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Telling the story
of Michigan Baptists

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Mike helped me go topless

by Tim Patterson

PLYMOUTH, MI – Now that I have your attention, let me tell you what led up to this situation and what eventually transpired.

It was early on a Saturday morning and I was already extremely frustrated and stressed out. I truly thought that if I had the right equipment going solo on this job would be simple and easy. My confidence had been high, but alas, it soon became evident that my confidence lacked capabilities.

Even though I had researched the matter on the internet and viewed several YouTube videos of others doing it, failure had reared its ugly head and my goal was doomed. I needed help and that would necessitate me asking someone. This is so humbling for a man who prides himself on being self-sufficient. A pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstrap's kind of guy. A man's man. A mister fix-it, Tool Man, I can do this by myself dude. Yet the reality was that I was in need.

Some months back I purchased a Jeep Wrangler Unlimited as my daily driver and masculinity crisis vehicle. It is a wonderful ride and I truly love putting around in it. One of the reasons I purchased it was that I need to sell my two-seater convertible and get something I could more easily get in and out of without the risk of throwing out a hip. (Old age stinks!)

Yet, I still wanted to be able to have the top down and enjoy the breeze in my hair (what's left of it), and feel the sun on my face. I guess that desire is a leftover from my Florida years. So, I purchased a Jeep that has a removable top. The only problem is, that to remove it takes either a mechanical hoist or at least two individuals. Since it was only yours truly in the garage and no mechanical hoist in sight, I was in need of help. A situation in which I find myself more often than I want in my aging years.

The fact is, that I am being forced to depend on others more and more as the months of the calendar are torn away from the others and put aside, to be discarded with the previous pages of life. I really don't like the feeling this situation affords. It is humbling and at times down right humiliating.

I have always been the one to help. Not the helpless. I have always been the one to do the heavy lifting for others in all areas of service and life. I have always been the one that others came to for help. Not the other way around.

I have come to the realization that I can't do it all by myself and I need others. The truth is, we all need help. If not immediately, soon! We all need others.

If this current pandemic has taught me anything it is that we need each other and when we learn to depend on one another, we are better for it. The truth is, mankind is needy. Why?

Because we are a mess. That's just a way of saying we are all sinners and corrupt to the core. "We have all sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one."

If you are hurting and in need of help because of this sorry situation we are going through, I want to encourage you to reach out to those around you who know the transforming power of the Savior and ask for help.

Yes, it can be humbling, but the fact is we are all in need in some way. Don't let pride keep you from receiving the grace and provision He has for you.

The family we call the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) has generously set aside funds to help those of our family who are suffering and in need because of the COVID-19 crisis. These funds were received through our State Missions Offering this past year and are for the express purpose of helping those adversely impacted financially during the pandemic.

It has been my experience that those most in need are the ones who are least likely to ask for help, and this is especially true for pastors. I'm not sure of the reason, but could it possibly be you are accustomed to helping instead of being helped?

Are you the one who others usually go to? Whatever the reason for your reticence, don't miss out on the blessings that come from asking for and accepting a helping hand.

I reached out for help and now I can gladly say that I can run around topless whenever I like. (For more information about the State Missions Offering Pandemic Relief Fund, please contact the BSCM Offices, info@bscm.org)

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.

My Mom

by Dr. Tony L Lynn

PLYMOUTH, MI – Mom is suffering from Alzheimer's and is in a memory care facility near my dad in central, lower Michigan. Here is a list of some memories that I cherish knowing that she, in the coming years, will lose these memories. Happy Mother's Day, Mom. I love you.

- As a preschooler, I was chasing friends around a coffee table with sharp corners until I slipped on a small rug and fell into the table and cut my head open. I remember the warmth of the blood trickling over my face until the embrace of my mother's arms picked me up and her gentle washcloth compress on the wound slowed the blood and my panic on the way to the hospital emergency to have the wound sewn closed.
- I practiced riding a bicycle downhill in front of my Flint home during 1960-something. My parents sat on the cement front porch watching as I improved with each turn until that moment when I over-corrected my steering and fell hard onto the gravel road. With stones embedded in my knees and the palms of my hands, the sting from every bleeding limb felt strange. I didn't think the sting would ever stop. Mom laid out a quilt on the cold porch for me, and she picked out the stones and washed out the dirt from my wounds. I fell asleep listening to my parents gently talking about our lives.
- Two bullies chased me repeatedly off the bus during my elementary years until Mom solved the problem. On the last occasion of the attacks, the boys chased me into the yard where they had been shoving me into the ditch, kicking, and hitting me. On this final day, Mom threw open the screen door of the house and commanded the boys, "Hold it right there you two. You let Tony up. If we're going to have a fight, we're going to have a fair fight. You can fight him one at a time. Go ahead. Who is going to be first?" After those words, the boys apologized and a childhood friendship was forged.
- While a teenager, I fell in love with Jamie who became my wife in 1977. My mother was good for our teenage relationship overseeing our interaction with the grace that only a godly mother can carry. Somewhere around midweek, Mom would ask me about our Friday night date plans. Without seeming to pry, she would ask questions to make sure our dates were filled with good friends and good activities: "Who are you going out with?" "Where are you going?" "Take good care of our Jamie," she would say. Mom made us matching shirts and she made the cake for our wedding reception.
- Mom could convince me to do anything for her with her gentle voice and her loving smile. It was Mom who, during my teenage years, persuaded me to go to a church where my discovery and calling to follow Christ started. Somewhere in my mid-teens I started towering in height over my mom and her small frame. On rare occasions, I would start a fight with my younger sister which caused Mom to lift the flyswatter off the tack where it hung on the cork bulletin board by the back door. I would run to the other side of the dining room table, and ask my mom to forgive me until we both laughed and she would wave the flyswatter in the air toward my direction and implore me to, "Be good now!"

There is something amazing about a mother's love and care. This month I want to say how grateful I am for my mother and all the mothers worldwide who raise children to love the Lord

and to love others. I am blessed because my mother impacted my life toward Christ and gave me a desire to make a better world. I am doubly blessed because I have watched my wife, Jamie, strive for the same goals. To my mom, Jamie, and my three daughters, Naomi, Bethany, and Amy, Happy Mother's Day to all of you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the State Director of Missions for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as lead pastor for more than six years at Crosspoint Church in Monroe, Michigan. He and his wife, Jamie, also served with the International Mission Board in Africa and in Europe.

Unique pieces of wood

by Mike Durbin

PLYMOUTH, MI – It's amazing what can be done with pallet wood! Just google "pallet wood", and you will see a plethora of creative ways to use what most think of as a by-product of transportation. From furniture, to signs, and wall coverings, pallet wood is finding new uses. Churches across our state are using it in a variety of artistic ways to beautify their places of worship.

I was recently struck by the transformation pallet wood made in the foyer of City Church in Clio. Pastor Rick Marcus is doing an incredible job replanting the church. Part of his ministry is leading the church to reimagine some of the spaces. One of the most dramatic, visible expressions of this is their using pallet wood to create an inviting space where people connect with each other in a remodeled foyer. Wood that was originally used to transport something else of value, was repurposed to add beauty, character, and charm. The redesign of this space created a setting where people feel comfortable and relaxed as they huddle in small groups, sit around tables, or stand around the beautifully designed counter for coffee and doughnuts.

Having seen so many inviting ways to use pallet wood, Shar and I decided to use it in our own remodeling project. Each piece of the reclaimed pallet wood was unique. As we sorted through the boards, some were scarred, filled with nails or staples that had been cut off. Some were longer, thicker or wider than others. Some were smooth on the surface, while others were rough sawn. Each board, because of its unique characteristics, took the stain differently. We joined the wonderfully diverse boards together in a way that pleased us.

As I was working with the unique pieces of wood, memories flooded my mind of how God brought some precious, one-of-a-kind people in my life. People from different backgrounds,

different places, with stories much different than mine, but He brought us together through our common faith in Christ.

Working with the boards, I was reminded of the time I asked a church to write an answer to the question, "What does Jesus mean to me?" For several weeks, people covered the walls of the foyer with their testimonies of the value of Christ in their lives. Before long, the walls were filled with written testimonies from every age person in our church. People stopped before and after the services to read the testimonies. Here is a sample from every age group expressing gratefulness for Jesus:

"Jesus is my heart" (Preschooler).

"Jesus means to me the world, my life, my strength." (Elementary age).

"Jesus has always been a friend to me, a light in dark places. When all have forsaken me, Jesus was there as my only companion. When my family was broken, He was my father. When my whole world shatters around me and I have no want to toil on in this weary world, the Lord is my lifeline and gives me a purpose and a mission" (High School student - Foster Kid).

"Comfort during times of uncertainty, reassurance in times of doubt, mercy and grace, guidance when I am feeling lost, and most of all Jesus means to me everlasting life" (College Student).

"I've been through a lot of valleys in my life. Looking back, I can see it's because I've made a lot of choices that weren't in line with His will. But even though I haven't always done His will and accepted Him as my best Friend and Father, I know He has been by my side every step of the way, loving me, and leading me. That is something no human has ever done or been for me consistently. He has never left me wanting, and has provided for all of my needs. I will be forever grateful to Him for having loved me in the past, for loving me today, and for loving me and walking beside me in the future" (Adult).

"Jesus means everything to me. He came into my life at age 13. Jesus has never left me or failed me. Jesus is my hope, my assurance, my joy. There is no way to tell anyone what Jesus means to me. Jesus has filled my every need" (Senior Adult).

One of my favorite testimonies was written by a middle-aged adult: "It seemed like Pastor Mike preached about every painful thing going on in my life. One Sunday, I was handed a stone as we entered church. I was sure that Pastor Mike had lost his mind. I soon found out that he was going to help me find mine. ...When he gave the altar call, he said to bring our pain, sorrow and burdens in the rock and leave them on the altar. Well, I left my pain on that altar as well as renewing my prayer for forgiveness. Since that day, I have the greatest peace I have ever known. Jesus is only a breath away. With Jesus as my Savior, there is nothing we can't handle."

The testimonies told during that emphasis were as unique as the people who wrote them. Each was a testimony to the work of Christ in individual lives, and a testimony to our unity as the

family of God. I was so moved by the testimonies that I kept them for years in a file as a reminder to the work of Christ.

As I was building the pallet board wall, the faces of many people came to mind. Like the wall I was building, each person was a beautiful part of a much more beautiful whole. Each piece of wood was bound to the other. Each was held in place by boards - beside, above, and below it. Together, they made something that they could never be alone.

I know, it's just a wall. But it's a reminder to me that we are part of an incredible family - the family of God. We are connected to those who came before us, to those with us on the journey, and to those who will follow. Together, we are "...no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22).

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.

Putting out the call for volunteers

by Nancy Spears

ROSCOMMON, MI – Have you ever worked intensely? So hard your body aches and you can hardly stand up? Not that the work itself is hard work, but the days are long and each moment of the task at hand is worthy of your whole attention to detail and your best effort... the task that does not seem to matter in the larger scheme of life and yet, it makes a difference in the moment for the place you are serving... the work that is almost thankless, and in the background unnoticed... that is the way of serving at Bambi Lake. So, you might wonder, why do we serve?

The Infinite Retreat was held the weekend of April 16-18, 2021. Since COVID 19 began, this is the first light and beginning of normalcy at Bambi Lake. More than 100 youth and leaders were in camp. Bambi Collective, led by Mick Schatz, was in its regular form of exuberant worship music joined by singers, Noah and Grace. John Coin, worship pastor, challenged the students to

find the new normal that is found in Christ and not in the world. Seven students professed Christ as Savior, and new life began.

Behind this, many of whom were relatively unnoticed, were the volunteers. Staff volunteers repaired leaking pipes and fixed faucets in buildings that were opened from a long winter rest. Staff volunteers cleaned the rooms, washed the linens, and placed them on the beds, making sure each room had the essentials that were needed. Volunteer staff made a menu, ordered food and prepared it for each meal assisted by weekend volunteers. Volunteers registered all the people, making room assignments to keep people with their group. Volunteers greeted the youth and their leaders; temp checking each person, and directed each group to their rooms. Mountains of dishes were washed by on camp volunteers. It was weekend volunteers who washed and sanitized the tables between meals and vacuumed as needed. Weekend volunteers made milkshakes and smoothies in the Snack and Gift Shop under the supervision of a staff volunteer.

After the event, weekend volunteers took the used linens from the lodge to the laundry room and the trash to the dumpster. And on Monday, staff volunteers continued to “pull linens and trash out” of the other buildings. And so, it continues, with another event scheduled to begin the following weekend. And some of the same volunteers will return to do work the next weekend, adding in some other projects like drywalling and directing activities.

A busy weekend, yes! But this is the easy season at Bambi Lake! Still, there are many essential things to be done in the camp that cannot be done by our volunteer staff of five full-timers and three part-timers. Many short-term volunteers are scheduled to come to the camp in the coming weeks.

- Disaster Relief ChainSaw volunteers will be cutting down and cleaning up trees that need to be removed.
- Baptist Builders are building ramps into cabins 1 & 2, and a handicap accessible fishing dock over the water near the beach.
- Campers on Mission volunteers are scheduled to repair and paint the play area in the campground, and other campground repairs.
- First Baptist Church, Lee’s Summit, Missouri missions group and choir to work on a boardwalk project at the beach and general camp clean-up.
- Harmony Baptist Church volunteers working on docks, campsites and other grounds maintenance.
- Through the Roof Ministry is going to build small ramps to make easier wheelchair access for the lodge.

As we make the camp more handicap accessible, there are many more projects to be completed. There are hand-held showers heads to be installed, a concrete walkway to the beach area, walkways and doorways to be made more accessible, and handicap bathrooms to be completed in the lodge.

Summer is coming! Extra volunteers will make the difference at Bambi Lake. Whether for one day, a weekend, a week-long, a one-time commitment or repeating, any tasks that are completed by fresh volunteers make it possible for the staff volunteers to refresh, do their best and work more efficiently. For example: volunteers from Holland Baptist came for a two-night stay and built the cabinets in the barrier free bathrooms, as well as some much-needed reorganizing in the kitchen and kitchen storage office that made a big difference as we tackled the Infinite Retreat. It is amazing what can be accomplished in a short time with the right person with the right tools.

Now for the big ask! We need your help!! Our volunteer staff will continue to do what needs to be done. But we need your prayers for health and physical endurance. A very busy summer is on the schedule and we cannot do it alone. We need volunteers to come alongside us to help us do what needs to be done. People who are willing to do whatever needs to be done, and to do it with a cheerful spirit are indispensable to our camp. Your camp!

Some of the tasks that could be done by additional volunteers are:

- Mowing and trimming the property- weekly through the summer growing season
- General clean up of fallen branches-a regularly needed job
- Painting- exterior and interior, repairing as needed
- Grinding stumps, filling holes
- Servicing lawn mowers, leaf blowers, chain saws, generators before the summer
- Repairing golf carts, servicing and repairing vehicles
- Repairing paddleboats
- Landscaping areas by Lodge, Worship Center and Prayer Chapel
- Making signs for Mini-golf, Monster Hill, and other areas, directional signs
- Kitchen help
- Housekeeping help
- And much more

Many jobs require skilled laborers like running water lines and electricity to cabins or campsites. Some jobs just require willingness and flexibility like picking up dead tree branches that have fallen on the ground. But each job makes a difference for the camp. And it is our desire for the camp to continue to make a difference for the kingdom. Everything that volunteers do for the camp makes it possible for us to continue providing a place where we see people hear and respond to the call of God on their lives. That is why we serve, sacrificially at Bambi Lake Retreat and Conference Center.

Is there something God is calling you to do? Do you have a skill to share or a heart to serve? Interested in volunteering?

Please contact Nancy, Tim or Mick at Bambi Lake 989-275-5844 or email nancy@bambilake.camp.

*“Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people.”
Colossians 3:23.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy is married to Daniel, a wonderful and understanding man who encourages her to serve where God calls. They have a large family who loves spending time at Bambi Lake where she is a full-time volunteer.

Bouyer announced as the new BSCM Diversity Ambassador

by BSCM staff

PLYMOUTH, MI – The Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM) announced the hiring of Rev. Coye Bouyer as the BSCM’s Diversity Ambassador. Bouyer’s role will be to connect with ethnic pastors across the BSCM mission field, to encourage pastors in their ministry settings, and to be a bridge of communication between the BSCM and the state’s ethnic pastors. BSCM Executive-Director, Tim Patterson said, “I am thrilled to be serving alongside Coye in this ministry. I have found Coye to be a delightful and loving kind of leader.”

In addition to the responsibilities laid out for Bouyer’s position, he has a list of personal goals that he hopes to accomplish. He says they include developing relationships, to embrace the diverse forms of worship and church across Michigan, and to be a bridge builder between the BSCM and the state’s minority churches.

Tim Patterson announced the hiring in a letter to BSCM churches. The letter can be read in its entirety below.

Dear BSCM Family,

It is my privilege to introduce to you the newest member of the Baptist State Convention Staff. Rev. Coye Bouyer will serve as our new Diversity Ambassador for our state. I am thrilled to be serving alongside Coye in this ministry. I have found Coye to be a delightful and loving individual that passionately loves his Lord and his family. Coye also has a deep desire to be the kind of

leader who can understand and communicate effectively with people from all walks of life, backgrounds and ethnicities. I see in Coye a wonderful and godly leader. His role and responsibilities will include but not be limited to:

- Serve as Diversity Ministry Ambassador for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan as directed by Timothy Patterson, BSCM Executive Director
- Connect with all Ethnic Pastors in the BSCM Mission field.
- Encourage pastors in their ministry settings across Michigan and express our appreciation for them.
- Share our 500 by 2025 vision with pastors and challenge them to join the movement.
- Point pastors to resources that are available, especially on our website and in the Baptist Beacon and other SBC resources.
- Explain the Cooperative Program and the power of our partnership to advance God's Kingdom together and demonstrate the various methods used to contribute.
- Be a bridge of communication between our state offices and our ethnic pastors and leaders.

Pastor Coye shared some of his aspirations in his new role:

1. **To Develop Relationships** – I want to establish and develop relationships throughout our state with other minority pastors and leaders as well as their churches.
2. **To Embrace and be Embraced** – Due to the diversity of the church body different churches have differing cultural norms, worship styles and ways of acceptance into their church communities. I hope to not only embrace the diverse ways of worship and dynamics of different churches but also be embraced by my brothers and sisters who are a part of them.
3. **To Become a Bridge-Builder** – The ultimate goal is to become one who connects our Michigan Southern Baptist Minority Churches with our state office; it's staff, it's resources and its vision for Michigan Southern Baptist. As well, I would like to see the State office connect and build authentic and intentional relationships with our Southern Baptist Minority Churches and Ministries throughout Michigan. In this role I get the privilege of connecting two parties to each other, thus becoming a Bridge-Builder.

I am so excited about Coye joining our team. I strongly encourage you to contact Coye and welcome him to the family.

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A church, a freeway and a stained glass window

by Tom Bradley

GRAND RAPIDS, MI – In the early 1900s a church planting movement went across the small, but growing city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Eventually a church was started, and a facility built in the densely packed working-class neighborhood on the northwest side of the city called *Fair Haven*. In a central place in the auditorium, they placed a beautiful stained-glass window with a Bible at its center to visualize their commitment to bring Jesus to the neighborhood and city.

A number of years later, as is common in many American cities, the urban northwest side changed, and the church struggled to adjust. Fair Haven became a congregation in decline. Then a new freeway, I-131, was slated to divide the growing city, and Fair Haven was square in its path. Relocation now had to happen, but where?

With the opportunity to have a fresh start, Fair Haven decided to move out of the city. A new facility was built, extra loans were made, but unfortunately the congregation continued to shrink. Eventually, to pay back the loans the congregation deeded the building back to the association, and a small remnant continued to meet there.

Back on the urban West Side, the city sunk into a period of economic and cultural decline. Houses became slumlord apartments, and parks were a combination of rusty playground equipment, trash and broken glass. Schools overwhelmed and underfunded, struggled in a neighborhood saturated with drugs, alcohol, violence and brokenness.

Westwood and church planting and CrossWinds

In 1991 Merri and I felt like God was calling us to plant a church on the northwest side of Grand Rapids, called Westwood. We struggled to find a place to meet, and eventually wound up at a YMCA. After a few years, the association told us about a facility they could make available to us to use, and eventually buy. A small congregation met there called Fair Haven Baptist Church.

Within a few years our church plant continued to grow, and Fair Haven dwindled and eventually disbanded. Westwood, a growing church plant, was now a vital part of a thriving, church planting movement helping to start many churches in West Michigan.

Then our young youth pastor felt called to plant as well, called back to the urban neighborhood he grew up in. Some of the members went with him and in the joyful parting a new church was born in the city. For many years it struggled. It was not a three-year, self-sustaining start. It was blood, sweat, and tears. For years they clawed to get a foothold in the broken neighborhood. When temporary denominational funding dried up, Westwood continued supporting them, and Merri and I marveled, as we watched them love their neighbors. Many times, it came close to closing. But they never quit. They kept trying, and they saw the miraculous hand of God transforming lives in the darkest places of the city. They called themselves CrossWinds, they planted a second congregation, and a movement was growing.

Over the years by the sacrificial example of CrossWinds, Merri and I began to see the need for church planting in the city. So, our ministry started drifting to the urban West Side. It started with a backyard bible club that morphed into a summer soccer program. Neighborhood kids, with nothing to do showed up. We met families, the schools pitched in, and a summer league developed. People were available, hungry, and looking for anything that would help their families, and the Church became present in the middle of the brokenness. It was like lighting a candle in the darkness.

Full Circle

As the needs and the opportunities became more apparent, I started talking with the CrossWinds team about planting a church in the Urban West Side. I would be happy to help *facilitate, encourage,* and possibly participate in some way to help get it started. But I really wanted to see it happen. After a couple of years, the CrossWinds team came up with a strategy for planting a church on the Urban West Side... it was me, they said, and I knew it.

So, Merri and I moved from the quiet suburbs to the always-noisy West Side. We're living next to drug dealers, 100 yards from a free health clinic, and loving it. We can walk to the place our church meets in the downtown West Side in a few minutes, while passing neighbors we know and love, and speak Jesus to on a regular basis.

When we came, we brought back something with us. The stained-glass window with the Bible in the middle. It was important to a group of people nearly 100 years ago who believed they could make a difference in the city. We still believe that today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom and Merri Bradley planted CrossWinds West Side in Grand Rapids, Michigan three years ago. If you would like to learn more or receive their newsletter feel free to contact them at pastortom@windschurch.net.

Giving them back to God

by Phyllis Harbaugh

STERLING HEIGHTS, MI – “You’re going to have a baby!” I remember the excitement of bringing all three of my ‘bundles of joy’ home from the hospital to begin the journey of being a mom.

I was 6 years old when my family went to a church service where my mother took my youngest baby sister to the altar, and the pastor prayed over her. When I asked my mom what that meant, she said she was giving her back to God. I wasn’t sure why she would do that, but as I grew up I learned what it meant as she prayed for us and taught us to trust God for everything.

So, I started my “mother journey” by dedicating my babies to God, giving them back to Him. I promised God that I would raise them to know and trust Him, and asked Him to help me be a godly example in our home.

Many times through the years I have had to give them to God again as life became hard and overwhelming. Each time, He reminded me that He loved them and had a plan for their life, and I would have to surrender my plan and my will for His. Every time He accomplished His will for them, and encouraged my faith and trust in Him.

Every phase of their lives I found myself on my knees giving God permission to work in their lives, and to grant me wisdom to help them through all that life brought them. As I cuddled them as babies, listened to their problems as teenagers, and counsel them as women today, I am still confident that “He who began a good work in you (them) will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Philippians 1:6

The greatest thing about being a mother is to know that my precious gifts from God are loved by the God of the universe. When we surrender them to Him, we have a peace and confidence that He will work all things for good in their lives.

It’s never too late to commit your children to God and give Him permission to work in their lives. Love your children, pray for them, be a godly example.

Proverbs 31:28 “Her children rise and call her blessed...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phyllis Harbaugh is a mother of 3 daughters, 3 son-in-laws, Gramma of 6 and wife of Pastor Herb Harbaugh, Sterling Heights, Michigan.

'Product of CP' leads Texas church to health

by Erin Roach

Editor's Note: Sunday, April 25, is Cooperative Program Sunday in the Southern Baptist Convention.

MABANK, TX (BP) – When Southern Baptists tithe, the emphasis usually is on what they can give to support ministries throughout the world. But sometimes it's worth considering what churches receive from the Cooperative Program.

At Grace Community Church in Mabank, Pastor Michael Cooper explained how CP dollars that went out from his church circled back to benefit the congregation.

"I would say that I am a product of CP. So in a sense, I owe a debt to those who have given," said Cooper, a two-time graduate of Criswell College and a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

CP dollars support Criswell and Southwestern, among other entities. These schools educate leaders like Cooper, who was only 24 when Grace called him as pastor in 2013. Then the 13-year-old church had members with an average age of 70 and attendance around 30.

"The group just loved the Lord. They were older saints, but they had a desire to grow spiritually and reach the community," Cooper said.

The Cedar Creek Lake area southeast of Dallas has hundreds of churches of various sizes, but finding a church that prioritizes the Gospel is not easy, Cooper said.

"One of the things we've really tried to do here at Grace is to cultivate a focus on Gospel community both within the church and outside the four walls," Cooper said.

Grace Community has three core values to guide its focus: Christ-exalting simplicity, biblically faithful worship and family-oriented community. Cooper said in his first few years at the church, he led the congregation to a healthier culture primarily through preaching and small group discipleship. Church attendance reached 140 before COVID hit, and is currently averaging around 100. As the church gained some health, more people were saved and baptized. Last fall, despite the pandemic, the church paid off its debt. Now it's in position to build a new sanctuary for the years ahead.

"I'm convinced we're at the precipice of really seeing good Gospel growth and Gospel transformation within our church but also within our community," Cooper said.

Mabank is projected to see a population increase during the next two years of 1,500 people, Cooper said, adding: "For us as a little rural town, that's big time."

Much of that growth will be near Grace Community.

“There are about 300 homes being built less than 500 yards away from our church,” Cooper said. “We already have plans in place to make sure we knock on every single one of those doors so that every person in that home receives a personal invitation to church and a personal invitation to come to Christ.”

At Grace Community, the pastor envisions a funneling discipleship process where people start by attending a worship service and then go deeper by branching off into small groups. Beyond Sunday School and Wednesday nights, people can join Ladies of Grace or Men of Grace Bible studies offered on weekdays.

The Ladies of Grace and Men of Grace ministries identify and cultivate gifts and train leaders for service.

“For us, that is one of the identifying marks of discipleship, when our leaders are training up new leaders for various ministries,” Cooper said.

Grace Community forwards 7 percent of its undesignated receipts through the Cooperative Program and gives another 5 percent to its local Baptist association.

“If a normative-size church like Grace Community Church can impact darkness all around the world through the Cooperative Program, then I’m going to support that,” Cooper said.

“I’m thankful that our convention forwards 55 percent on to the Southern Baptist Convention. That’s one of the dominant reasons I love being a Southern Baptists of Texas Convention pastor – we believe in CP.”

When Grace Community called Cooper as pastor, he remembers the search committee telling him they didn’t want to hire a pastor just to benefit from him; they wanted to be a blessing to that pastor.

“I can say from that time to now, being 32, nearly eight years of pastoring a single church, I would not trade any of it for anything,” Cooper said, adding that he has done a lot of funerals of saints who laid the groundwork for the fruit that is visible now. The vision of Grace Community is not just something the congregation made up, he said.

“It goes back to Jesus – to be a blessing to our community, to be a blessing to the nations, to see people come to know him, to be baptized, to be taught,” he said. “It ultimately goes back to the Great Commission. We’re called to something bigger than ourselves.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Roach is a writer in Mobile, Ala.

Flexible VBS options allow churches to reach kids in varied pandemic contexts

by Aaron Wilson

NASHVILLE, TN – As COVID numbers improve in many locations around the country, much of the hesitation that surrounded Vacation Bible School a year ago has been replaced with anticipation as churches look forward to one of their calendar’s most significant evangelistic events.

Nevertheless, the question, “How will we host VBS?” remains a valid consideration as leaders evaluate churchgoers’ comfort level in gathering during a pandemic. To help churches find a 2021 VBS format that’s right for their congregation and community, Lifeway has created a new set of resources structured around four VBS formats:

1. Traditional: the “VBS as usual” approach
2. Neighborhood: smaller gatherings held in members’ driveways, porches, yards and cul-de-sacs
3. Alternate timetables or formats: Wednesday/Sunday nights, weekends or one-day VBS
4. Virtual at home: online worship with in-home Bible study, recreation and crafts

“Churches will differ in how they approach VBS this year, but they are overwhelmingly saying ‘yes’ to VBS because the gospel is worth sharing,” said Melita Thomas, VBS and kids ministry specialist. “Last year we identified four ways that VBS could safely happen. This year we’re doubling down on that and providing specific resources for each of those strategies. There’s no reason why a church can’t pull off VBS this year in whatever format they choose.”

Church leaders can visit [VBS.lifeway.com/yes-to-vbs](https://www.lifeway.com/yes-to-vbs) to help determine the best VBS model for their congregation. There they can find an overview of each approach, discover available resources and download a free “4 VBS Strategies” e-book.

For churches who plan to encourage kids to participate in a VBS experience from home or a church/home hybrid model, leaders can also download the free “Virtual VBS Directors Guide.” This new resource includes:

- guidance on scheduling VBS events and organizing volunteer teams
- practical tips for recording quality video
- suggestions for virtual crafts, recreation and Bible study activities
- guidance for copyright compliance when using VBS music/media
- ideas on creating VBS at Home packs for families to enjoy together

An 18-minute overview video of this year’s virtual VBS resources can also be found on Lifeway VBS’ Facebook page.

Lifeway is offering two VBS themes this year: “Destination Dig,” an archaeological theme designed to help kids “unearth the truth about Jesus,” and “Concrete and Cranes,” which was introduced in 2020 to encourage children to “build on the love of Jesus.”

Regardless of how churches host VBS during a pandemic, their approach is likely to be well received. According to a [Lifeway Research study](#), almost 9 in 10 Protestant churchgoers (86%) say they are proud of how their church has responded during the coronavirus pandemic, with 58% strongly agreeing.

“The reason Lifeway exists is to help churches be successful,” said Thomas. “By giving churches several options for how to host VBS and outfitting them with the best resources to pull it off in their particular context, we want to make things super easy for them.” More information on VBS options for 2021 can be found at vbs.lifeway.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Wilson is a writer for Lifeway Christian Resources.

About Lifeway Christian Resources

In operation since 1891, Lifeway Christian Resources is one of the leading providers of Christian resources, including Bibles, books, Bible studies, Christian music and movies, VBS, and church supplies, as well as camps and events for all ages. Lifeway is the world’s largest provider of Spanish Bibles. Headquartered in Nashville, Tenn., Lifeway receives no denominational funding and operates as a self-supporting nonprofit.

Lessons to a mom

by Gail Faulkner

I was a young mom with three children living far from home, in a foreign country having left all that was familiar and comfortable behind. My chaotic thoughts seemed to run in every direction. I wondered if my children would be scarred for life after being placed in an unknown culture with a language we could not speak and not a friend to call their own.

Those years are faded memories now, but lessons I learned are tucked deep within the secret places of my heart. God was tender and personal.

Allow me to share a few lessons I learned as a mother on the field.

It is good to be fully dependent on the Lord – painful, but worthy. I think we have experienced some of that in 2020 with a worldwide pandemic. Strip everything away and the spiritual battle of loving God with all our heart, soul and mind is no longer clique words, but life itself. Teach children to be dependent on God.

God is a God of details. He met the needs of our family in ways I could not. We met a French/American family that had 6 children and became immediate friends. Fellow missionaries were instant Aunts and Uncles. Sibling relationships cemented deeply. The Lord provided a beautiful home with wildlife, fruit trees, exotic plants and flowers that made this strange new home exciting. Nationals were welcoming and kind to us.

In those early days of settling, I felt like Hagar in Genesis 16:13, “I can call the name of the Lord who spoke to me, ‘You are a God of seeing.’” The Lord saw us in that unfamiliar place, and as I journey back to those days and to the present I can still say, “I have seen him who looks after me.” Do not miss those opportunities to point your children to a heavenly Father who cares for us.

I learned about God from a different worldview. I am so thankful we were exposed to poverty, different skin colors, foreign languages, strange food, discomfort, and loneliness. We try to protect our kids and make their world comfortable, yet it robs them of learning the heart of God for the nations. Face the unfamiliar roads with bumps and let that grow and mature your family. Sometimes God calls us to go across borders and other times we find the world in our own backyard. No matter where we are, we have been entrusted with the holy calling of telling God’s story. Let that be your legacy.

I learned that God takes care of moms, too. We never outgrow needing a mom. I found mine on the mission field. She did not birth me, name me, and she did not raise me. I will never forget the safety of her embrace as she wrapped her arms around my frame to comfort and hold me. She whispered in my ear that all would be ok, and I was not alone.

Her name is Elizabeth. She has no biological children, but hundreds of “adopted” children all over the world. I am one of them. Years later she is the one I call when I need a word of wisdom, gentle guidance or even a stern correction.

You do not need to birth a child to claim the precious name MOM. Our influence touches those around us and our obedience to simply love ushers us straight to the heart of those we invest in throughout life. Open your arms and welcome others in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gail Faulkner attends Hillsdale Baptist Church. She has been married for 39 years. Gail has 3 children and 5 grandchildren. Her new hobby is gardening.

Bringing mom dandelions

by Brian Jones

TECUMSEH, MI – I am not particularly good at it. And no, this is not false humility, I really can't... sing, that is.

It's not that I can't sing in a particular key, it is just that I sing in all of them, on every song, and at any given moment; but that doesn't stop me from singing at church. (No, not leading in music, I am pretty sure there are Geneva Convention restrictions against that.)

However, when the body is gathered together to join in song to the Creator of the universe, I sing happily and joyfully; just not well. And believe it or not, this makes me think about Mother's Day.

As a kid, did you ever take flowers to your mom? Especially on Mother's Day? You just wanted to find some way to express how much she meant to you, and flowers seemed like a good choice.

And my guess would be that if you were a typical kid without a lot of money, then you probably didn't bring her a dozen red roses. You probably did the best you could. And what you may have done, like so many other kids, was to look for flowers that were readily available. Something you could pick from the yard.

And unless you lived on a golf course, you probably had several little yellow flowers in your yard. You know the ones that are so much fun to play with. Eventually they turn into white little puff balls that are far too enjoyable to blow after you pluck them from the ground. It is almost impossible not to do it when you see them.

And most kids, at some point in time, have pulled one from the ground and presented it to mom with love and devotion. And mom, heart swelling with emotion, promptly lectured the child that it is not, in fact, a flower but an invasive weed that does not belong in the yard.

No, she didn't do that. She grabbed a teacup and put the dandelion in it as if it were a beautiful rose or tulip or lily. Why? Was it her lack of horticultural knowledge? Maybe, but probably not.

Most likely it was because she understood the heart of the one bringing this gift. That her child was bringing a present, an offering, that is the best that they could bring, because of their love for mom.

Our singing should be similar; it should be the best that we can bring; whatever that is. Far too often I see people who are reluctant to sing because they don't sound like Celine Dion or Josh Groban. But God commands us to sing whether we have angelic voices or not.

We are commanded to sing for our good and for His glory. We are commanded to sing because it shows our love and devotion to Him.

So, bring your offering of voice. Bring your gift of song. Sing to the One who created you. Sing to the One who redeems you. Sing to your heavenly Father. Sing like you are bringing a little yard weed to mom on Mother's Day, because you are singing out of love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Jones is pastor of Tecumseh Missionary Baptist Church. He earned his Master of Divinity at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

A church investor's guide to the Cooperative Program

by Chris Forbes

The Cooperative Program: A missions impact multiplier

I've spent some time lately thinking about the importance of the leaders who help oversee the stewardship of our local churches. Every church has them—those three or four people in whom the church places their trust to help them make wise financial choices. Sometimes they include church business administrators; other times it's a member or two in the church who have experience with or a knack with things related to finances.

As a steward of your church's finances and missions giving, I know that your strongest desire is to assure that your church's giving makes the most impact in the Kingdom of Heaven. Giving to missions is a kind of investment in the Kingdom of Heaven, after all.

That got me thinking. What would the Cooperative Program look like if presented as an investment? I think it would show that the Cooperative Program (CP) is a diversified missions investment portfolio that gives your church a global reach and multiplied impact.

Let me demonstrate why the Cooperative Program is a sound missions-funding vehicle that meets your church's fiduciary requirements.

The prudent-person rule

"The sensible person's wisdom is to consider his way" (Prov. 14:8).

A staple of sound investing is the **prudent-person rule**. As *Investopedia* says, this investment principle “is used to restrict the choices of the financial manager of an account to the types of investments that a person seeking reasonable income and preservation of capital might buy for his or her own portfolio.”

If you are going to invest your church’s financial resources in the Kingdom of Heaven, you should exercise reasonable means to assure there is a return on your church’s investment, from a missions standpoint. While your church is not investing in missions as a means to make a profit, you would, no doubt, want to see your investment multiply impact. The prudent-person principle is wise, and it is based on some sound advice from the Bible. Other passages of Scriptures echo this instruction:

- The Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30)
- The Wise and Foolish Builders (Matt 7:24-27)
- The Man Who Builds a Tower (Luke 14:28)
- Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters (Eccl. 11)

Since 1925, Southern Baptists have leveraged the biblical principle of stewardship prudence with great impact. **Here is a video with a brief history of the CP.**

The Cooperative Program is Southern Baptists’ unified plan of giving through which cooperating Southern Baptist churches give a percentage of their undesignated receipts in support of their respective state convention and Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) missions and ministries. Read on to see how the CP stacks up as a missions portfolio.

A strategy with conservative stability

Sound investors do not simply throw money into every new idea. Instead they seek to ensure stability in their investment portfolio. When cooperating churches include CP giving in their church budgets, a reliable stream of income is made available to provide a stable base for the thoroughly-vetted missions the church supports. The CP provides the stability needed to assure supported missionaries and ministry leaders around the world are freed from the time-intensive task of fundraising, allowing them to focus on ministry instead of development.

The CP supports a diversified collection of ministries that reach and serve people at every level. Each ministry is overseen by Southern Baptist church leaders who serve on boards or as trustees, holding leaders accountable to their missional responsibilities. See more about **how the CP is allocated in Oklahoma here.**

An aggressive missions multiplier funding strategy

Conservative investments are the foundation of a sound portfolio, but growth-oriented investors want more than just stability. They want increase. Southern Baptists have an aggressive (in the financial sense) strategy for funding global missions.

Another “*prudent-person*” aspect of the CP missions culture of Oklahoma Baptists is that our churches themselves take up the responsibility of fundraising for the CP *and* the convention’s designated offerings such as the **Lottie Moon Christmas Offering** (LMCO), the **Annie Armstrong Easter Offering** (AAEO), and the **Oklahoma Edna McMillan State Missions Offering** (SMO).

Because the Cooperative Program covers the administrative costs of managing and promoting designated offerings, 100 percent of these funds can go straight to the mission fields all over the world. This allows ministries that are supported by the CP to multiply their impact in engaging the world with the Gospel.

Instead of the time and money-intensive mission society fundraising used by other organizations, our churches make raising support on behalf of our missionaries their task. This has been our consistent culture of generosity.

This strategy means churches are not constantly inundated with appeals for money and requests for access to their pulpits for fundraising appeals. This also helps our churches maintain focus on ministry instead of fundraising. It’s an effective strategy, and it has worked for nearly a century.

Every Southern Baptist ministry that receives funds from the CP is able to leverage maximum impact for special offerings that increase their missional impact. *Each of these ministries has a proven track record for biblically-sound Gospel ministry.*

Look at the impact of the SBC missions portfolio when multiplied by the Cooperative Program:

- Unreached people groups are reached by **IMB Missionaries** on the field who are paid salaries through Cooperative Program funds. This means they are able to use LMCO money strictly for ministry projects. **Look at the IMB impact report [here](#).**
- The North American Mission Board (NAMB) **reports that** mega cities and towns of all sizes are able to reach new people with the Good News through church multiplication. Church planters are discovered, assessed, trained and coached because of CP support. Many ethnic churches would not be able to function without supplemental support from the CP.
- A new generation of leaders are educated and trained through **Baptist colleges like Oklahoma Baptist University** and the six **SBC seminaries**. Every dollar these schools receive from the CP is a dollar less that has to be paid by these students, thus reducing student debt.

- The Cooperative Program makes it possible for Oklahoma Baptists to have a ministry profile on 41 college campuses in Oklahoma and at universities all over the United States, through **Baptist Collegiate Ministries** (BCM). The CP provides funds for full and part-time ministry leaders who reach students at a critical time of their life development. Because of CP support, future leaders of the world are being reached with the life-transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Comprehensive ministries to **children, youth**, young and senior adults are enhanced by the CP because the need to raise administrative costs is reduced. See also **Oklahoma Baptist Homes for Children** and **Baptist Village Communities**
- Southern Baptists are able to engage culture BY applying biblical principles to social and moral problems while promoting religious liberty through the **Ethics and Religious Liberty Committee**. CP funds help Southern Baptists maintain a strong voice for the church and help raise awareness of the needs of the unborn and broken people.
- Physical needs are met for people who are impacted by disaster because **Oklahoma Baptists Disaster Relief** units are able to maintain readiness through CP support. Because of the CP, money donated in times of disaster are strictly used for relief efforts and not for administration and fundraising promotions.
- One hundred percent of **SBC Global Hunger Funds** are leveraged to feed people, and zero money given to hunger relief is used for administration or promotion because the CP covers administrative expenses.
- In Oklahoma, thousands of youth are evangelized and disciplined through **Falls Creek** with costs for programming covered by the CP.

As you are responsible for helping your church make wise financial decisions, I pray you will take a closer look at what a wise investment the CP really is. For nearly 100 years, Oklahoma Baptists have been investing in the Kingdom of Heaven by giving through the CP.

Imagine if every Oklahoma Baptist church would take a fresh look at the level of support they give to the CP mission's portfolio. We can make a difference. Here are a few steps you can take now to help.

- Cultivate the culture of cooperative missions generosity in your church
- Review your church's previous CP giving and evaluate how your church prioritizes cooperative giving
- Increase CP allocations in your church's budget
- Include CP advocacy in church missions education
- Involve next generational leaders in the process of planning missions giving
- Get involved in the life of our convention, take leadership and help shape our collective future

Pandemic altered U.S. churchgoers' discipleship practices

by Aaron Earls

NASHVILLE, TN (BP) – Fewer churchgoers filled pews and Bible studies during the pandemic, but many still continued personal discipleship habits throughout 2020.

A [study by Nashville-based Lifeway Research](#) found U.S. churchgoers were less likely to be involved in small groups during the pandemic, but many added some digital and individual activities to their discipleship routines.

“Some have defined discipleship as a journey of following Christ in fellowship with other believers,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “COVID-19 appears to have had both positive and negative impacts on discipleship. Pre-pandemic churchgoers largely have shown more resolve in following Christ over the following year while altering how they engage with other believers.”

Scattered small groups

In January 2020, prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, around 3 in 5 U.S. churchgoers say they participated in a church small group. Slightly more than half (52 percent) say they were a participant in such a group, while 7 percent say they served as a group leader. Another 41 percent of churchgoers say they were not involved in such a group prior to the pandemic.

Young adults aged 18 to 29 are the most likely to say they were participants in a small group before COVID (68 percent), while churchgoers 65 and older are the most likely to say they didn't participate in groups at all (57 percent). African Americans (62 percent) are also more likely to say they were participants in a small group in January 2020 than white churchgoers (48 percent).

A year later, fewer U.S. churchgoers overall say they were involved in any type of church small groups. A third (33 percent) say they were participants in January 2021, and 4 percent say they served as a leader. More than 3 in 5 did not participate, including 29 percent, because their church didn't offer any small groups, and 34 percent, even though their church did offer some.

Among those who say their church offered small groups in January 2021, around half (52 percent) say they were involved either as a leader (5 percent) or a participant (47 percent). Slightly less than half of those who had the option of small group participation (48 percent) chose not to be involved.

“Our research has shown that Christians involved in in-person small group Bible studies and Sunday School classes are more likely to exemplify Christlike behaviors of serving those outside

the church, sharing the Gospel, volunteering within the church, giving and investing in spiritual disciplines,” McConnell said. “During the pandemic, far fewer churchgoers benefited from these Bible-focused, relational meetings, and only a portion took advantage of online options.”

Discipleship in a pandemic

Pastors became increasingly worried about discipleship within their churches as the COVID-19 pandemic stretched beyond the summer of 2020, according to [analysis](#) of a [previous Lifeway Research study](#).

In the most recent Lifeway Research study, U.S. churchgoers relayed how their discipleship practices changed or not during the pandemic by comparing 2020 with 2019 practices of in-person worship service attendance, online worship service attendance, attending another church’s online worship service, viewing a worship service on TV, listening to a worship service on the radio, attending an in-person Bible study, attending an online Bible study, giving the church a percentage of income, reading a Christian book and listening to a Christian podcast.

“In nine of these discipleship practices, a majority of churchgoers have participated in the last two years,” said McConnell. “In-person worship and Bible studies saw the greatest declines in frequency, while potential replacements for these saw the greatest increases in participation.”

Most (57 percent) say, compared to 2019, they attended in-person worship services at their church less often in 2020. Fewer say they attended the same (27 percent) or more (10 percent).

In many cases, the lack of in-person attendance was replaced with online worship services, as 53 percent of churchgoers say they participated in more online services in 2020 compared to 2019. Fewer say they did so the same as 2019 (22 percent) or less (11 percent).

Around 1 in 5 churchgoers say the pandemic led them to participate in online worship services from another church more in 2020 than in 2019 (21 percent). The same percentage (21 percent) say they were involved in those services the same in both years. For almost half of churchgoers (45 percent) this was not part of their discipleship practices in either year.

Similarly, 45 percent of churchgoers say they did not participate in worship services on television in either 2019 or 2020. Less than a quarter say they did so more (23 percent) or the same (22 percent) when comparing years. Fewer (10 percent) say they participated less.

Most (59 percent) did not turn to the radio in either year for worship services. One in 5 churchgoers (20 percent) say their participation in radio services in 2019 and 2020 was the same. Around 1 in 10 say they participated more (11 percent), with slightly fewer (10 percent) saying they did so less in 2020 than 2019.

For in-person Bible studies with other adults, 33 percent of churchgoers say they participated less in 2020 compared to 2019. Fewer say they were involved with in-person Bible studies the

same (22 percent) or more (10 percent). Another 35 percent say in-person Bible studies were not part of their discipleship practices in either year.

For those who participated in Bible studies, some may have moved over to an online alternative, as 23 percent of U.S. churchgoers say they participated in online Bible studies more in 2020 than 2019. One in 5 (20 percent) say they were involved the same amount both years. Fewer (13 percent) say their participation decreased in 2020. Close to half (45 percent) say those online groups were not part of their practices in either year.

More than half of churchgoers (53 percent) say they gave a percentage of their income to their church the same in 2020 as 2019, while 15 percent say they gave more. Around a quarter (23 percent) say they gave less during the pandemic year. For a tenth of churchgoers (10 percent), giving a portion of their income was not part of their practice in 2019 or 2020.

Some churchgoers (15 percent) found more time to read a book on Christian living in 2020 compared to 2019. Around 2 in 5 (42 percent) say they read the same in those two years. Fewer (13 percent) say their Christian living book reading decreased in 2020. Three in 10 churchgoers (30 percent) didn't read any books of that type in either year.

Listening to Christian podcasts also increased for 15 percent of U.S. churchgoers in 2020. More than a quarter (27 percent) say they listened the same amount in 2020 and 2019. Few (9 percent) listened less. Almost half (48 percent) say Christian podcast listening was not part of their discipleship practices in either year.

Young adult churchgoers (aged 18 to 29) were among the most likely to say they increased their participation in 2020 in in-person worship services (22 percent), online worship services from another church (27 percent), TV worship services (31 percent), radio worship services (24 percent), in-person Bible studies (24 percent), online Bible studies (31 percent), giving a percentage of income to their church (26 percent), reading a book on Christian living (27 percent), and listening to a Christian podcast (31 percent).

African Americans and Hispanics were also more likely than white churchgoers in most categories to say their participation increased in 2020 compared to 2019.

Despite fewer churchgoers being involved in small groups in 2020 and many discipleship practices decreasing during the pandemic, more than 9 in 10 say they grew closer to God through the events of 2020 (54 percent) or at least stayed about the same (39 percent), according to a [previous Lifeway Research study](#).

“Those who were churchgoers before COVID-19 say they are more in-tune with God because of the events of 2020,” McConnell said. “This move reflects what Jesus called the greatest commandment, to love God. During the pandemic, the second greatest command to love your neighbor has often been expressed through social distancing. It will be interesting to see what impact this greater love of God has on relationships with others as those activities restart.”

For more information, view the [complete report](#) or visit LifewayResearch.com.

Methodology

The online survey of 1,000 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted Feb. 5-18, 2021, using a national, pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attended religious services at least once a month in 2019. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity and education to more accurately reflect the population.

The completed sample is 1,000 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 weight. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups. Comparisons are made to a Lifeway Research survey of Protestant churchgoers Sept. 20-27, 2019, using the same methodology.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Earls is a writer for LifeWay Christian Resources.

After the ‘three-year pandemic’

by Eric Reed

SPRINGFIELD, IL – The stories we hear right now are anecdotal: churches here and there witnessing something of a revival after months of closure and privation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some pundits warned that it may take years for all the regulars to return to church services, if they ever do. But more recent polls show people are growing eager to return to the normal things in life, including church attendance.

In a few places in Illinois, accounts of young families seeking out church services even as the schools remain online only are especially encouraging. Church plants holding their first services and baptizing new believers after serving the community with food distributions and other pandemic-related ministries cause us to say, “Can it happen here?”

In fact, it has happened before.

In the darkest days of the Spanish Influenza a full century ago, some churches reported revivals. In the decade that followed, the Southern Baptist Convention’s \$75 Million Campaign led to the

birth of the Cooperative Program, funding the steadiest and most effective missions movement in history. It was in this environment that a Sunday school director from First Baptist Church of Marion was asked to take his burgeoning methodology nationwide. Arthur Flake and Flake's Formula spurred amazing growth of Sunday schools and church attendance for the next 40 years.

Can it happen again? Can something good come from such troubled times? Before we attempt a conclusion, let's consider just how dark those days—and years—were.

"The Spanish Influenza broke out in Europe in 1918, then spread worldwide," Aaron Prince wrote. "All told, 20 million people died," he said, more than twice the number who died on battlefields in the just-concluded first World War.

Prince, a Fairfield native, had just been called to serve as pastor of First Baptist Church of Eldorado, Illinois, in February 1919, when the Flu broke out there. "Some folks went out of their heads with temperatures up to 105 degrees, chills and vomiting. There was nothing we could do. We didn't know what to do."

Still, Pastor Prince tended the sick after the town doctor went down with the disease, using a bit of wartime medical training to dispense aspirin and quinine. Then when the undertaker got sick, he took on that task too. A nearby funeral home would send an assistant to set up the embalming machine for two or three bodies at a time, and Prince would handle the rest, including dressing the deceased and arranging them in caskets.

"Those three years—February 1919 to September 1921—saw the hardest work of my ministry. I'm not exaggerating when I say that sometimes I was up 24 hours at a time. When I came home at night, my wife, Pearl, would have me a clean change of clothes. I changed over at the church, for fear our children might get contaminated."

Churches closed for up to two months at a time across three winters, along with "all public meetings including the picture shows. Everyone was told to stay home," Prince wrote. "But in spite of the flu, we kept winning people to Christ. I guess our best revival was in January of 1920... I baptized new converts twice a day for two weeks, at the 2:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M. services, nearly 100 in all."

Prince and his family stayed well through three outbreaks of the Spanish Influenza. Finally, as the last of the illnesses in southern Illinois subsided, the pastor said, "I was standing on a street corner in Harrisburg, waiting for the tram-car to Eldorado. All of a sudden, I got sick, and by morning, every member of our family was in bed. We had to hire a nurse to take care of us."

His story of God's care was repeated when Prince was called to the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Marion, and later as president of Hannibal-LaGrange College and founder of Honolulu Christian College. Looking back 100 years at Pastor Prince's pandemic, we may ask how God can bring good from a dire situation. It has happened before.

“For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Reed is editor of Illinois Baptist media.

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First Person: Invite people to follow Jesus

by Todd Gray

LOUISVILLE, KY (BP) – Sometimes I know the best way to answer a great question about 30 minutes after the conversation is finished. That was the case recently when I was asked about an element of evangelistic preaching known as the invitation.

The invitation is a time of response to the message from God’s Word that was just proclaimed. It usually comes right at the end of the sermon. There is often a song that is sung, and people are invited to come to the front of the church to indicate they are ready to follow Jesus, be baptized, join the church, answer the call to Christian ministry or possibly pray or re-commit their life to Christ.

I am in favor of invitations and use them most every time I preach.

It is not difficult to make a biblical case for issuing a call for public response. Jesus told Matthew to follow Him. He invited others to come to Him. He told weary people to take up their cross and follow Him. When a person heard Jesus speak, they were challenged to act.

But there is another case that can be made for invitations today. In Acts 16:30 the Philippian Jailer asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved. They immediately answered his question and he responded.

Our Sunday morning worship services do not normally allow for a question-and-answer time at the conclusion of the sermon. However, is it not possible, and in some cases likely, that someone in the congregation is asking, “What must I do to be saved?”

If it happened in the Philippian jail it may also be happening in the pews of the church building, or the Facebook livestream, where you have been preaching.

Here are five elements of a helpful invitation:

1. **Be Clear:** Ask people to take action and tell them the action they need to take. Consider saying this: “I am going to ask you to give your life to Jesus today.” Then proceed to tell them how to trust in Christ to save them.
2. **Be Considerate:** No one wants to be embarrassed, so be sure to go out of your way not to publicly embarrass people. Invite people to pray where they are and call on Jesus to save them. Then invite them to respond during the invitation song by meeting you in front of the pulpit for prayer and further counsel, or the back, or fill out a card, or some other appropriate action given the setting of the preaching event.
3. **Be Careful:** One helpful practice for evangelistic preaching is to have invitation counselors trained and ready to counsel all who respond during the invitation. Make sure these mature men and women are trained to share the Gospel and then use them to provide spiritual counsel to those who respond during the invitation.
4. **Be Convinced:** When Paul preached to a group of ladies, as recorded in Acts 16, God moved to open Lydia’s heart to receive the message Paul spoke. God still opens hearts today. Be convinced that God opens hearts through faithful Gospel preaching.
5. **Be Celebratory:** Be prepared to celebrate every good thing God is doing when the Gospel is preached.

God can also use a simple Gospel invitation to prompt those who are hearing the Gospel to respond publicly affirming the work He is doing in their lives. When God moves and people respond the entire church celebrates and gives praise to the God who saves.

Keep inviting people to lay down their life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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