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The effective prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much

BERKLEY – World news has been littered with hype about the recent “Wedding of the Year” as Anant Ambani, son of the richest man in Asia, finally tied the knot. When the eleventh wealthiest person in the world plans a wedding for his son and sends out a nine-page dress code that guests like Tony Blair, Ivanka Trump, the Kardashians, and Mark Zuckerberg are all expected to adhere to, we smile.

When God Almighty details for His redeemed how they are to enter His presence, how much more should we eagerly comply. (And just to keep things in perspective, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb alone will far surpass the grandeur and significance of even the most extravagant earthly celebration.)

How we should come into His presence

Prayer has been a centerpiece of Christ’s church since its inception at Pentecost (Acts 2:42). The first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to *prayer*. Church leaders in Acts 6:4 opted out of personally meeting understaffed food service needs to devote themselves to their priorities- *prayer* and the ministry of the Word of God.

So, we too must be vigilant to maintain the priority of prayer in our ministries. But merely prioritizing prayer is not enough. It is vital that our prayers conform to Scripture in purity, in purpose, and in power. We come to the King of Kings on His terms.

James selects the prophet Elijah to illustrate three core prayer principles. A survey of Elijah’s ministry (1 Kings 17-22 and 2 Kings 2:14) readily demonstrates how integral prayer was in this highly honored servant of Yahweh. Elijah did it right.

In 1 Kings 17 and 18:41ff God uses Elijah to communicate to King Ahab that it will stop raining (a critical concern for an agrarian-based economy) and only start again when God wills. James tells us that this was done by Elijah’s righteous **prayers**. Next, Elijah **prays**, and a widow’s son is raised from the dead. Elijah then confronts 850 false prophets and is victorious through answered **prayer**.

Although James mentions prayer throughout chapter five, the culmination of his exhortation on this topic and his reference to Elijah’s example is found embedded in verses 14-20. From these four verses we find three essential elements for potent, Elijah-like praying:

1. Pray in Purity (verses 15-16A)
2. Pray God’s Promises (verses 17-18)

3. Pray in Power (verses 16B)

Pray in Purity

Before stating a famous verse about powerful praying in James 5:16, James explains the only acceptable context for prayer is purity. He calls on God's people to confess their sin to one another.

Prayer that pleases God requires that we acknowledge, confess, and repent from sin (Psalm 66:18; Isaiah 59:2; I Peter 3:7). We dare not approach our Thrice Holy God in the filthy garments of self-righteousness or stained with an adulterous love for the world. To make supplication in such attire is to make a mockery of God's gracious invitation to enter His throne room. Prayer is no act of ceremonialism but initiates a divine transaction of forgiveness and restoration whether it be on the human-to-God or the human-to-human level ("to one another") or both. The path to prayer is now free from this obstacle.

Further, what modifier does James attach to the person whose prayers are "effective and accomplish much"? He or she is righteous. Yes, at the core of effectual praying is holy living.

But what should we pray?

Pray God's Promises

James details for us in verses 17-18 the content of Elijah's prayers. He asks first that it would not rain and later that it would. Why? Is he single-handedly curating a national crisis to get King Ahab's attention? Not at all. He is praying precisely what God promised to do when Israel sinned. He would withhold rain (Lev. 26:14ff, Deuteronomy 11:17; 2 Chron. 6:26-27). If they would repent, He would send rain again and heal their land. This is exactly what happens.

Elijah is praying in accord with the heart and revealed plan of God in Scripture. What does this mean for us?

Struggles with doubt about whether we are praying the will of God are removed when we pray the Bible. The Apostle John asserts "And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us..." (See 1 John 5:14-15)

Romans 8:26 reminds us that "we do not know how to pray as we should but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." So humbly seek the Spirit's enablement in both the manner and content of prayer. Often the Spirit links particular passages of Scripture to people on our prayer list which we may pray specifically for them. And how encouraged they often are when we share that with them! This kind of praying is productive and potent.

Pray in Power

Have you ever wondered why Elijah was used so mightily by God when he prayed?

We may feel at times rather useless with all our weaknesses and fears. But take courage at James's words in verse 17. "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours...." He was "but dust" yet was called to minister *by God's enablement*- an enablement he accessed in *prayer*. Yes, more than any other characteristic, James zeroes in on how Elijah prayed. He prayed "fervently." We too actively participate in the works of God when we pray that way.

This intensity does not result from an emotional experience or a personality type. Rather, fervent prayers are fueled by the Spirit of God.

Jude 20 reminds believers of the importance of prayer with a noteworthy qualifier-" *Praying in the Holy Spirit*". It is sobering to realize that it is possible to pray apart from the third Person of the Trinity. May God save us from that.

How can we know that we are praying in the Holy Spirit? Praying in purity and praying the Bible are two strong indicators. And when our prayers are answered in the affirmative, "we know that we have what we've asked of Him" (1 John 5:15). Although we will probably not see every prayer we pray answered in our lifetime, we can rest in peace and confidence that God wisely and faithfully responds in His time. George Mueller prayed for the salvation of three specific individuals for decades. One came to faith before George went to glory. The other two were converted after George's death. That is Spirit-empowered praying.

There is no greater gift of love we may bestow than to pray for each other, our congregations, and our missionaries. Let us devote ourselves anew to this often-neglected spiritual discipline- praying in purity the promises of God in the power of His Spirit.

Consciously relying on God's grace, commit yourself to continually climbing to new heights of biblical prayer. The ascent is arduous, but the view from above is amazing.

Jer. 33:3 "Call to Me and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things you have not known."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sonya Smith has served for 20 years as a missionary in Asia and Central Europe with her husband Peter who now pastors Hope in Christ Bible Church, a growing congregation in Berkley, Michigan. Sonya holds a Bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies from the Master's University and a Master of Arts in Theology from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. She has spoken to ladies' groups in California, Washington, Michigan, and in the Czech Republic. She, and a team of gifted teachers, lead the 'Women of Hope' Bible study which meets twice weekly.

The Arabs and Uncle Sam's country

TROY – America or Uncle Sam's country as they like to call it in the Middle East for it's a lot of people's dream to enter and enjoy the benefits that come with being here.

According to Franklin Roosevelt's famous speech "The Four Freedoms Speech", there are four freedoms that every person in the world can enjoy. These freedoms are freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from fear, and freedom from constriction.

But there is a fifth freedom that only God can give to Arabs in America. It is the freedom from sin. This is granted not by the law or any human constitution, but only the Lord can grant it to each man through the ministry of his local church. Here was born the necessity for planting Arabic churches in America.

You can find Arabic speakers who have fled from different wars in their countries, and many have lost the most precious things. Some have lost their family through death or separation. Many have lost their money, and others have lost positions. Due to that, they have gained the most precious thing in the world, the Lord Jesus Christ. He covers all the necessities and needs that any man can have, and here lies the local church that the Lord instructed us to complete before his ascent back to heaven.

Here begins the importance of what started last month in Alpharetta, Georgia. More than 60 men and women gathered who account for church planters, leaders, and their wives to achieve their mission in America which is the proclamation of the grace of Christ and his salvation that he has gifted to all people.

For this movement is not the goal or achievement of one, but it's a community that is being built to have churches that are honest in proclaiming the Word of Christ to the millions who are in America and have made it a shelter. Now, may they also find shelter in Christ, and safety in what he has done on the cross.

We must acknowledge the role of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan (BSCM), and more specifically of Dr. Tony Lynn and Pastor Tim Patterson. They have supported this movement from the moment it was launched.

Dear brothers, sisters, believers, and shepherds from our convention, I plead with you to pray for the continuation of the movement, just as the first church prayed and the ground shook. We believe that through your support in prayer that the ground of this ministry will shake as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amgad Beshai is the pastor of Evangel Arabic Church of Troy, Michigan. He and his wife, Eman, have three wonderful children. Amgad is also an Arabic Consultant for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan.

Black Church conference helps leaders ‘Thrive’

RIDGECREST, NC (BP) – The annual Black Church Leadership and Family Conference (BCLFC) resembles the churches it aims to serve – energetic worship and powerful sermons but still grappling with the effects of the pandemic.

Recognizing this reality, Mark Croston wanted to encourage those gathered at Ridgecrest Conference Center on July 22-26, 2024, and remind them their churches and ministries could thrive.

“These are challenging times for churches,” said Croston, national director of Black Church Ministries at Lifeway Christian Resources. “From the post-Christian environment to the technological shifts, church leaders are facing numerous issues, all while many have not yet returned to pre-COVID attendance. We want to encourage leaders and provide resources to equip them for this season of ministry.”

With the theme of “Thrive,” taken from Psalm 92:12-15, Croston sees some of those same challenges for the BCLFC itself. This year more than 700 participants gathered for what Croston said is the largest annual meeting of African American Southern Baptists.

Attendance has increased each year since being forced to host an online event in 2020 but still has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Croston said the image of the palm tree in Psalm 92 provides the ideal model for thriving ministry in the current context. “The palm has a significant root system with a flexible tree that produces fruit in the right season. Those should be characteristics of our lives and our churches,” he said. “When we are firmly planted in Jesus, flexible in turbulent times and patient to see the fruit develop, we can thrive in any circumstance.”

Each day BCLFC attendees could take part in early morning praise and prayer time, Bible exposition based on Lifeway’s YOU curriculum, dozens of breakout sessions designed around different aspects of church ministry, gender-specific afternoon sessions, opportunities to

connect with Southern Baptist entities and leaders, and an evening worship service and sermon.

Evening worship

Croston said the conference intentionally features a variety of preaching styles. "Every pastor is an expository preacher, but they communicate in different ways," he said. "We don't want to idolize a style, and we know different people respond to different styles."

On Monday night, Gregory Perkins, senior pastor of The View Church in Menifee, California, preached from the primary passage of the conference, Psalm 92:12-15. He spoke of troubling statistical realities facing the Black church, but also of the hope that exists for those who plant deep roots in Jesus. "Stop worrying about what you can't control and rest in the fact that God is sovereign," said Perkins, president of the National African American Fellowship of the Southern Baptist Convention (NAAF). "There is no circumstance or situation that is bigger than our great big God."

Tuesday night featured a sermon from JJ Washington, national director of personal evangelism at the North American Mission Board, on Psalm 23. He highlighted the benefits from David's famous psalm but reminded listeners, "The benefits only come through a relationship with the Lord." Encouraging pastors to spend personal time with Christ, Washington said, "The man of God needs to feed his own soul so that he leads out of the overflow of his relationship with the Lord. When your cup runs over it should spill into the lives of others."

Johnnie Bradley, senior pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Dallas, preached the Wednesday night sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:58. "When you are going through what you are going through, how will you respond?" he asked. "You have to persevere no matter the problem." Bradley told those gathered, "You never will produce fruit if you don't stay connected to the vine. If you minister from a surrendered life, you will thrive and flourish."

In the final evening session on Thursday night, D.Z. Cofield, senior pastor of Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Houston, delivered a sermon from Matthew 4 drawing steps for surviving tough times from Jesus' temptation. "The difference between a temptation and a trial is who brings it and what the purpose is," he said. Cofield noted that while Satan tries to tempt God's people, God is still working. He said believers must rightly understand God's Word in difficult moments. "If you take content out of context, you can justify improper conduct."

Conference goals

This year marks the 31st BCLFC. Croston came to the first event in 1993 as a pastor and has served as event organizer for the last 11 years. "The Black Church Leadership and Family Conference provides a contextualized experience for a segment of the body of Christ," Croston said. "We are all part of the body, but Scripture reminds us that the body is varied. At this

conference, Black churches and people who want to minister in that context can find culturally relevant resources to equip them for success.”

Because Croston aims for the conference to be a place for entire families, events are hosted for children and students, including a FUGE camp, throughout the week. Families could also participate in recreation and relaxation times. Wednesday night featured a screening of “The Forge,” the upcoming movie from the Kendrick brothers.

In developing the conference, Croston said he considers all that he hears from pastors around the country. “What do churches need? What issues are bubbling up? We want to equip pastors and leaders to face those,” he said. In addition, Croston aims to address as many different facets of church life as possible. “We gather speakers and leaders who have demonstrated expertise and success in these areas.”

As the BLFC continues to climb back to pre-pandemic levels, Croston sees encouraging news from the 2024 edition of the conference. “Around a third of the people in our worship service said this was their first time coming,” he said. “Like many churches, we are still missing some previous attendees, but we are reaching new people and that’s exciting.”

Registration is now open for next year’s Black Church Leadership and Family Conference on July 21-25, 2025. To register or for more information, visit [Lifeway.com/BlackChurchConference](https://lifeway.com/BlackChurchConference).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Earls is a writer for LifeWay Christian Resources.

We need each other: A call to arms for women’s ministry in the church

PLYMOUTH – Have you ever had two hours change your life?

Home on a college holiday break, I was invited by my mom to join her for an evening Bible study that she helped facilitate at our church ... *and* she needed someone last minute to help with tech. I began the teaching segment for the group and sat in the back tech booth with my Bible open. Taking what felt like feverish notes, I was overwhelmingly moved by the teaching. Not only was it powerful to sit and learn under a female teacher in a room filled with a diverse group of women, but when it was finished, several women even stopped by to say hello, to chat, and to ask how they could pray for me.

Without a doubt, those two hours changed the course of my life. The excitement that stirred in me to study the Bible like that and the taste of community that I experienced was missing in my everyday life. I returned to college with fervor; within the week, I had changed my major to Theology and Philosophy. Since then, I have completed undergraduate and graduate coursework in both Theology and Education and have had the privilege of working or serving in Women's Ministry in the local church for decades. I am so thankful that my mom encouraged me to come with her all those years ago. She showed me a glimpse of a thriving Women's Ministry, invited me in, and God began showing me the plans He had for my life.

This is part of our calling as the church, to lead women God's way. To invite them in, disciple and share the gospel, and help them to gain solid scriptural knowledge. The impact of which has ripples into the home, churches and communities, and into the world. As we lead and shape ministry for women in our churches, I would like to offer three considerations that I hope will inspire and embolden our efforts.

(1) The Significance of Women

Pages are filled with incredible female characters with powerful stories. Eve shows us what it means to be a helper to Adam and challenges us to examine our own tempted hearts; Pharaoh's daughter and Esther face risk and even possible death at the hand of their governments; Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth all speak to the tender struggles of infertility; Deborah to the boldness of calling; Mary, the courage to obey God in the face of ridicule; Priscilla, the work of teaching and evangelizing. Personally, I love reading Luke 8 where it references "the Twelve and the women".[1] Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna were all named as followers of Jesus. These women welcomed him into their homes, financially supported his ministry, and often taught others as well. They were by Jesus' side in his death, burial, and resurrection, key players in the advancement of the gospel. The significance of women is not lost on us. God wanted women to know how important His daughters are to Him as evidenced by their presence in Scripture. It is so important for the church to highlight the faithfulness of these women because their stories are *our* stories. Not only do women in the body desire a deeper understanding of the Word of God, but they are being called according to His purposes as leaders, mothers, teachers, caretakers, business leaders, and more. They are looking to the church for help and guidance as they navigate God's calling on their lives.

According to Pew Research,[2] 55% of Evangelical Protestants are women, making up the majority of our church populations. Further, 59% of women say that religion is very important to them compared to 47% of men. Women also surpass men in weekly attendance, frequency of groups participation and weekly Scripture reading.[3] Whether an official Women's Ministry is established, or leadership is developing the overall discipleship vision and plan, targeting ministry based on gender should happen in a variety of ways in a healthy church. We should consider and mold our preaching, programming, and community involvement to the needs of our female participants. This in and of itself could be another article; but for now, some things to ponder as church leaders could be including female voices in our teaching teams, regularly

involving them into the conversation of the life of the church overall and aligning teaching illustrations and study topics within women's contexts. These are voices that we need to lean into when appropriate, strengthening the core and heart of our churches.

2) Women on Mission

Women's Ministry should primarily be under the authority of God. It should serve as an expression of the home church and clearly represent its mission. When building and shaping such an effort, we must be sure that every event, program, and action be centered on The Great Commission. The reality is, there is no shortage of events and opportunities hollering at women to attend, volunteer, and participate:

The library is hosting S'mores and Stories.
The Historical Society has a Fall Festival.
There's a charcuterie night at a local pop-up shop.

On and on it goes. We are inundated with Stuff To Do. As a leader in Women's Ministry, I have loved hosting similar events in the church – they're not a bad thing! – but there is so much more we can offer the women in our churches and communities. Instead of a revolving door where we run the risk of women being another number in a social club, we must ask ourselves: Where is the gospel? How are we making disciples? Are we answering the call of the Great Commission for the women in our church?

A helpful way to look at it is a balance between the relational and the transformational.[4] Fun events are great! But we simply cannot underestimate the capabilities and spirit of women. They are skilled, passionate, and able to engage with deeper study and understanding of God's Word. We must equip, encourage, and challenge them to rise to the occasion in the very things that God has created them to be and to do in the world. Many of which are specifically female roles that are integral to the kingdom.

Author Gena B McGown says it well:

"[we] do them a disservice when we underestimate their capability or even their interest. Sitting in your church right now may be a woman into whose heart God has put the fire, but for whatever reason, she lacks the confidence. She is waiting for someone to say: "I see this in you. I know you can. I'll help you get there."[5]

Part of the mission for Women's Ministry is to find that woman, to give her resources and community, and send her out; ensuring that she is armed with Scripture that shapes her identity and purpose. I think it's also important to point out that influencers and celebrities alike would love to convince us that virtual connection is essential. It can certainly have many benefits, of course. However, in this time of being more "connected" than ever before, women seem to be feeling more and more alone. Scrolling for some sense of virtual connection can never replace genuine community and discipleship. As church pastors and leaders, we must rise

to the call to show these women what it looks like when the church helps bring the hurting to the foot of the cross and be grounded in the Word of God.[6] In a study by Barna in 2015, I learned that 43% of women said that they do not feel any emotional support at all from church.[7] How unfortunate and sad. The report also makes the point that without the strong relational bonds within a church community, a woman's absence is more likely to go unnoticed[8] and thus, her connection to the church will likely flounder. Striving to specifically help women be aligned with purpose, grounded in their knowledge of Scripture, and connected to their church body will have numerous positive outcomes for their lives and for the health of our churches. Some action steps might be to consider the strength and access to Biblical study opportunities, the integral role of building up mentorship teams or programs (let us not forget Titus 2!)[9], and spending time teaching women about how their spiritual gifts are vital and needed in our churches. Women in the body desire a deeper understanding of the Word of God – we can and should eagerly meet that desire.

3) A Heart for Women

Women are amazing creatures. We are smart. We are passionate. We are relational. To minister specifically to the needs of our women is to boldly proclaim their value to the world. As ministry leaders, we can all agree that the world needs Word-filled women. These are the daughters, mothers, aunts, grandmothers, neighbors, and friends who are changing the world, one relationship, one conversation at a time. With so many competing narratives about a woman's identity, the noise and constant barrage is maddening. We need to know who we are, and we need those ahead of us to show what it looks like to be rooted and grounded in the Word: heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Women's Ministry is important because it has the opportunity to reorient the women coming through the doors with their true identity, in a safe space with other women around them, inviting them to ask harder questions and discuss personal things that they wouldn't feel comfortable doing in a co-ed setting. Women also need to know that they were created by a loving Father God who delights in their gifts and designed their hearts to reach the world through their art and love and worship. Through their work as nurses, entrepreneurs, and homemakers. The ripple effect of equipping women is immeasurable. It sends them out into the world, shining light into areas that only they can reach, through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. The church is facing generational shifts where the women sitting in the pews are largely unchurched. When they taste and see the goodness of God, there is a gospel fire that burns and spreads – to the pickleball courts, to the PTA meetings, and the soccer fields. To the grumpy neighbor, the young adult making lattes, friends at work, and unbelieving family members. Women are strategically positioned by God to embrace other women who would never step foot into a church. And by pursuing them, with the Word on our lips and in our actions, we are shining the light of Jesus to those who desperately need to know of His love for them. This is world changing.

To have a heart for women means we empower them. It means we lean on them. It means we embrace their gifts and shepherd them. May our efforts in the church aim to cultivate faithful

women who are fiercely committed to iron sharpening iron[10], who learn and practice how to pray deeply with and for each other, who challenge and love and inspire each other to bring these Jesus-truths out into the world. Let's train women for the work of the ministry. Let's help them find each other in our churches and let's equip them. It can happen in many contexts. Bible study, over a cup of coffee, mentoring programs, running groups, and so much more. It happens when women gather together and pray, serve, disciple, feed, celebrate, and grieve together.

This call to arms is not in terms of weapons wielded. This is a call to our arms being open, ready to hold each other up when the road looks unsteady. We need each other. We are voices filled with wisdom and perspective and when we step into the mission field, we are armed with the truth of the gospel and can inspire hope wherever the Lord takes us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Baruzzini has been serving and teaching in Women's Ministry circles for decades. Working at Mile City Church in Plymouth, Michigan, she lives her life in grateful response to the goodness and beauty of truth in Scripture. She considers herself a forever-student; thankful for the depth of training and spark that ignited in her theology studies at the University of Sioux Falls in South Dakota. Samantha lives in Livonia, MI with her husband and three children. She loves to read, eat delicious food, and delights in true Sabbath rest.

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[1] Luke 8:1-3

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[4] (McGown 2019, 65)

[5] (McGown 2019, 65)

[6] (McGown 2019, 70)

[7] 1. "Five Factors Changing Women's Relationship with Churches," [Barna.com](https://www.barna.com/research/five-factors-changing-womens-relationship-with-churches/), 2015,
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[8] "Five Factors Changing Women's Relationship with Churches," [Barna.com](https://www.barna.com/research/five-factors-changing-womens-relationship-with-churches/), 2015.

[9] Titus 2:3-5

[10] Proverbs 27:17

Laugh

PLYMOUTH – Somewhere along the way the word has gotten out among the Christian community, that being a Christian requires somberness and a totally serious countenance that visually proclaims the occupant of this body is “holy”.

There are those who feel that in order to be "truly spiritual", one must wear scratchy burlap underwear, eat cold lumpy oatmeal, live without air conditioning, and wear dark clothes. And whatever you do, you must not laugh in a worship service or have any sort of outward expression of joy in a public place.

To do so, would place you among those who do not take their religion seriously, but treat it in a frivolous manner.

I cannot tell you the number of times some solidified saint has quoted, "The Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent." (Now of course they have no idea where that passage is located in the Bible, but it sounds good!)

The problem is that those who advocate warmed over death as the proper deportment of a Believer, must deny a major portion of God's Word. The Psalms, though dealing with great adversity and pain, still bubble over with joy.

How could the Psalmist sing Psalm 100 and not be expressive of his joy for our Lord. The very words in the Hebrew text for "praise" have within their definition and meaning, "**verbal and outward expression**".

I can just see some fellow out there who doesn't know the Lord, observing some Christian from the First Church of the Frigidaire. He comes to an obvious conclusion that Christians look like they were baptized in lemon juice and weaned on a dill pickle. Their face has the appearance of an English Bulldog and they sanctimoniously spout, "I don't do this, or that or anything that even comes close to being fun. Don't you want to be just like me?"

The Word tells us over and over "His joy is our strength". The Book of Philippians is replete with the subject of joy. I believe that when Jesus got away with the disciples and as they sat around the campfire, there was a great deal of laughter and joy. I'll bet that even old Peter told a joke or two. By the way, here are a few good lines that should bring a smile to your face.

Things You **Do Not** Want to Hear in Surgery

1. Better save that. We'll need it for the autopsy.
2. Somebody call the janitor - we're going to need a mop
3. 'Accept this sacrifice, O Great Lord of Darkness'
4. Sparky! Come back with that! Bad Dog!

5. Wait a minute, if this is his spleen, then what's that?
6. Hand me that ... uh ... that uh thingie.
7. Oh no! I just lost my Rolex.
8. Oops! Hey, has anyone ever survived a full hypo of this stuff before?
9. Everybody stand back! I lost my contact lens!
10. Could you stop that thing from beating -- it's throwing my concentration off.
11. What's this doing here?
12. I hate it when they're missing stuff in here.
13. That's cool! Now can you make his leg twitch?!
14. I wish I hadn't forgotten my glasses.
15. Well folks, this will be an experiment for all of us.
16. Sterile, shcmeril. The floor's clean, right?
17. Anyone see where I left that scalpel?
18. Next, we remove the subject's brain and place it in the body of the ape.
19. Now take a picture from this angle. This is truly a freak of nature.
20. This patient has already had some kids, am I correct?
21. Nurse, did this patient sign the organ donation card?
22. Don't worry. I think it is sharp enough.
23. What do you mean 'You want a divorce'!
24. She's gonna blow! Everyone take cover!!!
25. FIRE! FIRE! Everybody get out!

Now admit it. You laughed. If you didn't, you are probably scheduled for surgery this week. It is my opinion that we, who are representing heaven as its future occupants, have somewhere along the way lost the knowledge of the fact that we will be rejoicing for all eternity. We need to "lighten up" some. Laugh and have fun. Don't take yourself or life so seriously. Express the true joy of Jesus.

I would much rather be happy than be an old sour puss. Happiness is infectious. Let's pray our whole community will come down with a serious case of it.

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.

An accelerating Arabic church planting movement

PLYMOUTH – “A never-before-seen Arabic language movement among Southern Baptists accelerated in 2022 when two Arabic language pastors, state convention leaders, and the Send Network joined efforts,” says Tony Lynn, Send Network Director in Michigan. The Lord used two NAMB-endorsed church planters to spark the movement. Pastor Amer Safadi of the Arabic Baptist Christian Church of Cincinnati in Ohio and Pastor Amgad Beshai of Evangel Church of Troy in Michigan, originally from Jordan and Egypt respectively. The two men, then and now, voluntarily serve hundreds of Arab language people through personal visits, Internet meetings, phone calls, emails, and texts while each pastors his church and raises his family in the Midwest.

Lynn adds, “What started, two years ago, with just more than a dozen people in Ohio, erupted this year into a three-day gathering, on July 10-12, at the North American Mission Board in Alpharetta, Georgia with 65 participants from 20 North American cities, from 9 different states, who originally came from 10 nations from the 10/40 Missions Window, plus an international missionary with the International Mission Board with 14 years of dedicated service among Arabic language people who grew up in a small town in Texas.”

The international missionary participating in this third annual gathering said, “I’ve been so encouraged by the love and concern that this group shows for one another and their desire to support one another in the task to make disciples through planting churches. I see in them potential for a great movement of God, reaching Arabic speaking peoples and many others not only in the U.S. but throughout the world. This potential comes from brothers and sisters from diverse backgrounds and places working together in unity and love for the sake of God’s Kingdom.”

A married couple from the Midwest sharing the Gospel among the largest and densest population of Arabic people in North America said of their experience at the gathering, “We have been challenged to keep God as our focus, including a proper perspective of longevity in our life, our family, and to the mission God has called us. Thank you NAMB for hosting the Arabic Church Planting Conference.”

Safadi passionately describes the vision of this growing network easily in English and Arabic when he says, “We are reaching the Arabic community with the Gospel, making disciples, equipping leaders, and sending them to plant healthy multiplying Arabic churches everywhere for everyone.”

The *Arabic Church Planters and Pastors Network and Gathering*, as labeled on its Facebook Page, is much more than a social media page. Individuals, church leaders, and church planters are able to gather annually in-person and monthly through local in-person cohorts or online meetings because of the generosity of the executive directors-treasurers of various Southern Baptist state conventions who financially give and prayerfully support the ministry.

Safadi and Beshai voice their constant and ever-growing appreciation to all of the partners who are consumed by a similar passion and calling to the Arabic speaking peoples of the world.

The next annual in-person gathering of this network will take place in Columbus, Ohio in 2025. If you have questions or would like to be included in the news concerning next year's gathering you may write to Pastor Amer Safadi at amer.safadi.sm@gmail.com or Dr. Tony Lynn at tlynn@namb.net.

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.

The Groom's glory

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – Summer is wedding season, and the excitement is palpable.

Our daughter's wedding took place a decade ago at a beautiful golf course in the city. She looked absolutely stunning in her beautiful, elegant-but-simple dress, with hair and makeup perfected. I "gave her away" to a handsome, gentle Christian man who loves her fiercely.

In our culture, the bride is the centerpiece of every wedding ceremony. She wears the long flowing dress that often costs dad too much money, she enters to a bridal-march, she parades down the center aisle with pomp and circumstance, and people stand as she enters. It's clearly all about the bride (Lance Witt, *Replenish*, p. 83).

The groom, on the other hand, is usually an afterthought. He's told when to show up, where to stand, and when to speak, if at all. He's *filler*, some might say, the warm-up act for the main attraction. Unlike the bride, he usually enters from a side door. He wears a rented tux from Men's Wearhouse that some other groom will be wearing next weekend. There is no "special song" for him and the groomsmen. It's clearly all about the bride.

The Book of Revelation describes the ultimate wedding scene. But here it is the *groom* who gets all the attention, not the *bride*. "Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has prepared herself" (Rev. 19:7 CSB).

It is the wedding of the Lamb, not the wedding of the Bride. A couple of verses later, the apostle John writes, “Blessed are those invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb!” (Rev. 19:9 CSB). Our attention is firmly fixed on the Groom.

In John 3:29 the writer makes an interesting statement. He says, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice” (NIV).

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. That's not only a statement about Jewish, first-century marriage, it's also a great illustration of the relationship between the church and Jesus. It has enormous implications for how we see the church and how we regard our role as pastors and leaders in the church.

In many places and in many movements, it has become all about the bride, the church, rather than the groom, Jesus. But the bride belongs to the bridegroom. As a pastor, then, my job is to watch out for the bride on behalf of the groom.

Pastors are like “spiritual wedding coordinators,” says author Lance Witt. The coordinator's job is to assist and serve the bride and groom, behind the scenes, in making their wedding day a meaningful event. No hired wedding coordinator would ever steal the spotlight from the bride and groom.

Jesus said in John 17:24, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they will see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the world’s foundation.” There should never be anything blocking the bride's view of the groom's glory. Pastors need to get out of the way so that the bride will be awestruck by the unequalled, unrivaled, incomparable majesty of her groom!

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The church is not my personal project. As a pastor, I have been given a sacred trust to care for the church. The groom has asked me to look after the bride until he comes for her.

So, if you hear a pastor or church leader talk about *his* church, *his* staff, *his* board, and *his* vision, be cautious! Do him a spiritual favor by reminding him gently and quietly that the bride belongs to the bridegroom. In a healthy church, Jesus is the Famous One. He gets the most airtime, he is the most talked about, and he is clearly center stage. We should be happy just to spread his fame. **Glory to the Lamb!**

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.

Yes, to Your will

DETROIT – I am thankful to God for the challenging days as they have shown me that I can rely on him in every situation. In the past, I felt confident in my abilities to handle any circumstance and make things happen until a dark storm overshadowed my life. This storm was overwhelming, and beyond my control. Despite my upbringing in church and attending catholic schools from kindergarten to twelfth grade, I had never truly experienced God's power until He intervened in this storm for me.

Marrying my first boyfriend in a church ceremony, I mistakenly believed this alone would ensure a happy marriage. I was mistaken. Relying on our own wisdom and advice from people with unsuccessful relationships, led us to a divorce court. Around the same time, my father passed away, and my only daughter discovered a lump in her breast. My husband's family has a history of breast cancer, including his mother and niece passing away from the complications of cancer, and his sister battling the disease. Doubts crept in, fueled by the devil whispering I had made a mistake in marrying my husband, and my daughter's story would include cancer.

I vividly recall the moment when my daughter and I visited her pediatrician about the lump. After an examination and x-ray, we were informed of two lumps. Overwhelmed, I ran out crying, questioning God, why? She was a devoted child serving in various church ministries and didn't deserve this. She was my only daughter, I hadn't gained victory over my other trials and tribulations, and now this. I was convinced that the devil was destroying everything I hoped and prayed for.

Upon returning home, I turned to God, seeking his Word (Malachi 6:33). I confessed my sins to him and made a covenant to surrender my will to His will. Realizing my lack of control and the need for his power in my life, I began earnestly seeking God (Psalms 107:13-14), and true to his promise, God intervened.

Through seeking his word, I found peace in the passing of my father because he accepted Christ before he died, relief as my daughter's lumps were benign, and the cancellation of the divorce court date. On celebrating 30 years of marriage, we now run a marriage ministry, helping couples mend their relationships through God's teachings. Recently, I have taken the steps to further my education in marriage counseling.

Relying on the guidance of God's instruction (the Bible) is crucial for navigating life's challenges. Without following his guidance, we are bound to fail.

Grateful for God's countless blessings, I strive to lead others to Christ, acknowledging him as the solution to every situation and the purpose of our existence. As the director of *Sisters Who Care of Michigan* (WMU), I work with churches to spread the message of God. It is my heartfelt desire to see souls saved, emphasizing the importance of continuous evangelism such as the WMU emphasis on *Making disciples of Jesus who live on mission*.

Remember, God's Word never returns empty, so it is our duty to sow the seeds of his Word. I echo God's desire for all souls to be saved, so that they may gain peace, a love like no other and have eternal life.

Isaiah 55:11 "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

I can never repay God for all that he has done for me, and I will continue to do all that I can to help bring others to Christ.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Celise Tillery has been married 30 years to Pastor William Tillery III of Cass Park Baptist Church. They have 4 children and 3 grandchildren. She serves as the Director of Sisters Who Care in Michigan, and GDBA WMU Director.

Preventing burnout in ministry

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – My husband and I, along with two other couples, planted Lakepointe Church in 2010. As church planters, there are many needs to be met; often, we can find ourselves wearing multiple hats. When you plant a church, you start from the ground up; no building, no people, no processes, no programs... only the call from God and the vision He placed on your heart. In the beginning stages of Lakepointe, we had to fill many different roles and then delegate those roles to people as God provided.

In 2020 after returning from our online services due to Covid, we were not prepared for the growth that occurred, and we had to begin to transition from a part-time staff to a full-time staff. During this time of transition, I found myself doing too much. There were things only I could do, but I also held on to things I should have laid down for a season. I began to care more for the church than I did for myself, which led me to burnout to the point of depletion.

Through this difficult time in my life, I stayed connected and rooted in my relationship with God. I truly believe I wouldn't still be in ministry today if it weren't for my relationship with

Jesus. He was with me on the hardest days, reminding me that He saw me, and He was going to carry me through that difficult season.

One passage of Scripture that the Holy Spirit would often remind me of is found in the book of Psalms,

“I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” – Psalms 121:1-2 (NIV)

I prayed consistently for God to give me His strength and to help me during this time. My journal was my lifeline to God that I would write in daily and sometimes more than once a day! Looking back, I know there was no way I could have persevered without Him. He truly empowered me and worked supernaturally!

Having gone through this season of burnout, here are a few lessons I learned that I pray will encourage you.

1 – Know your calling

Do you know what God has called you to?

I love how author Rebekah Lyons speaks about calling.

She says, ***“Calling is where our burdens and our passions collide.”***

What burden has God placed on your heart?

Where has God gifted you to be able to help meet the needs of that burden?

In ministry, there are always things that need to be done, but we can't do everything. When you save your “best yes” for the things God has called you to, they won't feel heavy and hard.

2 – Live within your limitations

God gave us limitations so that we would depend on Him. He alone is limitless! We often blow past our limitations for many different reasons. Maybe we are finding our worth in what we do. Perhaps you feel like you are the only one who can do the task, or you may be a perfectionist and you don't trust anyone else to do it as well as you can. For me, I never took the time to rest physically. I thought I could keep up that pace for just that season while we were in the process of hiring new staff, but I couldn't. I needed to care for myself first before I cared for anyone else. It's easy to say, but it can be hard to live out; especially when it comes to serving in the church.

God modeled limitations to us in Genesis 2:2 (NIV):

“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.”

God didn't rest because he had to, rather he rested to model to us our need to rest!

3 – Say no with confidence

On this side of my burnout, the word “no” is empowering to my health and keeps me in line with the boundaries I have set to stay healthy.

Great questions to ask yourself when faced with saying “yes” or “no” to something:

- What will my “yes” cost me?
- What are my limitations in this season?
- Do I feel like this is being placed on me, or do I feel called to it?
- Is this something I am doing because I want to, or is it because I am trying to please someone?

4 – Trust God

When knowing what we are called to, understanding our limitations, and choosing to say “no” to the things that aren't for us, we show that we trust God! God has unlimited resources, and He is sovereign over all things; everything is under His control! If we truly believe that, then we can say “no” confidently knowing the situation doesn't depend on us, and we can trust Him for the outcome.

Jeremiah 32:17 says,

“Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” (NIV)

If you want to finish well in ministry, you should consider applying these principles to your life to prevent burnout. If you know someone who is on the verge of burnout or has already burned out, the best thing you can do is encourage them, pray for them, and let them know you care about them.

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!

IMB using virtual reality at Olympics to provide immersive introduction to Jesus

You are in France for the Olympics and see someone handing out free water bottles. It's hot, and you're thirsty, so you take one, but don't stop to talk. On the bottle you notice a QR code. Later, when you get home, out of curiosity, you scan the QR code on your phone, and it takes you to a website that says, "Who Am I?"

You see an option for a virtual reality (VR) experience and put on your headset. A couple clicks later, and you find yourself standing in a wide, deep room in the virtual world. You look up and see thousands of tiny, sparkling stars shining down through large windows. A floating screen tells you this is a place with a spiritual message.

Another click, and you see posters of Olympic athletes set up at intervals along a hallway. The photos display various emotions athletes experience. Struggle and celebration, victory and pain. As you walk down the hall, the posters transition to images of ordinary people illuminating life moments of heartbreak or joy.

As you reach the end, you see two doors. Above them hangs the question, "Who Am I?" One door displays the image of someone who looks defeated and the other an image of someone celebrating. Which door will you choose? Which person are you?

You choose celebration and find yourself transported to a world with pristine white sands and crystal skies. In the distance across an expanse of blue water, there's an island filled with palm trees, and you can hear music and people laughing. You see there is a party, but as you hurry toward the island, suddenly you drop. Down, down, into a dark, damp tunnel. Life is full of ups and downs. In the distance, you think you may see light. You start your journey, moving toward the Light.

This summer, IMB is using virtual reality to complement the European affinity's digital engagement strategy for the 2024 Olympics in Paris. Virtual reality is an immersive medium offering unique ways to engage ideas and stories in a highly social context.

"Every medium offers something unique that if you press into that, you will find new opportunities," said Bryson Holtson, a member of the International Mission Board's MXLabs – a globally-focused innovation team – that created the virtual reality world in partnership with the European affinity digital engagement team.

The experience culminates on a beautiful, serene island moving from a question of identity to the question of who Christ is. As many people in the world today grapple with their identity, this question connects their longing to the "I AM" statements of Jesus. At the end of the journey, participants can watch a gospel presentation in one of several, different languages.

“It’s about who He is, so we are working toward Jesus in this,” Holtson said about the interactive journey through light and dark, difficult and calm, leading to a deeper understanding of the unconditional love of God.

This is the first ever virtual world IMB has created. Holtson explained there are still questions to answer about connecting virtual reality to missions. Like, what benefits does it offer? What are the opportunities? Are people interested in this? What sorts of people would come? Would they understand the message?

Holtson said his team is testing what it means “to connect virtual reality to a traditional missionary task strategy. What could it bring and how can we interpret a typical engagement theme and message and approach to a whole new medium like virtual reality?”

Virtual reality worlds also function as a social space where people connect and talk to one another. Holtson emphasized that VR is a space where many people in the world are living out their lives and finding their community.

As the IMB labors to reach people everywhere with the good news, Holtson believes new, immersive technologies and digital spaces are the next frontier for bringing the gospel to the nations.

“I want Southern Baptists to understand that the IMB is looking at these things,” Holtson said. “We have to figure out how traditional missions and the missionary task can be expressed through new mediums like virtual reality.”

During the Olympics outreach this year, Holtson’s team will begin to explore just that. IMB’s virtual world is hosted in the VRChat app. Holtson explained that the more people visit the world, the more it will increase visibility for others to find it, and hopefully, hear the gospel.

“We would love for anybody to come, any Southern Baptist that has a VR headset or PC,” Holtson said. “So, if non-believers come, hopefully there will be believers here that could start a conversation with them.”

For more information on how to access IMB’s virtual world, visit <https://whoamitoyou.com/vr-experience>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Sosebee writes for the IMB.

‘God first’ commitment fuels Armstrong’s Olympics outlook

PARIS, FRANCE (BP) – His Instagram account proclaims “GOD FIRST!” and U.S. Olympic swimmer Hunter Armstrong tries to be faithful to that description whether he’s winning gold medals or not.

“That’s the first thing I want people to see and know about me,” Armstrong told Baptist Press. “As we grow, we have to make sure we have our priorities in line. I keep God as a priority. I can’t really live without him. I can live without swimming or being an Olympian or any of that stuff.”

Armstrong captured one gold medal in the Paris Olympics as part of the men’s 4×100 meter freestyle relay team with Caeleb Dressel, Jack Alexy and Chris Guiliano that held off Australia to win the title on Saturday. In individual competition on Sunday, Armstrong failed to advance to the finals in the 100-meter backstroke.

Armstrong’s walk with the Lord has grown considerably over the past several months, he says. While he has professed to be a Christian for a long time, his faith was more peripheral than central to his life.

“I feel like in past years I’ve been sort of on the edge of it,” he said. “When I’m in competition, I’ll pray, and that will last for a little bit. Church camp, same kind of thing. But as soon as I didn’t need him anymore, it would fade.”

That began to change in the aftermath of a breakup with his girlfriend – a woman Armstrong had planned to marry – and following the death of his grandfather.

“The biggest catalyst for change in life tends to be pain,” Armstrong said. “Sometimes God will put you in a position where you have no other choice than to turn to Him.

“That’s been the biggest change that I’ve made this year,” he continued. “I promised at (world championships) that if He would help me get out of this, then I would embrace it.”

Armstrong’s gold in Paris was the second Olympic gold medal of his career. His first came in Tokyo in 2021 as part of the 4×100 meter medley relay. Success in relay races is fitting for Armstrong, as he is quick to point to the influence that some of his fellow swimmers, such as Michael Andrew and Carson Foster, have had on him spiritually.

He remembers an encounter with Andrew at a swimming competition. Though the two had met, they didn’t really know each other well. Armstrong remembers being especially nervous prior to a race, and Andrew noticed Armstrong’s state of mind.

“He got out of the warmup pool, came over and said, ‘Hey, can I pray with you?’” Armstrong said. “He was the start of, ‘OK, this is how you use faith in competition.’”

Foster also helped sharpen Armstrong by inviting him to participate in group Bible studies for competitive swimmers.

“Truly my goals for Paris are just to do my best and see what the results are,” Armstrong said prior to the Olympics. “I think everybody here wants a gold medal, but I’ve overcome so much this year that I’m just happy to be here.

“Obviously, I want to have a great performance for myself, my country and my teammates. But if I walk away and I don’t have a single medal or a single best time, I can still walk away knowing that I represented myself well – and God.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Ellsworth is associate vice president for university communications at Union University in Jackson, Tenn. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists’ concerns nationally and globally.

Global Vision Trip to North Africa inspires church planters to reach neighbors, nations

TORONTO, ONTARIO – Kesevan Balasingham knows firsthand that he doesn’t have to look far from his Toronto home to find a mission field. It’s because he was once part of the mission field.

Originally from Sri Lanka, Balasingham has lived in three countries, learned four languages, became involved in gang violence and was sentenced to nine years in prison all before he was 20 years old.

“While I was incarcerated, God providentially placed a Bible in my hands, and I began to read the Bible for the first time,” Balasingham said. “And in God’s mercy, I never put it down.”

Today, Balasingham is the pastor of Fellowship Church Rouge Park in Toronto, and it’s his church’s goal to help each member – from the college student to the single mother – find their missional pathway. This desire led Balasingham to participate in Send Network’s Global Vision Trip to North Africa earlier this year.

“I was with a unique group of pastors on this trip that live all over North America but had very diverse backgrounds. We had planters from Japan, Congo, Puerto Rico, Venezuela ... it was very humbling to see how God brought a group of pastors from different nations to go to the nations to share the Gospel,” Balasingham said.

Global Vision Trips for church planters are an initiative propelled by the partnership of Send Network, the North American Mission Board’s (NAMB) church planting arm, with the International Mission Board (IMB). They enable church planters in North America to experience ministry among the nations by traveling to and learning from IMB missionary teams worldwide.

“We want Send Network churches to pursue a culture of reaching the nations from the very beginning,” said Mike Laughrun, director of global engagement for Send Network. “We desire every Send Network planter and the churches they lead to know God’s call to reach our neighbors nearby as well as the nations of the world. It’s always our neighbors *and* the nations.”

As church planters spend time on the ground with seasoned missionary teams and national partners, they learn more about varied missionary strategies to use in their own city, and they take back a global vision to share with their church.

“During the trip, I was reminded of the importance of prayer and Gospel partnerships,” said Balasingham, whose church started an internship program for young adults. “As I train future missionaries from our church, I want to train them in such a way that they are better prepared as we send them out.”

To that end, when returned from the trip, Balasingham shared a presentation with his church, challenging congregants and specifically young people to consider God’s calling on their lives to be a part of His global mission.

“My hope is that God would use trips like this to birth leaders that we can identify, train, develop and then send out as missionaries in partnership with the IMB,” Balasingham said.

Of the planters who have participated in a Global Vision Trip, 92 percent had no previous experience with the IMB, said Travis Ogle, executive vice president of Send Network. One of the goals of these trips is to help church planters form Gospel partnerships with IMB missionaries and send mission teams from their churches in the future.

“The deep dive into Southern Baptist cross-cultural church planting efforts overseas has affected how these church planters and their church members are now engaging their backyards with the Gospel,” said Chris Derry, the IMB’s director of church and campus engagement, who co-leads the Global Vision Trips initiative alongside Laughrun.

“We hear updates on how they’re studying their cities, looking for people groups, developing local partnerships and adapting to new strategies to reach and disciple a generation longing for hope – all with a vision toward multiplication,” Laughrun said. “Many have planned return trips for this year and next.”

Balasingham believes that the next church planters in North Africa, just like the next church planters in Toronto, are yet to be discovered.

“They might be like me — lost in gangs or drugs — living a life of darkness,” he said. “And God can use us to reach out and disciple them so they can reach their family and community and become the next church planter.”

To discover how churches can reach their neighbors *and* the nations through church planting, visit SendNetwork.com/Mobilize. To meet other pastors and ministry leaders joining God’s activity to mobilize their church and to learn from the top church-planting experts of today, [register for a Send Network Gathering near you](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Skudarnova writes for the North American Mission Board.

Most churchgoers invite others to join them

BRENTWOOD, TN (BP) – When churchgoers show up to their church’s worship service, they’re often hoping to have a guest with them.

A [Lifeway Research study](#) of U.S. Protestant churchgoers finds 3 in 5 (60 percent) say they have extended at least one invitation in the past six months for someone to attend their church, including 19 percent who have made one invitation, 21 percent with two invitations and 20 percent with three or more invitations.

A third of churchgoers (33 percent) say they haven’t invited anyone to a worship service at their church in the past six months, while 7 percent say they aren’t sure how many invitations they’ve made.

“Churchgoers were not asked the typical net promoter score question of whether they recommend their church. They were asked if they’ve actually invited someone in the last six months,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “For most churchgoers, invitations are not just an aspiration but a current practice.”

Extending invites

Compared to a similar Lifeway Research study six years ago, a slightly larger percentage of churchgoers say they haven't invited anyone recently – 33 percent now versus 29 percent in 2017. Fewer churchgoers, however, are making three or more invitations. In 2017, 1 in 4 (25 percent) said they'd extended at least three invitations for someone to visit their church in the previous six months. Currently, 20 percent say the same.

“It is not surprising the proportion of churchgoers extending invites is not growing since the proactive nature of inviting people to church is counter-cultural,” McConnell said. “People in America are not being more relational, but an invitation to church is an invitation to join you in activities you enjoy, a message that brings you hope, and relationships with you and others.”

Some churchgoers are more likely to invite guests than others. Unsurprisingly, those who attend more often are more likely to extend invitations. Churchgoers who attend four times a month or more (27 percent) are more likely than those who attend less often (11 percent) to say they've made three or more invitations in the past six months.

Those under 50 are more likely to extend invitations than older congregants. Almost a third of those 50 to 64 years old (32 percent) and nearly half of churchgoers 65 and older (46 percent) say they have not invited anyone in the past six months. Those 35 to 49 (29 percent) are most likely to have offered at least three invitations recently.

African American churchgoers are among the most likely to say they've extended either two church invitations (28 percent) or three or more (25 percent). White churchgoers (36 percent) are more likely than African Americans (26 percent) and Hispanics (18 percent) to say they did not invite anyone in the past six months.

Baptists (27 percent) and those attending Restorationist Movement churches (21 percent) are more likely than those at Presbyterian/Reformed congregations (9 percent) to say they've invited at least three individuals or families. Lutherans (52 percent) are among the most likely to say they haven't invited anyone.

Churchgoers with evangelical beliefs, which include believing it is very important to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior, are more likely than non-evangelicals to invite others to church. Almost a quarter of evangelicals by belief (24 percent) say they've extended three or more invitations, compared to 15 percent of those without such beliefs.

Invitation limitations

When asked why they don't bring guests more often, churchgoers point to several reasons. Around a quarter say they don't know anyone to invite (27 percent) or those they invite refuse their invitations (26 percent).

Another 13 percent say they're just not comfortable asking people to church, while 7 percent say they don't think it's up to them to bring people to church. Few (4 percent) say they're too busy serving on Sunday morning.

Additionally, 19 percent say they don't know why they don't bring guests to church more often, and 5 percent say it's another unspecified reason.

"It can be easy for churchgoers to have their own relationship needs met at church and not know anyone else to invite," McConnell said. "It takes intentionality to be meeting new people in your community to have opportunities to invite them."

Compared to 2017, churchgoers today are more likely to say they don't know anyone to invite (27 percent v. 17 percent) and those they invited said no (26 percent v. 20 percent). Current churchgoers are less likely than those in 2017 to say they aren't sure of the reason they don't bring guests more often (19 percent v. 31 percent) or to point to another unnamed reason (5 percent v. 15 percent).

Those who attend most often say the reason they don't have guests with them more frequently is because their invitations are refused. Those who attend a worship service four times a month or more (31 percent) are more likely than those who attend one to three times (19 percent) to say a rejected invitation is the primary reason.

Baptists (33 percent), as well as those at non-denominational (27 percent) and Restorationist Movement (24 percent) churches are more likely than Lutherans (12 percent) and Presbyterian/Reformed (11 percent) to say the primary reason they don't bring guests with them to worship services more often is because the potential guests refuse their invitations.

Methodists (28 percent), Lutherans (24 percent) and those at Restorationist Movement churches (19 percent) are more likely than Baptists (9 percent) to say they aren't bringing guests with them because they aren't comfortable asking people to church. Additionally, Methodists (23 percent) are among the most likely to say they don't think it's up to them to bring people to church.

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

Methodology

The online survey of 1,008 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted Sept. 19-29, 2023, using a national pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attend religious services at least once a month. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,008 surveys. The sample provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. This margin of error accounts for the effect of

weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups. Comparisons are made to a survey of 1,010 American Protestant churchgoers conducted August 22-30, 2017.

Evangelical beliefs are defined using the National Association of Evangelicals/Lifeway Research Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition based on respondent beliefs. Respondents are asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced-choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Those who strongly agree with all four statements are categorized as having Evangelical Beliefs:

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Are some churches stuck in the past?

BRENTWOOD, TN (BP) – *Pews? Where we're going, we don't need pews.* Some churchgoers say walking into their church feels like time travel, with ministry that would be at home in the past.

Around 3 in 10 (29%) U.S. Protestant churchgoers say their church's ministry activities and methods would fit best in a time period before the turn of the new millennium, according to a new study from Lifeway Research. Close to half (52%) say their church's ministry belongs in the 2000s or later. Another 19% aren't sure.

Additionally, 2 in 3 (67%) churchgoers feel the conversations at their church are either celebratory of the current ministry (39%) or optimistic about what the future will bring (28%). Fewer are focused on previous glory days in the past (11%) or wondering if their church will exist much longer (5%).

"The pace of changing methods in churches differs greatly, and local churches also exist at different places in their lifecycle of growth, decline, renewal or closing," said Scott McConnell,

executive director of Lifeway Research. “Most churchgoers notice these shifts and discuss them.”

Dominant decades

Just like bell bottoms were groovy in the 1970s and grunge was awesome in the 1990s, certain types of church activities and ministry methodologies feel like they belong to certain eras.

More than a third of churchgoers (35%) feel their church fits a post-2010s vibe, and 17% place it in the early 2000s. Still, many see previous decades living on in their congregation’s activities and methodology, including 8% in the 1990s, 8% in the 1980s, 5% in the 1970s, 3% in the 1960s, 2% in the 1950s and 2% who feel their church would be at home pre-1950s.

Generally, the larger the church the more likely a person believes the congregation is modern. Almost 2 in 3 (62%) of those attending a church with a worship service attendance of 500 or more say their church fits post 2010s. Less than half (46%) of those at a church with 250 to 499 in attendance say the same, while fewer agree at churches with 100 to 249 (30%), 50 to 99 (29%) and less than 50 (27%).

Churchgoers at normative and smaller-sized churches are more likely to believe their congregation is stuck in the years just before the turn of the century. Those attending churches with worship service attendance of less than 50 (20%), 50 to 99 (19%) and 100 to 249 (19%) are more likely than those at churches of 250 to 499 (10%) or 500 or more (3%) to say their church ministry belongs in the 1980s or 1990s.

Those who attend most often are most likely to believe their church methodology belongs post-2010. Churchgoers who attend four times a month or more are more likely than those who attend less frequently to say their church is modern (39% v. 29%).

Non-denominational churchgoers (45%) are more likely to feel their church is at home post-2010s than Baptists (34%), Lutherans (28%) and those at Restorationist movement churches (28%). Those at non-denominational churches are also least likely to say their congregation belongs to the 1980s (3%). Meanwhile, Methodists (14%) are far more likely than Baptists (2%), Lutherans (2%), those at non-denominational churches (2%) or Presbyterian/Reformed (1%) to say their congregations feel like pre-1950s.

Churchgoers in the Northeast are the most likely to believe their church belongs to the 1950s or 1960s (15%). African Americans (13%) and Hispanics (17%) are more likely than white churchgoers (6%) to say their church ministry fits best in the 1990s.

“The message of the gospel is timeless, but how a local church encourages people to interact with this truth changes over time,” said McConnell. “Innovations in activities and methods are not adopted by every church, and some practices are short-lived if ineffective or not enjoyed.”

Past, present or future?

Around 2 in 5 churchgoers (39%) say the conversation tone at their congregation most often sounds like “This is the best!” celebrating current ministry. More than a quarter (28%) believe talk is more future-focused—“Things will get better!”—not excited about the present but optimistic about the future.

Around 1 in 10 (11%) hear “Those were the days!” recalling better days in the past. One in 20 (5%) say talk has turned even more dire, with people asking, “Will we make it?” and wondering how much longer the church will exist. Additionally, 11% say none of these, and 5% say not sure.

Unsurprisingly, larger churches are living in the now, while the smallest congregations are worried about the future. Those attending churches with 500 or more in worship attendance (60%) are among the most likely to say conversations focus on celebrating the current ministry. They’re also the least likely to say the tone centers around recalling better days in the past (2%).

Small and normative churches are the most likely to have people asking, “Will we make it?” Those attending congregations with worship attendance of less than 50 (13%) and 50 to 99 (9%) are more likely than those with attendance of 100 to 249 (1%), 250 to 499 (1%) and 500 or more (2%) to wonder how much longer the church will exist.

Restorationist movement churchgoers (16%) and Baptists (14%) are more likely than those at non-denominational churches (7%) to hear a conversation tone of “Those were the days.” Churchgoers who attend one to three times a month (15%) are also more likely than those who attend more frequently (8%) to say the way people talk recalls better times in the past.

Those in the West (46%) are more likely than those in the Northeast (31%) to hear “This is the best!” Churchgoers in the Northeast (36%) are more likely than those in the Midwest (24%) to say the conversations sound like “Things will get better!”

Different ethnicities say they hear different conversations at their congregations. White churchgoers (42%) are among the most likely to say the tone is celebrating current ministry. African Americans (15%) are among the most likely to hear people recalling better days in the past. Hispanics (44%) and African Americans (36%) are among the most likely to say people are not excited about the present but optimistic about the future.

Churchgoers 65 and older (20%) are the least likely to say the tone of the conversation in their congregation sounds like “Things will get better!”

“Stories of lives being changed are more commonly told within large churches, so it is not surprising they are the most likely to celebrate current ministry,” said McConnell. “Churches

that close are typically down to their last few members, which coincides with this worry existing mostly among small churches.”

The decade in which churchgoers feel their church’s ministry belongs contributes to the tone of the congregational conversations. Churchgoers who believe their congregation fits on this side of the new millennium are more likely to say they hear conversations that sound like “This is the best!” Those who feel their church is at home before the year 2000 are more likely to say they hear people saying, “Those were the days!”

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

Methodology

The online survey of 1,008 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted Sept. 19-29, 2023, using a national pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attend religious services at least once a month. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,008 surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2%. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

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HBCU students experience international missions, see ‘someone like me’

Chyler Hughes had never seen a Black missionary. At church, she learned to minister in her local community, but no one ever talked about international missions.

The concept entered her world when she left Kentucky and enrolled at Lincoln University, a historically Black university in Jefferson City, Missouri. She learned about international missions by attending Rooted, a collegiate ministry, and [Soma Community Church](#). They partnered with an International Mission Board missionary team in Brazil and sent their first short-term team of students to work with them.

It was on this trip to São Paulo, Brazil, where Hughes met her first IMB missionaries, Eric and Ramona Reese, and saw firsthand how they share the good news of Jesus Christ in the *favelas*, low-income settlements.

“It was really inspiring to see Eric and Miss Ramona in a place like Brazil,” Hughes said, speaking of the diversity of the community. She witnessed people with different ethnic backgrounds and of different color spreading the gospel and sharing their testimonies. “Seeing that representation shows you missions is for everybody.”

Jon Nelson, pastor of Soma Community Church, nodded his head. This is exactly what he prayed for his young team to learn on this missions experience for HBCU students. The pastor pointed out statistically about 8.4% of all missionaries in any denomination are African American or of African descent. He noticed this low engagement among his students who typically don’t think of leaving their own communities for missions. For most, this trip to São Paulo was their first international trip.

“Some fruit from this trip is just in the way they [will] see the world now. My students were able to see people that look like them,” Nelson said, referring not only to the Reeses but the diverse Brazilian population. “That takes the racial aspect out of missions and better allows them to think about what it looks like to serve God in another country. They see it’s about being obedient to God.”

Brian Kinney kept reminding himself that the whole experience was “bigger than me.” With tasting new foods and experiencing a new culture, he didn’t want to get wrapped up in the new and miss what God wanted him to see. He found he was able to spread God’s Word, no matter the language barrier, through smiles, play, hugs, feeding the homeless and of course, translators. The experience now has him thinking about full-time missions, something that wasn’t even on his radar before the trip.

The same happened with Hughes as she saw many challenges and hardships in the people’s lives she met. She held babies in the favela and played games with the smiling children. She talked with a man in a little town square where people with addiction hung out and learned his struggles. She listened to national believers tell their testimonies of coming to faith in Jesus.

Through all the new experiences, Hughes felt her eyes and heart opening. She went from thinking somebody else can do missions to “why not me?”

“There are so many people out here in São Paulo and all over the world that are struggling with things similar to how all of us are struggling. They just need Jesus in their lives,” Hughes said. “We need more people out there spreading the gospel.”

Call to Action

You, too, can experience missions firsthand either as short-term, mid-term or long term. Join a team like the one in Sao Paulo and work alongside IMB missionaries. <https://www.imb.org/go/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Smith is a videographer for the IMB.

Most Southern Baptist churches use background checks, fewer receive abuse training

New Vision Baptist Church in Murfreesboro has used background checks in its ministry for more than 10 years.

“It gives us peace of mind,” said Kellie Clem, financial assistant at New Vision. “Also, there are occasions where it becomes a chance to talk with volunteers about their faith walk due to results that have come back.”

According to the **2023 Annual Church Profile** (ACP), most Southern Baptist congregations, like New Vision, use background checks for volunteers. Fewer, however, say they have been trained in reporting sexual abuse or caring for sexual abuse survivors.

Almost 3 in 5 congregations affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (58%) use background checks. More than a third (36%) are trained in reporting sexual abuse, while 16% are trained in caring for survivors.

“Many within the Southern Baptist Convention and other denominations have been expressing a desire to do more to prevent sexual abuse,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “To better understand what sexual abuse prevention and response practices were already occurring, several state conventions used the ACP to ask congregations questions about what they have done with their volunteers and workers.”

Background checks

Almost all Southern Baptist congregations with more than 250 in attendance, like New Vision, perform background checks (94%), but the smaller the congregation the less likely they are to

do so. Most with 100 to 249 (82%) and 50 to 99 (61%) in worship attendance use background checks. Among those with fewer than 50, however, 35% say they do.

Newer congregations are also more likely than older ones to check volunteers. Those started since 2000 are the most likely at 72%. Around 2 in 3 (65%) congregations founded from 1950-1999 use background checks, compared to close to half of older congregations—50% of those started from 1900-1949 and 48% of those that began before 1900.

Southern Baptist congregations in the Northeast (90%) are the most likely to perform background checks on volunteers, while those in the South (53%) are the least likely.

“Like any ministry practice, sexual abuse prevention and response require preparation and ongoing work,” said McConnell. “The ongoing work of sexual abuse and prevention must become a ministry habit. We are seeing this habit develop more quickly among larger churches that likely have more staff, newer churches that likely learned this as their church planter was trained, and those in Northeast where laws are stricter and communities demand vigilance.”

To assist churches, Lifeway has a relationship with Clear Investigative Advantage to offer **verified background checks** starting at \$9, through its **One Source program**. All screenings check nationwide sex offender registries, various terrorist watch lists and more than 2 billion felony and misdemeanor crimes.

Since 2023, churches conducting background checks through Lifeway One Source have performed more than 36,000 screenings, 12% of which returned some type of crime. Most (53%) were misdemeanors, but 35% included felonies.

Abuse training

While several SBC entities worked together to produce resources at **ChurchCares.com**, compared to those that use background checks, fewer congregations say they have been trained in reporting potential sexual abuse or caring for sexual abuse survivors.

Around a third (36%) say their congregation has been trained on how to report sexual abuse. The largest congregations, those with 250 or more in worship services, are the most likely to say they've been trained (70%), while the smallest, those with 50 or fewer, are the least likely (24%).

Most (53%) congregations started since 2000 have been trained in reporting sexual abuse. Fewer than 3 in 10 of the oldest ones are trained—29% of congregations founded from 1900-1949 and 28% of those started before 1900.

Those in the Northeast (69%) are most likely to have received training on reporting sexual abuse, while congregations in the South (32%) are the least likely.

Similar trends are also evident in the percentage of congregations that have been trained in caring for sexual abuse survivors. Overall, around 1 in 6 Southern Baptist congregations (16%) say they have had such training.

The largest congregations (28%) are most likely and the smallest (12%) least likely. While a quarter of congregations planted since 2000 (25%) have been trained to care for sexual abuse survivors, 12% of those founded before 1950 say the same.

Around 1 in 4 Southern Baptist congregations in the Northeast (27%) and West (24%) have been trained on caring for survivors compared to 18% of those in the Midwest and 14% in the South.

The SBC's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force **recently sent boxes** of "Essentials: Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response," a comprehensive plan for churches to implement abuse prevention protocols and care for survivors, to Baptist state conventions for local churches. They also made the material available in a free **download**.

"The wording of each question expressed the ideal, which is that prevention and training is occurring with all who work with children or students in a church," said McConnell. "More Southern Baptist congregations may have done these in the past but couldn't answer yes that all workers had participated. Investing in the prevention of sexual abuse is ongoing work since almost every year churches will have new workers."

*For more information, view the **2023 sexual abuse prevention statistics report** and the **ACP abuse reporting differences report** or visit **LifewayResearch.com**.*

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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, Vacation Bible School, and church supplies, as well as camps and events for all ages. Lifeway is the world's largest provider of Spanish Bibles. Based in Nashville, Tennessee, Lifeway operates as a self-supporting nonprofit. For more information, visit **Lifeway.com**.

Lifeway One Source is a **free service for churches** that researches and finds specialized service and product providers for church necessities.

Lifeway Research is a Middle Tennessee-based, evangelical research firm that specializes in surveys about faith in culture and matters that affect churches. For more information, visit LifewayResearch.com.

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