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## A heart of surrender

**SHELBY TOWNSHIP** – I love reading about the birth of Jesus every year as the Christmas season rolls around. If I am not careful, I can read through the events of Jesus' birth quickly and move on to the next thing on my busy holiday "to-do" list. There are so many treasures to find in the Bible when we slow down and take time for God to speak to us through His Word.

I love the beginning of the first chapter of Luke. We see two very similar stories that Luke writes about, yet two very different responses.

In Luke 1:13-17 (NIV) we read about an angel visiting Zechariah. Luke writes, *But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

Elizabeth and Zechariah had faithfully prayed for a child through the years, and the Bible says in Luke 1:7 *"that Elizabeth was barren and they were both well along in years."*

Zechariah responds to the angel of the Lord with a question that revealed his unbelief. In Luke 1:18 (NIV), *Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."*

Instead of looking to God and believing He could do the impossible, Zechariah's question showed that he was looking at human limitations when God is a limitless God! Zechariah needed a sign that the angel was from God. He was looking for assurance, rather than putting his faith and trust in God. Since Zechariah responded in unbelief, the Lord closed his mouth and he was unable to speak until his son John was born.

As we continue to read in Luke 1, we read about Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel.

In Luke 1:28-33 (NIV), Luke writes, *The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

Mary responded to Gabriel with a question that revealed her heart. *“How will this be, Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

Mary’s response showed that even though she knew *what* would happen, she just didn’t know *how* it would happen. Her question showed her faith, not unbelief. She was wondering how a virgin can physically give birth? She wasn’t questioning if it was possible, she just wanted to know how it was going to happen.

Mary responds in Luke 1:38, *“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.”*

Mary’s response showed her heart of surrender. She trusted the word that came from the Lord, and she gave herself fully to God’s plan.

I long to have a heart of surrender like Mary, but more often than I care to admit, I am more like Zechariah. Recently, the Lord spoke something to me, but I didn’t see it unfold in the time frame I thought it should; therefore, I allowed fear to creep in.

I began to take the situation into my hands and started to change plans. Thankfully, one day as I was reading in 2 Chronicles, God revealed to me where I wasn’t trusting Him. I confessed my sin, and told God from that point forward I would trust Him in that situation. You know what? He showed up and everything worked out the way He told me it would!

How do you respond when God speaks something in your life? Are you like Zechariah and question if it is possible? Do you constantly ask God for a sign to be sure it is Him? Or do you respond like Mary, fully surrendered to do the work of the Lord. Do you know Him well enough to recognize His voice and trust His ways?

I invite you to pray the following prayer of surrender as you yield to God’s plan in your life.

*Father God,*

*Thank you for loving me despite my faults and lack of trust. God, I want my heart to be fully surrendered to you. I confess that often I ask for a sign of confirmation or I question the things you speak over me. I believe, Lord, but help my unbelief! Show me where I struggle to trust you and build my faith. I pray that as I learn to discern your voice, I will be courageous and obey what you are asking me to do. Lord, I want my life to matter for you and for eternity.*

*Amen*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Karen is married to Scott Blanchard, pastor of Lakepointe Church, and moved from Florida to Michigan in the summer of 2009 to plant Lakepointe Church in Shelby Township. She enjoys mentoring and discipling women and also leads women’s life groups through her church. She is

passionate about helping women find their purpose in who God created them to be. She is on staff at Lakepointe Church and loves being part of what God is doing in the Metro Detroit area!

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## 5 things we're missing that the global church gets

**Many spiritual topics that captivate the global church are often ignored in the American church today to our detriment.**

It's easy for us to focus on the needs of our own churches. After all, this is where and to whom God has called us to serve. Yet, God's design is for us to contribute to and benefit from the global church.

In September 2024, 5,000 believers from more than 200 countries gathered in South Korea for a week of exhortation, collaboration, worship, and prayer at The Fourth Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. The participants included many believers who represent Christ in their workplace in addition to church and ministry leaders.

The Bible teaching and discussions were robust. This was a diverse gathering, so the teaching and writing did not match any denomination perfectly. But this group was intentionally biblical and gospel focused. We share many areas of ministry focus with the global church. But it's striking how many topics captivate the global church that many in the American church ignore today. Here are five of those points of emphasis.

### 1. The importance of the Holy Spirit

In the same way Jesus's followers waited in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit, the global church points to the importance of waiting for the Holy Spirit today. In America, we're quick to pursue our mission in our own strength. Yet the mission is not possible without proclamation that is faithful to Scripture and affirmation of the role of the Holy Spirit.

Our theology may say one thing, but our behavior is often more focused on our work and our plans than God's presence. We desperately need the Holy Spirit to move in the hearts of people within our churches and among those who are not yet followers of Christ.

"Coram Deo" is a Latin term for the presence of God. Our goal should be to constantly live in the presence of God. We are not just asking the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of others, God has called us to constantly rest in His presence and ask, "What should I do?"

When this takes place, it's common for it to prompt personal and corporate repentance and seeking forgiveness from others. In the words of Bishop Efraim Tendero, CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance, "We need to revise the view of Jesus's presence from mere security to inculcate accountability." In God's presence, we have no secrets.

Spiritual disciplines can help us step into God's presence. Such habits can draw us to listen to God and to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. This is far different than what global leaders observe in our western cerebral ecclesiology.

## **2. The need for prayer**

Similar to the emphasis on the Holy Spirit is the frequent dependence on prayer heard throughout the global church. A believer in Hong Kong prayed for her coworkers only to find them coming to her with questions and seeking spiritual guidance. A believer in Iran prayed and fasted for two months before she was called to a place six hours away where she found people hungry for the Lord.

S.D. Gordon, a devotional writer in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century wrote, "You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed." Starting with prayer demonstrates the humility of saying, "We can't, but God can."

The growth of the church in South Korea and the large number of international missionaries they send to reach the nations coincides with a high value they have placed on prayer. It's common for their churches to have early morning prayer meetings every weekday. A Korean missionary in Madagascar frequently spends his Saturday mornings—the one day with no prayer meeting—prayer walking his city. This heart for seeking God's heart drives the mission.

Ronaldo Lidorio, missionary to peoples in the Amazon, pointed out, "It is impossible to accomplish mission without courage." That courage comes from God, not training, knowledge, or experience. We need to pray often, asking God for courage to share and live out the gospel. "We are not called to pray. We are called to a life of prayer," said Lidorio.

## **3. Our role in facing injustice**

Lidorio also pointed to the reality that "because the gospel is countercultural, it finds injustice." As believers uncover and begin to address this injustice, they face opposition and persecution.

The question is not whether there is injustice in our world today. It's rampant. The question is not whether God cares about injustice. He does. The question is whether we as believers are engaging with the people and problems in our community to make a difference in the name of the gospel.

The global church assumes the problems in your context are problems believers are actively seeking to make a difference in. That brokenness is not just a context for ministry. Rather, proclaiming the gospel while displaying love for the broken is integral to the mission. Believers seek to impact spiritual, mental, and physical brokenness in the workplace, in the community, in politics, and in the environment.

When someone raises an issue of injustice in America, Christians are quick to point out when it's not our fault. Instead of this more self-focused response, we would better reflect Christ's compassion if we saw local issues and asked, "How can I help?"

#### **4. How to stand with those facing persecution**

Scripture tells Christians to expect suffering because of their faith. One reason American Christians experience little suffering is because we're not radical. Christ's teachings are radical. They go against human instinct to claim and protect "what's mine." They put others first. If we engage in areas of injustice, we'll suffer for it.

Indeed, Americans have a high level of religious freedom enshrined in our Constitution, but contrary to what many in our culture may think, this freedom is both the freedom to gather and to scatter, spreading the Word and will of God in our communities. As we engage in going into our communities to declare and display the gospel, there will be resistance to this message. But such resistance will likely still pale in comparison to that experienced in many places in the world.

What can we do? Being informed is an important part of embracing the global church. Praying for believers experiencing persecution is a tangible way to help. A church in Madagascar has a weekly prayer meeting for the persecuted church. A believer in Singapore attends a regular prayer meeting for Muslim background believers who often face family and community rejection when they identify with Christ.

America still has power and influence in the world. Asking our government to pressure other governments to give their citizens religious freedom is another tangible way to seek to transform society.

#### **5. Our need for the global church**

Standing together with the global church and its persecutions could be nurtured as a spiritual discipline. Doing so draws us closer to God and His activity around the world even in adversity. Jesus Christ is the head of His Church. This includes believers in all places. As members of Christ's body, we are designed to identify with the global church, learn from each other, share with each other, and be in relationship with each other.

The Bible describes us as being one bride and one body. We need other churches around the world in the same way your church needs each member. This doesn't mean we know about

every church, stay up to speed on every hardship, nor invest in every cause. But it does mean our local churches work best when they're seeking to be [relationally connected](#) with parts of God's global church. There are burdens among global churches that your church is equipped to bear. There is good news among global churches that [your church can celebrate](#).

Hopefully these five insights from the global church can improve our faithfulness where God has placed us to serve.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## **A desperate call for prayer from Thailand**

**ISAAN, THAILAND** – Noei was a housekeeper for an International Mission Board worker in Bangkok, Thailand, for many years when she accepted Christ as her Savior.

She became a trusted assistant in ministry, not just a housekeeper, but when she retired and moved back to her home in rural Isaan, she lost touch with Christianity.

Less than 1 percent of Isaan is Christian, and Noei and her husband, Seri, prayed for God to send a shepherd to look after them. That was 10 years ago. They forgot about the prayer and became entrenched in Buddhist culture again.

God didn't forget the prayer, though. He arranged for a Korean-born man to meet a Korean born woman in the U.S. and travel to Isaan as IMB workers in 2021. When Joshua and Sarah Jung found Noei and Seri, they had Buddhist statues in their home and were wearing Buddhist necklaces.

"We told her, 'God still loves you. God is still waiting for you. He wants you to come back,'" Joshua recounted. Noei wasn't ready to live for Jesus again, but she was willing to attend Bible study with the young missionaries.

One day, she was in a motorcycle accident but was unharmed. That was enough to convince her God still had plans for her, and soon both Noei and Seri were serving the Lord again, now with a shepherd in Isaan.

The Jungs were sent to serve through the IMB in Thailand by Hanmaum International Baptist Church, a Korean congregation in Fort Worth. The church prays for them at weekly prayer gatherings and individual members provide financial support and encouragement.

Joshua was himself involved in a motorcycle accident in Korea when he was 5 years old, and he was seriously injured. His mother, a nominal Christian at the time, prayed God would spare her son. If He would, she would offer him as a missionary someday. She didn't share that prayer with Joshua until he was preparing for ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"She hid that prayer from me for many years," Joshua said. "Also, she probably forgot about it. After that day, she told God she wanted me to become a rich person who could support missionaries. That was her second prayer. I guess God listened to the first prayer. God called me to the mission field."

Isaan, where the Jungs serve, covers about one-third of Thailand – about 21 million people. The population is largely uneducated and very poor.

"There is a saying that to be a Thai is to be a Buddhist," Joshua said.

Missionaries can freely share the Gospel there, he said, but hearts are hard toward Jesus.

"They turn their backs and get very harsh with their family who want to become a Christian," he said. "We teach children English and Bible stories, and some of the kids want to become a Christian. Once they become a Christian, their grandparents stop sending the children. That happened to us many times."

It's the grandparents in charge of the children, he said, because the parents often have left for Bangkok, Chiang Mai or another country in search of work. That makes the population of Isaan very old and very young.

**"Isaan is a very, very hard place. When we share the gospel and ask if they've heard about Jesus Christ, they've never heard the name of Jesus." –Joshua Jung**

One way the IMB team makes inroads in the unreached, unengaged people group there is through a sewing ministry founded many years ago in Bangkok. Now in the rural regions, the missionaries teach women to sew dolls at home to earn a small income. Each person who is taught to sew also is taught the Bible.

Another way of gaining access is through an eyeglasses ministry. The missionaries travel to villages handing out eyeglasses, and each person who receives glasses hears the Gospel. "Through that we make connections," Joshua said.

Because Buddhism is so prevalent in Thailand, holidays are Buddhist holidays, funerals are held at Buddhist temples, and ceremonies are Buddhist ceremonies, he said. Helping people leave



that culture and follow Christ is a monumental task, and churches are key in grouping believers together for support.

The Jungs focus on church planting, and on Sundays he preaches in a small group in Isaan. Sarah, who recently underwent radiation therapy in Bangkok for early-stage breast cancer, takes turns with other members of their team leading Bible study with the sewing ministry.

“Isaan is a very, very hard place,” Joshua said. “When we share the Gospel and ask if they’ve heard about Jesus Christ, they’ve never heard the name of Jesus. A lot of missionaries who come here have a very hard time. Pray for the Isaan people so whenever they hear the Gospel their hearts will be open.

“Pray for our team. It’s a large area, the largest in Thailand, and we only have [a small number of workers]. Pray that God will send workers and raise up local leaders.”

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## **His peace is enough**

**WESTLAND** – As we go through our daily lives, we all face trials and challenges. Most times, we try to take care of things on our own. We should only be relying on the Lord to handle our obstacles. I can speak on my own experiences. Every time I try to take charge of a situation it seems that it never works out in the way that I feel it is supposed to.

The Lord is gracious enough to give us free will and he lets us mess up and then he cleans up our mess for us time and time again. Philippians 4:6-7 says “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your request to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. CSB”.

God promises us peace from everything in this sinful world. All he asks us to do is pray to him and he will grant our request. But is that so hard for us to do? Sometimes we put so many other things before God and we forget who the head of our lives is and who gives us that peace that surpasses all understanding. Our spouse won’t give us peace when we are dealing with depression, our children won’t give us peace from the grief of a lost loved one, and our parents,

friends and co-workers won't give us peace from a past abusive relationship that we still have buried deep in our hearts from the past.

Jesus Christ is the only peace that we need. There have been so many days that I have felt nothing but joy in my heart even though there is a storm going on outside in my life, that joy and peace is only because I have grown to develop a relationship with Jesus. I have not always had peace, and yes! In the past I have looked to people and materialistic things I thought would bring me peace and happiness, but that feeling only lasts a short time.

To start feeling some peace in your life your first step would be to start praying to God. He wants to hear from you. Even though he has already ordered your steps and has your ultimate plan written down, he still wants to hear from you. He wants to know that you are committed to him.

Ask God to open your heart to get a better understanding of his word. Thank the Lord for all the blessings that he gives to you, because we forget so many times of all that he does for us. Don't forget to give him praise. Worshiping the Lord through song and hymns, just praising God for his goodness will surely bring peace to your spirit.

Remember this Scripture John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the World gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful." The Lord is with us every step of the way. We are never alone in this world of calamity. With all the stress of life just know that His peace is enough.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jessica Wimberly is the 1st Lady of One Mission Church in Westland Michigan. Jessica and Pastor Antonio have 4 children, Savanah 18, Antonio II 11, Alexandria 1, and Anthony 7 months. Jessica is the Director of the Children's Ministry, Women's Ministry, and Assists with the Media Ministry at One Mission Church. A nurse by profession, loves art and spending lots of time with her family. Outside of family time, she enjoys arts and crafts, writing, fellowship with her church family, and helping seniors in the community.

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## **Gifts**

**PLYMOUTH** – I have always struggled with giving gifts during the Christmas season. It's not that I don't want or love to give gifts, because I do. I get such great joy and satisfaction from the act of giving. My struggle is with focusing on a gift and making sure it reflects my love for the individual and it is something they will truly appreciate.

I learned years ago that buying gifts for Sabrina could turn into a mine field of catastrophic consequences if wrong steps were taken. I no longer buy her lingerie or underwear because what I like and what she will wear are not even close to the realm of reality. She loves jewelry and I love to see her enjoy it, but what she really wants and what my bank account can sustain don't balance. Also, I never gift her with clothing. It never fits. If it is too small or too large, the resulting reactions are not good. Trust me! Don't attempt this.

Of course, most of what I have said about gifts for the love of my life were in jest. I have lived with her long enough to know her and that which brings joy to her life, and I do my best to provide that. Gifts are more a matter of expressing and sharing love and appreciation than exchanging material objects.

During the past ten years that Sabrina and I have had the joy to do ministry here in this marvelous place called Michigan, we have been more than privileged and blessed to be gifted with so much. We have been gifted to work alongside some of the most precious people we have ever encountered.

Tony and Jamie Lynn were two jewels dropped into our hearts that will always adorn and sparkle within our lives and our memories for the rest of our years. Mike and Shar Durbin became forever friends as well and continue to be exemplary encouragers. These two couples comprised the heart of our ministry team.

The list of those with whom I worked side by side in those early days will forever be written on our hearts. Anne Glissman, Yolanda Chapa, and Nancy Spears were my first "angels at the East of Eden," protecting and providing counsel and care. I would have been lost without them.

I will forever be thankful for Mick and Jackie Schatz for leaving the warmth of the South to live in the fridged North to take the reins of our retreat and conference center at Bambi Lake.

So many others have joined hands with us to help "punch holes in the darkness", but if I tried to list them all I would surely omit someone. So please know that if you have not been named, you have been so loved and appreciated. The fact is you are our gifts. Gifts that will forever be treasured and loved. Gifts that came from your hearts and a heart for our Lord. Gifts that will not be forgotten when this "season" of life has passed, but will last for eternity.

This year Sabrina and I will receive many gifts, but none will ever surpass that which has been given to us by the sweet saints of Michigan.

**THANK YOU FOR THE GIFT!**

#### **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.

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## Christmas trees and church planting...

### Back Then

**PLYMOUTH** – One-color aluminum Christmas trees were the rage when I grew up in the mid-1900s! After Thanksgiving, smudged boxes filled with stainless steel rods wrapped in aluminum curled and twisted, make-believe pine tree needles were brought from the attic into the living room. Printed directions explained how to insert the tree's limbs into a single vertical pole with the long limbs at the bottom and the short limbs at the top to copy a typical pine tree in the forest. Looking back, I remember my cousins and I inserting the limbs randomly, trying to create a monster of a tree with no symmetry. Our parents would allow the Frankenstein creation for a few minutes before forcing us to follow the recommended pattern written on the box. Only after the limbs were correct were we allowed to hang ornaments.

### Glass Balls

My mother and my aunts circulated among themselves single-color collections of glass ornaments. The exchange added an annual pinch of variety to each home. One year, my mother would have us suspend clear balls; the second would be red, and the third would be blue until the rotation started again. Back then, uniformity was a shared and relentless obligation when it came to trimming the tree!

### Color Wheel

The most exciting moment would arrive after the one-color tree and one-color ornaments were displayed. Our parents would pull out the famously loved, motorized, spinning color wheel of red, green, gold, and blue from another grungy box. They would carefully place the color wheel far enough from the tree and paper-covered gifts not to melt the aluminum tinsel or scorch the gift wrapping. The 150-watt bulb provided enough heat that I think I can recall one of my sisters and me laying near the radiating heat, oohing over the four-color changes until we felt ourselves falling into a tired trance, after which we would stagger to bed to fall asleep with dreams of Christmas Day.

## **Now**

Today, decorating for Christmas is much different in most homes than in the 1960s. The season is filled with endless color, texture, and self-expression! For example, one of the annual traditions we started after our marriage, and especially when each of our children was born, was for each family member to buy a unique ornament representing a milestone, an interest, or a moment of personal history in that person's life. Our tree was filled with the stories of five individuals from one family. The number of new ornaments grew by five each year until our three children reached adulthood. Upon leaving our home for careers, university, or marriage, our children would take their boxes of ornaments into their new adventure. Strikingly, our Christmas tree would be 18-20 ornaments emptier because a new tree elsewhere told the history of someone we loved, which brought us joy.

### **Current Trends**

Good news worth mentioning at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's is that church planting now resembles the diversity of today's Christmas trees more than ever. As the language/ethnic church planting catalyst for the Send Network assigned to Michigan, I want to share three exciting trends we can share with one another over the holidays.

1. Increasing diversity
2. Cross-cultural opportunities
3. Next generation progress

### **Increasing Diversity**

This year, the Send Network announced that in 2023, Southern Baptist churches planted 652 new churches across Canada, the United States, and its territories. Of the church plants, 61% identified as non-Anglo, meaning their language or ethnic expression is something other than American or English.

In 2023, Send Network also reported that 122 existing churches opted to affiliate with Southern Baptists, and 66 new church campuses were started for a grand total of 840 new congregations in the SBC in 2023, some of which were also non-Anglo. A new trend!

We are experiencing the fulfillment of what the Lord promised thousands of years ago to a ninety-nine-year-old Abraham in Genesis 17:4-5. "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."

As people from other nations continue to move to the United States for security, education, and advancement, we can expect an increasing diversity in our neighborhoods and churches.

A Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Year's Prayer: Let's celebrate the Lord's promises and his passion for the nations because it includes us, those we love, and those we don't yet know.

## **Cross-cultural Opportunities**

Church members in North America no longer need passports to share in cross-cultural experiences. Occasional one-day road trips or regular incursions into ministries of another language or ethnic group are just around the corner from our homes. Passports and airline tickets are not required; however, behaving like Jesus, Peter, or Paul is needed.

John 4:4 describes Jesus Christ before he meets with the Samaritan woman at the well: “And he had to pass through Samaria.” Christ’s obligation was not a logistical arrangement but a divine compulsion. We must let that divine compulsion take hold of us, moving us as the Lord desires.

Acts 10:34-35 reveals how the Lord radically rearranged Peter’s convictions when he looked upon a gathering of strangers with backgrounds different from his own as they took their next step toward the Lord. In the unfamiliar situation, Peter said, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Acts 17 contrasts two ways Paul shared one Gospel among two groups: the Bereans researched and reflected on Scripture after hearing Paul, whereas the Athenians reclined in the shadows of idols that cluttered the city while having never-ending conversations after listening to Paul’s message.

School classrooms, friendly connections, sporting contests, and workplace conversations are daily occasions to exchange ideas and deepen relationships.

A Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Year’s Prayer: Let’s rejoice because the Lord inserts divine appointments to express his love to others who we think stumbled into our lives.

## **Next Generation Progress**

As the youngest adults explore careers, universities, and marriage, they are often interested in mingling with others from different backgrounds. The distinctions between language and ethnicity appear to be minor or even irrelevant considerations to newcomers into adulthood. What were once considered barriers to relationships have become bridges for exploration.

Diversity has become the new norm. Adults work online with corporate teammates on the other side of the world through one shared language. University students can research materials from other countries because translation apps on devices instantly unlock documents, websites, videos, and audio recordings. Sources of knowledge and opinion have exponentially grown!

We are living in the greatest revolution of change that has ever existed. Previous generations must support the new adults who are spiritually stretching and leaning into their faith in the

Lord Jesus Christ. Nostalgia over the past must not keep God-driven endeavors out of reach from this new revival generation.

The closing words in the unexpected prayer found in Ephesians 3:20-21 describe the holy anticipation I feel each morning when I rise to pray for myself, my family, my friends, my ministry, and those I do not know throughout the world who need Jesus. That expectation grows with each word like a crescendo saying,

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” Do you see and hear the phrase “all generations?”

We have a lot for which we can give thanks.

A Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Year’s Prayer: Let’s praise the Lord because he uses each new generation to do far more than we could ask or think.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the Send Network Director for Michigan and the Language/Ethnic Church Planting Catalyst. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as a lead pastor in Michigan churches and as an international missionary, along with his wife Jamie, in the Niger Republic, France, and Canada.

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## **Handel's Messiah**

**WINDSOR, ONTARIO** – Have you read the fascinating story of George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*? According to one source, on Saturday, August 22, 1741, Charles Jennens brought a scrapbook with him to Handel’s small study. “Here is a collection called *The Messiah*,” he said. “Can you make an entertainment out of it?”

As soon as Jennens had left, the master started reading the text he had received. The words, Handel noticed, were all taken from the Scriptures; but in arranging the quotations, the master felt, Jennens had outdone himself. The words seemed to sing by themselves.

Handel started writing at once. He wrote so fast that the ink had scarcely dried on one page before he started another. The score was covered with splotches, but Handel did not notice them. He forgot the whole world around him. “Whether I was in my body or out of my body as I wrote *The Messiah*,” Handel said later, “I know not.”

For twenty-four days he remained in the little front room on the first floor of his house near Hanover Square in London, setting down thousands of notes to Jennens' biblical excerpts. At regular intervals Handel's servant brought him food, but the master left it untouched. Sometimes the servant stood in silent wonder as Handel's tears fell on a page and mingled with the ink while he penned his notes.

Once the servant found the Master sobbing with emotion. He had just finished the "Hallelujah Chorus." The main theme of this famous chorus is a direct quote from the King James Version of Revelation 19:6: "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

Does a Christmas season ever pass that isn't adorned with the magnificent melody of Handel's masterpiece? Rising to a majestic crescendo in churches and concert halls, the glorious harmony of "hallelujahs" rings forth from enthusiastic carolers everywhere. Yet, oddly enough, if you were to ask most people what the title *Messiah* actually means, they wouldn't have a clue.

The Greek word for Christ is a translation of the Hebrew term *mashiach*, meaning Messiah. Simply put, Christ and Messiah are synonymous terms, and they share a common definition -- "the Anointed One."

We can uncover still more about the meaning of *mashiach* by also examining its theological implications.

First, an anointing proclaimed that someone was authorized to serve the Lord in a position of great honor and responsibility. Second, though the anointing ceremony may have been physically performed by a priest or a prophet, biblical writers often referred to God as the true anointing agent (see 1 Samuel 10:1). Third, divine enablement accompanied *mashiach*. "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon" both Saul and David in connection with their anointing (1 Samuel 16:13; see also 10:6). And fourth, though many were anointed, only one would be the Anointed One, *mashiach*, through whom the destiny of the nation of Israel was to be fulfilled. All through Old Testament history, Israel anxiously awaited the arrival of the Messiah, the Anointed One whom they believed would immediately establish God's rule on earth forever.

### **We acknowledge Him as the Anointed One**

We often speak of Jesus Christ as if Christ were his second name. But as we have seen, it's really a title, a description. Jesus is the Christ, and when we acknowledge him in our hearts as Messiah, we claim Him to be the Anointed One. There is no other. He alone is the fulfillment of God's promised Redeemer, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end and everything in between!



## **We declare our search has ended**

We also declare that our search for any and all other so-called messiahs has ended. When Jesus asked His disciples if they wanted to leave him, Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). For the disciples, the search was over. They had found the Messiah. And we affirm this same truth each time we call him Christ.

## **We announce that He is our satisfaction**

Finally, we announce that He alone provides us with all we need for lasting peace and satisfaction. No one can lift you from the deepest despair like Christ. As Corrie ten Boom's sister Betsie put it, "There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still." That's Messiah. Hallelujah!

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Garth Leno is the Pastor/Planter Care Specialist with the BSCM. He serves in a similar role with the Canadian National Baptist Convention, and he is the founding pastor of The Gathering Church in Windsor, Ontario, a church he planted with his wife, Patty, and a few of their friends.

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# **Christmas: hope that has come and hope that is coming**

**MIDLAND** – At Christmas, we celebrate the hope that has come. We celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. We rejoice in his coming to earth, born of a virgin, laid in a manger. The Jews had been waiting in expectation for the Messiah to come. He would bring hope, peace, and justice. He would establish a new kingdom and reign as King. But it had been a long 400 years since God last spoke through the prophet Malachi.

I'm sure there were many times when they cried out to God asking how much longer they must wait; wondering if he had forgotten them. Indeed, it was a joyous miracle when Jesus had finally come. He willingly took on flesh, leaving heaven's glory to come to a sin-stricken earth. So we join with the angels, shepherds, and wise men to celebrate Jesus' arrival in Bethlehem thousands of years ago. Hope has come. Oh, what a glorious day!

But our hope does not end there.

You see, we've gotten to know more of the story. We know in more fullness what Jesus came on the earth to do. We know he lived the life we could not live and died the death we deserved. He willingly laid his life down as the perfect sacrifice so we can be with God. We know Jesus rose

from the grave, defeating sin and death. And we know he is coming back again. We know there is hope that has come, but we also know there is hope that is coming.

We live in the space of the already and not yet. Christ has already come and is already King, but he is not yet reigning in the manner that he will one day, with every knee bowed and every tongue proclaiming Jesus is Lord. Christ already restores hearts and makes us new, but he has not yet restored all creation to the fullness of glory to come.

As Paul said, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In his grace, God allows us to experience glimpses of heaven on earth, but it’s just a taste of what is to come.

So, like the Jews, we are back in a period of waiting. We eagerly wait for Christ, our living hope, to come back again. He will right every wrong, wipe every tear from our eyes, and make everything perfect. Indeed, sometimes, as we look around at our world and experience the reality and effects of sin in ourselves, others, and all creation, we can feel much like the Jews did in that period between Malachi and Matthew. Where is God? Has he forgotten us? How long, O Lord, must we wait? Yet we wait with hopeful expectation and confidence that the Sovereign One keeps his promises.

It could be argued that the Christmas story began back in Genesis when God first promised to send a Savior to redeem mankind and crush the serpent’s head. And Revelation is where the Christmas story ends: when God will complete the work to save his people and destroy that serpent forever.

So Christmas reminds us of the mystery of ages, revealed in Jesus Christ. We celebrate the hope that has come, and we look with joyful expectation to the hope that is coming.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Betsy Yurgaites is the church-planting wife of Nate from Damascus Church in Midland. She is the mother of 5, going on 6, and is also a homeschool mom. Doing dishes and changing diapers for the glory of God.

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## **Send Relief responds with aid as Cubans recover from triple disaster**

Cuba is still reeling from the devastating effects of not just one but three natural disasters.

Hurricane Oscar hit eastern Cuba on Oct. 20. Hurricane Rafael ripped through western Cuba on Nov. 6. A 6.8-magnitude earthquake shook the eastern part of the island on Nov. 11, compounding the destruction left by the hurricanes. Within hours of the disasters, Send Relief, through local partners and churches, mobilized to provide critical relief to families in heavily hit areas.

When the disasters struck, food and medication spoiled in refrigerators, phone screens cut to black as batteries died, and well water pumps were rendered inoperable due to a series of blackouts over the past month that left 8.5 million without electricity.

Cuba is grappling with severe food, water and gasoline shortages, which affect not only cars but also generators. The storms damaged banana, cassava, rice, beans, vegetable, corn and soybean crops. The crippling effects of the natural disasters extend beyond food and water.

Massive flooding cut off some regions, delaying aid delivery for days. Landslides left areas in peril. In Havana alone, 460 buildings wholly or partially collapsed. Many buildings are without roofs, and Christians report churches were damaged during the disasters.

The ongoing needs are overwhelming, but Send Relief is partnering with local churches, Cuba's Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions, Florida Baptists and other partners to provide much-needed relief.

In Send Relief's initial response to Hurricane Oscar in the far eastern part of Cuba, food, mattresses and kitchen supplies were distributed by the Western Baptist Convention. The Eastern Baptist Convention shared all the items listed above, as well as 600 water filters donated by First Baptist Church, Opelika, Alabama.

Send Relief leadership shared how encouraging it was to see how churches in Cuba's Western Baptist Convention responded to the devastation in the East. Churches sent several truckloads of food, clothing and other much-needed supplies. A local church in Havana followed Hurricane Rafael's devastating strike by sending a large bus filled with relief supplies to the hardest-hit areas in the East. More aid is on the way.

**Donations to [Send Relief](#) will help with the purchase of food, generators, clothing, mattresses, roofing materials, and kitchen and cleaning supplies.**

A Christian in Cuba shared that churches in Cuba are not just places to worship on Sundays; they are the center of communities, making them prime places to distribute aid. Send Relief is working with Christians who are hosting feeding kitchens in churches with intact roofs. Some churches have generators, which are utilized to provide meals, charge phones, pump water from wells and keep refrigerators running so families can store milk, food and medicine.

The churches are feeding thousands of their neighbors. Six churches are distributing food and supplies in one area, and one church alone has already fed more than 650 people. Fifty churches are operating out of local churches in the eastern areas affected by the hurricanes. Even amidst their loss, these Christians are selflessly serving.

“In the face of the recent disasters in Cuba, we have witnessed the unwavering faith and endurance of our partners on the ground,” said Matt Waldruff, Send Relief’s area director. “Their commitment to serving the most vulnerable in their communities is a testament to the body of Christ in action. Their tireless efforts and steadfast presence have provided much-needed hope in a time of crisis. They consistently show the love of Christ through both words and deeds, and it is a blessing to be able to serve alongside them. Their resilience is not just a reflection of their strength, but of God’s faithfulness to His people.”

The island nation, by many accounts, is in the midst of a spiritual awakening.

Two years ago, churches reported that 101,514 people made professions of faith. Last year, 142,634 committed their lives to Christ. The 22 new churches and the 6,086 house churches that have formed have opportunities to be salt and light in their communities.

“The church in Cuba is growing stronger, even as the island faces so much hardship after these disasters. Pray that as we partner with believers there to bring much-needed help, they will be a light to their neighbors and earn the opportunity to be heard as they show and share the love of Jesus,” said Bryant Wright, president of Send Relief.

Southern Baptist churches and conventions in the U.S. have answered the call to help. The Florida Baptist Convention joined ranks with Send Relief and the Cuban conventions to deliver aid. Send Relief staff and volunteers plan to travel to Cuba to deliver water filters and other supplies.

**Your [gifts to Send Relief will help](#) provide food, water and shelter to communities recovering from the hurricanes and earthquake. [Donate now.](#)**

You can also partner through prayer.

**Join us in praying for Cuba.**

1. Pray for survivors in Cuba, as many are suffering from a lack of food, electricity and water.
2. Pray for families who have lost or suffered damage to their homes.
3. Pray for those who have lost their livelihoods and crops.
4. Pray for Cuban church partners as they minister to their neighbors.
5. Pray for the spiritual revival that continues across Cuba, as thousands come to faith in Christ.
6. Pray for Send Relief as it continues to respond with partners.

7. Pray that Send Relief and our partners will be able to offer help and the hope of Christ amid the loss and recovery.
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## Cold weather adds new needs to Helene recovery in N.C.

**ASHEVILLE, N.C. (BP)** — Buddy heaters, blankets and winter clothing are among the items being distributed by Baptists to those dealing with western North Carolina's first cold blast of the season amid recovery from Hurricane Helene.

Rain and snow showers move through the area today are accompanied by overnight temperatures dropping into the 30s.

Stacy Harris, pastor at Trinity of Fairview in Fletcher, lost power at his house this morning but is keeping warm thanks to his gas logs.

"The cold weather is certainly a player for the folks displaced and staying outside," he said. "Churches have done a marvelous job of finding them a temporary place to reside until their housing situations are dealt with. God has been good, and we're thankful for the goodness of so many others that have helped us in these times."

Cold weather items have been popular, of course, but the urgency to rebuild has grown with the winter months looming. Harris' church has engaged with five families to assist in their rebuild.

Similar efforts across the area have received a boost from North Carolina Baptists and Baptists on Mission through the Essentials Rapid Repair Program (ERR).

The program isn't designed to finish homes but provide a safe and warm environment for families, Baptists on Mission executive director-treasurer Richard [Brunson told the Biblical Recorder](#).

"We want to get them into a home that's safe, secure, functional," Brunson said.

Perry Brindley, associational mission strategist for Buncombe County Baptist Association, told Baptist Press that multiple homes each week are already being impacted by the program.

“Trained, skilled Disaster Relief volunteers are able to get homes ready within a couple of weeks,” he said.

Churches and the association continue to hand out items. The relatively inexpensive [Buddy heaters](#) have become highly sought-after due to requiring only one small propane tank and being usable indoors.

“Getting those items and others like heavy clothing, sleeping bags and blankets are the main thing right now,” he said.

At the same time, some distribution sites have scaled back in anticipation of the next recovery phase – housing church mission teams.

“We’ve had teams from churches respond already,” Brindley said. “But we need to remember that this recovery is going to be a marathon.”

[Hard-hit Swannanoa](#) has progressed in its recovery, said First Baptist pastor Jeff Dowdy, whose church continues to serve as a distribution site for donations.

“Power has come and gone for some,” he said. “There aren’t many in tents that don’t have alternate help. We’ve given away a lot of heaters, blankets, sleeping bags and other items in the last couple of days.”

If people don’t visit the area as part of a mission group, they can also help by doing so as a tourist.

Helene’s arrival came just prior to the most lucrative season for the local economy. [More than \\$2 billion](#) came in direct visitor spending in 2023, said the state’s executive director over travel marketing. This year, Asheville itself could see a [tourism decline of 70 percent](#).

Most highways in western North Carolina [are open](#) with destinations ready for travelers. Some sections of I-40 and I-26 remain closed, however. [Areas of the Blue Ridge Parkway](#) have reopened, with numerous tourist attractions like [the Biltmore Estate](#) once again welcoming visitors.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Scott Barkley is chief national correspondent for Baptist Press.

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## Rural churches keep Gospel light aflame, meet community needs

**AUSTIN, NV (BP)** – Smack dab in the middle of Nevada is the tiny town of Austin, home to First Baptist Church, where Charles Vaughn has been pastor since 2008. The population has declined to about 100 people, down from 167 four years ago. Fifteen to 25 people attend services.

Vaughn also pastors Yomba Baptist Church on the nearby Yomba Indian Reservation where the town's population is down to about 25. Usual worship attendance is three to five.

Vaughn lives about 75 miles in any direction from the nearest Southern Baptist church. He deals with the isolation because, "Bottom line, I've got a wife who loves me," Vaughn said. "I try to go to the monthly associational meetings just for the fellowship. And we pour ourselves into other people, which keeps us from loneliness that could become an issue.

"We're not the only ones in remote areas who struggle with it," Vaughn continued. "Helping people find the Lord opens the door to communication with them that helps them deal with the loneliness as well."

Vaughn attended the mid-October annual meeting of the Nevada Baptist Convention because, "rural churches don't always have opportunities to engage with the new concepts people are talking about," the rural pastor said. "That's why the state conventions and associations are so important to rural churches. They help bridge the gap."

The annual meeting "had topics I was interested in," Vaughn continued. He said he wanted to attend a workshop about the Evangelism Toolkit produced by the North American Mission Board (NAMB) and learn some new ideas about what other pastors of rural churches are doing by participating in a seminar led by Kyle Bueermann, rural specialist for NAMB's Replant team.

"Communities will be changed when the churches love the communities they're in," Bueermann said in a message based on 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. "The church exists for the sake of the community."

Statistics tell the tale, Bueermann said.

About 800 churches in the Southern Baptist Convention close each year, an average of 15 each week. Eighty percent are in metropolitan areas of more than 50,000 residents. Nine percent are in "micropolitan" areas of 10,000 or less.

"When an urban church closes, there's often another SBC church within a short driving distance," Bueermann said. "But if a church closes in a rural community, the only evangelical witness in 50 to 60 miles in any direction might be lost."

“But there is hope,” Bueermann said. “It’s both-and: plant and revitalize.”

Mark Clifton, NAMB’s executive director of church replanting and rural ministry, published an updated version of “Reclaiming Glory” in January 2023. Bueermann listed the book’s six main points and added commentary:

- Pray without ceasing
- Love the remaining members (realize these are the people God thought you could lead)
- Exegete your community (find out who lives in it now, rather than 20 years ago)
- Simplify your strategy (being bogged down with committees, programs, structure is not good for small churches)
- Focus on reaching young men (go where they hang out, ie: local gym, become a volunteer firefighter or police chaplain)
- Make disciples who make disciples.

“We need to rethink our definition of rural,” Bueermann said. “Rather than referring to a geographical area, change that to refer a people group. It’s said, ‘If you’re rural you’ll know it.’

“Rurality encompasses a sense of isolation, cooperative living – such as farmers’ co-ops – and small-town values,” he continued. “Rural churches matter! Our smaller churches, they’re the backbone of the SBC.”

Common denominators to churches closing include members not seeing the danger soon enough.

“Often churches don’t get serious about it until they say, ‘We can’t pay our light bill anymore,’” Bueermann said.

But that’s still not too late, when Southern Baptists stand in the gap.

Around 92 percent of the churches across the SBC have fewer than 250 in Sunday morning worship, and around 50 percent have fewer than 50.

“That’s important for pastors to know,” Bueermann said. “That the vast majority of churches in the SBC look just like you. I wish I had that understanding when I was a pastor in New Mexico.

“For churches with a pattern of decline, there is hope for them. God can breathe new life into declining and dying churches. It takes a pastor who knows his church and loves his church as it exists now,” he continued. “He can’t love his vision more than he loves his people. Unless the pastor loves his church and his community, he’s not going to lead his church to a place of health.”

Bueermann quoted Mark Clifton as saying, “A revitalized church starts with a revitalized pastor.



A church that is making disciples, making the community noticeably better, is a church that appears to be healthy, Bueermann said.

“If the church ceased to exist, would there be a hole in the community?” the rural ministries strategist asked.

One example of a church’s involvement in its community: At First Southern Baptist Church in Glenrock, Wyo., teen volunteers, at the request of the city, maintain the flower garden at the town’s entrance.

A church that reaches out to help other churches is a church that shows its health, the rural strategist said.

A Southern Baptist church in Englewood, Colo., now called Calvary Church that replanted with a new pastor has now planted and replanted more than 20 churches. Crosspoint Church in Hutchinson, Kansas, has formed a network with 14 rural Kansas churches by providing location pastors and connection with the Crosspoint family. Cornerstone Bible Church in Port Jefferson, New York, is a replant that has become a multiplying church.

“Don’t wait until you have everything you need before you help others,” Bueermann said. “The Lord fills the void when you give your best.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Karen L. Willoughby is a national correspondent for Baptist Press.

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## **Baptists in Mexico still displaced after Catholic leaders renege on agreement**

**HIDALGO, MEXICO (BP)** – About 150 Baptists forcibly displaced from their homes in Hidalgo, Mexico, since April have sought refuge in a neighboring state after Catholic village leaders reneged on an agreement that would have welcomed the Protestants home.

According to a Nov. 21 report from Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the members of Great Commission Fundamental Baptist Church began moving to Chalma, Veracruz, after it became clear that the [Sept. 27 agreement](#) would not be upheld.

Instead of being granted the religious liberty guaranteed in Mexico's constitution, the indigenous Baptists in the majority Catholic community would be required to pay financial contributions and fees to the Catholic church and would be banned from speaking about their religious beliefs. Religious conversions would be banned, travel and communication within their residential villages of Coamila and Rancho Nuevo would be monitored and limited, and the Baptists would be withheld from official residency rolls for a year, barring their access to health, education and government benefits.

Under the agreement, Baptists would have returned home over a period of time and enjoyed religious freedom. Utilities to their homes would have been reconnected, and members of the church would have paid to a beneficial community fund, which they had been blocked from contributing to since 2015. But as village leaders refused to adhere to the terms of the agreement, Baptists told CSW, city and state officials refused to intervene or secure the Baptists' safety.

Anna Lee Stangl, CSW co-director of advocacy, expressed disappointment at what she called the Mexican government's neglect at every level to uphold the nation's constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion or belief.

The Mexican government "has placed the responsibility to resolve the egregious violation of their fundamental rights on the victims. This group's resettlement in Veracruz was wholly preventable and, in effect, affirms the criminal actions of village authorities in Coamila and Rancho Nuevo in their insistence that religious minority groups will not be tolerated," Stangl said in a press release Nov. 21.

"While we welcomed the municipal and state governments' proactiveness in brokering (the) agreement," Stangl said, "this means little in the absence of enforcement and accountability measures for village leaders who continue to openly break Mexican law."

CSW continued to urge the Mexican government to protect religious freedoms for all, including indigenous people, and to prosecute those who criminally violate such freedoms.

Beginning April 26, the indigenous Nahuatl-speaking communities in Hidalgo were forced to flee their homes after village leaders cut off their electricity, vandalized and blocked access to some of their homes and the Great Commission Fundamental Baptist Church, and posted guards at village entry points.

Despite the guarantee of religious freedom in Mexico's constitution, a dual legal system allows local indigenous communities to govern under the Law on Uses and Customs. The laws, which vary by village and customs, are often exploited against religious minorities, several religious freedom watchdog groups have reported.

The violations have intensified in the villages since 2015, CSW said, with local authorities repeatedly attempting to force the Baptists to participate in Roman Catholic religious festivals.

Local authorities have tried to force the church members to monetarily support Catholic events and actively participate in acts of worship.

Protestants in several Hidalgo villages have also faced severe beatings, lack of access to medical care, arbitrary detainment, employment discrimination and confiscation of property. Children of religious minorities have been blocked since 2018 from attending the local school.

Hidalgo has one of the highest numbers of such cases in Mexico, CSW said, and the local government refuses to cite the actions as religious freedom violations.

The U.S. Department of State, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and persecution watchdog Open Doors have all reported that customs and use laws have led to the persecution of religious minorities in Mexico.

Open Doors ranked Mexico as 37 on its list of the 50 countries where Christians suffer the most persecution.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' senior writer.

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## **Ice cream and auto rickshaws part of answered prayer in South Asia**

An ice cream break. That's what they needed. Luis Baltazar and Hugo Gonzalez recently traveled to a South Asian city to discover whether there were any believers among an unreached people group. They had no contacts, and they didn't know where they were going to spend the night. The hotels they walked into were too expensive. The weather was also bad, which made everything more stressful.

They decided to stop for ice cream and regroup. This pitstop turned out to be the turning point in their search.

Gonzalez and Baltazar moved to South Asia from Venezuela to serve as Global Missionary Partners (GMPs). GMPs are financially supported by their sending church or organization and serve with IMB teams. The IMB team ministers to 17 people groups.

The men met at a training at Baltazar's church in Venezuela, and they went through the same sending organization that trains and sends missionaries from Latin American countries.

### **Ice cream and bumper stickers**

The wall of the apartment they share has pieces of paper pinned to the wall. One column has the label "English," and another for the local language.

Eight months ago, Gonzalez could not speak English or the language of the South Asian country. For six months, both he and Baltazar studied the local language for four hours a day, and Gonzalez also spent four hours a day studying English.

Now, both Gonzalez and Baltazar actively and successfully seek out, find and train believers using the predominant language in the most unreached areas where their IMB team serves. Gonzalez is also now comfortable using English.

IMB missionary James Andretti said the GMPs are pioneers and live in strategic places with the least amount of access to the gospel.

"These guys love and invest deeply in their national partners, helping our team with our goal of 'going farther' into unreached areas, and 'going deeper' in discipleship," Andretti said.

Now, back to their ice cream break. As their ice cream melted, Gonzalez and Baltazar prayed and prayed. They'd traveled to a city to look for believers among one of the IMB team's 17 people groups. It was getting late, and they'd made no progress.

After they finished eating their ice cream, they hailed an auto rickshaw. As they slid into the back seat, they noticed a sticker that read, "God bless you."

"Is it possible?" they asked each other, excitedly.

The auto driver, a Christian, was the contact they'd been praying for. They asked if he could take them to meet his pastor because they had a training they'd like to offer.

The driver helped them find a hotel, and they made plans to meet the next day. On their trip, they met the driver's family, who are also Christians, and they had the opportunity to pray for them.

Baltazar and Gonzalez met with the pastor, and he was interested in the training. The pastor invited them to speak at a meeting that evening with a group of pastors, who they were then able to train.

They went into the city knowing nothing and came out with contacts and trained churches. "You cannot start a work before praying," Baltazar said. "God made it all happen."

They plan to return later this month.

Andretti said on their trip, Gonzalez and Baltazar opened doors in an area their team had never visited and resulted in two discipleship and church planting trainings.

### **From having nothing to having everything**

Searching, walking and praying are themes of Gonzalez and Baltazar's term in South Asia. Gonzalez and Baltazar wanted to have a final conversation before they moved to their current city.

They walked around the city for more than an hour.

"God, please, I need your help in this moment because I want to talk to the people about Jesus," Gonzalez prayed. "I want to talk to the people about the gospel, about Jesus, about the Bible, about truth, about the life."

Soon after, the Lord led them to a man from the lowest caste. Gonzalez and Baltazar were moved listening to his story.

The man told Gonzalez he was sad and felt alone. Gonzalez told him he was not alone. God loved him and wanted to have a relationship with him. Gonzalez shared that he wanted to give him a gift, the gift of knowing his Savior and how he could have forgiveness from his sins.

The man chose to commit his life to Christ.

### **Mobilizing a missions force**

Baltazar and Gonzalez film videos they send to churches in Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Brazil. The videos are in Spanish, English and Portuguese. Their hope is to encourage and mobilize more Latin Americans to serve overseas.

Andretti said they already have mobilized many churches in Latin America to pray for entry into areas where gospel witness is unknown.

The GMPs translated a gospel-sharing tool that shares stories from Genesis to Jesus into Spanish that is used to help Hispanic volunteers understand this tool in their heart language before they arrive in South Asia.

Their commitment to serve is for two years, and they can renew for another year.

Baltazar said there is so much work to be done, and two years isn't enough time. He plans on serving longer. Gonzalez plans to return to Venezuela to cast vision to churches. His desire is to see many churches join the task of reaching South Asians with the gospel.

Andretti commends Baltazar and Gonzalez for accepting the challenge of raising the missions-sending capacity in Venezuela and other Latin American countries.

Gonzalez and Baltazar continue to walk, search and pray as they seek to contact more people from the 17 people groups.

*Some names may be changed for security reasons.*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tessa Sanchez writes for the IMB.

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## **Power of prayer boosts work around the world**

A volunteer from Alabama prays before heading out for Olympic pin distribution and witnessing in the streets of Paris. Hundreds of volunteers from the US are reaching the lost during the Paris Olympics 2024.

Someone recently asked me, "What does it mean to have people praying for you?" It's a very timely question. You are about to pray for my ministry, [Project 3000](#), and so many others as part of [Week of Prayer for international missions](#) beginning Dec. 1, and I want to say, "Thank you." But I also want you to see why this is so important.

Getting people engaged in the work of International Mission Board missionaries has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have had since arriving on the mission field. At first, this seemed to be another requirement for my job. As part of the IMB's renewed commitment to finding the last 3,000-plus unengaged and unreached people groups, missionary explorers are asked to report back to [virtual explorers](#). Sometimes this is through mass email distribution, and other times it is through a smaller prayer circle group. Asking people to pray felt like another pointless task.

Then I got to the field and realized my utter dependence on God and prayer!

I found there is an indescribable difference in the effectiveness and outcomes of the work when you alone are praying versus when an *entire group of people are praying* all around the world.

These prayer warriors are in different time zones, allowing their own convictions and faith to be tested as they pray for seemingly impossible tasks.

These prayer warriors are people who, in most cases, never talked about overseas missionary work or had direct steady communication with missionaries on the field. They are not just random people receiving pointless updates. Some are church choir members, women's and men's groups who spend hours lifting us up. They rejoice in tears as they praise God for answering requests they made known only to Christ.

When I allowed God's people to pray for me, that was the moment my entire ministry in South Asia changed. As a result, we now read [stories like Lahud's](#) and so many others who are among the first of their people to proclaim Jesus' name. I can't wait for the day Lahud will meet you, the men and women who have prayed for him faithfully.

So, when you ask, "What does it mean to have people pray for you?" it means God STILL answers prayers.

"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." John 14:13-14

*Name changed for security*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John Pratt is an IMB [missionary explorer](#) serving in South Asia. He is part of Project 3000, the IMB's renewed commitment to find, research and share the Gospel with the last remaining 3,000-plus unengaged, unreached people groups in the world.

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## **Digital engagement results represent God's faithfulness, collaborative effort by Southern Baptists**

From passages at sea to airplanes, from shortwave radio to tape recordings, from smartphones to social media, the evolution of technology creates opportunities for greater gospel access among the nations.

Now, more than ever before, Southern Baptists are in a time and place to leverage technology to reach more people for Christ. When the International Mission Board tested a new digital

engagement strategy during the Paris Summer Olympics earlier this year, the results were thrilling.

“I am so encouraged,” said John Brady, IMB’s vice president of global engagement. “This is a new chapter in the IMB’s effort to reach the world for the Lord Jesus. We have never seen this before.”

Using the Olympics as a springboard, IMB teams explored the intersection of digital engagement with on-the-ground outreach. What they found was that the online and offline strategies fit together seamlessly to provide even greater gospel access.

“It dovetailed perfectly with on-the-ground strategies,” explained IMB missionary Jack Bentley, who serves as a digital engagement strategist for IMB’s Asia-Pacific Rim affinity. “The gospel is proclaimed mouth-to-ear on the ground. Those [pins are given out and the QR code](#) is scanned and more gospel truth is shared. Maybe someone starts with a pin and ends up at a Bible-reading plan.”

Brant Bauman, IMB’s global digital engagement lead, said the results demonstrate how God used the collaborative efforts of Southern Baptists around the world to engage people in Paris and beyond this summer. He shared the story of one woman’s cry for help.

Sara, a South African woman desperate for community, was contemplating suicide when a digital ad on Facebook caught her attention. The ad, one of several posted by the IMB during the Olympics, asked “How can I pray for you?”

The IMB shared [Sara’s story](#) earlier this fall.

When Sara responded to the ad, she was connected to a volunteer and then to IMB missionaries who lived close to her. All the while, people around the world were praying. Now, months later, Sara is thriving in community and being disciplined by women from her church.

Sara’s story is a testament to the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of Southern Baptists working together to bring the gospel to the nations.

During the Olympics, almost 9 million people scrolled past one of IMB’s digital ads. “This is not a vanity number,” said Glenn Ansley, who serves as part of Europe’s digital engagement team for the IMB.

“It’s a testimony to the faithfulness of SBC churches regularly giving to missions. We wouldn’t have the resources to put these ads out there without those churches. That’s 9 million opportunities for the Holy Spirit to reach into someone’s life and to move them towards the word of Christ,” Ansley said.



More than 170,000 people engaged with the digital ads and almost 7,500 started conversations with a digital responder. The IMB trained 183 virtual volunteers from 23 states in the U.S. and 26 different countries to be digital responders during the Olympics. As individuals like Sara interacted with IMB's digital ads, responders shared the gospel and prayed with them.

Some volunteers have even continued responding. Bauman shared his father is still responding to someone he's been talking with for four weeks, discipling him until he's able to connect with believers locally.

Most exciting of all, 43 people professed new faith in Christ.

"We're boasting in the faithfulness of the body of Christ and the faithfulness of our good God," Ansley said. "We celebrate these numbers because they are a testimony to the faithful service of missionary-minded believers across the world and, more importantly, they celebrate the faithfulness of a God who graciously calls people out of darkness and into His marvelous light. Eternal results are worth celebrating."

Sara represents many others around the world, people on the outskirts of society who have been unreached by traditional outreach methods. Some are people who live in hard places, hungry for discipleship and community. Others are seekers, people who have never heard the gospel before.

The IMB is excited about the potential for digital engagement to bring the good news to people groups and places that remain closed to missionary presence and still have no gospel access.

"My heart overflows with gratitude to the Lord just to let my eyes see this in my day. I have dreamed about something like this for a long time," Brady said. "Southern Baptists ought to be proud about what their Lottie Moon Christmas Offering® produces. I can't think of a better investment of their resources."

*Some names have been changed for security.*

*The work of the IMB is sustained through faithful giving of Southern Baptists through the [Cooperative Program](#) and the [Lottie Moon Christmas Offering®](#).*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kristen Sosebee is a writer for the IMB.

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