

A change of seasons

by Tim Patterson

PLYMOUTH, MI – Fall as a youngster was not fun. Maybe I should clarify that. Before I started school, Fall was a great time of year and filled with more fun than a boy should be allowed. At the first breeze of cool air following a long hot West Texas summer I began to get excited about the days and weeks that lay ahead. I knew that within just a few days all the leaves would begin to fall from the elm trees that lined the streets of Kermit and I would literally have piles of fun for weeks.

My dad would rake the fallen tree clothing into enormous mountains that would be strategically located on our property. These huge heaps of dying deciduous delights were much more than decaying leaves, but they were the very building materials for houses, burrows and caves. They also made a dandy bed for an afternoon nap.

As soon as the seasons began to give way to the other, I knew that Halloween and all its trappings were waiting just around the corner. My Aunt Wilma's famous popcorn balls would soon be sticking to my teeth and palate, and my siblings and I would be happily trying to pry them loose. More candy than anyone should eat in several years would be gathered and consumed in a matter of days, and on some occasions hours.

We didn't have enough money to buy costumes at the grocery store for Trick-or-Treating, so we always dressed as hobos. All that was needed was a pair of my dad's work pants, an old shirt, his boots and some of mom's makeup. We could have developed our own line of clothing called Hobos R Us. However, one year we dressed my sister as an angel. A nightgown and a halo made from a coat hanger and some tin foil was all that was needed. She already looked like an angel, but only acted like one when she was asleep.

Hot on the tail of Spook Week was Thanksgiving. This was more of an adult time, but the food was great and getting together with all the cousins was fun for the most part. One cousin always bloodied my nose, and each time he said it was an accident. He got his later in life.

Then of course came the most glorious holiday of all. The holy grail of holidays. The Mecca of merriment. Christmas! The holiday for which all the rest of the year waited. All of this was part of the excitement I felt as a 5 or 6-year-old when the fall season began, but all of that changed when I started to wade through the trenches of school. To say that I had an intense dislike for school would be to understate the fact.

I was a severe asthmatic and spent many weeks every year in the hospital or at home in bed, and subsequently I had gaping holes in my education. These holes created frustration and eventually an attitude of despondence, and helped me form my dislike for school. The fact that I was dyslexic did not help matters. As I grew older when the fall winds began to blow, they would not trigger a rush of excited anticipation, but a cold chill of despair and gloom. I actually

came to the point that I hated the fall. Just the sound of rustling leaves stirred up dark emotions and a fearful foreboding.

After trudging through school year after school year I finally graduated and went on to college. Learning was still difficult for me, but I eventually began to fill in the gaps and holes that had plagued me, and came to the point of enjoying the educational process. Today, when the cool fall winds begin to blow, I have a completely different attitude toward the seasonal changes. The coolness, the colors, and the season of gatherings warms my soul instead of chilling it.

I love the smell of fallen leaves after an afternoon rain. The colors of the changing leaves, especially those in the Carolina Mountains, and here in the beautiful state of Michigan are candy for the eyes and sweetness to my senses. The relief from the sweltering summer heat is life giving. I love the Fall!

Isn't it strange how the things we once despised are now so cherished, and the things that we once cherished are now looked at with disdain? If you had asked me when I was six years old if I liked the fall my answer would have been a resounding "Yes!", and yet if you had asked me that question just a few years later, I would have responded with a definite "No." Now, if I were asked if I like the fall the countenance of my face would answer without a word being spoken. As with the changing of the seasons the hearts and lives of people change. The things we once loved, we now despise and the things we despised are cherished. How can that be? How can people be so radically different? Check out these verses:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

II Corinthians 5:17

To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: 2 A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted; 3 A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; 4 A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; 5 A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; 6 A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; 7 A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; 8 A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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.

BSCM sees growth despite COVID-19

by Tony Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – Good news! During 2019-2020, we saw new church affiliations and new church plants in spite of COVID-19. We want to thank you for your daily prayers, your faithful contributions and help.

1. New Churches

9 total new churches were, or soon, will be added to our convention

4 new affiliations

- Trinity Baptist Church, Detroit, Pastor Maurice Flaniken
- Chapel Pointe Church, Hudsonville, Pastor Joel Wayne
- Love Ministries, Detroit, Pastor Charles Stubbs
- Venture Church, Howell, Pastor Shea Prisk (application coming soon)

5 new church plants

- Rhiza Church, Ann Arbor, Pastor Tito Diaz (SEND/BSCM)
- Trails Church, Farmington Hills, Pastor Phillip Box (SEND/BSCM)
- Journey Church, Gaylord, Pastor Donn Broeker (Pines Association)
- Cross and Anchor Church, Detroit, Pastor Josh Bowers (SEND/BSCM)
- CrossLife Community Church, Bay City, Pastor Mick Schatz (SEND/BSCM)

2. Recent In-Person Church Plant Assessment

Our last in-person church planter assessment took place on November 11-12, 2019. We saw six men or couples approved as church planting missionaries. Some will apprentice before launching the church plant.

- Malcolm & Maisha Griswold, Detroit
- David Clark, Detroit
- Jon & Chelsea Hackett, Ann Arbor
- Bryan & Tonia Kent, Mason
- Jason & Amanda Aaron, Monroe
- Jamison & Chelsea Bebiak, Owosso

3. Future Virtual Church Plant Assessments

The first Detroit Virtual Assessment is taking place September 29-30 with Nathan & Alison Sharpe of Greater Grand Rapids being assessed. Simultaneously, an additional 12 men, or couples, are being prepared for their assessments and future launches:

- 1 Grand Rapids area
- 1 Flint area
- 2 below the bridge area
- 1 Michigan Bay area
- 1 Michigan Thumb area
- 6 in the Greater Detroit area

4. Six-Month Send Network Training

After passing assessment, 8 church planters collaborated with peers, for six-months, refining their vision and strategy for launching, planting and growing a new church that will start new churches.

- Tim Shrader & Darren Greer led church planters Ricky Pearson and Rick Marcus to successfully complete their training earlier this year, below the bridge.
- Ken Nether & Tony Lynn led church planters Bryan Kent, Torion Bridges, Jon Hackett, Jason Aaron, David Clark and Malcolm Griswold to successfully complete their training earlier this year, in Plymouth.

5. Coaches for Planters

We are grateful for Dave Ferraro who matches coaches to planters in Send Detroit and Dan Russell who matches coaches to planters in Send Network Michigan throughout the year. Planters benefit from having two conversations per month with a minister with whom they can “talk things out” concerning ministry and life. Coaches listen attentively, ask questions and allow the planter to discover what the Holy Spirit is leading him to do in his circumstance and context.

6. Send Network Orientation

Twice each year, we provide an occasion for planters to participate in a nationwide orientation where they fellowship with brothers sharing their calling throughout North America. The upcoming events are scheduled for:

- Tuesday, November 10, 2020
- Tuesday, March 16, 2021
- Tuesday, November 9, 2021

7. Planter Care

The Send City Missionary, 6 church planting catalysts and I continue our quest to discover, develop and deploy church planters throughout the region, while caring for almost 50 church planters somewhere in between their year-of-preparation to their fifth year of church planting.

The state convention and the Send Network regularly bless the planters with expressions of love on your behalf.

Would you, please, pray for us by name one time per week during your daily devotions?

- Wayne Parker, Detroit Send City Missionary
- Ken Nether, Church Planting Catalyst
- Barry Martin, Church Planting Catalyst
- Tim Shrader, Church Planting Catalyst
- Matt Thompson, Church Planting Catalyst
- Eric Stewart, Church Planting Catalyst
- Darren Greer, Church Planting Catalyst
- Tony Lynn, State Director of Missions

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.

Pastor Appreciation month

by Mike Durbin

PLYMOUTH, MI – Ministry is challenging! Always. It's safe to say that for most pastors there has never been a time in ministry more challenging than 2020. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, pastors are leading through social unrest, racial injustice, political tension, economic downturn, natural and man-made disasters, unemployment, and community disruption caused by the closing and opening of businesses and schools.

It has been a challenging season for pastoral ministry. That's why it's especially important that we express our appreciation to them. October is Pastor Appreciation Month. It's a wonderful opportunity for us to let our pastor and his family know that we are grateful for them.

While talking about this year, one pastor captured how many may feel about 2020 when he said: "Life at church is weird." Preaching to a camera in an empty auditorium is weird - so too is preaching when half of the seats are roped off and people are wearing face masks. Things that were once so natural - like greeting one another with a handshake or hug - now feel awkward.

A pastor recently told me about a guest who decided not to return to the church because there were too many people shaking hands and hugging. Finding just the right balance in a world of opinions, preferences, comfort zones and conflicting information has been and continues to be challenging to say the least.

In some circles today, the church is described as “non-essential.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The overwhelming majority of our churches did stop having in-person worship services for a season to flatten the spread of COVID-19. It was done out of love for our church families and the people in our communities, but we never stopped sharing the Gospel or ministering. Despite the language used by some, the church never stopped being essential.

The speed at which pastors and churches turned to online platforms to share the Gospel and connect with people was amazing. So too were the new and creative ways churches found to serve the communities around them. Below is just a small sampling of the ways that pastors led churches to demonstrate the love of Christ during these unprecedented times:

When several dams broke in the Midland area, more than 11,000 people were affected. Because of COVID-19, Emmanuel Baptist Church was not using her building for worship services. A local shelter was threatened by the flood waters, so the church opened their facility to the men and women of the Open Door (shelter to the homeless, hungry and hurting) to have a place to live. The church was out of the building, but the people of the shelter were in. Pastor Sam Hamilton says, “It is a pleasure to be here and deal with some precious people.”

Sunrise Baptist Church immediately reached out to the community to help flood victims. Lead pastor Philip Miles said that the church mobilized on day one to help people. “We’ve had crews that have been tearing out drywall, getting furniture out of basements, and really doing the hard work of helping get people back into their homes.” Sunrise housed the Michigan Baptist Disaster Relief team under the direction of State Director, Bob Kiger. Disaster Relief volunteers emptied basements of debris affected by the flood and sprayed to stop the spread of mold and mildew. They prayed for and served people as they worked.

Mission Strategist David Roberts said about the flood, “In the midst of a pandemic, this happens. How do you prepare for it? You can’t. ...We need to respond in love, meet people’s needs and share the Gospel.” That’s exactly what the churches of Bay Association did as they served their community in the name of Christ.

Thousands of people in Michigan were laid off as a result of the pandemic. Grayling Baptist Church partnered with the Crawford County Food Commission to distribute a semi-truck load of food weekly. Pastor David Longstaff said, “We’re not offering just food. We’re offering food for the soul. We are excited to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our community.” Between 400 and 700 people are served weekly.

Several churches across the state, Tecumseh Missionary, Hillsdale, Harmony Jackson and the Greater Detroit Baptist Association are distributing semi-truck loads of dairy boxes to their communities. The boxes include 2 gallons of milk, 1 quart of chocolate milk, 1 quart of strawberry milk, cottage cheese, cream cheese and French onion dip.

Out of the blue one day, Pastor Nathan Norman of the Orchard Church got a call from the local school superintendent. Many schools in the area were planning a “drive-through” graduation or satellite graduations, but the Kingsley school superintendent wanted a physical graduation and he had a creative idea of how they could do it.

The school had a long history of optional baccalaureate services for graduating seniors. The idea he presented was simple - if the Orchard Church could sponsor the service, they could also use it to pass out diplomas. It would be a joint “Baccalaureate/Graduation” event recognizing this significant milestone in the lives of graduating students. It was a special moment for the students and their families and just one of the many ways that churches are serving their communities in the name of Christ.

Most of our churches have opened their buildings for worship now. Worship looks and feels different than it did a few months ago, but Michigan Baptist pastors are leading through these challenging days. Let’s make sure we express our deep and abiding appreciation to them for the many ways they advance God’s Kingdom through preaching and serving.

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.

The bright future at Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center

by Mick Schatz

ROSCOMMON, MI – As you are already aware, COVID-19 and all its shutdowns have been devastating to Bambi Lake. The events since March through the end of 2020 have been cancelled. The largest portion of the revenue for Bambi Lake is realized from summer events which we did not have this year. We have been very grateful for the success of the

campground, single church events and private guests that have brought in more than \$32,000 in revenue. In the Gift and Snack Shop, an additional \$6,000 in gross sales has been a blessing to us. Although this may not seem like a lot of money in comparison to most summers, it has been an encouragement in our nearly closed-down state.

It has been a time of new challenges as the time available for repairs and upkeep of the facilities has been great, but the limited funds to do these same activities has made it a struggle.

The final painting of the interior of Cabin 2, along with new tile in one bathroom has completed the renovation of that cabin. There's still a lot of work to be done in the beach area, including repairing and painting the docks. Seawall embankments have been added to prevent washing away the shore along the area of the Booyah waterslide. A large amount of sand has been added and spread on the beach area. With the limited finances and the restrictions of gatherings, the decision was made to postpone the new well for Pinegrove and the Beach House until spring.

With the volunteer labor of the Chilton Builders and Campers on Mission, Chalet 2 renovations began Labor Day Weekend. We are happy to report at this time that Chalet 2 is about 75% completed. Volunteer labor has been a critical part of this - from new ceilings and interior lighting to new steps for the side entrance.

We are excited for the future for Bambi. We are taking steps to decrease expenses through the winter months by closing and winterizing all the outbuildings. That takes six buildings and their utilities off the utility bills for the winter. With this savings, we feel confident that keeping the lodge open is a good move. It will allow winter retreats to continue, as well as preventing the potential damage from shutting down a complex system of water and heating that is in the lodge.

The outlook for 2021 summer events is promising as the it is already being booked by campers, schools, churches and other organizations who have come to love Bambi. With our regular summer events already on the calendar, the summer should be very busy. Volunteer help for grounds, housekeeping and kitchen staffing will be essential in keeping costs down during our recovery from the financial struggles of 2020.

God has been faithful. New people are regularly coming and discovering the priceless peace of our camp. We are working hard. God continues to bless us with volunteers who are willing to bring their time, skills and talents to make a difference here. We expect the future to be bright as God continues to bless Bambi Lake.

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.

Cheesy cliché or Kingdom cooperation?

by Seth Springs

WATERFORD, MI – I find an odd joy in cheesy clichés. Without cheesy clichés, how would we know what to do “when life gives us lemons?” How would we relax without someone telling us to “let our hair down?” How would we accomplish anything without knowing “you miss 100% of the shots you don’t take?” It would surely be an “uphill battle.” But, there is one cheesy cliché that I’m finding to be deeply biblical and accurate when used to describe fruitful Christian community:

“Teamwork makes the dream work.”

I’ve heard it and you’ve heard it. But, our little league coach wasn’t the first to say it. Listen to what King Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 4:9...

“Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts.”

According to God’s Word, teamwork really does make the dreamwork. And, this is bigger than a little league baseball game. It’s bigger than the World Series. We’ve been invited onto the field of God’s mission, to make known the Good News about Jesus and to make disciples of all nations. (Mt. 28) Teamwork, or Kingdom Cooperation, is key to carrying out the Great Commission. This is why Jesus sent His disciples out in teams (Lk 10:1) and taught them to pray for more teammates (Lk 10:2). This is why Paul coached the Philippian church to play as a team saying, “make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”(Phil 2:2) It’s a beautiful thing when the Church works together to see God glorified, disciples made, and lives transformed by the Gospel. Teamwork makes the dream work.

While unity is at a premium during this season, I’m amazed at how God is bringing together different people with different stories and situations to participate in His mission. Over the last few months, I’ve had the privilege of seeing a 35-year employee of General Motors use his first official day of retirement to serve at our totally free community car wash. At the same event, a young couple spent their anniversary loving neighbors in the name of Jesus. A police officer has come straight from his overnight shift to run our sound board on Sunday mornings. A young mom and others have spent time each week serving with a local community organization. Another young lady has currently leveraged her life to love a beautiful little boy through foster care. Retired teachers have used their time and resources to love and serve young families. A young man even moved from Alabama to be a part of a missionary team. And, don’t forget the normal, everyday people who have left church every Sunday to live as everyday missionaries all week long. Together as the local church, these people serve and sacrifice, give and go, so that lives will be transformed by the Gospel. This is more than a cheesy cliché. This is Kingdom Cooperation.

As I consider God's Word and see others put in the work, I want to be on the team and in the game! I want to, along with these teammates, be a part of something bigger than myself, connecting people to Jesus and seeing lives transformed by the Gospel. The question is, do we believe that teamwork really makes the dream work? Will we team up with the local church and be a part of what God wants to do in our community?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Springs serves in Waterford, MI with his wife Taylor and daughters Layla and Lily. Seth is a church planter and one of the pastors of Transformation Church Waterford.

Let the children lead

by Stan Parker

LANSING, MI – Recently, Nyla, a five-year-old child had what appeared to be a typical discussion regarding her upcoming birthday with her mother. While the discussion was initially viewed as typical, the results were far from it. When Nyla was asked by her mother what she wanted to do for her birthday, Nyla replied, "Let's bring all of the homeless to our house and feed them." Her mom was somewhat surprised by the response from Nyla, but was moved by her compassion. Therefore, Nyla's mom stated, "I don't think we can do that, but we can help to feed them."

Nyla's mom then searched for a special food pantry to support the greater Lansing community. A friend of Nyla's mother, and a friend of Faith Fellowship recommended the Faith Pantry.

As we remember Matthew 19:14, "But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Nyla's desire and determination to celebrate beyond herself is an example of the powerful impact of a child's compassion at a young age. Nyla's consideration of others who are less fortunate is a by-product of the training she has been given by her parents. It is such a joy to see we still have parents who are willing to follow the wisdom of God's word as recorded in Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it".

As Nyla and her family delivered the food to the Faith Pantry, their little big and smiles displayed joy as they unloaded their food donation. When asked why she wanted to give food to the homeless she responded that she really wanted to help them. Nyla wanted to show them

they were loved. The kind and gentle spirit of Nyla needs to be taught to all of God's children and the world we live in will be a better place. It is such a joy even in the midst of a pandemic to see how children can focus beyond themselves and show care and concern for others. Let the children lead us to continue to model the love of Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Stan Parker, Pastor of Faith Fellowship Baptist Church Lansing, current President of the Michigan African American Fellowship, and married to Charlotte.

Message In Loving Kindness

by James R. Ellsworth

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go and come back. And tomorrow I will give it," when you have it with you.

Proverbs 3:27-28 NKJV

LENDALE, MI – Earlier in 2020 when the Covid-19 came on the scene in Michigan many churches shut the doors and shut down their help ministries and outreach. But Brian Jones, Pastor of Tecumseh Missionary Baptist Church (in Lendale Association), received an email from a non-profit organization out of Blissfield, MI. Hope and Encouragement for Humanity (HEH) was offering free milk on Friday afternoons to other nonprofits. The HEH says that by providing free milk to local food pantries, churches, homeless shelters, senior citizen programs, and individuals in need, God's love and hope will be spread while providing a valuable resource and outreach to the community.

Later, other Michigan churches heard about the free milk distribution and joined the effort. Pastor Jones stated that, "We are getting a better handle on the distribution." One of the unexpected ways the milk distribution has helped the church's ministry during this difficult time is that people within the church have searched for ways to be evangelistic, but were unsure about how to go about it. When people picking up the boxes ask about the free milk/dairy distribution, they are able to say it came from Tecumseh Missionary Baptist Church, and what the church means to them. They are now taking the Gospel message in Word and deed to their neighbors.

HEH allows nonprofit organizations to come and pick up gallons of milk or dairy boxes for free to distribute in their communities. According to Becky Koppell, Hillsdale Baptist Church Food

Bank director one church drives to pick up 160 boxes a week to give through community food bank, This is approximately 1 ½ hour drive one way. Koppell states, “The milk helps us give a personal touch to the food boxes every week. We can pray with the folks, and even share a birthday wish with some of them from time to time”. The Hillsdale food bank has increased two times in size over the last year especially since the COVID quarantine when many people lost their jobs.

Central and Lendale Associations of Baptist churches often work together to help each other out. Pastor Elton Spurgeon of Thornhill Baptist Church in Lendale and Pastor Donald Anderson of Jackson, MI, were getting their milk distribution order through another church. Soon they caught the vision of sharing with their communities, and now both churches have to pick up their own orders due to such large orders. Between the two churches they are now passing out 75+ boxes of milk. Each box contains, 2 gallons of 2% milk, 2 bottles of 16 oz chocolate milk, 2 bottles of strawberry milk, 1 container of cottage cheese, 1 container of cream cheese, 1 container of sour cream, and 1 container of French onion chip dip – for an approximate value of \$15.00 to \$20.00.

Pastor Anderson reports from his church that even through the pandemic. “We have had a few visitors in our church and now at least one of them is signing up for the boxes every week.”

New Day Baptist Church in Adrian is also distributing the milk boxes. This church is a bilingual Spanish/English church without a pastor right now. The head deacon, Jose, and his wife order the milk every week and are using it not only to feed some of the congregation, but also to reach some of their neighbors. Jose said that he put information about the church in the boxes before giving them to the neighbors in case they don’t have a church home.

Joe Taysk, Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, has had recent surgery on his hand. His wife receives the boxes, and shares them with those in their congregation. Pastor and Mrs. Taysk said, “It has been a big blessing to our folks.”

Chuck Turner, Associational Mission Strategist for Lendale and Central Associations, shared with Harmony Baptist Church Jackson the information of the free milk distribution being a great ministry tool. Chuck was the pastor of Harmony Baptist in 1995 when the Food bank was started. Now the food bank is part of the DNA of the church, and part of the missional mind of the church. Harmony is now ordering 200 boxes a week. But they are going beyond just that. Approximately once a month the church partners with HEH and others in the Jackson, MI area to bring the milk to the people. It cost the church \$1,000 for the semi truck fuel to deliver and keep the milk cold during the distribution. In August, they ordered two 2 semi-trucks from HEH to distribute. That’s \$2,000 the church is investing to give away milk free (about 4,000 dairy boxes) to their community.

Between the Central and the Lendale Baptist churches, they are distributing to their communities over 500 boxes of milk and dairy products, not including the semi-truck loads. The churches had the vision to partner HEH free milk and dairy distribution project as a great

outreach and help to their communities. They say they are sending God's Message In Loving Kindness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James (Jim) Ellsworth is a member of Tecumseh Missionary Baptist Church in Tecumseh Michigan. Jim has been married to Connie Michell for 13 years. He is a member and an endorsed Chaplain with NAMB of the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief.

A daring endeavour

by Stefan Ghinescu

WARREN, MI – Golgotha Romanian Baptist Church in Warren, Michigan is a small ethnic church, with people coming together for worship from a multitude of cities in the Detroit metro area. They are scattered during the week, and gather for worship on Thursdays and Sundays.

The pandemic lockdown has brought the church life to a standstill. Early in March, they canceled all in-person meetings, and switched to online meetings and streaming. One person in the church was diagnosed positive with COVID-19 and fell terribly sick. It was a wakeup call to remind us how fragile life is and how we depend on God, the giver of life. The church was quick to start interceding for the sister, but for a while they thought that God might call her home. Yet, on Easter morning, God answered their prayers and she came out of the coma, and quickly started to recover. The church saw it as a display of God's rich mercy to unworthy sinners.

In May they resumed in-person services limiting it to one public meeting per week, observing the guidelines regarding masks and distancing, while still using online meetings for other activities. These special circumstances limited severely the worship and fellowship they were used to. Nevertheless, the last Sunday of August was a special day of celebration for the church. For them as Baptists, baptism is a distinctive reason to celebrate. Jesus said that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. They rejoiced with the angels to witness the testimony of six young people who made public professions of their repentance and faith. For the church, they were glad to see the young generation coming to faith and following the Lord.

As an ethnic church scattered all around, the evangelistic impact in the community is significantly limited. But the youth are the most effective link to the non-Romanian community. They speak English without the accent of their parents, understand the culture, and are able to relate and communicate better. The church has been on a quest of integrating English in their

mostly Romanian language services. They train their youth to instill in their conscience that though they are in this world, and called to minister to it, they are not OF this world.

Pastor Stefan Ghinescu says, “It is of utmost importance to remember that God, our Creator and Redeemer is the One who defines who we are and how we should live.” He adds that “ they try to teach and to show living examples of a godly character, which we pray will take shape in them. It is a daring endeavor and we give God all praise for what we are able to do for his Name.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefan Ghinescu is the senior pastor of Golgotha Romanian Baptist Church in Warren, Michigan, since 2013. He is a graduate of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Bucharest, Romania, and of Western Seminary, Sacramento, California, and has been in the pastoral ministry since 1999. He has been married to Claudia since 1998 and together they have two children.

Church starting in a small town

by Jason Aaron

MONROE, MI – When God calls someone to start a new church, it’s not always in a big city or popular destination. Pastor Jason Aaron and his family were called from Winchester, Kentucky to plant in the small town of Monroe. Pastor Aaron says starting a church in Monroe was never on his radar, but this is where they came because this is where God called them.

Aaron adds that the beauty of living and ministering in a small town is that everything is close by including the people. This allows Aaron to reach people from all walks of life.

The pastor says, “Church planting is one of the most humbling things I have ever done.” The process has brought him to learning to trust in God instead of in his own abilities. He adds, “This has been the most challenging undertaking in my life.”

Patience, humility, dependence, faithfulness. Aaron says genuine family has begun to develop at their Outpost Community Church, and that he sees people loving one another and spending time together away from Sunday morning meetings.

Aaron asks for prayer. “We really want to see a movement of God’s hand in our city and it starts in our own hearts.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason is the Preaching Pastor at Outpost Community Church where he also serves as an elder. Jason went through a two-year Pastoral Internship at Parkway Baptist Church in Bardstown, KY from 2015-2016 under Pastor James Carroll. Upon completing that, he accepted a Church Planting Residency at First Presbyterian Trenton under Pastor Aaron Carr in January 2017 and completed in December 2018. Jason completed his M.Div. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in May 2018.

Talking politics in church

by Dan Russell

SOUTHGATE, MI – Please allow me to touch on the touchy subject of talking politics in church. I will avoid the divisive issues of party partisanship or promoting a particular candidate, but I will give five suggestions of how Biblical principles can guide us as we talk politics among our fellow believers in our church family.

1) Put Jesus before politics

by talking as much, or more, about Him as you do about your political views or candidates. Matthew 6:33 “But *seek first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

2) Speak the truth in love

by agreeing to disagree without being disagreeable. This will keep your political conversations from interfering with your relationships with people. Ephesians 4:15 “...but, *speaking the truth in love*, may you grow up in all things into Him Who is the Head, Christ...”

3) Be passionate, but not emotional

by coolly, calmly, and quietly expressing yourself without getting angry. Listen as much as you talk, and don't lose your temper. James 1:19 “So then, my beloved brethren, let everyone *be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...*”

4) Don't criticize in order to legitimize

by tearing down another person in order to make yourself, or your candidate, look better. Critiquing issues is one thing, but criticizing a person is another. Ephesians 4:29 "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for *building another up*, that it may impart grace to the hearers."

5) Be reminded, and remind others, that God is in control

by realizing that God will have His way in the world of human government, no matter who wins a given election.

This will be even more true as we move closer to the end of time.

Revelation 17:17 "For God has put it into their hearts *to accomplish His purpose* by agreeing to hand over to the beast their royal authority, until God's words are fulfilled."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dan Russell is the Ministry Director for the Southeastern Baptist Association of Michigan. Dan has been in pastoral ministry for 40 years and currently serves as the Executive Pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Southgate. He is also the Send Network Coaching Coordinator for church planters in Greater Michigan, as well as being on the NAMB Assessment Team for prospective church planters.

Milestone for Michigan Campers On Mission

by Cindy Truesdale

ROSCOMMON, MI – After a year of hard work and prayers, Michigan Campers on Mission (MI COM) was officially organized. It was a busy three months. Organizers held meetings at Bambi Lake Baptist Camp to discuss the constitution and bylaws, and to vote for an Executive Board. On July 31st, a ceremonial event was held to commemorate the milestone. National COM Coordinators, Jerry and Renee McGovern, came from Florida; Region 4 COM Representatives, Don and Janice Kragness, came from Illinois; and BSCM Pastor Tim Patterson was there to offer support and give the charge. There are currently 32 members of MI COM, and continued growth is expected as people begin to hear about the organization and its mission.

During the month of August, a request from Pastor Stan Parker was accepted to help Faith Fellowship Baptist Church in Lansing with a housing project for the needy in the community. MI COM also donated to their food pantry and back to school party. The project is not completed, and will continue to work with Pastor Parker.

MI COM went back to Bambi Lake Baptist Camp in September to do construction work on a cabin. They worked on drywall spackling, building wooden walls and doors, and replacing outside stairs. Ladies set up a sewing room, and have made more than 70 cloth bags to donate. A bag will be given to foster children to carry their clothing and personal items rather than the usual black trash bag.

God is blessing and touching lives through the organization already. MI COM is on the move to evangelize, assist churches and camps, and many other ways to minister throughout Michigan. Special thanks is being given to Heritage Baptist Church of Grand Blanc, and Pastor Chip Collins for faithful support, prayers and involvement in going forward "Sharing Christ as We Go."

If you would like to join or keep up with what MI COM is doing, go to the website at www.michigancampersonmission.org or Facebook Michigan Campers on Mission.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick and Cindy Truesdail have been married for 27 years. Together they have 5 children and 14 grandchildren. During their early years together, they worked as leaders of a Single Adult Ministry. Rick is a Licensed Professional Counselor and a licensed SBC minister. He served as Associate Pastor with a Spanish-speaking church in Flint for 10 years and Cindy served as the Pastoral Assistant. They are currently active members at Heritage Baptist Church, Grand Blanc, and are eager to work with Campers on Mission in their retirement.

First-Person: Change lives by helping children learn to read

by Sarah Bentley

ATLANTA, GA (BP) – My husband and I live in East Atlanta among refugees. I taught at a school where all of my students were refugees learning English as their second language.

Teaching science was both challenging and rewarding. I had many students who excelled in this environment and were able to grasp the content through the supports I provided. However, I had many students with little to no English understanding in verbal or in written form. I was

heartbroken, because I realized that the content they were learning in my class, even with the supports I provided, was far above their comprehension level.

During this time, I saw the critical importance of being able to read and comprehend. While I was a trained and certified science teacher, as well as a certified ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) specialist, I did not have the knowledge or ability to teach the basics of reading. I had a growing concern and call to provide extracurricular reading and literacy education to students in my community.

Knowing that I could not meet the language needs of a large percentage of my students, I decided to go back to school and get a master's degree in reading, language, and literacy (ESOL) education. This degree certified me as a reading specialist and gave me the tools I needed to teach students how to read.

Through a simple Facebook post about changing the direction of my career from teaching in a school to focusing on volunteer opportunities in the community, God immediately made a connection with a church member who helped me put my new skills to work. I was given the opportunity to create a children's summer reading program for a non-profit that was connected to my church. Through this program, I was able to provide materials and direction for interns who were then equipped to teach students some of the basics of reading.

God has used my training as a reading specialist outside of the classroom to provide opportunities for students to hear the Word of God. It has connected me with students individually, which has given me opportunities to talk to them about their lives and how God can help them deal with problems and issues that they face.

Students living in poverty or of a different language background often do not have as many opportunities to encounter the written English language. Being read to and provided reading materials on their reading level outside the classroom is desperately needed for their success.

Individuals or a church can connect with a local school and find students who need additional reading support. The church could provide a time to read to students and/or a library that has an assortment of books for students. This could be done after school during the school year or as a summer reading program.

There are students with reading and literacy deficits in every community. Providing assistance to families is a tangible support that demonstrates the love of Christ and connects the local church with the community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Bentley is a former high school science teacher now leading literacy ministry in her community on the east side of Atlanta.

Personal evangelism gets creative, overcomes coronavirus barriers

by David Roach/TEXAN

AUSTIN, TX (BP) – COVID-19 may have impeded some traditional avenues of evangelism, but it hasn't stopped the Gospel's advance.

Rick Pittman, a member of Great Hills Baptist Church in Austin, reinforced that lesson when a tree limb fell on one of his neighbor's vehicles and the neighbor asked him for assistance. Pittman removed the limb with a chainsaw, hauled it away and shared his personal testimony with the neighbor as they drove to dispose of the wood. Later, the neighbor came to Pittman with follow-up questions.

"We hear stories like that" regularly, Great Hills pastor Danny Forshee said.

While masks, social distancing and extra time cloistered at home have made personal evangelism more challenging, Forshee and other evangelism leaders have found ways around those challenges.

The apostle Paul "didn't let being shackled in place prevent him from sharing the Gospel," said Matt Queen, L.R. Scarborough Chair of Evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. If Paul "can do it shackled, we can do it sheltered."

Still, the challenges for personal evangelism are real. Distributing Gospel literature, inviting people to church and holding evangelistic meetings all have been impeded by the pandemic, according to an analysis by Ed Stetzer, executive director of The Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College. Added to that, conversations can be hindered by face coverings, and many social settings require people to keep their distance from one another.

Yet the challenges are met with opportunity. Four evangelism leaders interviewed by the TEXAN all said lost people are more open to the gospel than they have been in recent memory. It remains to be seen whether Christians will take full advantage of the openness.

Sharing the Gospel with those in our normal social circle generally is not inhibited by coronavirus restrictions, Queen said. But it can "be kind of awkward" to bring up Christ if a Christian has known someone for years but has never broached the subject. To break the ice, a believer can say, "I've really been thinking a lot through COVID," and "I realized that I have sinned against you. I want you to know I need to ask your forgiveness." Tell the person the sin is failing to talk about the hope available in Jesus, Queen said. Then admit the reason for hesitancy was fear of how they would react. Finally, begin a Gospel presentation.

Another method of witnessing to people in familiar social circles is telling "the story of you and Jesus," said Chuck Kelley, president emeritus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Believers should consider the people they encounter regularly during their pandemic routines, he said, and ask, “Has each one of them heard my testimony?”

People love stories, and often they are open to hearing both salvation testimonies and accounts of “some life experience when Jesus really helped,” Kelley said.

If social distancing makes sharing a testimony face to face difficult, Kelley said, write a letter telling a lost friend you’re praying for them and that you realized you have never told them how you met Jesus. Then write your story. It may be helpful to include a Gospel tract with the letter.

“You’re not having to worry about social distancing with a letter,” Kelley said.

Because mask wearing isn’t expected at meals, they present opportunities to overcome the conversational impediments of face coverings, Kelley said. He has begun Gospel conversations with servers by telling them, “I just want to say on behalf of all us you’re serving how grateful we are you’re wearing that mask all day.” Servers typically appreciate the acknowledgment and are willing to talk further.

Shane Pruitt of the North American Mission Board recommended sharing a testimony via social media to overcome pandemic restrictions.

Using a smart phone, make a 60-second video of yourself explaining “who you were before you met Jesus, how you met Jesus and what Christ has done in your life,” said Pruitt, NAMB’s national next gen evangelism director. Then post the video on a social media platform – which can lead to hundreds or even thousands of views.

“If you did that in person, we would make a really big deal about” it, he said. “On social media, it’s still the same thing. I think we need to celebrate that and make it a big deal like it is.”

To take the witness a step farther, Pruitt said, text lost friends a link to the social media post and ask them to share their thoughts after watching it. “That’s an immediate door to a Gospel conversation.”

Forshee recommended using current events to spur Gospel conversations. When speaking with someone of another race, it can be helpful to reference America’s racial turmoil and say, “We’re living in crazy times. I know there’s a lot of tension. I just want to let you know that I care for you,” he said. Gospel conversations also can result when a Christian references the pandemic, along with ensuing economic woes and political tensions, then says, “There’s a lot going on. Can I just take a minute and pray with you?”

Churches can corporately take advantage of spiritual openness during the pandemic. Among suggestions offered by the four evangelism leaders:

- Make sure benevolence ministries include intentional Gospel witness to those receiving assistance.
- Have church members share their testimonies during worship services to model how it can be done.
- Include invitations to receive Christ for online viewers of each internet broadcast.
- Participate in the Who's Your One? campaign launched by NAMB and Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear. The campaign asks every Southern Baptist to select one lost friend and make that person a focus of prayer and witnessing efforts.

“God is doing something in this season that really is softening hearts,” Pruitt said, noting he preached at fewer student camps than normal this summer but saw larger-than-normal rates of response to evangelistic invitations. Christians must “preach the Gospel and give everyone an opportunity to respond.”

Forshee is modeling for his church that the coronavirus need not halt personal evangelism. This summer, he led a pest control man at his house to Christ.

Most Evangelicals choose Trump over Biden, but clear divides exist

by Aaron Earls

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – Evangelicals seem ready to cast their ballots in the 2020 election. Nine in 10 evangelicals by belief are registered to vote, and few are undecided about their presidential choice.

A new survey from Nashville-based LifeWay Research conducted Sept. 9-23 finds President Donald Trump with a sizable lead over Democratic nominee Joe Biden among likely voters with evangelical beliefs. Deep divides, however, persist among evangelicals across ethnic lines.

Overall, 61 percent of evangelicals by belief plan to vote for Trump and 29 percent for Biden. Other candidates garner around 2 percent combined. Fewer than 1 in 10 (8 percent) are undecided.

Evangelicals by belief are also twice as likely to identify as a Republican (51 percent) than a Democrat (23 percent). One in 5 (20 percent) say they are independent.

“Voting for or against an incumbent president is a more certain situation for voters,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. “Fewer Americans, including those with evangelical beliefs, are on the fence than at this same point in 2016.”

Presidential preferences

Voting plans for Americans without evangelical beliefs are almost the mirror opposite of their evangelical counterparts, with Biden holding a commanding 56 percent to 33 percent lead over Trump.

President Trump’s advantage among evangelicals, however, comes primarily from white evangelicals, among whom he leads Biden 73 percent to 18 percent.

African Americans with evangelical beliefs overwhelmingly plan to vote for Biden (69 percent to 19 percent). Among American evangelicals of other ethnicities, however, Trump has a 58 percent to 32 percent lead.

Compared to a previous LifeWay Research survey conducted in the months leading up to the 2016 election, more white evangelicals say they plan to vote for Trump this time (73 percent to 65 percent). However, more also say they plan to vote for Biden than said they planned to vote for Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee four years ago, (18 percent to 10 percent).

While almost a quarter of white evangelicals were undecided or supporters of a third party in 2016, few say the same in 2020. Only 2 percent back a third-party candidate this year, compared to 8 percent four years ago. And while 16 percent were undecided in 2016, that number fell to 7 percent this year.

Individuals with evangelical beliefs who identify with the two largest political parties plan to be loyal to their party’s candidate. Among Republicans with evangelical beliefs, 91 percent say they are voting for Trump. Eight in 10 Democrats with evangelical beliefs (81 percent) support Biden.

“Different ethnic groups are more attuned to specific failures of our country and of specific candidates,” said McConnell. “One’s ethnicity and political party are more powerful in predicting the vote of someone with evangelical beliefs than their shared religious convictions alone.”

Among likely voters who identify as Christian and attend church at least once a month, support for Trump and Biden is evenly split (46 percent to 45 percent). As with evangelicals, ethnic divides are also present among churchgoers.

White churchgoers back Trump 59 percent to 30 percent, while African American churchgoers are solidly behind Biden (86 percent to 9 percent). The former vice president also has a sizeable – though smaller – lead among Hispanic churchgoers (58 percent to 36 percent) and churchgoers of other ethnicities (49 percent to 36 percent).

Key election issues

Improving the economy and fighting the pandemic are the top characteristics registered voters say they are looking for in a presidential candidate. Evangelicals agree but are much more likely to also point to abortion and religious liberty as factors.

A majority of registered voters say an ability to improve the economy (72 percent), slowing the spread of COVID-19 (58 percent) and maintaining national security (55 percent) are important factors in deciding their vote.

Close to half say the same about addressing racial injustice (49 percent), personal character (48 percent) and the candidate's position on immigration (48 percent).

In the survey, which began prior to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death, a third (33 percent) say likely Supreme Court nominees are an important factor. Similar numbers point to the candidate's ability to protect religious freedom (32 percent), their position on abortion (31 percent) and their position on the size and role of government (30 percent).

Trump voters are more likely than Biden voters to say the economy (82 percent), national security (67 percent), immigration (62 percent), religious freedom (49 percent), abortion (44 percent), Supreme Court nominees (42 percent), and the size and role of government (40 percent) are important issues in determining their vote.

Biden voters are more likely than Trump voters to point to COVID-19 (75 percent), racial injustice (68 percent) and personal character (66 percent).

When asked the single most important issue in determining their vote, 26 percent of registered voters point to the economy, 22 percent say slowing the spread of COVID-19 and 15 percent say personal character. No other issue garners more than 8 percent.

Among evangelicals by belief registered to vote, improving the economy (22 percent) and slowing COVID-19 (16 percent) remain the top issues, but the candidates' position on abortion (11 percent), and ability to protect religious freedom (11 percent) are more likely to be the top priority compared to those without evangelical beliefs.

Fewer evangelicals (8 percent) than other Americans (16 percent) say the personal character of the presidential candidate is the most important issue in deciding their vote.

“Most evangelicals are not single-issue voters,” said McConnell. “Eighty-nine percent of those with evangelical beliefs selected more than one important issue that is influencing their vote. Like other Americans, their top concerns reflect the current recession and pandemic, but more than 1 in 10 with evangelical beliefs will vote for the candidate they think will protect religious freedom.”

Voting benefits

LifeWay Research also asked registered voters, “Who do you hope your presidential vote benefits the most?” More than a third (35 percent) say people nationwide who are like them, and 22 percent say people whom our country has failed.

Fewer say they hope the ones who benefit the most from their vote are themselves and their family (17 percent), people nationwide who are different from them (10 percent) or people in their community or region (7 percent).

Evangelical voters are more likely than other registered voters to say they hope their vote most benefits people nationwide who are like them (41 percent to 34 percent).

Registered voters with evangelical beliefs are also less likely to say they hope their vote most benefits people our country has failed (15 percent to 24 percent).

“Few Americans with evangelical beliefs will be casting a ‘Good Samaritan’ vote on election day,” said McConnell. “Instead, most will vote to benefit those like them or their own family.”

Those voting for Trump are more likely to say they hope their vote most benefits themselves and their family (21 percent to 14 percent of Biden voters) and people nationwide who are like them (43 percent to 31 percent).

Biden voters are more likely to say they are casting their vote in hopes that it most benefits people who our country has failed (32 percent to 10 percent of Trump voters).

For more information, visit [LifeWayResearch.com](https://www.lifewayresearch.com) or view the complete report.

Methodology

The online survey of 1,200 Americans was conducted Sept. 9-23, 2020, using a national pre-recruited panel. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to more accurately reflect the population. The sample includes an over-sample of Americans with evangelical beliefs providing additional reliability for breakouts of this group. Totals for all Americans reduce these responses to their correct proportion through weighting.

The completed sample is 1,200 surveys. The sample provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Comparisons are made to a LifeWay Research survey conducted Sept. 27 – Oct. 1, 2016, with a completed sample of 1,000 surveys and a 95 percent confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.1 percent.

Likely voters are defined as those registered to vote and planning to vote. Christians are those with a religious preference of Catholic, Protestant, Non-denominational Christian or Orthodox. Evangelical beliefs are defined using the NAE LifeWay Research evangelical beliefs research definition based on respondents' level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Those who strongly agree with all four statements are categorized as having evangelical beliefs:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Earls is a writer for LifeWay Christian Resources.

Slade calls churches to higher standard regarding sex abuse

by Diana Chandler

EL CAJON, CA (BP) – It perplexes Pastor Rolland Slade that certain secular institutions have the good sense to strip professional credentials from sex offenders, while some churches seem to overlook their crimes.

“The world can't have a better idea than we do. We're serving God. So how could their standard be that person's got to change their career, and our standard is we put them back?

That doesn't make sense, at least not to me." Slade made the remarks in an interview with Baptist Press shortly after his election in June as chairman of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee.

Tuesday (Sept. 22), chairing the first Executive Committee meeting after his election, he emphasized the church's responsibility to provide a safe haven for sexual abuse victims.

"It's very personal to me," he told the EC in his opening remarks. "For the last 40 years of my life, I have been in touch with a survivor of sexual abuse in church; in fact, we've been married 39 years. So when I say it's personal, it's personal."

The pastor of Meridian Baptist Church in El Cajon, Calif., has worked as a teacher and a part-time high school track-and-field coach, and has seen secular groups tackle sexual abuse decisively, although some cases may still remain undetected.

"As a teacher or a coach, if a coach violates that rule, and is brought up on criminal charges, guess what, they can't be a coach anymore. A teacher does it, can't be a teacher. Doctor, can't be a doctor. Lawyer, can't be a lawyer," Slade said. "But unfortunately what happens with us in the church, we talk about redemption, and grace and mercy, and I understand those concepts."

But Slade doesn't appreciate grace and mercy being used to restore sexual abusers and return them to ministry.

"I understand we can restore them ... but we can't put them back in leadership," Slade said. "They can't go back there. They've got to find another vocation."

Slade's EC chairmanship garners him a seat on the SBC Credentials Committee, charged with reviewing reports of churches operating in ways that are not in friendly cooperation with the SBC.

"The Credentials Committee, now that I'm a part of it, I understand our limited scope." Slade said he appreciates the solid accomplishments the SBC has made in fighting sexual abuse, and doesn't intend to cast a negative tone on advancements already made in ministering to sexual abuse survivors.

"As it stands today, the Credentials Committee can determine that a church is not in friendly cooperation with the SBC and make a recommendation to the Executive Committee to disfellowship a church," Slade said. "Or in the case where the church is technically in friendly cooperation, it recommends not to disfellowship. In my mind those are two ends of a long spectrum."

Slade said he doesn't anticipate a solution in handling sexual abuse that will please everyone. He realizes that while teachers, doctors and others are stripped of their credentials, stripping

ministers of ordinations likely would be neither plausible nor effective among autonomous Southern Baptist congregations, as each church handles ordinations differently.

Slade envisions a multipronged approach to fighting sexual abuse, much in the same way the medical community targets certain diseases with medical care, education and behavior modifications. He recommends the Caring Well Challenge the SBC launched in 2019 as a resource for churches, coupled with other targeted steps.

The Caring Well Challenge was created as the SBC addressed sexual abuse extensively in 2018 and 2019. SBC President J.D. Greear initiated in 2018 a Sexual Abuse Advisory Study in collaboration with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, that released its findings shortly before the 2019 SBC Annual Meeting in Birmingham. There, messengers received the report, established the work of the Credentials Committee, passed the first of two votes required in two successive years to make sexual abuse the grounds for a church to be disfellowshipped from the SBC, and amended applicable bylaws.

“We need to figure out a way – and I hope that over the next couple of years, we get a chance to really drill down and find a way that we can deal with this issue in the Southern Baptist Convention,” he said, “so that we’re not passing sexual predators from one church to another, one state to another.”

Churches need to understand the long-lasting trauma and vulnerability sexual abuse victims experience.

“If we don’t understand the trauma as a church, oftentimes we re-traumatize them by making them tell their story over and over again, or, we traumatize them by not believing them,” Slade said. “They’re telling you and sharing with you their experience. So now, your part is to investigate that their experience is correct, ... and if so, you’ve got to make some change. ... You can’t allow that to continue.”

When churches fail to address the issue properly, the victim gets the message that the church’s love is superficial, and because the abusive environment continues, the church remains an unsafe place for victims.

Caring Well materials to help churches learn how to prevent and deal with sexual abuse are available at CaringWell.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

Kentucky church experiences ‘move of God’ during pandemic

by Mark Maynard

OWENSBORO, KY (BP) – Pleasant Grove Baptist Church stared down COVID-19 and never blinked.

Oh, they respected the disease that has put a stranglehold on the world, wearing masks and keeping a proper distance from each other. But they didn’t let COVID define them or even slow them down.

They made the adjustments and let God do the rest, according to new pastor Jonathan Bonar.

“I feel like it’s just a move of God really,” he said.

The Owensboro church has finished building a new \$2.5 million sanctuary, hired a pastor, nearly doubled weekly giving and added dozens of new members – all during the past six months when “COVID” became the most frightening word in the world.

Sunday morning attendance has grown from 320 in June to 477 Sept. 13. Two months ago, Bonar became the church’s first pastor in nearly two years, and his leadership came at a critical time as COVID-19 made decisions for churches more difficult by the day.

The confirmation from God that he received was eye-opening, too, making it obvious to him that he was sent for such a time as this.

On the day he delivered his trial sermon, Bonar received 100 percent of the vote after the morning session. His wife Cathryn was so sure the call from the church was coming that she made a call to a realtor – from the front row pew in the church – to put a bid on a home that was perfect for their family even before her husband spoke a second time. He received 100 percent of that vote too.

That hasn’t happened ever in the church’s 185-year history.

As for how the church has attacked COVID-19, the new pastor said they have done it with extreme caution but not fear.

“I think we’ve tried to be respectful of COVID sensitivities but not allowed it to keep us from pushing aggressively for the Great Commission and reaching people,” he said. “It’s been a delicate ballet of being careful and doing some of the things we’ve done in the past.”

The pastor said it was a “Genesis 50 thing, when Joseph told his brothers, ‘What the enemy meant for evil, God meant for good.’”

T-ball players hold up their trophies proudly in front of friends and family at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church.

Rather than cancel them, the church made adjustments to longtime outreaches like a t-ball baseball league that normally reaches about 500 families.

“We weren’t able to have as many kids as we normally do,” Bonar said. But the outreach was effective.

“We gave them a taste of the children’s ministry for kids, led them into some crazy worship and said, ‘Hey! Come join us!’ We were able to reach many families through that program.”

The lesson, Bonar said, was that while it may not look exactly like it did before COVID, the programs that were successful can still be done with some creativity. That creativity was on display in the church’s handling of face masks.

“We ask everyone to wear masks,” he said. “At first, we had a little concern from people about it. We had a mask competition in church. Who could have the best masks? The leaders of the church began taking pictures and the deacons judged. We gave away a prize to a child and an adult with the best mask. We were trying to have fun with it. Those people who were upset about it or didn’t want to do it felt like they were missing out because everybody was having fun and laughing.”

The church also added services to allow social distancing in the sanctuary. Numbers have grown to the point that church leaders are considering adding an additional service.

“We’ve had a great balance of being careful and mindful of the pandemic, but at the same time we were motivated and aggressively pushing forward and not just waiting and sitting back,” Bonar said. “We’re doing some of the same things, just in a different way. ...

“How do you make it very safe for people to feel comfortable in church? No handouts, open every door for them. And we have reinforced online giving, and our giving has gone through the roof too. We had it but we weren’t giving it any oxygen or talking about it.”

The weekly donations have nearly doubled, he said, adding: “God is doing something supernatural. It can’t be traced to men. He provides the wave; we just steward that momentum and ride that wave as long as we can.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Maynard writes for Kentucky Today, www.kentuckytoday.com, where this article first appeared. Kentucky Today is a news resource of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.
