

Top Michigan stories of 2019

PLYMOUTH, MI – As we move into 2020 and close out 2019, it's important to remember some of the important milestones of this past year. At the Baptist Beacon, a great part of our mission is to share the voices from across our state whether they are pastors, church planters or mission volunteers. They may be serving in the Send City of Detroit or in the Upper Peninsula, in a big church or a normative-sized one. Here are three stories that highlight the BSCM motto, "Starting Strengthening, Sending."

BSCM Sells Office Property

The Executive Board of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) 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 netted 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. See the whole story [here](#).

27 New Churches in Michigan

BSCM State Director of Missions, Dr. Tony Lynn introduced some of the planters of the 27 new churches that have been planted over the last three years. Many of these plants were supported by [Send Detroit](#) and the newly formed [Send Network Michigan](#). See the rest of the story [here](#).

A Comeback Story

First Baptist Church of Swartz Creek is one of three stories of churches that came back from a low point. It was part of the emphasis of the [Frances Brown State Mission Offering](#). This year's goal is \$100,000, and a portion of the offering will go to strengthening churches. FBC Swartz Creek's story was told in a podcast produced by the BSCM. You can listen to it [here](#).

Set free...to serve

ROSCOMMON, MI – The holidays are over, and we need a break from the hustle and bustle! We also need a break from the everyday issues of life. Jesus needed to take a break from the distractions and get away to meet with His father. If Jesus needed to get away, we too must take time out of our busy schedules and get away just to meet with God.

This February 21-23, at Bambi Lake the women's winter mission retreat will be an exciting time away with God. The theme is **Set Free...to Serve**, with an emphasis on compassion.

Dr. Michelle White will inspire us with Bible Study, and Melba Clark, missionary to East Asia, will share stories from around the world. Get your worship on as Pastor Mick Schatz leads us to the throne to praise and worship the Father.

If that's not enough... there is more! We will have breakout sessions to help learn to show compassion to the hurting of our world.

We will be collecting items for the river ministry in Texas, and taking time to make new friends and see old ones. Our state is big and we miss out on fellowship with our sisters from other areas. You can take that much needed break and get together again.

Are you ready to enjoy home cooked meals that you don't have to prepare, and better yet, don't need to clean up? Bambi staff are ready to serve and to make our stay pleasant. Saturday afternoon will offer opportunities to rest or take on the challenge of Monster Hill, to grab a shake and popcorn, catch up on a euchre game, or just sit and visit. This would be a great time just to relax and reflect on all that God has done.

Saturday night the Women's Missionary Union team want to serve you, we want to show love and compassion, and our appreciation for you. Let us paint your nails, or have henna applied, or give you a facial and a backrub, plus take your picture!

There are a lot of places to get away, so why choose Bambi? Bambi offers serenity in its natural beauty, a place to "unplug", a place to focus on God, a chance to be alone with God while surrounded by people who love and support you. Bambi is unique to Michigan Southern Baptists, and a place one must experience to really appreciate its worth. We will be waiting to greet you, so save the date, Feb.21-23,2020, and come take a break with us.

[CLICK HERE](#) to register. For more information, contact wmu@bscm.org.

Missed opportunities

SWARTZ CREEK, MI – There are so many ways to connect people to churches. My wife and I traveled to Florida to escape the dreariness of a Michigan winter in January 2019. After renting a home in Lake Alfred, we started investigating a place of worship. We searched the SBC website and Google to find Southern Baptist Churches in our area. There were many choices available for us. Most factors didn't matter to us with the exception of an early service on Sunday mornings because we are early risers.

Being close to our rental property, First Baptist of Lake Alfred's website gave us all the information we needed. We were able to electronically "meet" the Pastor, see pictures of many gatherings, see Worship times, beliefs, post offerings and get directions. The site also offered a phone app to see prayer requests. We could request prayer through a link and it would be posted after verification. One of the benefits for the snowbirds or visitors like us, this app gave us the opportunity to participate not only in prayer for needs, but also to participate in church functions and church needs. We enjoyed the time we were there. By the way, I still have the app on my phone and regularly pray for those on the list even though in most cases, I have no idea of who they are. You see, through the app I am still connected to this church. They are on my mind and in my prayers every time a notification hits my phone!

We are back in Florida in a new area, and we have encountered a different story. Our goals did not change, but discovered a few close churches in our area using SBC.org and Google. Only one said they had an early service so that first Sunday we headed there to find out they no longer have an early service. In fact, we met another couple from Indiana that happened to be there in the parking lot waiting for the early service too. We had a good visit and we both left. Strike ONE. The following Sunday we tried the same church again only to be "late" for Sunday School because they started at 9:30 instead of 9:45 which was on their website. Strike TWO. Sadly, I did not see the Indiana couple in Sunday School, or at their 11 o'clock service. I hope they found a church.

Our second church choice did not fare any better. The 9:30 AM start of Sunday School contradicted their website's 9:45 start, and so we were late again. Strike ONE. Worship started at 10:45 instead of 11 as posted, and experienced by another snowbird couple. Strike TWO.

The third church had an old website with nothing updated since 2016! So we drove to the church on Saturday to see if worship schedules were posted on their sign and they were. I was a little sad that they felt it was unimportant to have a website to connect with people seeking a place of worship and service.

All of the churches we visited were small to medium churches, 80-250 in size. I cannot imagine it would take much time to update a church website and attach it to the [SBC.org](https://www.sbc.org) web page. There are far too many benefits to having an up-to-date web page for members and prospective worshippers in this electronic age.

Power of the Internet can point people to your church. Is your church taking advantage of every opportunity to connect with new people in our community? When was the last time you looked at your church's website? Take a minute and see what your experience would be if you were looking for a church. Not everyone might be as tenacious as we were in Florida.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Whitehead serves the Lord at First Baptist Church of Swartz Creek as Chairman of the Deacons, Sunday School Teacher and Men's Ministry. He is married to his wife, Joanne.

Baptist Friendship House marks 75 years as a beacon of hope in the heart of New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS – Baptist Friendship House has stood as a beacon of hope in the heart of New Orleans for 75 years. For the past 20-plus years, Dr. Kay Bennett has played a key role in sharing that hope with area residents in need.

“What keeps me motivated is the fulfillment of watching God work miracles in people's lives,” explained Bennett, who has served as Friendship House's executive director since 1997.

The ministry center, which first opened its doors in 1944, has operated from its current location a few blocks from New Orleans' famed French Quarter since 1947. “Over the years, the different ministries have kind of changed at Friendship House to meet the needs that are the greatest in our city,” Bennett said. “That's kept it alive and vibrant as it has changed.”

As Baptist Friendship House marked its 75th anniversary this year, current ministries include aiding the homeless with such basic necessities as food, showers and clothing; transitional housing for women, including mothers with their children; and day programs such as literacy, English as a Second Language, job readiness training and a community Bible study. Staff members also offer practical assistance to human trafficking survivors, ranging from providing temporary housing or connecting survivors with a safe house to arranging for involvement in long-term treatment programs or transportation back home.

Friendship House also partners with National Woman's Missionary Union to provide Christian Women's Job Corps and WorldCrafts ministries and with the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board in providing thousands of backpacks filled with a variety of items for schoolchildren, the homeless and those escaping human trafficking.

A lighthouse in the city

Reflecting on the center's day-to-day ministry impact, Bennett said, "You can see someone that is at the bottom that may be addicted and homeless and on the street and you realize when they come through the door that you can't change that person but you do know that Jesus can work in their lives. He can melt their hearts and bring healing and you can see them just totally turn their lives around and change. It is so fulfilling to watch how He works and changes them.

"It's just really cool to me to be able to be in a setting that has been here for so long because it's like a lighthouse in the city," she emphasized. "New Orleans is known as the city that care forgot, but here at Friendship House, we try to put a little bit of concern and care and help and hope back in our people."

With a well-earned reputation for making a difference in people's lives, Baptist Friendship House recently was among organizations honored by FBI Director Christopher Wray who presented the ministry center with its distinguished Director's Community Leadership Award for its work in fighting human trafficking.

"For many years, the FBI New Orleans field office and the Baptist Friendship House have worked together to combat human trafficking in the city of New Orleans," said Eric Rommal, FBI New Orleans special agent in charge. "Their staff continues to serve the shelter with compassion, dedication and professionalism."

Bennett accepted the award on behalf of Baptist Friendship House at FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. "Human trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal industry in the world, and it is all around us here in the United States," she pointed out. "I think it's very important that we, as Southern Baptists, look around us, assess needs, see what's going on and reach out to help people."

Life-changing relationships

Quoting I John 3:17-18, "If you have all that you need and see someone else in need and do not reach out to them, how can the love of God be in you? Let us not love merely through words and tongue but in action and in truth," Bennett said that is among the biblical truths that drive the center's ministries.

"Our mission statement simply states, 'Meeting needs through love, action and truth.' We do that by basically walking alongside others and doing life with them," she noted. "It is in meeting people's basic physical and emotional needs that it opens the door for us to minister to the greatest need of all which is the spiritual need so that a life-changing relationship can begin with Jesus Christ."

Peggy Day, who leads Friendship House's weekly community Bible study, said that perspective is typical of Bennett's ministry commitment. "She is such a blessing. She just never gives us.

She's always hopeful and always positive and always encouraging and accepting," Day affirmed. "That's one of the big things here is that everybody is treated alike, they're accepted."

As the ministry center focuses on clients' physical, emotional and spiritual needs, "we love having volunteers come to Friendship House and help us with our ministries," Bennett said.

Inviting individuals, churches and mission groups to join the effort, she said volunteer opportunities range from helping pack hygiene kits and snack packs or preparing meals for Bible studies to donating food and clothing or helping staff such annual events as Friendship Fest, Back to School Bash and Fall Festival. To learn more, call 504-949-4469 or email bfhjobs@aol.com.

Citing Baptist Friendship House's ongoing influence and impact, Bennett concluded, "I'm just thankful that here at Friendship House, we don't judge people. It doesn't matter where you've been, what you've done. We're to be Jesus to others and treat them with respect and treat them like Jesus treats all of us. He loves us no matter what."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trennis Henderson is a freelance national correspondent for the Woman's Missionary Union.

Intersections

PLYMOUTH, MI – Well, Christmas has come and gone and another year has just begun. Are you like the little boy who was asked what he wanted for Christmas, and his reply was: "I want contentment, cause that's what I'm gonna need when I don't get what I want." Are you content or just cantankerous?

How is your tension level? About this time of the year when we have just brought to a close the Season of all Seasons, you are probably strung as tight as a banjo at a bluegrass concert. If not, it is because something popped when you were shopping a few weeks ago, and your emotions are just hanging there like a broken string. Is this any way to live? Is this the way we are to feel having just celebrated the greatest Gift of all? If not, then what has happened?

If you are like me, this holiday season has been an opportunity for a multitude of events to cross your path at those "special intersections of life". Not big or major intersection collisions, but small bumps and dings that just happen.

Do you remember just a few short weeks ago when you had worked all day and rushed to the grocery store to buy all that swell food for your annual Thanksgiving feast? You felt like you had just finished the Boston Marathon and you were forced to pull the living members of your family tree in a wagon tied to your waist through the entire race. The aisles of the store were so crowded that you had to use turn signals and a portable horn to maneuver between the beans and carrots. When you finally found your place in the check out line there were ten people in front of you, and that was the shortest line. As the person just ahead of you cleared the end of the counter you looked into the eyes of that "sweet little checker" and smiled with all the Christian love that filled your heart and the season. Beads of perspiration dotted her forehead and confusion blanketed her face. The cash register paper had run out, and she didn't know how to replace it. Everyone with an IQ above 30 and the advanced technical ability to correct her problem was up to his or her eyeballs with customers. What did you do? How did you react? Did you bring your blood pressure medicine with you? How did you fare at this intersection of life?

Or do you remember that Friday night that you were going out with your significant other to that special dining spot that made the most incredible edible delights. You starved yourself all day so that you could play "Porky the Pig" that evening and lessen your gluttony guilt. After an hour and a half wait you were finally seated, and some teenager brings you a menu and a glass of water and says, "Buffy your waiter will be with you in just a sec!" Thirty minutes later "Buffy" shows up, but by that time you have chewed all four corners off the menu and have seriously considered making soup out of the ketchup. "Sorry to keep you waiting. What will you have tonight?" As you run through your list of culinary selections your mouth waters almost uncontrollably. It is at that point Buffy tells you, "I sorry, but all we have left is goose liver pate' and boiled fish." There it is. Another intersection in life. What did you do? Put the pedal to the metal, speed through that intersection, and make like "Buffy" was a bump in the road or did you respond with kindness and cordiality.

Life during the holidays can be tough. Tensions can run at extremely high levels and even to the point of exploding. But folks, remember who we represent. We don't have the privilege of "losing it" and running over others. EVER! Slow down. Be prepared to stop. Keep you eyes on "the road" and watch out for the other drivers. For all you know, they could have just come from the grocery store as well or a family reunion where all the crazy uncles gathered, and sibling rivalries escalated into fistfights. Just smile and be pleasant. Treat everyone with dignity and respect, but I would advise you not to smile too much. Those you encounter may think you stopped at the bar before you were seated.

Enjoy this new season of life and loosen up. The season to be jolly has come and gone, and now you have a whole new year to work on they way you drive and navigate through life. Be very mindful of those intersections. It is easy to run through them and over others. Stop. Look both ways. Especially up and into the eyes of those you meet. Never forget, they are the very ones for whom our Lord gave His life.

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.

Start something new with someone

PLYMOUTH, MI – Venturing into something new is always easier and more enjoyable with others.

If I could go back and redo many events in life, I would invite more to come along with me, or I would join others in their adventures. I would discuss the kernel of my ideas before taking my first step meaning I would avoid some of my major mistakes; and, with the practical suggestions of others, I would squeeze more out of my positive experiences.

Four years of childhood solitude was miserable.

My family and home life was great, but I drifted through my late childhood like a lonely survivor in an apocalypse. Fourth grade to eighth grade was rough. I did not tell my parents. I managed it alone. My family moved to a different school district midyear when I was in fourth grade. I went from being known, well-liked, and secure to being bullied and feeling worthless in one month's time. That feeling of being "nothing" lasted four years. Boys bounced dusty chalk erasers on my back during class until everyone roared. I slumped my shoulders, and disappeared into my isolation. Bow-legged David, at recess, repeatedly slammed me with a football. The teacher enrolled me in a special class that lasted one-hour per week with three other kids and a counselor which convinced the "normal" kids that they were correct judging me "defective."

The great news is that God provided people to pry me out of my isolation.

John Ayers, who formerly led worship at Warren Woods Baptist Church, is someone who likely is not aware of how he saved my life at the end of those sad years. John and I met in band. We played cornets. John, even back then, had a calm and a class about him that remains. We competed for chair positions in the brass section, we hung out together; and, ultimately, I started enjoying school because John shared life with me. It gave me confidence to try out for football where I learned the value of teams. With John, I ventured into something new because I had a calm, consistent friend.

Mike Durbin, who serves the Lord as well on the state convention level, has become increasingly more valuable to me as a friend with every passing year. Neighbors since our teenage years in the Flint area, we have simultaneously moved through every phase of life. We were risky, out-of-control-teenagers. God called us both to salvation at the same church. We both surrendered to ministry during the same week. We married women from our hometown, far above what we deserve. We went to the same university and same seminary at the same time. Both of us took our children and wives overseas as international missionaries. We now serve the Lord as partners throughout Michigan. Mike's drive to be set-apart for God's service was evident from the earliest days of his salvation and continues to this day. Because of Mike's devotion, I started this intimidating state-level role with an inspirational model walking beside me offering encouragement every step of the way. I am grateful God saw a way for Mike and me to continue as neighbors in our ministries and lives.

Jamie Lynn, who shares a ministry calling, three children, nine grandchildren and an arena of godly friends with me, is the greatest "someone" of all who walks beside me with a library filled with stories of "something new." In fact, secrets be revealed, living life with Jamie and the Lord is new every day. Lamentations 3:22-23 (ESV) says it accurately when it states, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Life nor death can stop what Lamentations describes. I held Jamie's hand during the birth of our three children; she held me up while I fought-off cancer for years. Jamie has never fainted away from a new faith opportunity. Her confidence in God is harder than concrete. Jamie's desire to impact others for Christ is immeasurable. Others might look at our lives and take note of the changes in our mailing address and see those occasional addresses and dates as something new; but, in some amazing graceful way, God has blessed our lives so that every single morning begins with a "Good morning, love" and a hug.

Our days begin with an insatiable hunger to start something meaningful and new for the Lord. We are not perfect with one another; life is not always easy; but, we prefer to start something new with someone rather than try alone.

Have you found the joy of sharing life with others? Why not start something new with someone in 2020?

- Lead a Bible study during a break or lunch with coworkers
- Invite family members, neighbors and coworkers to sit with you at church
- Host people often in your home for meals and visits
- Serve in a new role in church
- Read the entire New Testament or Bible
- Volunteer in the community where you can share life with those outside church
- Rescue someone who lives in solitude as I did in the past
- Write down a list of new initiatives then select one to start with someone

Venturing into something new is always easier and more enjoyable with others. Ask me. I know.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony 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.

New leaders, same God

PLYMOUTH, MI – God has encouraged me numerous times with His words to Joshua: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

In Joshua 1, the people of God are about to go a way they have never gone before, into a land they did not know, and experience a life unlike any they have ever lived. They are on the edge of a new reality as they prepare to enter the "Promised Land." This is the moment and the place they have been moving toward their entire lives.

The journey started four decades earlier when God delivered them from Egyptian bondage under the leadership of Moses. A lot happened in those 40 years. They were tough years, long years, heartbreaking years, but they're all behind them as the book of Joshua begins. The Promised Land, the land that flowed with milk and honey, is just across the Jordan River. It's so close that Joshua and the people can see it.

Everything they have been through has brought them to this moment in time. This is not just another tick on the clock. It's not just the passing of one day to the next, or one year to the next. This is time that is pregnant with opportunity. It's life changing time. It's history making time. It's God's time. It is time that is measured not by the clock but by the impact it has on life.

Joshua knows the significance of the moment and it terrifies him - so much so that God tells him three times in chapter 1 to be "strong and courageous." This is more than a passing difficulty in his life. Joshua is struggling with deep seated feelings of weakness and fear. He's about to be placed in a position of leadership that he doesn't feel ready for. He's afraid. He's unsure of himself. He doesn't feel adequate for the responsibilities and challenges that lay ahead.

Sometimes the most difficult land to conquer is not what lies before us, but what lies within us.

Joshua experienced this reality first hand. The first battle of the conquest took place in his heart and mind as he fully surrendered to God. Before the Jordan River would be crossed, before the

walls of Jericho would come tumbling down, God spoke courage and strength into Joshua's life and gave him the life altering promise of His presence. Joshua had been Moses' assistant. He had been mentored by the best, but it was his personal encounter with God that made him a transformed spiritual leader.

Several things stand out to me in the early days of Joshua's leadership of the people of God: God actively guided the leadership transition from Moses to Joshua. This is a truth God's people of every generation need to understand when they experience leadership transition. The book of Joshua begins with the words, "After the death of Moses the Lord's servant, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses's assistant."

The most radical reason for leadership transition is the death of the leader, but it also happens when leaders retire, move or leave ministry. The death of Moses must have been an exceptionally difficult time for the people of God. He was the only leader they had ever known. They loved Moses, but he was gone forever. God chose Joshua to be the next leader. He was the God-called leader of the people. Don't miss this: the real leader through the transition was God! It was God who took Moses home and it was God who placed Joshua in leadership. The new leader Joshua and the people he led were following God together!

God can always be trusted through change. For 40 years, the people of God had followed a routine that didn't change much from day to day. Life was going to change radically, not because of Joshua, but because of God. God was leading His people to the Promised Land. There was a change in leadership, but the mission remained the same.

Joshua did many of the same things Moses did, but he also did things that were totally new. God gave him the assignment to lead the people to a land where they had never been and by a way they had never gone (Joshua 3:4). This was not an assignment for Joshua. Just look at what happened when Moses tried to lead the people into the Promised Land 40 years earlier (Numbers 14).

God's plan did not change during the 40 years the people wandered in the wilderness. Forty years later, there's a new leader, a new generation of people, a new route to travel, but it's the same destination. They learned God can always be trusted during changing times.

New strategies are needed for changing realities. I can only imagine what the people thought when Joshua told them to march around the city of Jericho for six days without saying a word. The only sound was that of the ram's horn trumpets. On the seventh day, he told them march around the city seven times and then to shout with a great shout. They did so, and the walls came tumbling down. It had never been done that way before and hasn't been repeated since, but it worked!

The world around us is changing faster than it ever has, and will continue to do so in 2020. As we enter this New Year, I am reminded that God can be trusted to lead through it, to provide

spiritually transformed leaders, and to give new strategies for the reality of our time. It's going to be an exciting year as we follow God together. Happy New Year!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Grace has overcome

ROSCOMMON, MI – Happy New Year from Bambi Lake! 2019 was a fantastic year for the camp. We anticipate 2020 being even more exciting as we witness God using Bambi Lake in amazing ways.

A new year for many of us often marks a “New Beginning”. An opportunity to rethink or retool our everyday life and our plans for the future. Maybe a new year sparks new dreams, or prompts us to refresh old ones in a new way. However we approach this “New Beginning,” it will most likely require a reboot to our thinking. How we view our finances, our health, our relationships, our family - we have to look at these through different lenses.

I recently had to start wearing glasses and they have literally changed how I see the world. They are progressive lenses so they help me see things far away, not so far away and up close. I now have the choice to live in my former blurred reality or a new clear reality. It has been a “New Beginning” that is now allowing me to see clearly - I can read my phone now! However, making the decision to go to the eye doctor and have my sight examined required a new mindset. I had to acknowledge my eyes were not functioning properly, and decide this was no longer acceptable. As silly as it may seem, this required admitting I was getting older, going to the doctor, probably wearing glasses (one more thing to keep up with), paying for something I don't want, etc., etc. Nevertheless, I decided my need was greater than my pride. This was my “New Beginning” moment that ushered in a new reality. Which brings me to this question - Is pride keeping you from a “New Beginning”? Is pride keeping you from a “New Reality”?

I have no way of knowing the area of life you desire a “New Beginning”, but allow me to encourage you with this thought, this reality, “Grace Has Overcome!”. Grace wins! What a liberating and life altering reality to live in! However, it requires a new mindset. It requires surrender. Humility is the key that unlocks this “New Beginning” in our lives. We have to acknowledge our insufficient strength and resources to handle life on our own. Only by

completely surrendering to and relying on the work of God's grace can we truly have a "New Beginning" in any area of our life.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" Ephesians 2:8 (ESV).

Grace saved you, let it change you! Let it permeate every breathing moment of your existence. Choose a "New Beginning" with grace. Live in the reality that your striving is insufficient, BUT His grace is sufficient!

***My only hope is in the cross, my Savior died, He paid my cost
A slave to sin my soul in chains, until His grace, flowed down like rain
Your Grace, Your Grace has overcome, overcome!
Your Grace, Your Grace the battle won, the battle won!
Forgiven I stand in victory, for the glory, of my Savior King,
Your Grace has overcome!***

(Grace Has Overcome-Michael Schatz)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mick Schatz serves on the staff of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. He is the State Director of Spiritual Enrichment and Retreats and lives at Bambi Lake.

What does a strong church look like?

ANN ARBOR, MI – On December 8, 2019, 21 believers covenanted together to establish Treasuring Christ Church of Ann Arbor, MI. As we approached this day, the most pressing question that swirled in my mind was, "What kind of church would God have us to be?" There are so many helpful resources available to church planters today, for which we should be grateful. Yet, in the midst of all the resources, we cannot forget our one essential resource—God's Word. Our understanding of the church and what God's Word has to say about it should not be an optional feature to our church planting strategy, but should be foundational to it.

Where would you turn for such instruction and direction?

My mind was drawn to the Pastoral Epistles. Over the years, I have been fortunate to see faithful pastors model 2 Timothy 2:2, investing in me and entrusting me with the task of leading

God's church through faithfully teaching God's Word. In 1 Timothy 3:14-16, Paul provides a brief summary of God's design for the church. Listen to what he says:

(14) I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, (15) if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (16) Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

***He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.***

Paul makes clear that the church is the household of God. If we are to understand our calling as the church, we must understand that we are not our own. Together, we belong to God; together, we are the household of God. God has taken up residence among His people, the church. He has tasked His church to be the faithful guardian of the truth of His Word. He has entrusted us with a great confession to hold fast and hold high.

Paul's instruction to Timothy in 1 Timothy provides a robust description of the kind of church God desires. Just consider these points:

1. The church should teach sound doctrine and commit itself to God's Word (1:8-11; 4:6-16).
2. The church should proclaim Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners (1:15; 2:4-6).
3. The church should be a people of prayer; for those in authority, for one another, and for others to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ (2:1-10)
4. The church should be led by godly, qualified pastors and served by godly, qualified deacons (3:1-13; 5:17-25)
5. The church should be known for pursuing and growing in godliness (4:6-10; 6:6-10)
6. The church should care for the needy among them (5:1-16)

This is God's design for His church, and this is the church I want to labor faithfully to shepherd and lead.

When church planters work towards this week in and week out, God will bear fruit deep and wide in our churches. I recently read a quote from Charles Spurgeon, the great "Prince of Preachers" who pastored in London in the latter half of the 19th century. Since I read it, I haven't been able to get it off my mind. It describes my desire for Treasuring Christ Church, and I pray it is the desire of church planters and pastors all over our state.

Spurgeon was asked, "What does a strong church look like? He responded, "They are earnest, devoted, at peace, loving each other, and striving together to do the Master's work. Such a congregation is strong, whether it is composed of a dozen or five hundred members!"

Imagine church plants and churches all over Michigan laboring to this end. Now that Treasuring Christ Church has been established, you will find us laboring to be a strong church like this, and seeking to plant other strong churches all over southeast Michigan, across North America, and to the ends of the earth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Guyer is the Lead Pastor of Treasuring Christ Church in Ann Arbor, MI. He is married to Emily and they have two children. In addition to hanging out with his family, Michael loves a good cup of Ethiopian coffee, anything with peanut butter, and just about every sport. His greatest desire is to see Jesus treasured above all things and His church established right here in Ann Arbor and to the ends of the earth.

Rural ministry more rewarding than expected, pastor says

MAYHILL, NM (BP) – Rural ministry was not what pastor Matt Henslee envisioned for himself when he was growing up in the DFW Metroplex, but it's where God led him, and now he loves it. He's urging other pastors to consider that God does some of his best work in rural settings.

As pastor of Mayhill Baptist Church in Mayhill, N.M., Henslee wrote "Replanting Rural Churches: God's Plan and Call for the Middle of Nowhere" with another rural southern New Mexico pastor, Kyle Bueermann of First Baptist Church in Alamogordo.

Henslee was on the front row of his church in Grand Prairie from the age of 2, he said, and was saved at age 7. He was discipled by an associate pastor, visiting hospitals and nursing homes weekly until he was a teenager. In high school, he interned in the worship ministry at a church in Fort Worth and then served a church in Irving that met in a funeral home.

"Later I returned to Grand Prairie to be the student pastor and after school director at Westridge Baptist Church, which is where I'd also meet Rebecca, who later became my wife the day before I went in view of a call as the pastor of worship and children at a church quite literally in the middle of nowhere, Josephine, Texas," Henslee told the TEXAN.

"I fell in love with rural life and would later become the associate pastor at First Baptist Church Blue Ridge, which didn't have much more than a gas station, grocery store and a Mexican food restaurant that was rarely open."

He ended up back in Grand Prairie as the pastor of students and education at Inglewood Baptist Church, and he and Rebecca adopted four girls through foster care.

"It was then that I sensed God calling me to the pastorate and we moved to Pipe Creek, Texas, about 35 to 40 miles outside of San Antonio," Henslee said. "A little over two years later, I found myself choking back tears as I left to serve in Mayhill." He has been in New Mexico for more than two years.

Along the way, Henslee earned a master of divinity at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Now he's working on a doctorate in expository preaching at Southwestern, and along with pastoring serves as managing editor of LifeWay Pastors, a division of Facts & Trends.

"Pastoring in small, rural towns requires creativity to reach people with the good news," Henslee said. "In Pipe Creek, I did all of my studying at a mom and pop coffee shop in town, which allowed me to meet folks passing through, tell them about Jesus and invite them to church. We grew from about 40 to just over 100 in worship during my time there.

"In Mayhill, I do something similar. I often read outside the local café, where I'll evangelize and invite people to church. We've grown from about the same to as many as 170 in worship in a town of not much more than 60 to 70."

A welcome difference Henslee noticed right away when he moved to Josephine years ago was how quiet rural life was compared to the city. The slower pace helps him slow down spiritually, he said, and the hour-long trips to make hospital visits give him time to pray, unwind or make phone calls.

Certainly there are downsides to living so far out, he said, such as when his family runs out of sugar and must either travel an hour each way to the store or go to the nearest neighbor to ask for sugar. In rural America, neighbors rely on each other more, Henslee said.

Also in Josephine, he noticed a farmer might invite him out to toss hay or some other task, which provided several hours of quality time talking with the farmer about life, marriage and spiritual matters while working together. "You can't really do that in the city with a banker," he said.

Henslee's daughters "absolutely love" living in Mayhill and often spend their family days hiking in the mountains. "They have more fun doing that than when we would spend a day baking in the sun at Six Flags," he said.

Bueermann, Henslee's coauthor, grew up in tiny Tahoka, Texas, and didn't think he wanted to pastor a small town church once he finished school, Henslee said, but it turns out he is passionate about ministering in Alamogordo after following God and falling in love with the New Mexico culture.

"Never in a million years would I have thought that this is where I would like to be for the duration of my ministry," Henslee said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Roach is a correspondent for the TEXAN magazine, located in Grapevine, Texas. This story appeared in the texanonline.net.

Southern Baptist leaders welcome repeal of tax on churches

WASHINGTON, D.C. (BP) – Two Southern Baptist entity heads have greeted the repeal of a two-year-old tax on churches and other nonprofit organizations with gratitude.

President Trump signed into law Dec. 20 a spending bill that includes language rescinding a section of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 that requires houses of worship and other nonprofits to pay a 21 percent tax on such employee benefits as parking and transportation. The Senate approved the legislation that included the repeal Dec. 19 in a bipartisan, 71-23 roll call. The House of Representatives passed the measure also in bipartisan fashion by a 297-120 vote Dec. 17.

If it had not been repealed, the provision -- which took effect Jan. 1, 2018 -- would have cost the charitable sector an estimated \$1.7 billion in the next decade, according to opponents of the law. It also would have burdened churches and others with accounting and compliance costs not previously required.

Both the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) and GuideStone Financial Resources had worked since 2018 as members of coalitions seeking to reverse the tax provision.

ERLC President Russell Moore said in a written statement, "This repeal comes as a welcome relief for millions of Americans, lifting this burden from nonprofits and houses of worship around the country. Churches must never again be seen as untapped sources of government revenue."

Moore thanked House and Senate leaders, as well as other elected officials, who "worked hard on this issue. And I'm glad to see the President formalize this repeal with his signature."

"In these contentious days, finding a bipartisan area of agreement in Congress is worth celebrating."

GuideStone -- the SBC's health and financial benefits entity -- "expresses its thanks to the President for signing this important legislation, and to members of the House and Senate who prioritized this legislation for the benefit of all Americans," President O.S. Hawkins said in a written release. "We are thankful the parking tax has been repealed."

The ERLC and other coalition allies sent letters in both November 2018 and March 2019 urging repeal of the tax on churches and other nonprofits. The ERLC continued working for repeal as the end of the year neared.

As members of the Church Alliance, GuideStone and other organizations commented publicly against the tax twice in 2018 and once this year, noting their "fundamental opposition to the taxation of churches and church-related ministries."

Two Southern Baptist members of Congress -- Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., and Rep. Mark Walker, R-N.C. -- helped lead the effort to repeal the tax provision. Lankford reintroduced the Lessening Impediments From Taxes (LIFT) for Charities Act in February of this year, while Walker reintroduced his companion bill in March.

The House voted 220-183 last December to rescind the tax on nonprofits, but the Senate did not have the votes to approve the measure.

In June of this year, the House Ways and Means Committee approved repeal of the tax.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Strode is Washington bureau chief for Baptist Press. Roy Hayhurst serves as director of denominational and public relations services at GuideStone. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists' concerns nationally and globally.

Two ultrasound machines, hundreds of lives saved

***EDITOR'S NOTE:** Sanctity of Human Life Sunday is Jan. 19, 2020, in the Southern Baptist Convention.*

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) -- Amory's life changed forever when she saw those two blue lines on the pregnancy test. Thinking it was a false positive, she took it again, and again, three more times.

Amory had just finished graduate school, accepted her first job as a speech-language pathologist, moved into her own apartment and finally found a guy who she believed liked her

back. However, their relationship was rocky, and Amory had no idea how he would react to the idea of being a father. Although in that moment, Amory's life as she knew it seemed to crash down, her story did not end there.

Terrified of potential judgement and ridicule and almost too afraid to even seek help, she scheduled an appointment with Liberty Women's Clinic in Kansas City.

Amory's clinic nurse was Missy. Missy treated her with kindness, respect and grace, providing not only information, but hope.

Thanks to the ultrasound machine at Liberty Women's Clinic, Amory saw her baby's heartbeat for the first time. The emotions that flooded her heart were surreal, overwhelming. She knew she was going to be a mother. There was no doubt she was keeping her baby.

Ryder entered the world, and Amory says he brings her incomparable joy. When he says "I love you" she cannot imagine her life any other way.

Amory's story is not uncommon for recipients of the ministry of pregnancy care clinics.

Ultrasound technology is often referred to as a window into the womb, for it gives mothers a vivid picture of the life they carry inside them.

'TEETERING ON THE EDGE'

For the past 16 years the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention has donated ultrasound units to clinics like the Liberty Women's Clinic across the country through the Psalm 139 Project. So far, the project has funded and placed 20 machines.

The machines are fully funded through direct monetary gifts and through the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists' unified giving plan to support national and international ministry causes. The machines' impact is powerful.

Bobby Reed, chief financial officer of the ERLC, said the project is a very practical way for those passionate about the sanctity of human life to get involved and make a real difference.

"A lot of times people who become passionate about it, their follow-up question is 'Well, what can I do?'" Reed said. "One way to be involved in valuing human life is to be involved in the Psalm 139 Project."

Individuals can invest personally in saving lives, in ministering to mothers just like Amory. The money donated to the project goes directly to funding a machine placement and therefore, to saving lives.

But the lives that are to be valued also reach beyond the womb, Reed said. "It also goes to the orphan or the foster child who needs a home. There's a dual messaging there. Not only does that center help babies who are in their mother and need life, but they're also helping moms who are scared for their very lives."

Carol Graham, founder and CEO of Liberty Women's Clinic, said that in the twelve months since receiving the ultrasound machine they have provided nearly 4,000 services to more than 650 women.

285 of those women had a positive test result, 231 were eligible for an ultrasound and 209, to their knowledge, chose life for their child. That is a 90 percent rate of choosing life for those who saw their unborn child on an ultrasound.

"Ultrasound is truly what makes a difference for young women who are teetering on the edge of a decision between life and death of their child -- the quality of that image is vital," Graham said. "The truth presented in the ultrasound image and the compassion of His people poured out on the broken, provides an avenue to set captives free from their current anguish and the future despair of a decision to end their pregnancy."

LWC has more than 100 volunteers helping with events and projects as well as serving in the clinic. Additionally, more than 1,200 individuals, churches and businesses financially support the clinic on a regular basis.

"Together, we are encouraging hearts and saving lives, one client at a time," Graham said. "We have the amazing opportunity to have a mission field that literally walks through our doors."

'THAT'S MY GREAT-GRANDBABY'

Not all clinics that receive the machines are as large as LWC. Greenspoint Pregnancy Assistance Center in Houston is staffed by just eight volunteers and one ultrasound technician.

But even with the small staff, Flora Lopez, director of the Greenspoint center, said that 102 women gave their lives to Jesus in the past year through the ministry of the center.

Lopez said that her personal journey to the position of director has been filled with faithful reliance on God to utilize her desire to serve and share the Gospel. Previously working as a banker with no experience in the pregnancy assistance field, Lopez had doubts about whether she was fit for the role.

"I didn't feel that I had the skills or that I was prepared and that I wouldn't be able to do it because I was never involved with pregnancy centers before," Lopez said. "But when you put your yes on the altar and you trust the Lord and when you ask Him 'what is your plan for my life and whatever it is I'll be there, I'll say yes and I'll go because I know you'll equip me. You equip

the called, you're going to be with me all along and you are going to help to go through this path."

Lopez said the key to being utilized in ministry is just to be available. She encourages anyone who is wondering what they can do to champion the value of human life to simply put their life in the Lord's hands and see what He will do with their desire to be used.

Lopez recounted the story of a new mother she recently served. The mother was 14 and came into the clinic with her grandmother. They were already planning on getting an abortion.

The grandmother was encouraging her granddaughter to have an abortion because she also had one when she was younger. Both individuals were confused and hurting.

Lopez said that the grandmother told her granddaughter that she could get an abortion but it would all be OK in the end because God would forgive her. "That statement broke my heart," Lopez said.

But the pair agreed to an ultrasound appointment for the very next day. Lopez said the grandmother told her if, in the ultrasound image, the baby appeared developed, then her granddaughter would not have an abortion.

The rest of the day, that night and the morning, the staff of the center spent time in prayer asking God to work in the hearts of the two women, to change them and convince them to choose life for the child. When the time came for the ultrasound, both grandmother and granddaughter were moved to change their minds about the abortion.

Lopez recounts what the grandmother told her after the appointment -- "I cannot deny, I saw it in the ultrasound. That's my great-grandbaby."

Lopez said 97 percent of the women who come into the clinic and receive an ultrasound choose life for their baby.

Even through this small center, Lopez said 50 lives of unborn children are saved in a year, averaging out to one child -- one life -- a week.

Lopez said their goal in the coming year is to hire another technician in order to have more ultrasound appointments and in the end, save more lives.

"When we encounter a woman that does not know the Lord, and we're able to share the Gospel, not only the person is being saved, but also their souls are being saved," Lopez said. "That's the main focus -- sharing the Gospel and the good news of Jesus Christ."

"God is doing great things through the ultrasound machine at different pregnancy assistance centers," Lopez said. "Thank you [donors] for making my dream a reality and God's dream too."

For more information on the Psalm 139 project, visit psalm139project.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tess Schoonhoven is a staff writer for Baptist Press.

SBC seminaries send out more than 1,100 graduates

***EDITOR'S NOTE:** During the first two weeks of December, six Southern Baptist seminaries sent out more than 1,100 graduates to pursue their ministry callings. Each institution celebrated milestones and shared words of inspiration to the students who were going out. The mission of the seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention is to prepare God-called men and women for vocational service in Baptist churches and in other Christian ministries throughout the world through programs of spiritual development, theological studies and practical preparation in ministry.*

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

KANSAS CITY, MO (BP) – The Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary community celebrated the culmination of its students' hard work, dedication and perseverance, as the school held its 66th commencement Dec. 6.

Additionally, president Jason Allen announced that the seminary will begin a series of messages during upcoming graduation and convocation services focusing on specific doctrinal topics of urgency and relevance.

Two-hundred-five students were conferred 222 degrees and began their service as the next generation of pastors, missionaries and ministry leaders. With the school's enrollment growth, now surpassing 4,000 students, the number of graduates has also increased, up from the 169 this time last year.

Midwestern Seminary also celebrated a milestone during the commencement ceremony, as 29 Spanish-speaking church planters earned their Church Planting Certificates. Two of those graduates also received their Masters in Theological Studies with an emphasis on Pastoral Ministry.

Allen's 10-part graduation/convocation sermon series will focus on topics such as the sufficiency of Scripture, the exclusivity of the Gospel, and penal substitutionary atonement. He began the series with a message from Jude entitled, "Truths Worth Contending For: Biblical Inerrancy."

Allen acknowledged that commencement is an ideal setting to focus on the topic of inerrancy because it's the "biggest, grandest stage that we have to offer, and our topic today, biblical inerrancy, merits such a stage." He added that, as Southern Baptists, there is never a wrong time to reassert, cling to and contend for one of our central and foundational truths.

For more information about Midwestern Seminary's commencement, [click here](#).

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

FORT WORTH, TX (BP) – Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's fall commencement ceremony Dec. 6 celebrated 191 bachelor's, master's, doctoral and certificate graduates.

Among the graduates were roughly 40 women, including Susan K. Rainey, who was the 10,000th female student to complete theological education at Southwestern since its founding in 1908.

Reflecting on the milestone after commencement, SWBTS president Adam W. Greenway said, "The 10,000th female graduate is noteworthy because of what it demonstrates about Southwestern Seminary's longstanding commitment to train women called by God to Christian service. Now, more than ever, we are resolved to offer the best and most comprehensive options for theological education to our sisters in Christ for their more faithful service to His church."

Preaching from 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, Greenway told the graduates that "while we celebrate what you have accomplished and achieved today," never forget that "it is not ultimately about what you have achieved, but about what you have received." He referred both to their salvation and to their calls to ministry.

"Yours is to be a ministry of light," Greenway said. "Yours is to be a ministry where people will find hope, real hope, that comes only through the life-giving power of the Gospel of Christ."

For more information about Southwestern Seminary's commencement, [click here](#).

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

LOUISVILLE, KY (BP) – Graduates of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary are heralds of the good news of salvation through the forgiveness of sins, said R. Albert Mohler Jr., president the seminary in Louisville, Ky., at its 224th commencement exercises Dec. 13.

During the ceremony in the historic Alumni Memorial Chapel, 150 master's and doctoral students were present to receive their degrees as members of a 208-person graduating class. These graduates are sent out as stewards of the knowledge of salvation into a world that desperately needs that knowledge, Mohler said in his commencement address.

"We are sending out these graduates to go out into the nations and out into the pulpits and into the churches, and to speak to everyone everywhere in order to communicate the knowledge of salvation," Mohler said. "But it's not just [a message of salvation that says], 'This is good news; God loves you.' That's true, but it's infinitely better than that. [The message is] that 'you are a sinner, but God shows His mercy to you in Christ in whom your sins can be forgiven.'"

His mission, Mohler said, is similar to the one passed down to ministers of the Gospel today.

"Why are we happy about these graduates? What gives us such joy on this occasion? It's because what was here assigned to John is what, by the call of God, is now assigned to them. They are to give knowledge of salvation to God's people in the forgiveness of their sins," Mohler said.

During commencement, Mohler also presented the Josephine S. and James L. Baggott Outstanding Graduate Award to Caleb T. Shaw, a master of divinity graduate from Glasgow, Ky.

The award is named after the Baggott family, who established a fund in 1980 to recognize an outstanding graduate of each graduating class.

The recipient is voted on by the members of the graduating class based on outstanding leadership, exemplary character and sound scholarship. The recipient receives an award from LifeWay Christian Resources and carries the seminary standard during the graduation procession.

Mohler's entire address will soon be available in audio and video at Southern Equip.

For more information about Southern Seminary's commencement, [click here](#).

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

WAKE FOREST, NC (BP) – Friends and family gathered together to celebrate the conferring of degrees upon 251 Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and College at Southeastern graduates Dec. 13.

Of those who graduated, 49 received advanced degrees, 171 received master's degrees and 31 received bachelor's degrees.

During this semester's commencement address, SEBTS president Danny Akin exhorted graduates to consider how Christ's humble sacrifice on their behalf compels them to give sacrificially as seen in 2 Corinthians 8:9.

"We give not out of obligation, we give not out of guilt, but we give out of gratitude for what the Lord has done for us," said Akin.

Akin gave three charges for every graduate to consider based upon Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians.

First, know the grace of Jesus. Akin built upon Paul's statement to the Corinthians that they know Jesus. He explained that Christians are given the gift of knowing and experiencing the life-changing power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

"This is something that we know as a deep, abiding, personal knowledge," Akin said.

Second, remember Christ's humble, atoning sacrifice. Akin explained that Jesus gave up all of the honor He had in heaven and humbled Himself to a cross so that mankind could be justified before God and one day stand righteous in His presence.

"This is how much this great Savior, this great God, loves you. He went all the way from the heights of heaven to the depths of humanity to death on a cross so that He might purchase you and He might purchase me."

Third, seek the riches found only in Jesus. Paul writes that those who follow Christ are given the riches found in God.

"Because of His amazing grace, we give," said Akin. "Yes, we give our money, but more than that, we give our lives. We give our lives to the Lord, and we give our lives for others."

Akin concluded with a final exhortation: "Graduates, you will go where others will not go. You will do what others will not do. You will serve where others will not serve. And you will give what others will not give."

For more information about Southeastern Seminary's commencement, [click here](#).

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

NEW ORLEANS, LA (BP) – Jamie Dew, presiding over his first graduation ceremony as president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Leavell College, congratulated graduate candidates at a packed house at Leavell Chapel and then asked a probing question.

"To what end?" Dew asked. "Why has God blessed you? What is this for?"

Dew, elected president by NOBTS trustees June 3, 2019, explained that God had blessed and sustained graduate candidates through countless hours of study and sacrifices to pursue the degree.

Graduation is a reason to celebrate, Dew explained, but he pressed candidates further to consider if they now hoped the degree would bring opportunity, a new platform and a name for themselves.

God will bring new opportunities, Dew assured listeners, but each will be temporary.

"A day is coming when your name will be forgotten," Dew reminded them. "So why labor for something that doesn't matter or count for all eternity? With that in mind, we now send you out as graduates of this institution into the harvest of our Lord. We send you now to go, in His name, to build His kingdom."

Making every moment count is a lesson that has stayed with him, Dew explained, and he urged graduate candidates to remember the same.

"The day is coming when you will lay this down," Dew said. "Live now for that day. Go forward with an eye for the very end, to Christ's return."

Dew closed with the Gospel message and, drawing from John 3:16, urged attendees unfamiliar with its meaning to consider God's love. Dew said, "This day as we celebrate Christ and we celebrate our graduates, I urge you if you do not know Jesus Christ, make today the day that you meet Him."

Before the conferral of degrees, provost Norris Grubbs pointed to 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 to remind candidates that God is faithful and will be with them.

"You must always keep learning," Grubbs told the candidates. "Our prayer is that you will serve God's people as you walk with Christ, proclaim His truth, and fulfill His mission."

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary conferred 121 master's degrees and 37 doctoral degrees including 14 Ph.Ds., one Ed.D, one D.M.A., 19 D.Min., and two D.Ed.Min. Forty-eight M.Div. degrees, 15 with specializations, were conferred.

Leavell College conferred 29 bachelor of arts in Christian Ministry degrees and four associate of arts in Christian Ministry degrees.

The Lockman Foundation presented each graduate with a copy of the New American Standard Bible.

For more information about New Orleans Seminary's commencement, [click here](#).

Gateway Seminary

ONTARIO, CA (BP) – Gateway Seminary conferred 42 diplomas, master's and doctoral degrees Dec. 14 on students from nine states and three countries. President Jeff Iorg noted the graduates would join more than 9,600 alumni who had received degrees over the seminary's 75 years of ministry. Commencement exercises were held in the chapel of the seminary's main campus in Ontario, Calif.

Iorg challenged graduates to follow Christ as the magi did, with endurance and submission. "Following the Lord is the essence of Christian leadership," he said. "If you follow the Lord, you must endure when circumstances are baffling, when time moves slowly and when opponents are threatening you."

He recalled the story from Matthew 2:1-12, when the wise men, also called the magi, modeled what it meant to follow Christ.

"They encountered unusual circumstances, the guiding star," he said. "The magi overcame geographic and time obstacles and arrived at the place where Jesus could be worshiped. They confronted a powerful enemy while following the Lord. Herod had slaughtered every male child under the age of 2."

Iorg said the magi followed the star, not knowing where it would lead, and they worshiped Jesus when they finally found Him.

"Here's Jesus, not an infant any longer but certainly a toddler, and they fell to their knees to worship Him. These were prominent, well-known men, and they were on their knees in front of a baby, giving gifts."

Iorg likened the magi's experience to that of those called to ministry.

"Submission means following God's direction, not always knowing where He will lead or what will happen when you get there," he said. "Submission is demonstrated and reinforced through worship. Privately and publicly, I worship and in my worship, I demonstrate submission."

In addition to the main campus in Ontario, Calif., Gateway Seminary serves through four regional campuses in the Pacific Northwest; Phoenix, Ariz.; Denver, Colo.; and Fremont, Calif.

For more information about Gateway Seminary, visit gs.edu.

Salvations, Christmas cheer highlight NYC church's toy sale

NEW YORK, NY (BP) – On an unseasonably warm Tuesday morning Dec. 10, the line of people at Tompkins Square Park on the corner of East 10th Street in New York City swelled to a little over 100. Some had been there since 1 a.m., armed with ponchos and umbrellas to battle a steady rain that fell on the city most of the night.

They were waiting for the doors of Graffiti Church to open for its annual toy sale outreach event. Inside, Graffiti's pastor and New York City Send Relief missionary Taylor Field, along with about 20 volunteers, also were waiting, anxious to spread a little Christmas cheer.

Field and several of the volunteers -- some donning Santa Claus hats and makeshift reindeer antlers with various Christmas salutations attached -- were in position at 9:15 a.m. when the first toy shoppers entered the church.

Qualified shoppers paid what Field called "a very low cost for new toys."

"This gives them the dignity of providing for their own children," Field said.

Those attending also received prayer and heard the Gospel in a one-on-one setting with Graffiti's prayer counselors.

Repeated refrains of "Merry Christmas" greeted each attendee. In the church's basement, volunteers served coffee, hot chocolate, cookies and other pastries. Kareem Goubran, one of Graffiti's worship leaders, also played his guitar for the guests.

Goubran loosened up the crowd with a gregarious spirit while belting out familiar Christmas tunes. At one point, toy sale shopper Michelle Rodriguez and a few others warmed up to the spirit of the moment enough to showcase their own vocals as Goubran accompanied.

"We just really appreciate everything that this church is doing for us here for Christmas," Rodriguez said a little later as she made her way out the door with a bag full of toys. "This just means so much to us and our community each year."

Some of the shoppers were there for the first time while others were veterans of the annual event.

Then there were those like Carmen Villanueva, Graffiti's office manager. Villanueva has known of Graffiti for well over 20 years. A former Catholic, she and her daughter were baptized and joined the church 13 years ago.

Since then, she's volunteered for the toy sale outreach event and other ministry activities each year. But the toy sale has a special place in her heart -- perhaps because, at one point, she was on the other side of the event as a shopper.

"We've been in this neighborhood, and we've raised our kids here, just like Taylor (Field) and (his wife) Susan," Villanueva said. "I brought my kids here to the toy sale years ago, so the good thing about this event is there are a lot of people in the line who are familiar faces."

After marrying her husband of 33 years, Villanueva moved to New York's Lower East Side, five blocks from the church. The toy sale, along with several other Graffiti outreach initiatives, introduced her to the place she now calls her second home.

"We're in the neighborhood, and we're all in the same struggle," she said. "We brought up our families here. We brought them up with Christ in our homes, even when the neighborhood was really bad, and drugs used to be everywhere. A lot of us are grandmas now who are now shopping for their grandkids the same way we used to shop for our children. And now, some of us are serving God in this church."

Such a testimony is music to Taylor Field's ears but so too is the fact that 29 people surrendered their lives to Jesus Tuesday.

"For me, that's what is my passion. That's what makes my heart sing," Field said. "It's just seeing people come from difficult circumstances into a more self-sustaining place in Christ that I really enjoy."

Field sang the praises of volunteers like Villanueva and shared the account of a woman who brought the father of her children to the event. Field said the father was a cocaine addict, but before he left Graffiti Church that afternoon, he prayed a tearful prayer to receive Christ.

"You can't quantify stuff like that," Field said. "It's the reason why we've been doing this for quite a while. It's why we keep doing it because it gives us a chance to pray with people, and, as a church planter, I love the fact that I've also got 15 to 20 of our church members sharing the Gospel with people, so it's not just me. And that makes me really happy."

Field points to another long-time volunteer, Wally Eades, as one of the ones who has helped the event thrive each year.

"Wally's been doing it for 25 years," Field said. "Started in the basement of a little Spanish Baptist church. He's from the Statesville (N.C.) area, and we've been able to bring different churches (to help) each year."

Eades works on collecting donations all year round, and the outpouring of support allows Graffiti to turn its sanctuary into a store full of toys for kids of all ages, refreshments, music and

fun. However, Field reiterates the fact that all of it exists to pry open a door for the Gospel to be shared and a prayer offered with each shopper.

That's the part that also excites Villanueva the most.

"A lot of times we'd have people come in to pray with the shoppers, but this year, the thing I loved most was that everyone that was a prayer counselor was also a member of our church," she said. "It was members, deacons and others who are here praying and sharing Jesus, and that just brings it closer."

It never fails that Villanueva will find at least one shopper during at Graffiti Church's toy sale who tends to stick with the ministry, just like she did over 20 years ago. That's why she believes the event is one of Graffiti's best on-ramps for people to connect deeper and find a loving spiritual family at the church.

"When I see them each year, I'm going down the line checking for their identification, and it's like, 'Hey, how are you doing this year? Are things getting better?'" she said. "When they come here, we know some are still struggling, but we receive them with a cheerful smile, and we always say, 'Graffiti is here for you. It's your church.'

"There's no judgment here. We won't ask you when the last time you came to church was. We just embrace you when you come and say that this is your home."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriel Stovall writes for the North American Mission Board.

Sex abuse response, entity transitions top 2019 stories

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – As Southern Baptists head toward 2020, they close the books on a year of transitions at several national entities, along with decisive action across the Convention to help churches care well for those affected by sexual abuse and harassment. With increased giving to both national missions offerings and the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists are poised to continue their Great Commission advancement efforts.

These 10 news stories, selected by both the editors of Baptist Press and a poll of Southern Baptist state publication editors, represent the most important stories of 2019.

1. Southern Baptists take action to curb sexual abuse in the Convention

Over the past year, Southern Baptists have taken historic steps to address the issue of sex abuse within the Convention.

In February, Southern Baptist leaders [expressed](#) brokenness over the findings of a series of Houston Chronicle articles detailing the plight of victims of sex abuse in SBC churches. The newspaper released a database of 220 individuals who had been convicted or pled guilty to sexual abuse. Greear called the abuse "pure evil" and resolved to mobilize the SBC in "stopping predators in our midst."

After 10 months of work, the Sexual Abuse Advisory Study initiated by Greear issued a 52-page [report](#) it hoped would "spark a movement of healing and reform" within the Convention. The three sections of the report called for the education of SBC churches to understand abuse and its impact, the equipping of SBC churches to care for abuse survivors, and the preparing of SBC churches to prevent abuse.

Southern Baptists overwhelmingly approved bylaw and constitutional changes at the 2020 SBC Annual Meeting to specifically deal with systemic issues the report addressed (more on this in story number five in this list).

In May, the International Mission Board released the [findings](#) of an independent investigation into past allegations of sexual abuse and harassment and began implementing recommended reforms. In June, the mission board [announced](#) the hiring of a full-time senior staff member to oversee sex abuse prevention response efforts. The IMB also said it would involve outside legal counsel when reports of child abuse and sexual harassment were received.

In June, the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, LifeWay Christian Resources and the Sexual Abuse Advisory Study [released](#) an eight-step guide to equip congregations to prevent predatory behavior and to care for survivors. A free training [resource](#) and a [conference](#) with 1,650 registrants were a part of the eight-step plan.

2. Four new presidents elected to lead SBC entities

In a historic year of Southern Baptist transitions, SBC trustee boards elected four new entity presidents.

In February, the trustees of The Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, [elected](#) Adam W. Greenway as the seminary's ninth president. Previously, Greenway had served as dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. At his introductory press conference shortly after the election, he declared his desire to continue the seminary's legacy as the "big-tent seminary of the SBC," where students who may differ on secondary theological issues can unite behind "rigorous scholarship, missions and evangelism."

Less than two months later, the SBC Executive Committee [elected](#) former SBC President Ronnie Floyd to be its new president and CEO. Floyd was in his 33rd year as the pastor of Cross Church, a multi-site church in northwest Arkansas. At his September inauguration, Floyd [urged](#) Southern Baptists forward in prayer, unity and a "hyper-focus on missions" in order to finish their Great Commission task.

In early June, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary trustees [tapped](#) Jamie Dew as the school's ninth president. Previously, he had served as vice president for undergraduate studies and distance learning at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

At a press conference shortly after his election, Dew [outlined](#) a four-part vision for his first year at the seminary, calling Leavell College his "priority number one." He also included enrollment, marketing and communications and building denominational relationships among his top four priorities.

LifeWay Christian Resources trustees [chose](#) Denver church planter Ben Mandrell as the entity's 10th president at a June 28 meeting in Atlanta. Trustees chose the 42-year-old Mandrell to lead LifeWay during a time of historic change. When he was installed as president in late August, Mandrell [stressed](#) the need for unity and teamwork as the entity pushed forward with large-scale changes to how it distributes products.

In November 2018, IMB trustees [selected](#) Paul Chitwood to be the board's 13th president, which meant five new SBC entity heads took over in less than eight months' time. IMB officially [installed](#) Chitwood as president on Feb. 6, 2019.

3. LifeWay closes brick-and-mortar stores in historic shift to new online strategy

In the most significant transition since its 1891 founding, LifeWay Christian Resources [announced](#) the closure of its remaining 170 brick-and-mortar stores in 2019 as part of a shift to a broader digital retail strategy. As part of this announcement, the entity said it would continue to offer a "broad selection of resources" through its website and the LifeWay Customer Service Center.

LifeWay also [announced](#) a number of new strategies to better engage customers in 2019. To compensate for a lack of physical storefronts, LifeWay implemented an Authorized Dealership program, allowing local, independent Christian bookstores to sell LifeWay-branded Bible studies. LifeWay's partnerships also go beyond independent bookstores, extending to established chain stores such as Walmart, Books-a-Million and Mardel Stores.

4. Great Commission Giving surges throughout the Convention

Southern Baptist churches gave generously to fund Great Commission efforts throughout the Convention in 2019.

In October, the North American Mission Board [announced](#) a record \$61.4 million Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. The offering marks the third consecutive year the AAEO hit a record high.

Southern Baptists also [gave](#) their third-highest total in history to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. One hundred percent of the \$157.3 million given through the offering goes directly to missionaries on the international mission field. The offering exceeded the IMB's goal for the 2018-2019 offering by \$2.9 million.

As the SBC Executive Committee's 2018-19 budget came to a close at the end of September, the committee [reported](#) that Cooperative Program giving had exceeded budget for the fifth year in a row. Southern Baptists gave \$196,731,703.44 to Great Commission causes through the Cooperative Program.

Last month, the Executive Committee [reported](#) the strongest first two months of Cooperative Program giving since 2009. Contributions to the Cooperative Program exceeded \$32.5 million, surpassing last year's budgeted contributions through two months by more than \$1 million.

A number of state Baptist conventions reported higher than expected -- even record -- missions giving. Several passed budgets to increase the percentage of their giving going to national Cooperative Program efforts.

5. SBC votes overwhelmingly to approve significant bylaw and constitutional changes

At June's SBC annual meeting in Birmingham, Ala., messengers [approved](#) two amendments to the SBC constitution, which stated that sexual abuse and discrimination based on ethnicity were grounds to declare churches "not in friendly cooperation" with the Convention. The two constitutional amendments will require a second two-thirds vote of messengers at the 2020 meeting in Orlando.

Messengers at the 2019 annual meeting also approved an amendment to the SBC's bylaws to repurpose the Convention's Credentials Committee into a standing committee. This new standing committee will make inquiries and recommendations for actions regarding sexual abuse, racism and other issues that could call into question a church's relationship with the SBC. The bylaw change required a vote at only one annual meeting.

In December, the new standing Credentials Committee [announced](#) the establishment of a portal for reports of a church's alleged departure from Southern Baptist polity, doctrine or practice. Submissions to the portal can be made both online and in print.

6. A flurry of pro-abortion and pro-life laws come before state legislatures nationwide after Supreme Court shifts

As state governments reacted to the perception of ideological change on the U.S. Supreme Court, some state governments made moves to protect unborn life while others made abortion laws more permissive. The moves come as a new [report](#) once again documented a decline in the number of abortions throughout the United States.

In an effort to defend abortion rights amid the Supreme Court's suspected rightward shift, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo [signed](#) into law the Reproductive Health Act, making the state likely the most permissive on abortion in the nation. The controversial law legalized abortion until birth for the mother's "health."

The recent New York pro-abortion law and controversial [comments](#) on abortion by the Virginia governor sparked the [passage](#) of a number of pro-life pieces of legislation in state legislatures, including several "heartbeat" bills that passed in the spring. These heartbeat bills restrict abortion after a fetal heartbeat has been detected.

A bill to protect "abortion survivors" [failed](#) in the U.S. Senate just days after Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam defended the killing of babies who survived abortions.

In May, the Alabama Senate [passed](#) a bill banning abortion in the state, two weeks after the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly in favor of the proposal. Republican Gov. Kay Ivey signed the law the following day. The law is one of the toughest in the nation and makes a doctor performing an abortion guilty of a Class A felony with the possibility of life imprisonment.

In October, California [became](#) the first state to require all of its public universities to offer abortion-inducing pills to on-campus students. With passage of the law, state taxpayers and students will likely underwrite the costs of the abortions.

7. Mohler announced as 2020 presidential nominee

In November, Florida pastor H.B. Charles announced he will [nominate](#) Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President R. Albert Mohler Jr. to be SBC president at the 2020 annual meeting in Orlando, Fla. Shortly thereafter, Mohler said he would accept the nomination, becoming the first confirmed 2020 presidential candidate.

Mohler's nomination comes a year after he celebrated his 25th year as president of SBTS. If elected, Mohler would become the first entity head to simultaneously serve as Convention president since Paige Patterson did so in 1999-2000.

8. NAMB launches 'Who's Your One?' emphasis

The North American Mission Board officially [launched](#) the "Who's Your One?" evangelism initiative in February. The emphasis asks Southern Baptists to pray for and focus on one person

in the hope he or she will come to faith in Christ. NAMB made a free kit available to all churches with resources designed to help them with the initiative.

In August, NAMB [launched](#) a "Who's Your One" nationwide tour to catalyze evangelism within the SBC. The tour began Aug. 11-12 in Fayetteville, N.C., with a Sunday evening rally and an evangelism workshop the next morning. NAMB continued the pattern at later stops of the tour. The rallies include preaching from Johnny Hunt, former SBC president and current NAMB evangelism vice president. Each rally also includes worship led by different groups. The evangelism workshops the following day are designed for pastors, church staff and lay leaders.

The tour traveled to eight states in 2019. According to whosyourone.com, NAMB has planned 21 such events for 2020.

9. SBC president J.D. Greear appoints the most diverse committees in SBC history

In February, SBC president J.D. Greear [named](#) a diverse selection of Southern Baptists to serve on the Convention's Committee on Committees. In total, 34 percent of the influential 68-member committee were female.

The ethnic breakdown of the committee included 50 percent white, 24 percent African American, 15 percent Hispanic, 7 percent Asian and 4 percent other/multi-ethnic. More than half of the appointments came from churches of 250 members or less, and 24 percent from churches of 100 or less.

At the SBC annual meeting in June, messengers [approved](#) 150-plus new or renominated trustees and committee members. Of these new and renominated appointments, nearly a third were female or non-Anglo.

10. Southwestern Seminary removes stained-glass windows commemorating the Conservative Resurgence

In April, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary sent a [letter](#) to donors explaining their decision to remove 40 stained-glass windows commemorating leaders of the SBC Conservative Resurgence from the J.W. MacGorman Chapel.

While the seminary gave no official reason for removing the windows, Jimmy Draper, chairman of the Southwestern Advisory Council, said the decision was under consideration for a year prior to the removal. The J.W. MacGorman Chapel and Performing Arts Center has become a centerpiece of the campus, and Draper believed it was no longer a good place to spotlight a small segment of the school's 111-year history. Draper and his wife Carol Ann were two of the 40 individuals depicted on the windows.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Religious liberty advances in 2019

WASHINGTON, D.C. (BP) – It was a good year for religious liberty in the United States, and the Supreme Court has the opportunity to advance such protection in 2020, say advocates for the country's first freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.

A string of victories for religious freedom delivered by judges and the Trump administration marked 2019, spokesmen for the organizations Becket and Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) told Baptist Press.

"It's been a very positive year on the whole, particularly in court and in terms of federal regulations," said Luke Goodrich, vice president and senior counsel for Becket.

In cases involving the First Amendment's ban on government establishment of religion, "you see courts more willing to treat religion as a natural part of human culture rather than using the establishment clause to eradicate religious symbols or strike down tax exemptions for religious organizations," Goodrich told BP in a phone interview.

"Then on the free-exercise [of religion] side, you see renewed protection for religious student groups and for potential, renewed protection for religious adoption agencies as well."

Jonathan Scruggs, senior counsel for ADF, said, "[Y]ou could really see a change in momentum, particularly in the context of business owner cases, creative professionals."

Courts came out "strongly in favor of people of faith entering into the market place and controlling what they say and preventing the government from really selecting particular religious viewpoints and forcing people to speak views against [their] beliefs," Scruggs told BP in a phone interview. "So there was actually a fair amount of encouraging things that happened that really protected a lot of people to go and live out their faith in the public square."

Meanwhile, 2020 offers hope for further gains.

"There are a very large number of significant religious freedom questions on the doorstep of the Supreme Court, and a major advance for religious freedom would be if the court took several of those cases and continued affirming robust protection for religious freedom for all," Goodrich said.

For Southern Baptists, religious freedom is vital to their mission, said Russell Moore.

"My prayer is that we never take this issue for granted or forget why it matters as we take the Gospel to nation and neighbor," said Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC).

"Throughout history, Baptists have been known for carrying the Gospel all over the world and for defending full religious freedom for everyone," he told BP in written comments. "Those two commitments are related. We press for religious liberty because we believe no law and no government can compel the conscience. And we contend for religious liberty for the sake of the free spread of the Gospel. There are many efforts underway both in courts and Congress, some giving cause for hope and others for concern."

Among the 2019 court rulings counted by most religious freedom advocates as victories in establishment clause cases were:

- The Supreme Court decided 7-2 in a June decision a 40-foot cross on public land in Bladensburg, Md., that serves as a memorial to World War I soldiers is constitutional.
- A three-judge panel of the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago ruled unanimously in March the long-standing ministerial housing allowance does not violate the establishment clause.

Regarding the free exercise of religion, court decisions regarded by religious liberty supporters as wins included:

- A panel of the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis ruled 2-1 in August that a federal judge wrongly dismissed the free-speech and free-exercise-of-religion claims of Minnesota filmmakers Carl and Angel Larsen, who refuse to create videos of same-sex weddings because they believe marriage is only between a man and a woman.
- The Arizona Supreme Court decided in September the city of Phoenix violated the freedom of speech and religion of artists Joanna Duka and Breanna Koski, who own Brush & Nib Studio and decline to create custom invitations for gay weddings.
- The Kentucky Supreme Court ruled unanimously in October in favor of Hands On Originals and its owner, Blaine Adamson, who declined to print T-shirts for a gay pride festival.
- A federal judge decided in September the University of Iowa violated the speech, association and free-exercise-of-religion rights of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA by barring the campus ministry from requiring its leaders to be Christians.
- Also in September, a federal judge blocked the state of Michigan from canceling the state-approved contract of St. Vincent Catholic Charities to provide foster care and adoption services because the agency refused to certify and place children in the homes of same-sex couples as a result of its belief that marriage is only between a man and a woman.

On the regulatory front, among the Trump administration's pro-religious freedom regulations issued in 2019 were:

- The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a rule in May that provides for the enforcement of 25 federal laws protecting the conscience rights of health-care

workers and institutions. A federal judge, however, nullified the regulation in November.

- Also in May, HHS proposed a regulation to rescind an Obama-era rule that required doctors to perform gender-transition procedures and abortions.
- The Department of Labor announced in August a proposed rule clarifying that churches and other religious organizations that act as federal contractors may hire and fire based on their sincerely held beliefs without fear of being penalized by the government.

“They’ve made some substantial contributions in terms of the guidance documents in protecting religious liberty,” Scruggs said of the Trump administration’s actions. “So we see it as a very significant step forward, and we’re hopeful to see what the administration continues to do.”

In a legislative victory in December, Congress approved and President Trump signed into law legislation that includes language rescinding a section of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 that required houses of worship and other nonprofits to pay a 21 percent tax on such employee benefits as parking and transportation.

The fight for religious freedom continues on these fronts, as well as others – such as gay rights legislation that could undermine freedom of religion and court cases regarding the freedom of churches and other religious bodies to govern themselves and the authority of a state to require churches to pay for potentially abortion-causing drugs through their health insurance plans.

The last year was not without discouragements, Goodrich said.

“[Y]ou continue to see some state and local governments or government officials that are willing to treat traditional religious beliefs about human life, like in the context of abortion, or about human sexuality, like in the context of same sex marriage, . . . as anathema and try to punish those,” he told BP.

The Supreme Court will rule in at least one major case in this term and is expected to decide in 2020 whether to review appeals of lower-court opinions in some important religious freedom cases.

The justices heard oral arguments in October in a case regarding whether the classification “sex” in federal civil rights law includes “sexual orientation” and “gender identity.” The ERLC and other organizations contend interpreting “sex” discrimination to cover gay and transgender rights would create conflicts for churches, religious schools and charities, and individual believers.

Among the cases before the Supreme Court, religious freedom advocates hope the justices will agree to rule on an appeal out of Washington state in the clash between religious liberty and sexual liberty. Barronelle Stutzman, a florist who declined to design flowers for a same-sex

wedding, has asked the high court to hear her appeal a second time after the state Supreme Court twice ruled she was guilty of illegal discrimination.

Lower courts have provided divergent rulings on cases involving wedding vendors who abide by their religious convictions and refuse to provide their services for same-sex ceremonies.

These business owners and artists are “trying to love and help people in their community and their respective clients regardless of who they are, but there are just some messages that they cannot celebrate and promote,” Scruggs told BP. “And that’s what these cases are all about.

“Eventually the U.S. Supreme Court -- and really now -- needs to weigh in on this issue and gain clarity for the entire country. It doesn’t make sense for religious business owners in one part of the country to be protected and not in the other.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Strode is Washington bureau chief for Baptist Press. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists' concerns nationally and globally.

First Person: Peace in the sovereignty of God

LEBANON, TN (BP) – My son did not live one more day than God planned; and he did not live one day less either.

This truth is one I keep returning to each day as my family and I grieve the death of my son, Kaleb. He was 15-years-old. Trials and afflictions marked his life.

Into the crucible

He was born 10 weeks premature with one of his kidneys covered with cysts. After two months, the doctors believed he was big enough to have surgery to remove that kidney. Once they removed the bad kidney, he could live a normal life with one kidney. As first-time parents, we felt somewhat relieved that the nightmare first two months would soon give way to going home and living a normal life with our newborn boy.

Everything appeared normal at first after the surgery. But that soon changed. His body was swelling and his blood pressure was rising. Something was wrong. After an ultrasound and an MRI, the surgeon came a delivered news to us no parent ever imagines they will hear, "There's

been a mistake. We not only took the bad kidney, but we accidentally took the good kidney as well." Everything else he said was a blur.

Kaleb's survival was uncertain. But he did. He defied so many odds. For the next two years, he received dialysis and waited for a transplant. He got his transplant just after turning 2 years old. His mother, my wife, was miraculously his donor. They had ruled her as a non-match just two years earlier.

Written in His book

While we waited for Kaleb to get a transplant, we were coming to grips with the fact that life would be different forever. Kidney transplants -- if he ever got one -- don't last forever. He would need multiple transplants if he lived to old age.

These thoughts can lead you to a dark place. They can grip you with fear about future events that haven't even occurred. Questions concerning his lifespan and quality of life assaulted our minds. Then God led me to a verse that became rock-solid foundation under our feet.

In Psalm 139:16, David writes, "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

Before Kaleb existed in the womb, he existed in the mind of God. From the foundation of the world, God determined that Kaleb Reed would be born on March 8th, 2004. Not only is this true, but He wrote the days of Kaleb's life in His book, before one single day came to pass. God wrote the days of his life in His book and He didn't write it in pencil.

This verse highlights the sovereignty of God over our lives. Nothing catches God off guard. God meticulously planned each day of Kaleb's life in such a way that He received maximum glory. Kaleb's kidney being accidentally removed is a tragedy from a human perspective, but unquestionably a part of God's larger design. God did not turn His face from us or make a mistake. This is the God who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11).

This verse gave our family immeasurable peace. We did not have to live consumed by "what-ifs" or worry that surgeons robbed Kaleb of opportunity. God created his life, sustained his life, and planned his life. Chance played no role.

Back into the fire

After Kaleb's transplant, he lived a somewhat normal life when measured by his standard. Normal for Kaleb would compare to riding a roller-coaster without a seat belt for most. He went to school, played video games, and took part in sports, but he dealt with many kinds of side effects from medications to keep his kidney from rejecting. He suffered from respiratory

disease that landed him in the hospital several times per year. But compared to his first and last two years, his middle 11 years were stable.

Then in October 2017, everything changed again. Kaleb got fungal meningitis. He had a stroke, lost his motor skills and ability to speak and was wheelchair bound most of the next two years.

On December 1st, 2019, his sick lungs could not recover, and his body had suffered long enough. He left the sufferings of this present time and stepped into glory. Absent from the body, he is now present with the Lord.

My wife commented on our first morning without him, "Today is the first day of Kaleb's whole life that he wasn't in a sick body." He is healthy now, and will never taste sickness again.

It is all written in His book. God determined both the date of Kaleb's conception and his death before one day ever came to pass. God fashioned and formed his life and his every experience. He planned it in love and with wisdom.

Peace in our pain

Since his death, my wife and I have held tightly to Jesus, each other and our daughters. We cry and laugh a little -- sometimes a lot -- each day. It is hard to lose a child. Caring for him governed our lives for over 15 years. It embedded habits and routines into us that are still firing.

We miss him. There's no getting around that. But we likewise rejoice in his restoration. He loved Jesus and now beholds Him with unveiled face. That delights our hearts.

Kaleb lived over 15 years. I'm tempted to add "only" in that previous sentence, but that implies his life was less than the imaginary guarantee we think we deserve. God doesn't owe any of us a single day. Each day is a gift, not a right. It is a deposit, not a withdrawal. Kaleb lived exactly the length of time God determined in eternity past. Nothing was stolen from him. Everything was grace.

There is tremendous peace that accompanies trust in the sovereignty of God. Kaleb did not live one day longer than God had chosen for him from the beginning of time. And he didn't live one day less either. God planned his life. He ran his race. He fought the good fight of faith. He endured to the end. And he has received his crown. That peace guards our hearts and minds in the midst of our grief.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erik Reed is the founding and lead pastor of The Journey Church in Lebanon, Tenn.