

The pain of COVID-19

PLYMOUTH, MI – Those of you who know me on a personal level are well aware of my amazing ability to frequently cause serious injuries to my body. To be honest, I am quite the klutz. No matter how careful and watchful I might be, it seems as though I have a very consistent propensity to cut, scrape, bang, and forcibly do severe damage to the temple in which I reside. Temple is an appropriate description of my body; it just has a marked resemblance to the fallen Greek temples of Rome, mere heaps of semi-recognizable rubble. Oh, how age has a way of doing that.

Over the years I have drilled holes in my legs and hands, fallen from buildings, severed fingers, and have pounded each of my digits with a hammer more times than I care to remember. I have required enough stitches, casts and bandages to supply the local hospital emergency room. Each time I bring harm to myself because of carelessness or my lack of focus or attention, I am reminded in a very acute way that there are consequences to my actions. It hurts! It hurts a lot!

Now if I had my way I would probably just do away with pain altogether, but the truth is that would be a horrible mistake. Pain has a purpose, and it is a divine purpose. Without pain in our lives, it is doubtful that the human race would even exist.

Several years ago I read a book by Dr. Phillip Yancey that gave me some wonderful insight into the human body, and its analogous relation to the church. In that book he described how he had worked with those in developing countries who had been infected with leprosy. Through his medical training and Christian compassion, he was able to help ease the suffering of thousands and bring the Light of hope to their lives.

I had always thought that leprosy was a disease that somehow “ate away” the flesh of the individual much like a cancer, but upon reading his book, [Fearfully and Wonderfully Made](#), I discovered that was not true. The fact of the matter is that leprosy destroys the nerves in the appendages, and thus causes the individual to lose the ability of tactile sensation. They lose the ability to feel. They no longer have the ability to sense pain.

Some may be thinking right now, “that’s a good thing,” but it is not. The ability to sense and know pain is a wonderful gift from God. Those with leprosy don’t have their appendages eaten away, they are damaged and rubbed away because they have lost the ability to know when they hurt and the healing process is interrupted. Now there are other factors that come into play, but that is the basic reason for their loss of limbs and suffering.

Just as our bodies need pain to help us perpetuate and protect us physically, so do we need emotional, mental, and spiritual pain to help us become who God wants us to be.

I agree with Rick Warren as he shares in his book, The Purpose Driven Life about troubles and pain. *“Now it doesn’t matter if things go great in your life. It doesn’t take any faith, it doesn’t take any character. So God has to bring some things along in our life to stretch us, to cause us to grow, and these are called troubles or trials. God wants to build character in you.”* What he is saying is that God uses pain to make us more like Him. He uses trials and troubles to conform us to His image.

The CoronaVirus pandemic is bringing a great deal of pain into every facet of our lives. Whether or not we are infected with the virus, it will no doubt affect us all, and in doing so will cause and continue to cause great pain for a long time. There will be emotional pain, physical pain, spiritual pain, financial pain, and many other kinds of pain.

Most of us would rather have a trouble and pain free life, but without pain our lives would become unrecognizable forms, only slightly resembling the image He intends for us to be. We should thank God that He cares enough for us that He would allow us the ability to experience pain.

I still don’t like pain, but it has taught me a great deal. The emotional and spiritual pain that I have known has helped me to not only be more like Him, but has given me great insight into my true nature. I have also learned that the pointy end of a screwdriver works best in the head of a screw and not in my hand.

Romans 8:28 – And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Romans 5:3-4 – And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

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.

Spring break with seventy-five university students

PLYMOUTH, MI – Why spend vacation days, in Puerto Rico, with seventy-five university students?

Sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas, my wife and I decided, during the coming years, to do more with our vacation time. At the end of our holiday conversation, we decided we wanted to do something meaningful with our annual personal-days-off. After exploring our options, Puerto Rico, Send Relief and GenSend Spring Break added-up. Baptist State Convention of Michigan's Disaster Relief Director, Bob Kiger (right) was the first to spark the proposal. We are so glad that we listened to his suggestion.

Send Relief offers meaningful pathways of service for university students and other pathways for high school students throughout the year. GenSend Breaks are one-week service opportunities during short holidays from school. GenSend Summers are longer opportunities, 6-8 weeks, where students experience what living life on mission looks like.

Having the Send Relief Team already on the ground in Puerto Rico made the mission so much easier and rewarding. At their invitation, we embedded ourselves into the Send Relief Operations Team, under the leadership of Itamar (Ita) Elizalde. Ita's familiarity with Puerto Rico, the Spanish language, university students and the people on the island helped us discover more than we could have ever managed on our own.

Jamie and I set our goal to serve everyone we could with whom we had contact. We:

- Shopped for food and supplies for 75 university students during two weeks
- Served three meals a day and cleaned-up after every meal with the students' help
- Repeatedly filled one-dozen, five-gallon water bottles with filtered water
- Washed and prepared ice-coolers for lunches during workday excursions
- Made multiple runs to the airport, picking up and dropping off students
- Captured images and videos to promote GenSend and Send Relief
- Encouraged the students and their leaders through personal conversations
- Counseled students who wanted to know what it was like to be a missionary

We were overwhelmed by the needs of three million people in Puerto Rico; while simultaneously, encouraged by the bold initiatives of Send Relief on the island.

New Send Relief Center Under Construction

A modern Send Relief Center is being built just forty-five minutes from San Juan's airport that will allow volunteers to be housed as large separate groups of male and female, or as small families. Lodging, traditional meals and transportation to/from mission sites can be arranged with Send Relief Puerto Rico.

Established churches and new church plants in Puerto Rico partner with Send Relief as the local face, hands and feet in the towns and cities of Puerto Rico. Short-term volunteers who come to the island to help can rest assured that locals who are helped or who receive the good news of

Jesus Christ will be followed-up by pastors and members of a local, Spanish-speaking congregation. We took part in the two-year anniversary celebration of a new church plant, One Church Comerio, under the leadership of Pastor Jorge Reyes.

New Southern Relief Center Almost Completed

On the south side of the island, within a short-drive of this year's earthquakes, a local Baptist church shares part of its building as a site for lodging and traditional meals for volunteers. We saw where local families sleep in tents in their yards because they're afraid an earthquake, during the night, might crush their families under tons of concrete.

Post-traumatic-syndrome affects many on the island who seem to always be preparing for the next big catastrophe. There are not enough counselors to help those who struggle with depression, and there are not enough engineers to inspect homes, schools and structures to restore confidence; but, Send Relief is there doing important things to remind the people of Puerto Rico that they are not forgotten.

School Under Tents in City Park

We visited a local school principal who manages over four-hundred students who meet under large tents as classrooms, guided by dozens of teachers and parents. This school is the only local school system willing to receive students with autism and other challenging behaviors.

The tents have been set-up in a city park where there is no danger of buildings or powerlines falling on students, in the case of another severe earthquake. Due to our early call back to Michigan as a result of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic we were unable to see that project get underway. The principal said she needed the following:

- Tent wall partitions to lessen the distractions of students
- Large garage-like fans and air-conditioners suitable for tents
- School supplies for students and teachers
- Handicap ramps for specific classrooms
- To remodel a teacher's lounge that has proven too sweltering for teachers to enjoy as they eat lunch, grade papers and return calls to concerned, overwhelmed parents

We would have loved to have remained two more weeks and see that project get underway. While visiting the tent-covered campus, we saw first and second grade children remove cell phones from their pockets to check-in with worried parents during recess when those children should have been giggling and playing with friends. It broke our hearts to see, on the littlest of Puerto Rico, the constant state of stress.

Adoption Center Partnership on the West End of the Island

One of the items that touched our hearts deeply was the big news that the government, because of Send Relief's sterling reputation these recent years, will allow Send Relief to collaborate with the government to help children needing foster care and adoption. The action is unprecedented, and Send Relief is doing all it can to make this a high priority, which is challenging, in light of the obvious aftermath of the hurricanes and earthquakes. Let us pray that God will inspire all of us to help Send Relief Puerto Rico receive the resources it needs to make these important dreams become reality.

Generously Give to the North American Missions Offering

There is still so much that needs to be done for the people in this American territory. No passport is required if you are a US citizen. The 5-hour direct-flight from Detroit is much cheaper than you would expect. When current conditions clear and life resets to a new type of normal, I hope you will collaborate with those in your church and with Send Relief Puerto Rico, and go on a mission trip to the island.

Despite our current struggles and our daily worries in the States, I pray that all of us will do something through our local churches, our state convention or through the site of the [North American Mission Board](#).

Imagine what it would feel like, to give generously in a time of fear to those on an island who have been enveloped by devastating hurricanes, shaken by earthquakes and now voluntarily quarantined to stop the spread of a pandemic during these past three years. They are acting to save our lives, let's act to save their lives.

Click on the following link to give easily, securely and generously to the local ministry expression of the North American Mission Board: [Support Puerto Rico Ministry Center](#).

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.

Peace through clean hands

PLYMOUTH, MI – Life looked radically different only a month ago. Social distancing, mandatory school closings, massive unemployment, and business shutdowns are affecting our lives in dramatic fashion. Most of us have never experienced anything like this. These are anxious days.

One of the most basic life skills - hand washing - is more important than ever. If you're like me, you have to make a conscious effort to wash your hands for at least 20 seconds according to CDC guidelines. I have been using a method a medical doctor taught me many years ago to help me thoroughly wash my hands. I have been quoting what she told me to say to make sure that I fulfill the 20 seconds.

It dawned on me recently as I quoted what she taught me to say that I could use this important hand washing time to quote some verses from the Bible that calm me and help me trust God. The verses are familiar to many of us:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”

Philippians 4:6-7

I am developing the habit of quoting these verses as I wash my hands and taking a moment to give God thanks or asking for His help with whatever is on my heart. I am exchanging my anxiety for His peace. Here is an acrostic using the word PEACE that may help.

P - Prayer

Many of us have longed for a deeper prayer life. This crisis has vividly demonstrated just how dependent we really are on God. Turning to God every time we wash our hands is a reminder that we need Him every moment of every day. This season has the potential to deepen our relationship with God as we come before Him with petition, thanksgiving, and our requests.

E - Everything

“Do not be anxious about anything....”. That means that we can lift everything we are concerned about to God in prayer. The picture behind the word “anxious” is of someone who is constantly worrying. It’s a perpetual habit of worrying that God wants us to replace with His perpetual peace. God cares about every detail of our lives and can be trusted with things big and small.

A - Acknowledge

Let's face it. There are a lot of things happening right now that we have absolutely no control over. We are more vulnerable than we ever imagined and it makes us uncomfortable. This is a moment to experience God's peace that transcends all understanding. We may not understand how we can experience peace in days like these, but we can as we prayerfully acknowledge our trust in Him. He is Lord! Of Everything! Even with what is on your heart this very moment!

C - Claim

Paul gives us a powerful visual in this passage we need to claim in our lives. It is the picture of God's peace—of God standing guard over the heart and mind of the believer. All the resources of God are available for our peace. Our peace does not consist in the absence of problems, but in the presence of God.

E - Eternity

Ultimately, we are not living for this time alone, but for eternity. These are hard days, but God is using them to prepare us for eternity with Him.

I am reminded of how one young woman expressed God's peace. She was dying and the verse, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed," became very meaningful to her.

A friend said to her one day, "You suffer much, I fear."

"Yes," she said, "but," pointing to her hand she said, "there is no nail there. He had the nails; I have the peace." Laying her hand on her forehead, she said, "There are no thorns here. He had the thorns; I have the peace." Touching her side she said, "There is no spear here. He had the spear; I have the peace." --Young People's Delight.

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"

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.

Melting snow and new life

ROSCOMMON, MI – Here at Bambi most of the snow has melted, and everything that was once covered in a sheet of white has become visible again. Projects left uncompleted are being put back on the to-do list along with the unfinished landscaping that was so easy to ignore as long as it was covered-up. When the snow melts, everything that was once hidden will become visible again and require some attention. Honestly, as much as I get tired of the snow, it is nice to have a rest from weeding, mowing, edging, and all the other yard maintenance stuff. Nevertheless, left unattended the grass and the weeds will become overwhelming and difficult to cut back. I know this for a fact because I have often ignored yard work, and just the thought of mowing and trimming the yard back into a manageable situation is overwhelming. The longer it is ignored, the more difficult it is to fix and so on and so on. If I would just do regular maintenance on the yard, it would never grow out of control.

Well, such is life.

I don't like it, but it's true. My natural tendency in dealing with conflict, relational issues, or frustrating circumstances of any kind is to ignore it and hope it goes away. Often, in the moment it seems so much easier to ignore the situation. It is easier to cover it up with rationalization, denial or busyness. I'm reminded of the encounter Jesus had with the religious leaders and referred to them as "white-washed tombs". They appear clean and tidy on the outside, but are dead and decaying/filthy on the inside. If I'm totally honest, I have to admit that I like being perceived as having it all together - clean and tidy - no flaws - white-washed. Trying to maintain the facade is deceptive and exhausting. Obviously, it does not fix anything either. Unfortunately, as broken humans, we use all sorts of coping mechanisms or escapes to white-out anything we don't want to deal with and anything we do not want others to see. I like to dive into a project I really enjoy so I can validate the time I'm not spending fixing the problem. I compartmentalize (hide) the negative and spotlight the positive. This allows me to rationalize not dealing with the issue. Nevertheless, no matter our choice of escape, all are equally wrong because it reinforces our selfish, sinful nature and denies an opportunity for God to intervene. My pride will keep me from experiencing God's provision. My pride will keep me from experiencing God's healing in me, and those around me. This will prohibit new growth and fresh life in my relationship with Christ. Spiritual/life maintenance is crucial to our spiritual growth.

Colossians 3:12-14 tells us, *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."*

As God's children we are to live life with compassion, humility, meekness and patience so we can continually maintain our relationships with others by holding them up in times of need and

forgiving. Love is to be our default heart condition - we should never be without it! Oh, the frustration, anger, and stress we would avoid if we just maintained our lives with these Godly actions. Imagine the growth we would experience, if we just act out of God's love and not our own selfishness. Let God melt away your frozen heart of pride and selfishness so you can experience new life in the Son.

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.

How do you lead in a crisis?

ROSEVILLE, MI – Part of my responsibility as a pastor is to look down the road, and anticipate opportunities and threats that my flock will encounter. But in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the months and years of planning that I have been accustomed to, have been reduced to hours and days. Providentially I am preaching through the book of Acts and have dropped anchor in chapter 20, where Paul's "upper room discourse" to the Elders from the church at Ephesus has become a wonderful template for my heart and church. The answer to the question of "how do you lead in a crisis" is the same answer to the question of, "how should you lead your church."

"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."
Acts 20:28

Your leadership in a crisis will be a reflection of your leadership overall. All that a crisis does is put us in a vice that squeezes into view what is on the inside. Here are 5 ingredients of good leadership that will serve your church well when the storm comes to your door.

1. Be Self-aware - "pay careful attention to yourselves"

Times of crisis are indeed times of stress. But, you must be on guard against the temptation to rely upon yourself, thinking that you can rise to this occasion without relying on the Lord. We are so tempted to put our confidence in ourselves thinking that we do not have time to pray. When we are too busy and stressed to pray, we are not paying careful attention to ourselves. We are believing the lie that we are up for this, when we are not.

But the call to pay careful attention is actually in the plural “to yourselves.” That is good wisdom, isn’t it? How is the leadership of your church as a whole? Do you pay attention to yourselves? Is there honesty, humility, transparency, accountability with one another? If these things do not mark your leaders, then what is being hidden will be revealed under the strain of a crisis. Someone has to set the mark in order to call the rest to keep the pace. Leaders do this for a congregation, but you may need to be the one who does this for the leaders.

2. Be involved and organized - “and to all the flock”

Good shepherds smell like sheep. They do not subcontract the shepherding out to hirelings who like mercenaries, are only in the battle for the paycheck. They are with the sheep. They know their sheep by name. They know who is in the fold, and who is lost and will go after them. Shepherds know what it means to be in the flock. They can tell you who “all the flock” are and therefore, they know who they must pay attention to. It takes organization to know who all the flock is. It takes a commitment to details and procedures to have church membership and to keep that current. But unless you actually know who is in your flock, you won’t know who you are responsible to pay attention to.

3. Consider your calling - “which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”

Yea, I too, missed that “preparing your church for COVID-19” class in seminary, and have wondered whether I can help navigate my people through these waters. On the one hand, I wonder why the Lord has put me into this position, and yet on the other, would not want to be anywhere else. If the Holy Spirit has put you into this position as an overseer (overseer, elder, pastor are synonyms in the NT) in your flock, then He who called you will equip you and direct you. Isn’t that comforting? Lean upon the Spirit for the wisdom that he promises. (James 1.5-8)

4. Be Loving - “to care for the church of God”

We know that loving is more than words, but at the same time, do not overlook the need of your people in hearing you tell them how much you love them. One of the simplest ways that I can “care for the church of God” is to tell them how much I love them. Assuming that you love your church, tell them.

5. Live with Accountability - “which he obtained with his own blood”

Jesus died for his church. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5.25). Wow! I am a steward of the flock that Jesus purchased and secured with his own blood. I will give an account for how I loved, led and fed his flock. And while that thought can be terrifying, it is at the same time comforting, because I am part of the flock that he loves, died for, secured and will keep.

Am I and my leaders humble? How are we engaged with our people? Do we serve with a sense of calling? Do our people know that we love them? Do I realize my responsibility to Christ? The

answers to these questions will guide you well as you lead your people through this present darkness and the others on down the road.

Jesus is worth a beautiful Bride!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Johnson has served as the Senior Pastor of the Cornerstone Baptist Church in Roseville, MI for the last 30+ years and is very happy about it.

Ministry in the time of COVID-19

SOUTH LYON, MI – The pastors reading this article know very well that the comforts of familiarity are no longer an option in the age of COVID-19. This wasn't an elective in Seminary that one could choose to study. Instead, this is an opportunity for pastors and God's many local bodies to assist and encourage one another.

Our church, First Baptist Church South Lyon, decided early on to suspend all services. Since suspending all corporate gatherings, we have implemented various digital options for discipleship. We have provided the weekly sermon with notes on our website and Facebook page. We have mobilized our Bible study leaders. They are contacting their groups daily and meeting with them through digital means. Many have resorted to Zoom and/or Facetime. We have some without the internet, so we have been mailing them transcripts of the sermons and calling them to discuss the Bible study each week. The pastoral staff has made an effort to contact each member at least once a week by phone, email or written letter.

Some of the ministry in the church that we have experimented with include offering to all members over 60 years of age the option of grocery shopping and pharmacy runs. We have now expanded that option to all homebound, widows, widowers and single mothers. Now that families are home with no extracurricular activities, we have seen this as a great opportunity to encourage family worship and discipleship. We have started a daily Family Worship video with a study guide. The study guide includes songs, a sample prayer, a text with a short commentary and points to consider and questions to pose to kids. This has been very well received in our community. We are noticing a number of families with no affiliation with our church commenting that they are now worshipping together and using the materials provided by us.

One thing that we are doing in our community is feeding those who are in need. We have a local food pantry called Active Faith. Our church supports them financially and with manpower. We have joined efforts with Active Faith to provide groceries for an entire week to anyone who

requests it. We have this ministry open three days a week. Our church has approached three senior retirement communities in South Lyon and offered to deliver groceries to them. Many who are taking advantage of this ministry have also requested Bibles and prayers. So, the Lord is opening many avenues for ministry in this difficult time.

I understand the pressures that have come with this pandemic. And like many of you, it grieves me deeply not to be able to worship corporately with the local body that God has placed me within. However, He has empowered us and equipped us to continue regardless of the uncertainty that lies ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Meaux is Lead Pastor of FBC South Lyon. He recently moved to Michigan from Mobile, Alabama where he served as Pastor and many other ministry positions over the years. He is married to Aimee and they share three children.

Southern Baptists donate 200,000+ masks, protective equipment items to medical workers

ALPHARETTA, GA (BP) – As COVID-19 cases continue to increase in the United States, many medical facilities have faced shortages of masks and other protective gear. In response, Southern Baptists have donated more than 228,000 sets of protective equipment to hospitals and healthcare workers in different states.

On Thursday (March 26), the U.S. surpassed China as the nation with the most confirmed cases of the virus.

Southern Baptist donations include more than 172,000 N95 masks and more than 56,000 sets of personal protective equipment (PPEs) given to help protect medical workers serving on the front lines of the coronavirus crisis.

Send Relief donated 30,100 masks and 45,520 PPEs to hospitals. Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDRL) teams from across the nation are donating about 142,000 masks and 11,100 suits to local hospitals and medical facilities.

"Medical personnel need the masks greatly right now," said Richard Brunson, who leads North Carolina Baptists On Mission. "Besides, they didn't belong to us anyway, they belonged to God! God just let us hold on to them for a little while until He could use them to bless others."

Baptists On Mission, of which the state's SBDR team is a part, donated 30,000 masks to various hospitals in their state. The masks are typically used in disaster responses, such as in flood recovery when harmful mold can build up in submerged homes, and in rebuilds.

"Southern Baptists have been so generous in donating during this time," said Bryant Wright, president of Send Relief. "Really, it's not that we're unusual as a people. It's just that we are extremely grateful that Jesus Christ gave His life for us, and we want to be giving to our fellow man in a time of need."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended SBDR, as one of the nation's largest providers of disaster relief, to several different state emergency management agencies as an organization that can provide wrap-around services, such as food preparation and delivery and spiritual and emotional care.

As Southern Baptists respond to the current crisis, they are doing so on a more localized, community-based level for the time being.

Tennessee and Arkansas disaster relief teams have been supporting food delivery and distribution in several cities in their states.

Colorado SBDR has set up a feeding unit in Centennial, Colo., south of Denver, serving vulnerable populations in the community. Louisiana Baptists are also providing meals in Lake Charles, La., with support from the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention (SBTC).

Some SBDR teams, including California Baptists and the SBTC, have set up support hot lines, staffed by trained chaplains, to provide spiritual and emotional support.

Other states have deployed shower units.

"Like everybody else, this disaster does not fit our typical response mechanisms," said Gaylon Moss, SBDR director for Missouri Baptists. "We've been trying to distribute a lot of information to our churches and associations about ways they can serve."

Missouri SBDR has deployed a shower unit for medical personnel at St. Francis Medical Center in Cape Girardeau, Mo., and distributed N95 masks to state medical facilities. State SBDR teams across the nation are doing similar work.

South Carolina Baptists have two shower units available for the homeless in Florence, S.C., and one unit for first responders in Hilton Head, S.C. Minnesota-Wisconsin Baptist Disaster Relief has activated a shower unit in Rochester, Minn., to support overflow at a facility for the homeless.

Several states reported that local volunteers with SBDR teams, churches and local Baptist associations are serving in food pantries, blood banks as well as other organizations providing assistance.

"We are trying to be creative, to think outside the box," said Sam Porter, national director for SBDR with the North American Mission Board (NAMB) and Send Relief. "Teams are able to do things they've never done or do things they've never thought of. It's a time where Southern Baptists across the convention are stepping up."

Send Relief, through its various ministry centers across the U.S., has been providing meals for vulnerable populations in Pittsburgh, New York City, New Orleans and across the island of Puerto Rico.

In the next two weeks, Send Relief will be packing care bags at the North American Mission Board building in Alpharetta, Ga., the ministry center in Ashland, Ky., as well as in Denver, Colo., to give away to medical workers as an encouragement during this difficult time.

"Send Relief is seeking to respond to needs wherever they are," said Wright. "Jesus is so strong about us loving our neighbor, especially our neighbor in need. This is certainly one of those times throughout all the world."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandon Elrod writes for the North American Mission Board.

First Person: Send Relief Puerto Rico trip

PLYMOUTH, MI – With the surreal twist of life right now with the COVID-19 pandemic, I find myself sifting through my normal activities trying to find their true weight. As a Jesus follower, I want to evaluate everything I do through the truth of our Creator's Word. One thing I did recently that I have a warm glow when I remember, is a mission trip to Puerto Rico with Send Relief. Serving others has true weight!

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Philippians 2:3

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Matthew 6:33

My husband, Tony, and I decided to use part of our vacation this year to go on a mission trip to help with hurricane and earthquake relief in Puerto Rico. It all started with our State Disaster Relief Director, Bob Kiger, mentioning the great need there. Then the Send Network Puerto Rico Director, Felix Cabrera, speaking at the Michigan Baptist Annual Meeting. Finally, our State Executive Director, Tim Patterson, and his wife, Sabrina, came back from a vision tour in Puerto Rico telling of the overwhelming need for help. They all shared the hardships that were going on in Puerto Rico, and we felt our hearts tugged to go.

We contacted [Send Relief](#) and told them our desire to help in Puerto Rico if they needed us. They told us about helping with GenSend Break PR during March. GenSend Break PR is for U.S. university students to come to Puerto Rico during their Spring Break and help with the hurricane and earthquake relief. Each team would stay for one week helping to seal or put on new roofs, and do volunteer construction work. It is great how Send Relief Puerto Rico works alongside local Pastors. Each repair project had a local Pastor to do follow up. Tony and I felt this project would be perfect in that we would be helping the people of Puerto Rico, and also helping university students with their faith journey.

The Send Relief PR staff (Itamar, Nancy and Derrick) were great. We found a kinship in working alongside them toward the same goal – helping the university students show God’s love to the Puerto Rican people. We were picked up from the airport, fed and housed. I found joy in helping with the operations of GenSend Break Puerto Rico. I cleaned, helped with meals (I was so thankful for Elizabeth who catered great local cuisine), drove vans filled with luggage and students back and forth to the airport, did inventory and purchase of major food and supplies for the students, worked to organize in the warehouse the donated items that came in, had touching conversations with students, encouraged the local Pastors, saw the beautiful island as we drove to job sites to capture images and videos of the students at work.

If any church is looking for a great ministry opportunity for their church later in the year, Send Relief is a great option. They have projects set up in many different places. Check it out at <https://volunteer.sendrelief.org/> they have so many volunteer projects waiting to be filled! There are 39 Poverty projects, 14 Refugees & International projects, 5 GenSend weeks, and 3 projects on Human Trafficking.

The crazy thing I keep thinking about is how I took a “working” vacation, and yet I came back refreshed and renewed in my mind and heart. I asked myself the same question that I asked the university students, “How will having been in Puerto Rico helping the people and softening the ground for new church planters to come, impact my life back at home?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie M. Lynn, I'm married to a God warrior, have 3 wonderful married children and 9 super grandkids. I love working at the BSCM office to help the churches in the Great Lakes area to thrive, serve God by drawing others to Him and to love their communities.

Leadership and suffering

HOUGHTON, MI – We serve in Houghton Michigan at Houghton Baptist Church, “A place for the Community.” We’ve been serving here for more than 12 years. 4 years ago we decided as a church to stop playing church and actually be the church. We opened our minds and hearts to new ideas and the possibilities of all that God has for us as a church. We built on, adding another 100 seats in our Worship space which also gave us a great space for our Children’s Church Ministry.

We strongly believe as a church in reaching versus maintaining. Many churches, if we're being honest, spend their days maintaining and miss all that God has for them and their community.

Six months ago we launched a second service to further grow as a church. It hasn't been easy, but it was needed. Recently, we brought the entire church together for a One Service Sunday, and we had over 230 people show up for worship and lunch. It was a zoo! So thankful for the growth and the wisdom to take that step so we could further multiply. Growth takes faith and a willingness to trust God at his word.

Since the New year, we've led 2 more people to Christ, and baptized 12 more people. Over the past 4 years, we've led 32 to Christ, and baptized 107 people in our church. It's been an absolutely amazing to experience. The harvest is ripe and the workers are few.

This is our purpose as a church; to reach lost and unchurched people, basically pluck them from the community and share Christ with them. Every change we've made as a church was worth the lives we're seeing coming to faith in Jesus. But don't misunderstand me, there have been trials. There's been suffering. There's been critical people. There's been elevated spiritual warfare. We've even lost around 75 people the last few years, and it's been heartbreaking. We fully understand the reason for all of this. Satan's angry with our church and it's leadership. That's crystal clear. We've painted a huge target on our backs. We're watching God break chains. Chains that have been there for years. More than half of our church didn't even have a home church a year ago. Meaning they were unchurched. The majority of Houghton Baptist Church hadn't been in a church for years. This is why the enemy hates us so much.

These people were in the enemy's grip, but God has used us to rescue them. Every blessing is coupled with some sort of sacrifice. As the Lead Pastor, I've suffered greatly. Let's be honest, serving as a Lead Pastor means you will suffer at some level. There comes a point in time in your ministry where people come against you. People that you've served with will leave you. They'll say the most hurtful things. They'll judge you. They'll betray you. They'll miss your heart and motives. The place that you are called to serve is supposed to be home and a safe place for you and your family, but that's not always the reality.

We lead. We love unconditionally. We serve sacrificially. We put our ministries first, and in the end, it cost us greatly. I've been chronically ill with a painful autoimmune disease for four years

now. Do the math. At the height of our ministry here, we've suffered the most. The second we decided to be a church on mission all of hell has come against us. We've had to lean on Christ more than any other time in our ministry and that's okay. God has placed favor on us and it's evident. But don't mistake favor for a trial-free ministry. Trials and hardships always come coupled with God's favor.

This past Sunday one of our members handed us a check for \$25,000.00 to put directly on the addition we built 4 years ago. It's unbelievable. We're putting the full amount on the mortgage which means we will only owe \$53,000.00. God has made a way for us to reach the most broken people in our community. The poorest in our community, and yet we're seeing gifts like this. Not to mention that last year was our best financial year since I became Pastor.

Why do I say all that? Why did I go into all of what we are experiencing both good and bad? Because you must know the price of authentic ministry. You must know that it won't always be easy. It won't always be pain free. Some days you are going to want to run and hide from the hurt. Some days you'll want to quit and do something else. But here's the thing, you were made to do this. You were designed for a purpose. And God is certainly big enough to carry you and provide for you and your church no matter the situation. He's faithful. We've seen salvations. We've seen baptisms. We've seen the church double in size. We've seen financial provision. Stay the course.

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, 21 to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”
Ephesians 3:20-21

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Whitaker, I a father of three amazing children, husband to one beautiful wife, Director of Operations at Love INC of the Copper County and Pastor at Houghton Baptist Church.

A simple phone call

MIDLAND, MI – These are strange times to say the least, but they are not unprecedented. History has seen instances of plague and pestilence, and the church of Jesus Christ has survived them all. What is unprecedented, however, is the technology that is available to us, and how that technology can be leveraged to the benefit of the church in times of separation and confinement.

What likely comes to mind when most think of the technology available to the church is probably live streaming software, social media, and other multimedia, but at Sunrise Church, we're finding that the most appreciated technology is really just a good old fashioned phone call. While email and text messages are useful for accumulating information about needs and other informational updates, and video conferencing provides the visual face to face component, when it comes to connecting personally with our church family, each falls short in one way or another. Texting fails to communicate the mood or tone of whom you're chatting with, and video conferencing can be cumbersome; requiring setup, planning and software downloads. Phone calls, however, are proving to be the best substitute for the usual face to face interactions that our church gatherings provide.

The Elders of Sunrise are learning that our people are really appreciative of the effort to contact them by phone to check on them, pray with them, understand their needs and fears, and simply give them an opportunity to engage in conversation. A phone call requires the same kind of attention as an in-person conversation, takes time and deliberation, and can't be multitasked. Across the board, each of our elders has noted the appreciation expressed by members of their shepherding group when contacted by phone.

Email, texting, and video conferencing have certainly proven to be effective efficiency tools for our leadership as we are constantly responding to and disseminating changing information, but efficiency isn't really the goal of the shepherd(s) to his/their flock. It is tempting to utilize these tools with the congregation, and they may make sense in the right application or context, but elders and pastors may want to consider the message of caring that is sent to a member of the church when the time is taken to call them on the phone, and give them personalized attention in this culture of social distancing.

Though our church is scattered for now, it is our desire that regular, personal contact during this season will maintain and strengthen the bonds of our church body and build anticipation for the day when we will be gathered together again. Regardless of the medium by which we seek to maintain our connectedness, may we be faithful to Paul's instruction,

“Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful.”
Colossians 3:14-15 (CSB)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Miles has served in nearly every facet of local church ministry over the last twenty years from Florida to Washington and Texas to Michigan. He married Kari in 1999 and they have four kiddos; two biological (Gavin, 17 and Griffin, 6) and two adopted (Gunner, 15 and Mayleigh, 7). Philip has been privileged to serve since 2018 with a wonderful team of fellow Elders at Sunrise Church in Midland, MI and is currently the Lead Pastor there.

Longing to come together again

JACKSON, MI – What an incredibly unique time we find ourselves in! During this pandemic, it seems as if new orders from our governor and national leaders are coming faster than we can pastorally keep up with them. Pastor's minds, schedules, and time have been consumed by issues such as: how to do a quality live stream or video, how to meet needs, how to help the church remain connected with each other, and even whether or not you can leave home to go to the office. Amid trying to get all of these things accomplished, I fear that we haven't slowed down to consider what our practices and language communicate to people about our ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology is the study of what we believe about the church. Christians throughout history have generally understood the local church to be a *"group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances."* (Jonathan Leeman)

When the local church gathers in corporate worship, this time includes fellowship, mutual edification, preaching of the word, giving, ordinances, and song. Considering these truths, we must be careful to not teach our churches that those other forms, whether it is through video or live stream or whatever else, are the same thing as the regular corporate gathering of the church in worship. Anything less than the face to face meeting of God's people together falls short of and is but a shadow of corporate worship. What this means is that we must be careful in the language we use to describe what we do when we livestream or post videos.

We must ask if the things that happen when the local church meets in person can happen through these other means. If the church is not gathered in person, can we advertise the livestream to be church? Should we tell people to "have church from their living rooms" by watching a video if the local church is not actually gathered?

My encouragement to you is to use the means God has given to communicate to your people, but to also be careful and thoughtful about what you say about those meetings. Allow God to use this time to teach His church that anything other than them gathered in person can bring fulfillment or fully meet their needs. Know that it is okay for the church to feel a great tension that what happens through a video feed is not the same as when they meet together. Pray that God would use this time apart from one another to create in our hearts a greater appreciation and longing to come together again in corporate worship and in community. When we are able to meet together again, let that time be a time of great celebration to the Glory of God!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Walling has pastored churches in Arkansas, Tennessee, and now Michigan where he has ministered as Grace Church's senior pastor since March of 2011. James has received degrees from several schools including a Doctor of Ministry degree in expository preaching from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

State conventions gather virtually to pray

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, prayer is still the overarching theme for the continued ministry of church leaders to their communities.

Several state Baptist conventions held online prayer gatherings this week. Those and more are making future plans to continue to engage in persistent, specific, group prayer.

"We believe fundamentally that we are a people of prayer," said Willie McLaurin, vice president for great commission relations and mobilization at the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee. "There's something special about the Spirit of God that unifies people who have a common purpose and a common passion, gathering together."

McLaurin said it is now the new normal, going forward to utilize creative and innovative ways to lift high the power of prayer.

Prayer is the foundation of the church, McLaurin said. Without it, the church would fall apart.

"When we work, we work, but when we pray, God works," McLaurin said. "We realize that there's only so much that we can do, but there is encouragement that happens when people from different parts of the state gather together."

Jordan Easley, pastor of First Baptist Cleveland in Cleveland, Tenn., led a portion of a virtual prayer meeting held Thursday (March 26) by the Tennessee Baptist Convention. Easley said the leaders of the meeting, using Facebook live, hoped to bring unity to the body of Christ during a confusing season.

"Much like the believers that gathered in the upper room after the ascension of Christ -- they waited and prayed and we are doing the same thing today -- we are anticipating what God is going to do next," Easley said.

Easley led the portion of prayer focused on praying for families in the church.

"Our families are scared and confused in this season of uncertainty, so we cried out to God and asked Him to show us His power and grace as we navigate these days," Easley said.

McLaurin noted that people are realizing how deeply they need the encouragement from other believers.

"People realize that we need one another, we need each other, we need community," McLaurin noted. "Anytime that we can find opportunities to get together is going to add value to the local church."

Jay Hardwick, associate executive director for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, helped host a statewide prayer meeting Wednesday (March 25). The meeting was held using Zoom and primarily focused on bringing together pastors and church leaders.

"Pastors are missing their congregations, and they are missing one another, which is why we wanted to try using Zoom instead of Facebook Live or other platforms," Hardwick explained. "We wanted pastors to see us and we wanted them to see each other. It was powerful just to scroll through the screens and see all the faces of the guys joining the call."

Hardwick said they wanted to see what would happen through prayer when leaders all across the state joined in intercession together.

Approximately 115 people participated in the call, and Hardwick said they plan to host another one in the coming weeks.

"Everyone is hungry for connection," Hardwick said. "Our number one hope was to simply join with whomever joined the call to cry out to God together and for them to see each other as a reminder they are not alone."

Hardwick said there was some uncertainty in how technology would hold up with such a large group on one call, but is glad they took the risk.

Other calls however, faced some challenges in utilizing online platforms.

Nathan Lorick, executive director for the Colorado Baptist General Convention, said their gathering Wednesday (March 25) was interrupted twice by hackers, who posted inappropriate content on the screen and used degrading language and slurs.

"We shut the meeting off twice in order to stop the hackers," Lorick said. "However, on the third time we signed on, before we started praying, we shared the Gospel with the hope that the hackers would hear and know God could forgive them, and they could have the hope of Jesus. After this, there were no more attacks!"

Lorick said it was encouraging to see people keep logging back on despite the disruptions.

"We had 190 at the peak of our time together," Lorick said. "These were pastors and lay people on our call. It was phenomenal to have so many from across Colorado and some from other parts across the nation join us."

The topics during the prayer call included prayer for leaders, the economy, health in the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental sense, prayer for pastors, churches and conventions, revival and the advancement of the Gospel through the crisis.

"We wanted to seek the face of the Lord together," Lorick said. "We are believing God is going to do something great through this crisis and we want to rally together to ask Him for that."

Colorado Baptists plan to gather online for prayer again April 1 and April 8. Many other state conventions have plans to host virtual prayer gatherings in the weeks to come.

Rick Lance, executive director for Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, said a statewide prayer gathering also held Wednesday (March 25) provided encouragement. He said they plan to hold more, to be led by leaders from across the state.

"For most who participated -- maybe all -- it was the first time to meet online for prayer with so many fellow believers," Lance said. "Many have expressed to me that the time was a blessing to them, and it was for me as well."

Hardwick said that this season of virtual prayer is also not just a short-term vision.

"We're learning new, creative ways to connect with pastors and the value those connections hold for our pastors," Hardwick said. "My growing sense is what we learn in this season will not just be for the short-term, but will become part of our ministry strategy once we're on the other side of this crisis."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tess Schoonhoven is a Baptist Press staff writer.

Churches united to serve Monroe County & Southeast Michigan

SOUTHGATE, MI – The Southeastern Baptist Association is a close knit group of eighteen Southern Baptist churches that have been serving the people of Monroe County for over six decades. It is my privilege to be the Association's Ministry Director and, along with the Association Leadership Team and a Ministry Assistant, to work together in helping the SBC pastors and churches of the area to edify believers and reach out to unbelievers.

Among the ways that the mission of the Association is put forth include monthly Newsletters, monthly Pastors Luncheons, bi-monthly Leadership Team meetings, annual Association Picnics, annual Mission Trips to international and national destinations, as well as other activities such as Association Missionary Conferences, Sunday School/Small Group Seminars, YMCA Youth Nights, Marriage Enrichment Conferences, Pastors' Wives Gatherings, and an Interactive

Fellowship for young men who have been called into the Gospel ministry. Recent mission trips have been to Peru, Montreal, and the Navajo Nation in New Mexico. Future initiatives will include evangelistic events, church revitalization conferences, and church security seminars.

The community involvement of our pastors and churches in the community is another bright spot of our Association. In the last couple of years, we have been helping schools with supplies, tutoring, and teacher appreciation. Folks in our churches have helping at the local community center, homeless shelters, and the pro-life organization in the county. The churches worked together to collect 100 bed pillows for the local Salvation Army shelter. They also gave donations toward the purchase of 18 infant car seats for Heartbeat of Monroe, which will give them to mothers who have their babies and need safe transport home from the hospital.

The motto of SEBA is “For The Glory of God and For The Good of The Association”! And, with God’s help, we will continue to live up to this in the days, and months, and years ahead!

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.

Sharing Christ as we go

After retirement, we became Snowbirds to Florida, missing three months of Michigan winter. We also missed ministry opportunities, and were not comfortable to “be on vacation” from serving the Lord. As we shared this at a church picnic last summer, a lady told us that she and her late husband had worked with Campers on Mission (COM), affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). We went online and immediately joined COM, a ministry that we wanted to be a part of when we would be Snowbirds again. We were disappointed that there was not a Michigan COM chapter, and soon the Lord laid it upon our hearts to begin this ministry so you would also know about COM. We have been laying groundwork for a new chapter, Michigan Campers on Mission (MI COM).

We invite you to join us soon for a MI Campers On Mission Work Opportunity at Bambi Lake Retreat & Conference Center. We will let you know the dates as soon as we are able to get a work week scheduled after the health travel restrictions are lifted. We will hold an informational meeting to tell you more about COM, and officially organize the Michigan

Chapter immediately after the work week. We currently have 20 members and are looking for new members to become volunteer missionaries with us. Call us for more information and to register.

Campers on Mission is a national fellowship of evangelical Christian campers who look for opportunities to share their faith and love of Jesus Christ through their participation in mission activities while camping. Two characteristics of COMers are a love of the great outdoors and a love of sharing Jesus. While enjoying the camping experience, they participate in mission projects including church planting, construction, disaster relief recovery, Backyard Bible Clubs, fairs, festivals, campgrounds, auto racing, parades, and truck stops, engaging in opportunities to tell others about Jesus. COMers are active members of local churches and “*on mission*” Christians, “*sharing Christ*” through word and deed “*as we go*”.

Michigan Campers on Mission will focus on mission projects in our state, but can also connect campers with opportunities throughout the United States. Whether you are a tent camper, an RVer, or a trailer camper; a seasonal camper, a weekend camper, or a full-timer; a retired couple, young family or single individual; there is a role for you as a part of the COM family. COM projects can include construction, repairs, maintenance, skilled trades, sewing, cleaning, painting, cooking, office work, etc.

There are no membership fees or dues to join MI COM. Each member is a volunteer missionary, having access to the Michigan and National COM websites to keep informed of upcoming opportunities to travel and serve. Travels can be individual or as a group, commitments are individually set up through a planned event, work opportunity, or camp. MI COM invites to join COM as a volunteer missionary. Find MI COM on Facebook [Michigan Campers on Mission](#) or on the web at www.michigancampersonmission.org or call Rick or Cindy Truesdail at (810) 869-4716.

5 Practical ways you can impact your community in the midst of COVID-19

BIRMINGHAM, AL – Leaders are making tough decisions in light of COVID-19 that can have significant ramifications for large numbers of people. As committed Christ followers, we can use our influence to make a positive impact on the Kingdom during this crisis. Here are just five practical ways we can be the hands and feet of Jesus. Christ will do the miraculous in our midst if we allow Him to use us for His glory.

1. Share God's peace.

The starting point is allowing God's perfect peace to fill our hearts. Then become intentional people of peace in your community. Start by being an active listener, connecting with people at their point of pain and offering encouraging words of hope. It's surprising just how much a calm demeanor can reassure others. Be people of peace sharing the love of Christ everywhere in your community as you are able to get out and about safely.

2. Minister to the elderly.

Many elderly are quarantining themselves. Can you imagine the increased levels of isolation and loneliness? Create a system to reach out by phone daily to make sure they are okay and have what they need. Be willing to assist with their needs such as medication refills, groceries or household supplies, walking dogs, etc.

3. Consider creating a community prayer line.

In the days and weeks to come, large numbers of people will be confined to their homes. The idea may be appealing the first day or two, but boredom is going to set in quickly. They will begin to look for ways to reach out and connect. Offer to pray for them and to pray with them.

4. Know where to find assistance in your community.

How can you help the hourly worker who has been sent home and may not be getting a paycheck until this is over? How do you minister to an isolated young man who is overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and is now entertaining thoughts of suicide? With many school closings, what about children who are food insecure without a mid-day meal at school? Reach out to a helping professional—a social worker, nurse, or teacher, for example. Ask them about needs in your community and services offered so you can help and encourage others. Be familiar with the resources in your community.

5. Tell of God's transforming power.

Most importantly, take every opportunity to share the Gospel so people may come to saving faith in Christ. If you are stuck at home, think of just one person a day to reach out to and give a joyful witness to the transforming power of God at work in your life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Wisdom-Martin is the executive director of national [WMU](#).

2020 SBC Annual Meeting canceled

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story has been updated since its original publication.

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting has been canceled for the first time in 75 years.

Citing authority provided by the SBC Constitution "in the case of grave emergency," the decision was made Tuesday (March 24) in a unanimous vote of a body composed of SBC officers, the SBC Executive Committee and leaders of the SBC's boards and institutions.

The Annual Meeting, which was originally scheduled June 9-10 in Orlando, is not being rescheduled. SBC President J.D. Greear, pastor of The Summit Church in the Raleigh-Durham, N.C., area, said he was "saddened" to make the announcement, but described it as necessary in light of the ongoing crisis and the uncertainty of when it might end.

"We are a people committed to keeping the Gospel above all," Greear said, "and our sole purpose in coming together is to support one another in that mission, catalyzing our collective mission efforts. This year, our unusual circumstances mean we can best meet that goal by not meeting together."

At the time of publication March 24, almost 400,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection had been reported worldwide, with more than 17,000 deaths. In the United States, more than 46,000 confirmed cases had been reported, with almost 600 deaths; the numbers continued to increase significantly each day.

In an attempt to slow the spread of the coronavirus, which threatened to overwhelm the nation's healthcare system, government officials at national, state and local levels have declared states of emergency and encouraged or required extreme social-distancing practices, as well as the closure of many businesses, stores and restaurants. Current federal guidelines, including a recommendation to avoid gatherings of more than 10 people, have been adopted at various levels -- sometimes as mandatory orders. In some places, residents have been ordered to stay home.

Convention organizers had anticipated the 2020 SBC Annual Meeting might draw the largest number of messengers since nearly 12,000 participated in the 2010 Annual Meeting, also in Orlando. But Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee, said continuing uncertainty over whether and when large groups would again be able to gather -- as well as concern about when it would be prudent to do so -- prompted the move to cancel.

Calling the SBC Annual Meeting "the most pivotal gathering we have as we advance our commitment to reaching the world for Christ," Floyd said SBC leaders were "faced with a

decision that none of us believed we would ever face," and described the cancellation as "heartbreaking," but said, "the reality around us nationally and globally cannot be ignored."

"We know it is the right thing to do," Floyd said. "We are extremely disappointed in having to make this decision, but God will see us through and give us a way until we are able to meet in person together again. ... We know our churches need to focus on ministering to their communities and to those who have been impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

"While we will not physically be coming together in June in Orlando, we will be going together in unity as we minister to our churches, our missionaries, our church planters, our seminary students and our own communities."

The last time the SBC Annual Meeting was canceled was 1945, during World War II, when the United States government banned meetings of groups larger than 50 people. The SBC was preparing to celebrate its 100th anniversary, but instead skipped a year.

The protocol followed Tuesday was instituted by messengers to the 1946 SBC Annual Meeting. The historic decision, set out in SBC Constitution Article XI, Section 4, was reached during two video conference calls.

In a roll-call vote, the SBC Executive Committee voted 75-0 for cancellation, with seven members absent. It was followed by a unanimous vote of the body composed of the Executive Committee, convention officers and leaders of convention boards and institutions.

Mike Stone, chairman of the SBC Executive Committee and pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Blackshear, Ga., said while the decision involved consideration of legal, financial and constitutional factors, he viewed the decision "as a pastor, not a board chairman." He added that the fact it was the first cancellation in 75 years "proves this is not a decision that is made lightly."

"While the constitutional process of voting to cancel is a simple one that involves around 100 leaders," Stone said, "the information needed to actually make the wisest decision is quite involved. The EC staff, officers and legal counsel worked diligently to consider the various results of cancellation."

Jeff Iorg, president of Gateway Seminary and chairman of the SBC's Great Commission Council, called the decision "prudent given the governmental directives, travel uncertainties and advance planning needed for the convention meeting," adding:

"The goal right now for Southern Baptists is to ensure our global missions, education and ministry enterprises continue to function effectively – which we are all working together to accomplish."

The 2021 SBC Annual Meeting is scheduled for June 15-16, 2021, in Nashville. According to the SBC's governing documents, postponement of an annual meeting is only an option "if the entertaining city withdraws its invitation or is unable to fulfill its commitments."

The SBC president has authority to convene a special meeting with the concurrence of the other officers of the Convention and the Executive Committee, but no such action is being taken at this time.

Holding the SBC Annual Meeting either online as a virtual meeting or at various satellite locations is not an option under the SBC's governing documents.

Although annual meetings have been live-streamed for years, the SBC's governing documents require all business conducted at the Annual Meeting be conducted by "messengers present and voting in person." Any changes to the governing documents would require approval of messengers at an annual meeting.

In its meeting in Sept. 2019, the Executive Committee declined a referral made during the 2019 SBC Annual Meeting to study the feasibility of distance voting and remote participation in SBC annual meetings. The motion was one of many similar ones made over the years. In declining to study the idea, the EC cited reasoning that had been cited in declining earlier motions, including:

The complexity of implementation; the vulnerability of sessions to potential technology failures; the accuracy of voting; and the mechanics of conducting business sessions, with messengers seeking recognition for debate. There's also no precedent for official business to be conducted using virtual methods at annual meetings of SBC state conventions.

With the cancellation of the Annual Meeting, SBC officers would remain in office until their successors are elected at the next annual meeting. Members of many committees would remain in office, as well. The expiring terms of trustees of Convention entities would depend upon each entity's individual charter.

"I certainly didn't plan for a third year [as SBC president]," Greear said. "But [I] trust that the God who ordains our days will give us strength equal to the task. This is an incredibly important time for the church, as we seek to demonstrate the certain hope that God gives to an uncertain world through Christ."

The Cooperative Program Allocation Budget and the Executive Committee and SBC Operating Budget could be adopted by the Executive Committee, which has ad interim authority.

With the cancellation of the 2020 Annual Meeting, all ancillary meetings that would have been held in the convention space have also been canceled.

Bill Townes, chief financial officer for the SBC Executive Committee and convention manager for the Annual Meeting, said the Executive Committee staff would immediately begin the process of "reviewing and assessing all contracts and obligations related to the 2020 SBC Annual Meeting." Townes said organizers would reach out directly to pre-registered messengers, exhibitors and ancillary event planners. He said many questions would be answered in an FAQ section published on the SBC website, adding the section would be updated as needed. Townes suggested emailing other questions to SBC EC staff at annualmeeting@sbc.net.

The SBC Pastor's Conference is a separate event. David Uth, president of the 2020 Pastor's Conference and pastor of First Baptist Church Orlando, said Tuesday that as an auxiliary meeting to the annual meeting, the pastors' conference would be canceled, as well. Uth's role as president for the 2021 pastors' conference has not yet been determined.

Greear said even without an annual meeting in 2020, the mission of Southern Baptists "will go on," and urged Southern Baptists to find encouragement in focusing on ministry until the 2021 Annual Meeting.

"The headquarters of the SBC is not in Nashville or Orlando," Greear said, "nor is its primary impulse for ministry what happens on the Convention floor. The headquarters of the SBC is the local church. Our strength is in its pulpits and pews. God has now given us a new challenge, and as He promises, He will give us grace sufficient for that challenge.

"My prayer is that when we come together in Nashville in 2021, we will find ourselves stronger than ever and rejoicing that our God was with us."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Schroder is associate vice president for convention news at the SBC Executive Committee.

IMB postpones volunteer trips through June 30, personnel 'shelter in place'

RICHMOND, VA – International Mission Board senior leaders have directed IMB missionary personnel around the world to postpone hosting any ministry volunteer groups through June 30, leaders announced Wednesday, March 25. Consideration of missionaries hosting volunteer teams beyond June 30 will be reviewed on May 1, leaders reported.

“We’re instructing our personnel to postpone all volunteer efforts at this time due to the uncertainty of health and travel for those traveling internationally, and also to comply with the State Department’s guidance,” said IMB President Paul Chitwood. “We strongly recommend that Southern Baptist volunteer teams postpone any travel during this time, particularly overseas travel.”

Chitwood said setting a parameter about volunteer teams is a complex issue because of the global nature of the virus, including with the United States being greatly impacted and movement becoming more restricted.

“We highly value all our field personnel and their partners—our long-term personnel; our mid-term personnel, including journeymen; and the faithful mission volunteers,” Chitwood said. “Throughout this situation, we are continually assessing local situations in the context of the global crisis and doing our best, at both the local and global levels, to make good decisions for our personnel’s health and safety, and for those who desire to serve alongside us as volunteers for a shorter time. Ministry overseas, however, hasn’t stopped as many of our missionaries are making the same efforts to move to online discipleship training and other types of meetings to ensure that Southern Baptists’ work and witness among the nations remains strong.”

Chitwood said every Southern Baptist and other partners have an opportunity to support missions now, even while being restricted in their travel, by committing to a concerted time of prayer.

“We believe that prayer not only paves the way for the Lord to work, but following Jesus’ example, we know that prayer itself is, in fact, part of that vital work,” Chitwood said. “What an incredible opportunity to step into the gap for millions of unreached people while our eyes are on the condition of the world.”

Prayer requests on [IMB.org/Pray](https://www.imb.org/pray) provide a window on the world, and IMB leaders urge those who are committed to prayer to join IMB’s 175 Days of Prayer, planned for May 11-Nov. 29, 2020, at [IMB.org/175](https://www.imb.org/175).

Olympics volunteers affected

The postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympics is affecting volunteers planning to share the gospel and serve other ways through the international event in Japan. IMB’s Olympic ministry coordinators shared [a message online](#) as well as through [a YouTube video](#) for those volunteers.

“We want you to know that the IMB and our partners here in Japan are still committed to the Tokyo Olympics [when they take place],” said Daniel Rice, who is coordinating IMB’s 2020 Olympic ministries. Between now and then, “our team will continue working hard to keep things moving forward in order to bring the good news of the gospel to the Japanese. We will make the necessary adjustments to continue our [ministry] plan when the Olympics take place. Our hope is that many of you will be able to join us.”

“In the meantime, we ask that you continue to pray for the Japanese people,” Rice said. “Many Japanese may feel disappointed and are even concerned that the Olympics’ postponement reflects negatively on them as a nation.”

Rice offered several prayer requests for Southern Baptists:

- Pray that the COVID-19 would be contained worldwide and that people of all nations can gather and celebrate the Olympics.
- Pray that during this time, local Japanese churches would gain a greater excitement for opportunities to minister during the Olympics that will lead to more involvement and partnership when the Olympics are held.
- Pray for the many athletes in Japan and around the world who may be discouraged by the delay of the Olympic Games.

Field personnel follow guidelines

IMB leaders have received questions about the status of field personnel who live full time overseas: long-term personnel and mid-term personnel, including journeymen. In most cases, field leaders have determined that missionaries remaining at their current location is the best option for their health and safety. In specific cases where personnel have medical conditions such as chronic respiratory ailments or pregnancy and live in locations with sub-standard medical care, IMB offered the option to temporarily relocate, as they are able to travel, to areas with better medical care.

The U.S. State Department has [issued this guidance](#): “The Department of State advises U.S. citizens to avoid all international travel due to the global impact of COVID-19. In countries where commercial departure options remain available, U.S. citizens who live in the United States should arrange for immediate return to the United States, unless they are prepared to remain abroad for an indefinite period. U.S. citizens who live abroad should avoid all international travel.”

Because IMB’s long-term and mid-term field personnel, including journeymen, live overseas, the missionaries are following the State Department’s guidance for them to “shelter in place.” The State Department’s Global Level 4 Health Advisory announcement of March 19 is not interpreted as a requirement or encouragement for personnel who live abroad to return to the U.S.

IMB leaders encourage concerned families to communicate directly with their field personnel as they are able to get the most up-to-date information directly about their family members.

“We remain committed to our mission to serve Southern Baptists in carrying out the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations,” Chitwood said. “While this global crisis raises many uncertainties, we remain steadfast in our belief that the Lord will fulfill the vision of a

multitude from every language, people, tribe and nation knowing and worshiping our Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 7:9). And we remain grateful for the opportunities He provides for us to join Him in fulfilling that vision.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie McGowan is AVP of communication, marketing and PR for the IMB.