

Pruning is painful

SOUTHFIELD – Midwinter in Michigan signals the start of vineyard pruning—a necessary, albeit painful, task for vinedressers seeking abundant harvests. In John 15, Jesus employs the metaphor of a vineyard to illuminate the profound relationship between Himself, His Father, and His disciples. He portrays Himself as the "true vine," God as the vinedresser, and the disciples as branches, underscoring their reliance on Him for spiritual nourishment and productivity.

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

John 15:1-2 NKJV

Reflecting on this passage, one may wonder if there's an alternative method for Jesus to cultivate fruit in us. However, pruning, though sometimes akin to discipline, serves a distinct purpose. Discipline corrects wrongdoing, while pruning fosters growth in the right direction. Although the effects of pruning may not be immediately evident, it unfailingly yields fruit (Galatians 6:9). Like a vinedresser recognizing a branch's potential, our Heavenly Father discerns our capacity for increased fruitfulness but knows it necessitates pruning.

In recent months, our church has experienced remarkable growth, both numerically and spiritually. Despite the joys of ministry, I've found myself navigating a personal season of pruning. God has orchestrated changes within our church, presenting challenges alongside family and ministry obligations, leaving me occasionally overwhelmed. Yet, amidst these trials, He has imparted a crucial lesson: to abide in Him rather than my own comforts or strategies.

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me."

John 15:4 NKJV

The More We Abide, the More Fruit He Provides

John 15:4 underscores the importance of abiding in Christ for fruitfulness. This season has taught me the potency of obedience and dependency—fundamental components of abiding. Through obedience to God's Word and reliance on the Holy Spirit, I've witnessed increased fruitfulness in my life.

Jesus emphasizes varying levels of fruitfulness—fruit, more fruit, or much fruit (Jn 15:2, 8). Similarly, our dependence on Jesus determines the fruitfulness of our lives. It's imperative for leaders to grasp that the desired fruit isn't merely outward actions but an inner transformation reflecting Christ's character.

If you are like me, the onset of the year has brought its share of discomfort, yet I recognize God's pruning as a means to cultivate greater fruitfulness in me. When it seems like God is cutting us down, we can find solace in the fact that He holds the shears!

Remember, God prunes us to produce more fruit in us. Although it is painful, let us find reassurance in the hands that wield the shears. When we embrace pruning as a pathway to spiritual growth it enables us to bear fruit that glorifies God and enriches our lives and ministries.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

John 15:5 (NKJV)

Without Him, we can do nothing but with Him, all things are possible (Jn 15:5).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Nether is the pastor of Crossover Church in Southfield. He is an insightful scholar and a dynamic communicator who has the ability to connect with people from all ages and backgrounds. Ken is also a Church Planting Catalyst for the North American Mission Board in which he is responsible for discovering, developing, and deploying church planters throughout North America.

Next Steps for Michigan Baptists: The search is on for the next Executive Director/Treasurer

PLYMOUTH – After nine years of faithful service to the Baptist churches of Michigan, Pastor Timothy Patterson will be retiring as the Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) at the end of 2024. Pastor Patterson has spent this last decade, alongside his specifically curated team, rebuilding and unifying the great churches in Michigan. He has brought the state convention back from the edge of certain death by establishing healthy leadership within the state office, pouring into long time pastoral leaders, and developing over 115 new church plants! The growing number of church plants have led to a renewed excitement, evidenced by a rise in Cooperative Program giving and reported baptisms. After several years of declining giving and baptisms, the trajectory is climbing under the leadership of Pastor Patterson.

With all that in mind, the family of churches that forms the BSCM has turned its attention to Pastor Patterson's successor. The search is on for someone to fill the big shoes that will be left behind. It is an exciting time in the life of Michigan Baptists. We are experiencing an extremely fruitful season of Kingdom work throughout Michigan and the next Executive Director will join hands and hearts with men and women who are committed to The Great Commission, which has always been the aim of Southern Baptists for past two centuries.

If you are a member of a Michigan BSCM cooperating church, please take a moment to help our Search Team to better understand the needs and priorities of churches in Michigan as we search for the next Executive Director of the BSCM. Please fill out the survey at bscm.org/survey

If you are interested in applying for the position of Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan, please go to bscm.org/search to fill out the application and upload your resume.

The Search Committee will accept resumes until April 7, 2024, at 11:59 pm and no resumes will be accepted after the deadline. All applicants will be contacted no later than April 30, 2024, informing them if they have been selected to progress to the next stage of the application process, or not. If you have any questions, contact the search committee admin at questions@bscm.org.

As a new era begins, we ask you to join us in prayer as the God of all wisdom reveals the next leader who will shepherd this great state to new heights for God's glory!

Two years into Russia's war on Ukraine, Send Relief partners persevere

KYIV, UKRAINE (BP) – For Luba, the pain of the past two years is hard to put into words. Her husband was killed when their house in Bakhmut, Ukraine, was bombed, and Luba was forced to flee her homeland. But thanks to Send Relief partners who helped her along the way, Luba says she now believes in God because she's seen His love in the people who helped her.

Luba's circumstances are not uncommon. Sources indicate that the number of confirmed civilian deaths in Ukraine surpassed 10,000 in November 2023, with numbers potentially being much higher. The continuing impacts of the war have left the country in urgent need, yet with an extreme openness to the Gospel.

Since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion two years ago, Send Relief, Southern Baptists' compassion ministry arm, has completed more than 100 projects in and around Ukraine, impacting 1.9 million people and resulting in more than 10,000 new believers.

"We've seen more people come to faith in Christ than ever before," said International Mission Board missionary Mike Domke, who has spent 15 years in Ukraine. "There's also more churches being born now than before ... there's a lot of spiritual openness."

On the flip side, as the war reaches the two-year mark, believers and unbelievers alike are experiencing discouragement and depression. "Emotionally, the people are at a bad place right now," Domke said. "Probably the worst since the beginning of the war ... that would be one prayer request, that they don't lose hope."

Yaroslav Pyzh, president of Ukrainian Baptist Theological Seminary and one of Send Relief's ministry partners in Ukraine, says that the help they're able to provide Ukrainians through Send Relief not only meets dire physical needs but also reminds people that they are not alone and someone cares for them.

"The help is critical," Pyzh said, "but it's more than just help. It's a message of hope."

Southern Baptists' gifts to Send Relief have helped the seminary open five WeCare centers in eastern Ukraine in areas directly affected by the war. These centers are designed to unite the local church with city authorities and civilians, and they deliver a broad range of humanitarian help – from food and hygiene supplies to trauma and spiritual counseling, Bible study and support groups and more.

These centers have also become a haven for children in areas where schools can no longer operate. As they continue their studies online, children come to these WeCare centers for stable internet and meals as well as to learn in a warm environment that also has a bomb shelter.

"Giving bread and giving food is critical," Pyzh said. "But the idea of these WeCare centers is more than that. We would like people to know Christ and have hope and abundant life."

Centers like these are part of a larger story of churches in and around Ukraine responding to the physical and spiritual needs of hurting people. Many of Send Relief's projects for Ukraine have included food distribution through local churches, totaling 1.3 million food boxes and 1.9 million hot meals provided since the invasion.

To date, Send Relief's response has involved 1,389 national churches — churches like the one Natalia found after leaving her home in eastern Ukraine to find safety. In addition to providing food and shelter for internally displaced persons, the church coordinated a 90-day program that included one-on-one trauma counseling, job skills training and worship and prayer gatherings.

Natalia now says she repented of her sins and aspires to serve God, study the Bible and live a life with purpose.

“It’s inspiring to see how Ukrainian churches have become centers of light and hope, as believers have taken great risks and sacrifices to move toward and serve their suffering neighbors,” said Jason Cox, Send Relief’s vice president of international ministry. “It’s been a joy for Send Relief to play a role in supporting these brothers and sisters, and it’s only made possible by the incredible generosity of U.S. churches.”

As the war progresses, the needs of the Ukrainian people grow. Domke, the IMB missionary, said that the war has caused a dramatic spike in the cost of living, while jobs are hard to find.

Many are struggling to provide for the basic needs of their families while also dealing with the psychological effects of living through war. Families are separated as women and children seek safety and men and fathers are often drafted to fight.

“They’re under this continual stress of air alarms and bombings,” Domke said. “The emotional part of that is just daunting, and it’s wearing on people.”

“We are still doing Send Relief projects,” he said. “And money is still needed because the needs are still very great. I encourage supporters to continue giving. Send Relief is a great way to help, and we’re seeing good results.”

To help Send Relief’s ongoing work in Ukraine, give through [Send Relief’s website](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Skudarnova writes for the North American Mission Board.

Daily life matters

ST. HELEN – My family recently moved from downstate Michigan to up north to start a new church (Northern Light Church in St. Helen). There has been lots of change from moving to a new home, new school, new friends, new atmosphere and the list goes on and on. But within all this change, God is asking our family to be in total surrender and to trust Him.

Many times, I just look at the surface level and think about what I see. Sometimes, I think I know what is going on and make loose plans and say, “*Okay God, show me what you want me to do.*” But God has been stopping me in my tracks, even today, to say it isn’t about what you

think is going on. I felt the Lord showing me that there is so much that I don't realize, and that I need to follow Him and trust Him and not lean on my own understanding.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Proverbs 3:5-6

I constantly wrestle with God and say something like, "I think you have the wrong person and whatever it is, must be for someone else to do." I don't always feel like the most equipped, and surely there are more qualified people.

For many years I would procrastinate on things because I thought things had to be perfect, or I couldn't get it together so why even bother. But God has been working on my heart to say, *"Okay God, I will trust You and I know I don't need to be perfect. I know you have a plan and purpose for my life and I'm going to stop believing these lies that have paralyzed me most of my life."*

Often, I have believed such distorted things and lived in fear of the what-ifs. But fear does not come from God, and God can use anyone who is willing to let go and let Him lead. I have had faith and trusted God for a long time, but God wanted my and my family's *full* surrender and not just *most* of it.

There are no coincidences in this life. God is a Sovereign God who is in control of everything. He knows when I rise and go to bed. He cares about not just the big things, but the little things in my daily life. All the people that are present in my life are there for a purpose. Some people for a short time and others for longer.

I remember thinking that certain people would always be part of my life. But sometimes, people have changed jobs, moved or circumstances have changed. Much of the time, I had assumed these people would always be part of my life. The truth is that circumstances change, and I don't really know what tomorrow holds. But God has shown me that I can help other people around me with the time I do have with them, short or long term.

Life can be hard at certain times, but Jesus is greater than any trial or tribulation that I will ever encounter. I need to remember to keep encouraging myself and others around me with God's truth. I need to remind myself and others to keep focused on Jesus just like when Peter got out of the boat.

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.

This is the hope I have In Christ that is celebrated each Easter and all throughout the year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Joseph is married to Dan Joseph, Pastor of Northern Light Church in St. Helen, Michigan. They are blessed with their miracle eight-year-old daughter Krista. Dan and Michele recently celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. Their family recently moved from Southeast Michigan to St Helen, Michigan to start Northern Light Church. Michele enjoys serving alongside her husband to wherever God leads her to.

God's morning is coming

PLYMOUTH – The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without it the believer has no hope for this life or for the life to come. The apostle Paul wrote, "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Our belief in this great teaching is not based upon some religious feeling or upon an unfounded idea about what may have happened in the past. Nor are we talking about an isolated rumor, but about a historical fact that is the very foundation and one which our faith finds its support and rest.

A few decades ago, a group of lawyers met in England to discuss the biblical accounts of Jesus' resurrection. They wanted to see if sufficient information was available to make a case that would hold up in an English court of law. When their study was completed, and they published the results of their investigation, they concluded that Christ's resurrection was one of the most well-established facts of history!

For centuries, the unbelievers of this world have tried to discredit and deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Thomas Jefferson was a Founding Father of our nation and a great man, nevertheless, he could not accept the miraculous elements in Scripture. He edited his own special version of the Bible in which all references to the supernatural were deleted. Jefferson, in editing the Gospels, confined himself solely to the moral teachings of Jesus. The closing words of Jefferson's Bible are these: "There laid they Jesus and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulcher and departed." **Thank God that is not the way the story really ends!**

In his little book, *Countdown*, G. B. Hardy has given us some thought-provoking questions about the resurrection.

"There are but two essential requirements:

- 1. Has anyone cheated death and proved it?*

2. Is it available to me?

Here is the complete record:

- *Confucius' tomb -- occupied.*
- *Buddha's tomb -- occupied.*
- *Mohammed's tomb -- occupied.*
- *Jesus' tomb -- empty! Argue as you will, there is no point in following a loser."*

This month we celebrate the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. The bunny, eggs, baby chicks, and spring flowers can enhance our celebration of new life in Christ or sadly they can become the center of our celebration.

The bunny didn't rise from the dead and those candy eggs will soon decay. Sorry to be morbid, but as for those baby chicks, they are soon to end up on someone's dinner plate or as a quick lunch for the family cat. All the beautiful flowers and the striking "Easter Lilies" will fade and fall away. The vast majority of the trappings we use to celebrate Easter will be gone before the months end.

Fables and stories of great leaders will come and go. Worldly saviors will rise to the pinnacle of society, but they will all find their final place in a grave. Rituals, religions, and fanciful tales will be repeated from generation to generation, but the only reality worthy of our wonder and worship is that of the Living Resurrected Savior. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a reality. Countless changed lives testify that it's a fact -- not a fable!

A true story is told about a distinguished man, the only white person buried in a Georgia cemetery reserved exclusively for African Americans. He had lost his mother when he was just a baby. His father, who never married again, hired an African American woman named Mandy to help raise his son. She was a Christian, and she took her task seriously. Seldom has a motherless boy received such warm-hearted attention. One of his earliest memories was of Mandy bending tenderly over him in his upstairs bedroom each day and softly saying, "Wake up--God's mornin' is come."

As the years passed this devoted woman continued to serve as his surrogate mother. The young man went away to college, but when he would come home on holidays and in the summer, she would still climb the stairs and call him in the same loving way.

One day after he had become a successful statesman, the sad message came: "Mandy is dead. Can you attend her funeral?" As he stood by her grave in the cemetery, he turned to his friends and said, "If I die before Jesus comes, I want to be buried here beside Mandy. I like to think that on Resurrection Day she'll speak to me again and say, 'Wake up, my boy, God's mornin' is come!'"

I am so looking forward to the day my Lord says to me, "Wake up, my boy, God's mornin' is come!"

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.

Creating an endless volunteer stream

PLYMOUTH – If pastors/planters have a recurring dream, it is likely the one where they have an endless volunteer stream filling every ministry opportunity in the church! Seriously, that may be the dream!

Experienced It Myself

During the 1980s leading my first church as the senior pastor, I was enlisted to chair the associational team that would enlist, train, and deploy volunteers in many churches across two counties. I tried enlisting volunteers from a variety of churches, but everyone turned me down until I started enlisting from the church I was leading. Within hours, everyone said, “Yes.” With a complete team, the state convention and national partners sent us to places like Hershey, Pennsylvania; Ridgecrest, North Carolina; and Nashville, Tennessee for excellent training modules.

The impact on our church was immediate, deep, and unstoppable! We saw two additions to the church by transfer of membership every month. We watched as the Lord increased our evangelism, and we baptized, on the average, two new believers each month! The influence of ongoing training taught people the “Why are we doing this?” And they learned “How to carry out their ministry well.”

Because people had received inspiration and information there was no stopping the army of people in the church I was leading. As you would expect, during the next years, the other churches offered candidates to attend the training opportunities and we were more than happy to share with them having been blessed by training that created an endless volunteer stream. We wanted the same for our nearby sister churches.

Accessible Free Training Easier Than You Know

Today, we have access to free training that does not require road trips or flights to faraway places like Hershey, Pennsylvania – though I will tell you the entire city of Hershey does smell like chocolate. Roll your windows down on the car as you approach the city if you ever go. With what I am offering below, you will have to unwrap a Hershey candy bar and lay it on your desk while you train with others in-person or online. After the session, enjoy the reward of your training.

Instead of traveling, open your laptop to the [Send Network Training Library](#) – it's easy, free, adaptable, and accessible to everyone in your church! Click on the link above, opening another window on your laptop, and start dreaming while you finish this article. On this link you will discover thorough, relevant training modules that will bring new life to your church:

- How to Build an Effective Fundraising Plan
- Starting Point: A Study to Discover Your Role in the Mission of God
- 10 Qualities of a Great Coach
- How to Write a Mission Statement

Free eBooks that Adapt to Your Needs

For the bookworms in your church who like to study on their own, or better yet for a meaningful book reading club that will revitalize your church, read any of the books you will find at:

- [10 Free eBooks](#) for pastors, leadership development,
- [5 Free Church Planting eBooks](#) (believe me these adapt to established churches, too)
- [Free eBook: How to Start a Residency](#)
- [Free eBook: Preaching for Mission](#)
- [Free eBook: Deep Bench: Discover, Develop, and Deploy Leaders Within Your Church](#)

Podcasts for Those Who Listen to Learn

There are those who learn best by listening rather than reading. There are those whose commute time could be used effectively listening to any of the following podcasts. There are those who multitask all the time in their lives. This section is for those wonderful group of potential volunteers that can take part in that endless volunteer stream.

Take a look at the [New Churches Podcast](#) which is a free online ministry in line with our network of churches always staying true to our confession of faith. These podcasts are available online wherever you listen to your podcasts: Apple, Google, Spotify, and YouTube! What is even better is that you can locate, listen, then share the podcast link by text messaging people in your church, a select small group or the entire congregation! What could be easier than that? Check out the wide assortment of titles that your people will enjoy:

- [Preaching to the Lost](#)

- [Leading Your Church in Fearless Prayer](#)
- [Preaching the Resurrection](#)
- [Kids Ministry](#)
- [How to Help Your Wife Thrive](#)

There are more than 800 podcasts in this free accessible library for the church! Imagine setting up a scheduled distribution schedule for the members of your congregation relevant to the needs of your church. These podcasts could lead to deeper, more meaningful discussions in particular groups or as a way to inspire and inform the entire church.

Call or Email to Receive Help to Train Others

I am here to assist you and others train for ministry. All you have to do is invite me into your church or into your local group of churches. I would be more than happy to sit down with you in a workshop-like manner so you could leave the meeting with a plan in place that would create an endless volunteer stream for every ministry in your church. Call or text my assistant, Dan Carty at (734) 776-6495 or email Dan at Dan@bscm.org to set-up an initial conversation or a complete workshop. The next step is up to you.

With Resurrection Sunday upon us this month, what better time than now to offer a pathway of meaningful service to the members of the church. Watch with anticipation how this Resurrection Celebration, with you pointing toward ongoing training, could advance a Gospel movement in ways that would go far beyond any dream you might have. I love the words of Ephesians 3:20, “Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.” May that “mighty power” become true in each one of the hundreds of our churches scattered from shore to shore across Michigan!

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.

We will preach in darkness

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – I love to preach, and it’s not unusual for me to ask fellow pastors, “What are you preaching or teaching these days?” Their answers often put a smile on my face.

Recently, I've heard about a sermon series on "Marks of Discipleship" from David Livingston. Nate Click is in Acts. Michael Guyer's working over Genesis 12-50 and calling it "God of Promise, Journey of Faith," while Scott Blanchard's series, "Grasping the Heart of God," teaches about prayer and fasting. 1 Samuel has yielded a gospel-focused series for Jeremy at Port City Church in Halifax called "Search for a King," and West Ridge Church gets to enjoy Brian Bloye's skillful, practical exposition of the Gospel of Mark, verse by verse. I love it, and my smile persists.

When Barnabas summoned Saul to help him with the flourishing young church in Antioch, their essential method was the same as ours. *So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people* (Acts 11:26 NIV) They taught.

Barnabas had been sent from Jerusalem to Antioch because a "great number who believed turned to the Lord" there, and they needed some encouragement to keep going and keep growing (11:21-22). Who better to send than Barnabas? His name means "son of encouragement!" But the primary way Barnabas brought encouragement and lived up to his name was *teaching*. For a whole year Barnabas (and Saul) met with the church and *taught* great numbers of people.

When Barnabas came to Antioch and "saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." (11:23 NIV). Isn't that the essence of pastoring and discipleship: People helping people to trust and follow Jesus with all their hearts? We do that most often and most effectively by teaching the Bible.

Spurgeon has been quoted as saying, "Let the sun stop shining, and we will preach in darkness. Let the waves stop their ebb and flow, and still our voice shall preach the gospel. Let the world stop its revolutions, let the planets stay their motion; we will still preach the gospel." It is the primary source of encouragement for the people we serve.

D. A. Carson once said when we teach or preach, we are dealing with the very thoughts of God himself, and "we are obligated to take the greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly." Can you imagine for a moment what it would have been like to hear Barnabas and Saul clearly *teach* the believers in Antioch? They must have been exceptionally effective teachers of the Word. It was, after all, the first place disciples were called "Christians."

Both men were well trained in the Scripture. They had both been filled and schooled by the Holy Spirit. Paul had studied at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law (Acts 22:3). They knew their stuff, and they explained it clearly.

Teaching was, and still is, the ministry of encouragement at its highest and best. Without encouragement, life would soon feel pointless and burdensome. Without encouragement, we can be overwhelmed by the very real pains of our lives. Without encouragement, we feel unloved. Without encouragement, we begin to think that God is a liar or is unconcerned with our welfare. We need the teaching from God's Word.

The Lord Jesus himself appoints and applauds teachers and preachers who lovingly, skillfully, and diligently open the scriptures week after week to teach, rebuke, correct, and train God's people in righteousness, all breathed to life through prayer.

So, fellow pastor-elder-overseer or teacher, whatever Bible text God has led you to, preach it or teach it so your people are encouraged to "*remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*" Balance grace and truth. Magnify the person and work of Jesus. Make room for the Holy Spirit. Pray like mad and preach like your hair's on fire! Help your brothers and sisters to remain strong and faithful in the last days (2 Timothy 3:1).

You don't need a seminary degree or an ordination certificate to encourage people, but you must saturate your heart with Scripture, and ground what you teach or preach in the Word. Make it clear. The Bible, not the best-selling books from Lifeway or Crossway, is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105). So...

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (2 Timothy 4:1-4 ESV)

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.

“Honoring Excellence” Celebration at Mile City

DETROIT – It is an honor and privilege to be the current president of the African American Fellowship for the state of Michigan. Our goal for the 1st MLK Jr. Day event was to bring together and celebrate some iconic pioneers of faith in Michigan. These ambassadors have served and dealt with church planting and ministerial duties for a period of 25+ years. They have helped pave the way for many African American preachers and teachers.

I praise God for the Holy Spirit orchestrating a network of people to glorify Him and edify His people via this event. I'm so grateful for our leadership, David Cox - Vice President, William Tillery – Treasurer, Celise Tillery – Secretary, and my wife (always by my side).

We began to diligently meet for countless hours to scrutinize every detail of this celebration. Our objective was to build a platform to honor Martin Luther King Jr. and show appreciation to our honorees for their accomplishments to glorify God and assist others.

Following much prayer for insight and wisdom, Unity became our theme.

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.

Psalms 133:1

The environment of the event was electric with the excitement of worship from a collective choir, delicious food, magnetic fellowship, and a dynamic (dynamite) message from our keynote speaker Dr. Jerome Coleman from First Baptist Church of Crestmont Philadelphia, PA and Vice President of National African American Fellowship (NAAF).

The event featured touching accolades for these ambassadors and a video on their perspective of unity. Some of our nominees had made their transition to our Lord. It was a blessing to hear from their grandchildren who also displayed a legacy for unity.

We had three types of awards. The trailblazer award was bestowed to an individual who started and diligently remained faithful to the call. Honorees: Nathaniel Bishop, Rev. Charles Swain, Deacon Ron Swain, Rev. Dr. Stan Parker, Rev. Dr. Robert Coverson, Rev. Dr. Rochelle Davis Jr.

In addition, the Ananias award (Sister Odelle Cadwell) and the Barnabas award (Rev. Wayne Parker) for individuals who are willing to go outside of their comfort zone and embrace others with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Michigan-AAF team conveys a huge and special shout out to our gracious host Pastor Travis Whittaker and his outstanding Mile City team. Our relationship is a reflection of our unity in Christ.

Finally, the deep concern is living unity daily. We want to work closer with more churches, and with more leadership regarding cultural representation for our state. We look forward to building bridges that will last until the return of our Lord. We're better together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor Cornelius Roberson is a church planter of Heart and Soul Community Church. They have two locations. One in the city of Detroit and West Bloomfield twp. He is married to the love of his life Marisa Roberson for 26 years. Three sons Ju'veonne, Andrew, and CJ. We are the grandparents of four grandchildren, Josiah, Jordan, Jayden, Jayla.

How the hope of heaven carries us through grief

OWOSSO – There is a glorious future that awaits us as children of God. The journey of life is often fraught with trials and tribulations, but in the midst of it all, we can take comfort in the promise of Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

For me, the reality of God's grace has been most evident in the midst of loss and grief. Early in our marriage my husband's parents, my grandmother, and my father departed this life. More recently, my mother and our dear son, Kenneth, have gone to be with the Lord.

I have said goodbye to other cherished family members and dear friends, each parting leaving an ache in my heart that only the comfort and peace that comes through prayer and the healing touch of God's love could soothe. Yet, even in the depths of my sorrow, I have found solace in the hope of heaven.

One of the most beautiful aspects of our Christian faith is the assurance of life beyond this earthly existence. As I look forward to the promise of eternal reunion with my loved ones, I am filled with a sense of peace that surpasses all understanding. In heaven, we will experience the fullness of God's love and the joy of being in His presence for all eternity. I have a profound sense of hope and anticipation for my heavenly home.

The promise of Romans 8:28 reminds me that even in the midst of life's greatest trials, God is at work, bringing about good from every situation. He uses our pain and suffering to draw us closer to Him, shaping us into the people He created us to be. And though we may not always understand His ways, we can trust in His unfailing love and His perfect plan for our lives.

His love knows no bounds, and His mercy endures forever. No matter what trials we may face in this life, we can take comfort in the promise that God is working all things together for our good. I am filled with gratitude for the hope and assurance that God's grace provides.

My prayer is that you too may find hope and comfort in the midst of life's challenges. May you cling to the promise of Romans 8:28, knowing that God's grace is sufficient to carry you through every trial and tribulation. And may you take heart in the hope of heaven, where we will one day live in God's presence and be reunited with our loved ones for all eternity. Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Bowen is a pastor's wife, mother, and User Experience Researcher living in Owosso. Her husband, Rick, is currently serving as pastor of Central Baptist Church in the Genesee Baptist Association. Diane has spoken at numerous church, associational, and state Women's events. She serves as Worship Coordinator at Central Baptist Church. She looks forward to reuniting in heaven with her loved ones, especially their son, Kenneth.

Serving young mothers

MONROE – The ultrasound technician had just told me and my husband that they heard two heartbeats. Twins! We were so excited. Fast forward 9 months later, we now have twin newborns, a 3-year-old, and an almost 2-year-old.

I remember the feeling of inadequacy. I did not know how I was going to do this. I constantly had people telling me how blessed I was to have so many children and how I should be so thankful, and I was and still am. I remember feeling overwhelmed trying to get them ready to go to church, only to realize that by the time I got to church, I was so worn out that I just wanted to cry. Then I would remember that I also needed to feed the boys and not be able to sit in the service, or I'd get a message from a nursery worker to say that another one of my children needed my help.

This phase of motherhood can be so overwhelming and lonely, despite never actually being alone. You are at church hoping to learn something from God's Word that you can take with you during the week only to be called out of service to feed or care for one of your children. Don't get me wrong, I love my children and love being their mom, but I was also constantly being told that I needed to make time for God and His Word; that church was important, but that I also needed to make sure that I was in the service and doing all the "right things."

I struggled with this because I didn't have time to be in the service long enough to feel like I was a part of it, and I also often struggled with being in the Word throughout the week while caring for my children. I would see pictures on social media of moms reading their Bibles with their children and start crying, wondering what was wrong with me. I couldn't seem to do what others were doing.

It was during this time in my life that I believe God softened my heart for a ministry of the church that I feel is often overlooked- the ministry of serving young moms in our churches. These are women who are often not getting enough sleep, adult conversations, or time in the Word (at home or in church). This is one of the times when we need the Lord the most and often miss out. We are pouring out, but not being poured back into.

The Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 that we are to "encourage one another and build one another up." I would like to share with you some ways that you could be an encouragement to young mothers in your church.

1. Text them a Bible verse and a short prayer.

Taking the time to send a specific verse and a short prayer to a mother may be just the encouragement she needs during the day.

2. Offer to go for a walk with them.

You could use this time while they are pushing their stroller to go for a walk and talk and pray together.

3. Plan a time when you could host a Bible study.

One of my former churches offered a time, once a week, for moms to come together to study the Bible and pray. This was one hour a week. Some of the older or retired ladies in the church would watch our children during this time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cindi Click is a pastor's wife and mom to four young children. Unable to do anything half-hearted, she can be found caring for her children, serving with the worship team, leading the children's ministry, engaging at her children's school, or finishing projects for her Master of Science in Elementary Education from Concordia University. With plans to step back into elementary education full-time this fall, Cindi has a heart for helping moms and their children grow in their love for Jesus. Cindi has been married to her husband, Nate, for ten years and they serve together at Heritage Baptist Church in Monroe where Nate is the pastor.

One of God's new beginnings

HOLT – Does God ever begin again? Consider Noah and the flood, the generation of Israel raised in the wilderness, David the second king of Israel, the church in Ephesus that had abandoned its first love. These are a few of many examples of God calling his people to begin again. Even the gospel call of repentance is a call to begin again. None of this means that God has failed; rather, it is the very means by which God fulfills his purposes for his people and for his world.

This is why I have a passion to see churches revitalized. The people of God, in order to remain faithful to God, often have to begin again. Sometimes he starts a brand new thing, such as through church planting. But oftentimes God brings renewal to something started long ago. This is the work of church revitalization, and specifically of church replanting.

That is what we are seeing God do in Holt, MI. I am honored and grateful to be a part of it, and this is how we are seeing God begin again.

At Chapel Pointe, we are passionate about kingdom expansion. For us, this happens in many ways, from supporting missionaries and sending missionaries to coaching and strengthening

churches. But we have especially seen the kingdom expand over the past year as we have begun launching campuses, and one of those new campuses is in Holt which is just south of Lansing.

But this campus is not a totally new endeavor. It is a work of renewal, a replanting of a church that has long had a gospel influence in this area. We were connected with this church last year. While we began with encouraging, coaching, and consulting, it became clear that this congregation needed and wanted more support.

Most importantly, we shared a heartbeat to reach to the lost and to see the kingdom expand in this community. So this congregation is now part of Chapel Pointe, and we are replanting this church as one of our campuses. The goal of all of this is that God would multiply transformed followers of Jesus in this community.

This has become my prayer for myself and for our church in this season: "Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?" (Psalm 85:6).

Would you join with me in prayer for God to renew my heart and your heart, the hearts of our people, and hearts of our churches? Would you pray with me that a deep joy in God would send us out to boldly share the message of the gospel?

At Chapel Pointe, we like to say that transformation is a continual process, not a one time event. God is always transforming us, growing us, reviving us. And when that happens not just in me but in a whole congregation, a church is revived. And a revived church is one that not only rejoices in God, but calls others to rejoice in him as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Bolcom is the campus pastor at Chapel Pointe's Holt campus. He has been married to his wife for nearly 10 years, and they have two boys who are three and one.

Now and not yet

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – Growing up I always knew I wanted to become a teacher. Some of my earliest memories are playing school or even assisting the teacher in the classroom, and eventually I went to college for a degree in Elementary Education. Before I ever graduated college, I was offered a position at the school where I was completing my student teaching.

What a blessing to know I would have a teaching position at the same school I had come to love and build so many connections. However, I still had to finish out my student teaching. I had to remain in the “now” while I awaited what was yet to come.

As followers of Christ, we live in this same tension. When we accept Jesus into our lives, we know we are promised eternity in heaven with Him!

In 1 Corinthians 15:55- 57 (NIV) Paul writes,

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Jesus defeated death so that we can live with Him one day.

The Bible says in Romans 8:37 (NIV),

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word conqueror as “one who conquers, one who wins a country in war, subdues or subjugates a people, or overcomes an adversary.”

According to Romans 8:37 the Bible tells us that we are “more than conquerors” which means the battle has already been won for us! We can live in the promised victory that Jesus gave us when he died on the cross and defeated death!

As amazing and life changing as that promise is, we must learn to live in the tension of the “now and not yet” just as I had to finish my student teaching position before I was able to step into a full-time teaching role and all the benefits that would come along with that. What happens when we know we have the future victory that awaits us, but we struggle to experience victories in our everyday lives?

It is vital to remember that we aren’t fighting for victory but that we are fighting from victory. We can know God’s Word and preach it to ourselves when the things around us aren’t working out in the way in which we hoped they would. We can’t allow the temporary things we face to distract us from our eternal victory in Christ!

In Romans 8:28 (NIV), we read,

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

God is working all things together. God is God, and we are not. He knows what lies ahead for us and He knows what is best. We have such a limited understanding, and often we will create the

plan in our minds of what we think is best in a situation and what the outcomes should be instead of truly trusting and relying on God.

When we find ourselves struggling in the “now and not yet,” we should search our hearts and ask God the following questions:

Where do I not trust you in this situation?

Where am I struggling to believe your Word to be true?

What is the truth found in your Word to help me in this situation?

As we begin to allow God into our fears, doubts, and unbelief... He meets us there. The Holy Spirit wants to show us how we can trust God even when things around us aren't the way we hoped they would be. By inviting God into our struggles and seeking Him for the outcomes, we will come to know him better. As we begin to grow in our understanding of God's character, we will believe what His Word says, and we will truly trust He is working all things together.

While we await our eternal victory, we can have peace in what we are facing now because we know God is in control.

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!

Evangelicals urge biblical response to nuanced views of immigration reform

WASHINGTON (BP) – Evangelicals' nuanced views on immigration should encourage faith leaders to offer biblical responses to all concerns, key evangelical leaders said Feb. 28 upon the release of a [new Lifeway Research study](#) sponsored by the Evangelical Immigration Table.

Both the compassionate care of immigrants and border security rank high among evangelicals, the poll showed, with respondents overwhelmingly desiring a clear path to citizenship and cohesive care for immigrant families.

“It’s important for faith leaders to be clear and speak to both issues, both felt needs,” Dan Darling, director of the Land Center for Cultural Engagement at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said Wednesday (Feb. 28) in a virtual press conference releasing the study’s results. “We can talk about both things, the rule of law and compassion.”

Evangelical groups represented at the press conference called for cross-partisan solutions to immigration this year – ahead of the next U.S. presidential term – and did not endorse a political party nor candidate best positioned to accomplish desired goals.

Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition and an Assemblies of God pastor, instead endorsed justice, love and mercy in the public sphere, and promoted “conviction and civility.”

There’s “a growing frustration that Congress can’t work across the political aisle to solve some of the most intractable problems,” Salguero said. “I hear that from people in my church whether they voted for Republican, or Democrat, or Independent or not party affiliated. We elect members of Congress to work together to solve difficult issues, and we are aware that immigration is one of them. Why isn’t Congress listening?”

National Association of Evangelicals President Walter Kim agreed with Salguero.

“We do pursue policies that are expressive of biblical convictions,” Kim said, “and we also seek to do so in a manner that is dignifying to people. And so, the kind of rhetoric that we would wish to pursue is a rhetoric that seeks to build bridges, even if there is a disagreement on a policy approach that would be presented by a candidate or the discourse that we see in Washington.

“In this election cycle all sorts of things will be said about evangelicals and their alignments, as well as organizations that the evangelicals may be affiliated with,” Kim said, emphasizing the NAE’s nonpartisan stance.

Nonpartisanship has been an important Evangelical Immigration Table principle, said Matthew Soerens, Evangelical Immigration Table national coordinator and World Relief vice president for advocacy.

“Our message is not vote for Republicans or vote for Democrats,” Soerens said. “It is to tell Republicans and Democrats and Independents in Congress that we want them to pass legislation that is consistent with our biblical perspective, and for them to know that there are many of their constituents who very strongly hold to those nuanced, biblically informed views as well.”

Evangelicals’ views expressed in Lifeway research track largely with the 2023 Southern Baptist Convention [resolution](#) “On Wisely Engaging Immigration,” which emphasizes the inherent

dignity of immigrants, legal pathways to employment and permanent status, border security, family preservation, compassionate speech and protecting minors from exploitation.

“This research underscores the reality that committed evangelical Christians affirm both a need for a strong, secure U.S. border and for a commonsense immigration system,” Darling said. “A clear majority of evangelicals call for a common-sense bipartisan fix to a broken immigration system. This is a clarion call to both parties to stop playing politics with this important issue and reform the system to both uphold the rule of law and respect the imago Dei of immigrants.

“A lot of Baptists,” Darling said, “are frustrated with the inability in D.C. to work this out.” World Relief Director of Government Relations Chelsea Sobolik and Lifeway Research statistician Daniel Price also spoke at the press event.

Immigration policy is personal for many immigrants, Sobolik said, either because they’ve been directly involved in ministry to immigrants, are themselves immigrants or are children of immigrants.

“Deferring action on passing more comprehensive immigration reform not only harms us as Americans,” Sobolik said, “but ... what is happening at the Southern border is not sustainable for anyone.”

Evangelicals encouraged pastors to address immigration from a biblical standpoint in sermons and Bible studies, as 82 percent of respondents voiced a desire for such, up from 68 percent in 2015.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

ERLC releases practical guide for addressing gender confusion

NASHVILLE (BP) – The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) has released a practical resource to help churches navigate difficult questions and scenarios surrounding the topic of gender confusion.

The resource, released Monday (Feb. 26), is titled [“God’s Good Design: A Practical Guide for Answering Gender Confusion.”](#)

The guide contains a theological framework addressing the topic of gender from a biblical worldview and offers answers to practical scenarios that churches or pastors may face or have faced regarding the topic. The guide also contains links to additional resources on the topic of gender confusion from a variety of Christian sources.

In the guide's foreword, ERLC President Brent Leatherwood spoke about the need to address the topic in the church today.

"The rate of teenagers who identify as transgender has doubled in the United States according to one estimate," Leatherwood wrote.

"Nearly one-third of Generation Z (the youngest generation for which we have statistics) identify on the LGBT spectrum. It may have (arguably) taken longer for the sexual revolution to reach our churches, but the time is long gone when we could assume it would pass us by completely."

Alex Ward, ERLC research associate and project manager for the ERLC's research initiatives, said the guide is meant to point to God's good design for gender and sexuality.

"Churches are grappling with contemporary gender challenges, navigating questions and scenarios inconceivable just years ago," Ward said.

"'God's Good Design: A Practical Guide for Answering Gender Confusion' is a resource for addressing these issues, offering a theological framework for fidelity to scripture on sexuality, masculinity and femininity. Developed with input from theologians, ethicists, policy experts and ministry leaders, it provides guidance to practical scenarios derived from real church experiences. While not exhaustive, it serves as a guide for churches navigating their unique contexts amid cultural shifts.

"The theological framework created by these experts also can help orient ministries as they create policies and procedures for how to respond in the future. In a time of many perspectives that err away from God's desires, the ERLC aims to provide a hopeful message that adhering to God's design for our bodies and sexuality is ultimately for our good."

To create the guide, the ERLC gathered a team of subject matter experts in theology, ethics, public policy and law, as well as a group of pastors and ministry leaders. The team worked together to create a framework for the topic of gender based upon Scripture and theological categories found in the Baptist Faith and Message 2000.

The group then uses the theological framework to address 20 different practical scenarios and questions related to the topic of gender that could take place in a local church.

The points of the guide's theological framework are:

- God created humanity
- God intentionally created humanity with physical bodies
- God’s good design for bodies is sexed: male and female
- God created men and women to complement one another
- The Fall affects how we see our body and sexuality
- God meets the refugees of transgender ideology
- The Church compassionately proclaims God’s design for gender and the body.

Some practical scenarios addressed in the guide include:

- If you had a transgender woman (biological male) come to your church on a Sunday and it was obvious that this person was really a male, how would your average churchgoer respond? How should church members be coached to prepare them for this?
- If your children’s ministry had a child (age 7) visit who wished to be called a different name than the one they were given at birth (and dressed in accord with their preferred gender identity), and the parent also desired this, how would your children’s ministry respond to the child and parent? Would the request be followed? Why or why not? What is said to the child? What is said to the parent?
- A couple in your church has an adult son, age 25, who is going through a gender transition. They are heartbroken but practicing “tough love” with the child and have cut off all contact. How would you counsel them?
- Imagine you had an unrepentant transgender individual wish to be baptized. How would the church’s leadership respond?
- A teen in your church has confided in a youth minister that they are experiencing bouts of gender dysphoria. What action plan is in place to help this teenager?

Leatherwood closed out the guide’s forward by offering a word of encouragements to Southern Baptists ministering in the midst of the society’s confusion surrounding gender.

“It is our hope that this theological framework and the practical scenarios will start (or continue) the conversation in your churches about how to serve those broken by the sexual revolution with the hope of the Gospel,” Leatherwood said.

The full guide can be found [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Cockes is a writer in Nashville.

First Person: Sowing Gospel seed in small-town Missouri

I'm guessing you have a town like Chula, Missouri, somewhere around you. With a grand total of 200 people in population, Chula has a post office, a community center, a school, and not much else. I grew up about 15 minutes away in the mega-city of Chillicothe (population 9,100).

Like many other small towns across North America, Chula didn't have a church of any kind. At one time, the town had four – three Protestant churches and a Catholic one. One of those, Chula Baptist Church, had been Southern Baptist. Built in 1896, the church had once been full. But the last few decades were tough. By the late 2010s, only three members remained. No longer able to support the church, they gave it to the Linn-Livingston Baptist Association. By the time Chula Baptist closed its doors for the last time, the town had no active churches. (See related stories [here](#) and [here](#).)

The population of Chula is roughly the same as it was 60 years ago when my dad became the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church down the road in Chillicothe, but as of 2020, the town had no local Gospel witness. Of course, Chula had believers, but they had to drive 20 to 30 minutes away to worship.

That would have been the end of the story if not for Calvary Baptist.

For the past five years, Calvary has invested tirelessly into this small town, particularly the local school where they've provided school supplies for the children and much-needed physical labor. They've sponsored trunk or treat activities near Halloween and set up booths during the school carnival. They've hosted Vacation Bible School during the summers.

For the past two years, the church has led Thursday night Bible studies for children, youth and adults inside the school after a lovingly made meal.

You might read all that and think that Calvary Baptist Church of Chillicothe is a sprawling megachurch with a large staff and an unlimited budget. But you'd be wrong. At 120-130 people in regular attendance, Calvary is a bit bigger than your average SBC church, yet it's hardly a megachurch.

But Pastor Jon Davis has this church sacrificing both time and treasure to plant the Gospel in Chula. In fall 2022, with the full support of the community, they started a worship service in the local K-8 school. During that time, the people of Calvary partnered with the community to clean up the old Chula Baptist Church building. Last fall, they began meeting in the building, and the consistent congregation of 25-30 people are making plans to constitute a new church soon in a town that once had no Gospel presence.

Of course, Calvary Baptist didn't do it alone. The community supported it, making the school available for weekly Bible studies and worship services. The local water company allowed the

church to insert notices about church events in the water bill. The town's biggest employer gave them water to power wash the old church building.

The Linn-Livingston Baptist Association also played an integral part, providing the old Chula Baptist building and paying the insurance on it. Keith Corrick, the associational missions strategist, also trained the lay preachers who are now rotating through the pulpit of the Chula church.

Chula is a unique community with a history that extends back into the 19th century. But it's also like a hundred other small communities throughout North America without a Gospel witness. More than likely, you have one of those communities near you.

I get it. You might not think you have the resources to invest in a community like Chula. But you have more to offer than you think. Calvary's model is a great place to start.

- They built relationships with the community by meeting practical needs in the local school and beyond.
- They sent Sunday school teachers to do similar classes in Chula using the same resources from their own classrooms.
- They started a worship service in the community with a rotation of lay preachers and music leaders. When they couldn't find a music leader, they played a worship video to help lead the congregation in song.

Your church can do this. It's not rocket science. You're not alone either. Work with a few like-minded churches to do this together. Your local Southern Baptist association can help.

Your North American Mission Board's Replant Team is here to help, too. We will be producing even more resources in the near future to support you in this effort. We'd love to walk with you as you explore replanting the Gospel in a rural community near you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Clifton is the senior director of replanting at the North American Mission Board. Mark has served as a pastor, church planter, church revitalizer, mission strategist, coach and mentor to young leaders. He has planted and replanted numerous churches and has also served as a national and regional leader for church planting and missions. His experience includes serving as the lead mission strategist for the Kansas/Nebraska Southern Baptist Convention, leading church planting efforts in the regions of north metro Atlanta, Georgia, serving as a church planter in Montreal, Quebec, as a Southern Baptist National Church Planting Missionary for eastern Canada, and has lead Southern Baptist church planting projects west of the Mississippi. Mark has been planting, replanting and providing strategic mission leadership since 1978. Mark and his wife, Jill, live in Kansas City, Missouri and have two sons, two daughters-in-law and three grandsons.

Justice Alito sounds alarm after Christians denied jury duty in state court

WASHINGTON (BP) – The barring of two Christians from jury duty in a trial involving a lesbian is evidence that Christians with a biblical worldview are increasingly seen as bigots, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito said after Missouri asked the High Court to review the ruling.

Such treatment of Christians is what he warned of in his dissent in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, Alito said in “reluctantly” concurring with the court’s decision not to hear Missouri’s appeal Feb. 20.

“In this case, the court below reasoned that a person who still holds traditional religious views on questions of sexual morality is presumptively unfit to serve on a jury in a case involving a party who is a lesbian” Alito wrote. “That holding exemplifies the danger that I anticipated in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, ... namely, that Americans who do not hide their adherence to traditional religious beliefs about homosexual conduct will be ‘labeled as bigots and treated as such’ by the government.”

While the High Court indicated in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling that it should not be used to discriminate against those holding biblical views of marriage, Alito said he’s “afraid that this admonition is not being heeded by our society.”

Alito had predicted in his dissent that the *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling would “be used to vilify Americans who are unwilling to assent to the new orthodoxy.” The decision, which equated the denial of same-sex marriage to the denial of equal treatment for African Americans and women, “will be exploited by those who are determined to stamp out every vestige of dissent,” Alito wrote in 2015.

Alito called to mind *Obergefell v. Hodges* after the Supreme Court declined to hear Missouri’s appeal of a court ruling that dismissed two jurors in a 2021 employment discrimination case brought by Jean Finney, a lesbian. In the original trial in the Circuit Court of Buchanan County, Finney’s attorney successfully moved to strike two Christian jurors for cause, arguing that “there’s no way” anyone who sees a gay person as a sinner “could ever fairly consider a case involving a lesbian plaintiff.”

In its appeal to the High Court, Missouri challenged the state appeals court’s decision affirming the removing of the jurors for their religious beliefs. The appeals court agreed with the lower court that jurors who believed the plaintiff’s homosexuality was sinful could not be impartial in hearing the case.

The Missouri Court of Appeals' reasoning is cause for concern, Alito said. The High Court should address such rulings at an appropriate time, he said, but asserted that a state law procedural issue complicates hearing the current case.

"I would vote to grant review in this case were it not for the fact that the Court of Appeals concluded that the Department of Corrections did not properly preserve an objection to dismissal of the two potential jurors and, thus, that their dismissal was reviewable under state law only for plain error," Alito wrote. "Because this state-law question would complicate our review, I reluctantly concur in the denial of certiorari."

The free exercise of religion must be protected in courts of law, Alito said.

"The judiciary, no less than the other branches of State and Federal Government, must respect people's fundamental rights, and among these are the right to the free exercise of religion and the right to the equal protection of the laws," he said. "When a court, a quintessential state actor, finds that a person is ineligible to serve on a jury because of his or her religious beliefs, that decision implicates fundamental rights."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' senior writer.

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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