as we encounter each new adventure in this joint experience."

His legacy will be the books which will continue to speak words of hope and redemption for generations to come. Thinking back on his illness, Burton does not mince words about living with ALS.

"People ask me if I am mad at God for contracting this disease. I say absolutely not because anger leads to bitterness and there is no healing from bitterness.

"I admit that I am sad because I have grandchildren who were not even conceived when I was diagnosed. I am sad because I cannot lay around on the floor and play with them, but I do work for quality time with them. They are the joy of my life."

Perhaps most important, he says he does not want to be remembered only as that guy with ALS.

"I decided very early on that I did not want this to define me. I still don't; above all else I want to be remembered as a disciple of Christ and a father and husband with a family that I adore. I was blessed with a career that challenged me and gave me a purpose in life through a strong sense of divine calling."

Burton says he believes in miracles of all kinds and is a living testimony that they exist. Most individuals survive only three to five years with the illness but he recently marked his seventh year. He remains a curiosity to his doctors.

"I am not afraid of heaven," he says matter-of-factly. "There are unknowns, for sure, but the reality of heaven overshadows any questions that remain unanswered."

"Scripture tells us enough about the afterlife so believers can have confidence about their destiny. It says we will claim our true citizenship and get new, disease-free bodies."

"And I'm looking forward to that."

## **4th Chinese church raid could portend broad crackdown**

by David Roach

BEIJING (BP) -- Beijing's Shouwang Church has become the fourth major underground church raided by authorities in China during the past seven months. The raids have led some to speculate the Chinese government may be preparing for a broader crackdown against Christians.

"China's oppression against house churches will not be loosened," ChinaAid President Bob Fu said, according to International Christian Concern (ICC), an organization that monitors persecution of believers worldwide. "A systematic, in-the-name-of-law crackdown will continue to take place," Fu said.

More than 20 police officers raided a Bible school class at one Shouwang Church location March 23, ICC reported. Attendees were taken to a nearby school, questioned and asked to sign a letter pledging not to attend the church anymore. They refused to sign.

Meanwhile, believers from another Shouwang location also were detained and brought to the school for questioning, according to ICC.

All the church members were released, but authorities changed the locks at the locations of both raids, according to media reports. Shouwang -- which has about 1,000 worship attendees -- and all its subsidiary organizations were closed, reported ChinaAid, a group that promotes religious freedom in China.

The church said in a statement it will change its venue and continue to meet, according to ICC.

Shouwang founding pastor Jin Tianming and two other of the church's pastors have been under house arrest since 2011, ICC reported. The church has been accused of failing to register with the government as a "social organization." As a result, according to ChinaAid, Shouwang has had its "multi-million dollar property" confiscated and been forced to meet outdoors -- even during inclement weather.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom "condemns Saturday's raid of Shouwang Church by Chinese police officers, part of #China's continuing and escalating crackdown on house churches," USCIRF tweeted March 26. "Shouwang Church has regularly faced persecution for refusing to join the state-sanctioned church."

An estimated 93-115 million Protestant Christians live in China, with fewer than 30 million attending churches registered with the government, according to data reported by the Council on Foreign Relations.

Shouwang is among a group of underground Chinese churches that have become what a March 25 New York Times report called "public megachurches." These



churches still are known as "underground" or "house" churches because of their illegal, unregistered status even though they conduct their ministries largely in public and have hundreds of members.

"Run by well-educated white-collar professionals in China's biggest cities, the churches own property and have nationwide alliances -- something anathema to the Chinese Communist party, which tightly regulates nongovernmental organizations," The Times reported.

Another such church, Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, was raided in December. Its pastor and 10 other members remain jailed. A church of at least 500 members, according to The Times, Early Rain helps the families of political prisoners, founded a homeless shelter and protests China's use of abortion for family planning -- all in addition to its evangelism and discipleship ministries.

Following the March 23 raid of Shouwang, Early Rain said in a statement its members "kneeled down to pray to give thanks and praises to our God, because we are delighted that the bride of Christ is closely following her husband."

Two other large Chinese underground churches were raided in recent months as well: the 1,500-member Zion Church of Beijing in September and Rongguili Church of Guangzhou in December, which had some 5,000 attendees, according to Hong Kong's South China Morning Post.

Christianity Today reported raids of larger Chinese churches suggest "the government may be 'testing' crackdown measures before more widespread implementation."

## ABOUT US

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

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